

The games institutions play – or the impact of university incorporation on the attitudes, beliefs and perceptions of college lecturers

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Abstract

This study gauges the impact of the incorporation of a college into a university on the attitudes, beliefs and perceptions of staff members who were not appointed in posts at the receiving institution. It is an account of the anger, fear and bias college lecturers experienced during the process of incorporation. Former college staff acted as both interviewers and interviewees in this innovative research design. The question asked during the free attitude interviews was: 'How did the incorporation of the college into the University affect you as a College lecturer?' The subsequent data analyses and reporting were composed by the interviewers. The data indicate that the lecturers experienced emotional phases similar to those described in Kübler-Ross's 'stages of grief' model. The need for a more humane approach to incorporation processes has implications for the successful transformation of higher education institutions.

INTRODUCTION

The current spate of mergers in local higher education institutions comes in the wake of government plans for the national restructuring of the educational sector in South Africa (van der Merwe 2000; Viljoen 2000; Hay, Fourie & Hay 2001). The higher education transformation programme is the culmination of the process initiated by establishment of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) in February 1995. Its major aim is to alter the national educational landscape 'to redress past inequalities, to serve a new social order, to meet pressing national needs and to respond to new realities and opportunities' (*Education White Paper 3* of 1997). This change to the organisation of higher education is to be executed through planning, governing and funding it as a national competence, thus incorporating colleges of education, which traditionally functioned as provincial entities.

As part of the redesigning of the higher education landscape, the Onderwyskollege Pretoria (NKP) ('College of Education Pretoria'), was incorporated into the University of Pretoria as the School of Teacher Training,

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the undergraduate section of the Faculty of Education, now housed on the erstwhile college campus in Groenkloof.

THE CONTEXT

The members of the research team were deeply involved in the process of transformation at this institution during 2001 to 2002. We became interested in the reactions and perceptions of the staff after witnessing the intense and widely diverse reactions to the incorporation process, especially as some staff members had previously had similar experiences at other colleges. The findings of this research could inform higher education planners and managers, and deepen our understanding of the human dimensions of educational change. Most merger research focuses on the economics and politics of mergers, that is a macro-level perspective. A triad of local studies by Gibbon, Habib, Jansen and Parekh (2000, 2001) offers a policy and practice perspective without considering what mergers mean to those subjected to them. This research inverts the macro-level order, offering a bottom-up focus, using participant observation as the grounding methodology.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to gauge the impact of the incorporation of a college into a university on the attitudes, beliefs and perceptions of college staff members who were not appointed at the receiving institution. An earlier study focused on college staff who were appointed at the receiving institution (Becker *et al.* 2003).

ON MERGERS

Although research on mergers has been based ‘mainly on economic and financial assessments’ (Buono & Bowditch 1989), a number of authors have recently shifted their focus to the ‘human side’ of mergers (Harman & Meek 2002; Jansen *et al.* 2002). Holtzhausen’s (1998) article, in particular, is of use with regard to the chosen theoretical framework because it focuses on the personal transformation of human beings, specifically facilitators, during periods of change. Halpern (1994 in Holtzhausen 1998:34) bases a stages of change model, namely denial, resistance, understanding, campaign, collaboration and institutionalisation on the stages of grief reaction identified and described by Kübler-Ross (1986).

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Kübler-Ross (1986) embarked on her research in an attempt to assist theology students writing a paper on ‘crisis in human life’. They decided that death was the greatest crisis people needed to face and used over two hundred critically ill patients and their family members, doctors, nurses, and so forth as the focus of the study.

The five stages Kübler-Ross (1986) and her team identified and described are

denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. The stages do not replace one another, but ‘can exist next to each other and overlap at times’ (Kübler-Ross 1986).

The choice of bereavement theory (Kübler-Ross 1986) as the theoretical framework of this study seems appropriate as it has been adapted (Halpern in Holtzhausen 1998) to describe the emotional stages people experience during times of transformational change. Certain aspects of the model have influenced the views of other researchers, for example Viljoen (2000) and Gordon (2002). Kübler-Ross (1986) clearly indicates that the stages are applicable to people experiencing any major type of stress, not only terminal illness.

RESEARCH STRATEGY

Many NKP academic staff members were ‘retrenched’ while none of the university staff were obliged to leave their posts. Several NKP staff members were redeployed with effect from 1 July 2001. Others, who had been unsuccessful in seeking appointment in posts at the university, were scheduled to leave during December (2001) and were compelled to apply for mutually agreed severance packages (MASPs), request to be reassigned to Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) district offices, or to resign.

The research team who were themselves part of this reorganisation conducted 14 interviews from the group of 21 who eventually left. Some staff members were off-campus at the time of the interviews while one specifically declined to be interviewed as she felt it would be too painful an experience.

The tools of participant observation were used to generate the relevant data (Tebutt & Marchington 1997). The research team used the free attitude interview technique to obtain data. After explaining the interview protocol to the prospective interviewees, namely that only one question, i.e. ‘How did the incorporation of the College into the University affect you?’ would be asked, respondents were assured that their responses would be confidential and would therefore have no adverse effect on any further appointment possibilities. Verbatim transcripts of the tape-recorded interviews would be available for them to verify what they had said.

After conducting the interviews, interviewers wrote brief reflections and analysed verbatim transcripts of the recorded interviews by identifying the most common aspects in all the interviews and listing the number of references to each aspect in all the interviews. As one interviewee sometimes referred to the same aspect a number of times, the number of interviewees who had mentioned the various aspects was determined. Finally, aspects were classified and discussed according to the stages of grief reaction described by Kübler-Ross (1986).

The researchers, in a sense, compiled ‘insider’ accounts (Foley, Levinson & Hurtig 2000–2001) and while their personal involvement in the process could be regarded as a major limitation, it is balanced by the fact that they were in a position of trust and empathy with regard to their colleagues, the interviewees, and could

therefore be assured of honesty and a ‘no holds barred’ attitude during the interviews. This was encouraged by the assurance of anonymity and confidentiality.

MAIN FINDINGS

The narrative stemming from the data was interrogated in the context of bereavement theory, viz Kübler-Ross’ (1986) five stages of grief reaction.

Stage 1: Denial and Isolation

The rationalisation process had been ongoing for a number of years – this acted as a buffer to a certain extent, as lecturers had known about the impending changes for some time. They had been assured continuously by the college management that they would retain their posts and experienced the reality of non-appointment as a major shock after having been seconded to the university, just like those who had been successful in seeking appointment.

Denial manifested itself to a lesser extent than isolation, yet the feelings of denial were expressed vehemently. One non-appointee who served the college for 25 years as residence official and later as head of department, could not believe what was happening to him as he regarded himself as almost a ‘super Afrikaner’ and felt he had been betrayed by his own people (Interview 2).

Another admitted: ‘I didn’t want to face the world, it was probably a sort of denial syndrome. It feels like a giant soap bubble that has suddenly burst – it hurts. I’ve grown old’ (Interview 4).

A third, highly qualified respondent, who had taught at the university for eight years while in his post at the college, was extremely shocked to find he was ‘suddenly no longer good enough’ (Interview 7). A woman said she was still in denial at the time of the interview and had ‘no future expectations’ (Interview 14). Another was so negatively affected by ‘the uncertainty which constantly gnawed at (her) self-confidence’ that she did not even apply for a post at the university (Interview 9).

Many respondents felt isolated. One said a major rift had been caused between staff by the non-appointment of some. ‘You’re good enough and I’m not,’ claimed one who blames both the college and university managements (Interview 8).

A colleague who opted not to accept the university appointment, felt isolated because of changed personalities and negativity in her department: ‘I became a different person . . . began talking about people . . . it irritated me that people were blatantly marketing themselves’ (Interview 5).

Some staff member felt especially isolated because of the changed relationships after the announcement: ‘[S]ome people suddenly developed an air and a know-all, bossy attitude . . . I don’t know if I want to work in that kind of atmosphere’ (Interview 4); ‘They’ve changed toward me, they think they’re better than I am’

(Interview 14); ‘I felt that the minute the results were available, everyone started avoiding everyone . . . no-one cares for me and I care for no-one’ (Interview 2).

The pattern of denial and isolation reflected in the interviews matches that described by Kübler-Ross (1986). The majority of respondents appeared not to maintain or to revert to the denial phase after the initial anxious ordeal characterised by the ‘No, not me, it cannot be true’ statement (Kübler-Ross 1986). One respondent was still in a partial denial phase at the time of the interview, well after the shocking news of non-appointment after the second and third rounds of interviews had been received. This could be ascribed to the fact that she had repeatedly been promised an appointment by members of the college management who apparently reneged. Respondents experienced long bouts of isolation induced mainly by the announcement of the appointments. All the respondents, bar one, had at this early juncture reached a stage of partial acceptance (Kübler-Ross 1989).

Stage 2: Anger

The ‘feelings of anger, rage, envy and resentment’ are accompanied by the question: ‘Why me?’ (Kübler-Ross 1986).

Matters relating to the management of the incorporation were the primary causes of anger among the interviewees, who at times were overcome with emotion, as can be seen by a number of quotations from the interviews. It is necessary to distinguish different components of management, namely the college management, the university management and the post-incorporation management of the Faculty of Education, as well as the GDE and the teachers’ unions.

The predominant aspects that could be classified under the stage of anger, rage, envy and resentment, are primarily related to the college and university managements. In particular, interviewees believe that management was guilty of misrepresentation during interviews and appointment processes, insensitivity toward staff and students, and largely responsible for the long period of waiting before incorporation.

Misrepresentations were cited by most interviewees as the cause of various degrees of anger. A particular respondent felt that ‘[T]he Department, the college, the university all stood here lying to us’ (Interview 1). Another ascribes the unhappiness to ‘bad leadership and leadership with a different agenda from the one tabled’ and asserts that ‘everyone close to the rector (of the college) was appointed, regardless of qualifications or diligence . . . this left a bitter taste’ (Interview 6).

Respondents described the statement by the college management that NKP was being used as model for the incorporation of other institutions, as untrue, as staff from other colleges, such as the Johannesburg College of Education (JCE), were retained en masse after their incorporation into universities. The following quotations illustrate this: ‘it happened at Wits and at Potchefstroom . . . the whole staff is there – it didn’t happen here – why not?’ (Interview 7); ‘[I]f you compare it

to other places then it's not logical' (Interview 10); '[W]e were real suckers to trust everyone and to believe they would look after us' (Interview 4).

Two respondents were positive about the college management: 'The old management wasn't so bad, but the new one is a bit . . . we don't know who's in charge . . .' (Interview 12) was how one respondent described the post-incorporation management directly after the incorporation. Another thought 'the management, or if I may say, rectorate, was probably very naïve, they [sic] weren't used to the situation ... I'm convinced that they did their utmost . . . but it didn't work because they didn't handle it correctly . . .' (Interview 3).

Respondents expressed anger at the GDE for prolonging the process and negotiating the absolute minimum legal remuneration packages.

Even greater anger was provoked by the lack of performance on the part of the teachers' unions, especially the traditionally Afrikaans union, the Transvaalse Onderwysersvereniging (TO) ('Transvaal Teachers' Union): 'The TO was just too much for me – typical of the bureaucracy of the old régime who left as fat cats and, with their previous positions and reputations, carved out places for themselves in the TO' (Interview 4).

The interviews and subsequent appointments were a bone of contention and the lack of post descriptions and criteria in the internal gazette was lamented: 'The interview was a nightmare, I felt totally incompetent (afterward . . . they could have handled the process very differently . . .)' (Interview 4); '[W]e were not properly educated as to what was involved . . . there was no description of posts . . . I was not adequately prepared' (Interview 13).

Interviewees believed the results of the interviews had been decided beforehand: '[T]hey were just doing the interviews to satisfy the unions' (Interview 6) and '. . . they had decided before the interviews who they were going to take . . .' (Interview 7).

Although the interviews had been comprised of panels in keeping with university and union regulations some interviewees had the impression that appointments had been decided by one person only: 'a one-man panel' (Interview 13).

Insensitivity toward staff and student needs was a grave concern amongst those interviewed. To respondents it appeared that the staff's general welfare was not even a consideration, as the new management seemed intent on 'sweeping clean' (Interview 13) and the 'college didn't have a counselling facility . . . It was a great flaw, many people here have emotional damage' (Interview 8). Staff did, however, have access to a counselling facility on the university's main campus.

Staff were highly upset when structural changes were made to buildings in the presence of leaving staff without their being forewarned: 'They just stormed in. When you looked again they would be breaking down part of your office wall and you never knew what was going on' (Interview 1).

The lack of sympathy was regarded as a gross insensitivity: '[D]ue process was followed . . . as far as the human element was concerned, it was totally ignored . . .

by the university – I think it's the university that held all the swords [sic] here, they had the clout, they had the leverage . . . there's no compassion here' (Interview 13).

Respondents were united in their condemnation of the lack of opportunity for staff to be involved in decision-making before and during the incorporation process: '[T]he process was not open enough, I felt that we were pawns in a game played by people who didn't really fight for or care for our cause' (Interview 4); '[N]o-one spoke to me – I wasn't involved' (Interview 9).

The consensus among interviewees was that student needs had been grossly neglected and would not be addressed in future: 'It was often said that we'd be here long enough to assist the students whose courses were phasing out . . . Students were upset to hear who has to leave – have we spoilt them?' (Interview 10); 'Our students need to be nurtured . . . the radical changes in this institution are not conducive to teacher training' (Interview 13).

A number of respondents cited the prolonged incorporation period as a stress-generating factor: 'The main thing was that it was such a long period . . . we were so terribly unsure . . . we realised we could trust no-one' (Interview 1); '[I]t feels as if it was all one long nightmare' (Interview 4); 'There were many snags and it dragged on too long. I think it was unreasonable and unfair . . . although it turned out well for me in the end' (Interview 7).

The consensus among respondents was that the general conduct of both the university and college managements during the incorporation process was uncaring and exposed staff to what they believed were untruths. This, in addition to their non-involvement in the decision-making process, led to further uncertainty. Staff's lack of confidence filtered through to their relationships with their students whom they believed to be in a far worse position after the incorporation, largely as a result of the perceived difference in approach by the university and the college. Some respondents regarded the interview protocol as a travesty. This perception generated a lack of confidence among respondents, especially as some thought that final decisions had been made before the interviews. The absence of on-campus counselling facilities aggravated the already wide-ranging emotional damage – a direct result of the protracted incorporation period. More anger was focused on the teachers' unions than on the GDE. The TO, of which some former college management members were representatives, was castigated for failing dismally in looking after the interests of its members.

Stage 3: Bargaining

People experiencing grief try to postpone the inevitable by bargaining, sometimes with people, often with God. This phase is less prominent than the others but is regarded by Kübler-Ross (1986) as helpful to the sufferer. One respondent bargained with the college management and university authorities and succeeded in retaining her post for a further six months after being informed by the GDE that her services were no longer required (Interview 11). Another described her short

contract appointment, the result of her bargaining with staff on the main campus of the University, as ‘a type of consolation prize’ (Interview 14).

Although the aforementioned respondents’ deadlines weren’t self-imposed like those described by Kübler-Ross (1986), their bargaining resulted in ‘prizes’ – the secondment and the contract respectively, thus a temporary postponement of their ultimate fate with regard to losing their posts.

The extended bargaining phase for both respondents outside the institution, led to one being temporarily reappointed by the GDE, at a district office, while the other was permanently appointed in a senior post at another university.

Stage 4: Depression

During the reactive depression phase the person is eager to share thoughts about the loss already suffered. Preparatory depression is characterised by preparation for impending losses and final separation.

Reactive depression

One respondent’s loss of self-confidence resulted in her not even bothering to apply for a post: ‘I didn’t have the self-confidence . . . to take a really dynamic post’ (Interview 1). A second stated that she ‘felt a total failure and sought answers everywhere’ (Interview 14) while a third said: ‘I felt totally incompetent . . .’ (Interview 4).

Reactive depression manifested in the staff members’ reaction to the extent that at least five sought professional counselling. Some staff started doubting their ability to teach students effectively, although they believed that they had trained them well until then.

This phase was typified by gossip among staff. One respondent points out that she started to talk incessantly and experienced herself as a gossip: ‘It influenced me so negatively, I suffered from a degree of depression because I stopped jogging – I no longer felt like suffering . . . My husband . . . once told me to stop talking about everything . . . My children said: ‘Gee, mom, you talk much too loudly’ . . . I experienced myself as a gossip’ (Interview 5).

Preparatory depression

Anticipated financial loss contributed to preparatory depression: ‘Financially it’s a terrible blow. I have a child studying here and now I’ll have to pay his fees. I didn’t before. I lived in the hostel – stayed free of charge, ate free of charge, and was even paid to do it’ (Interview 2); ‘I was vulnerable . . . Suddenly there was less money’ (Interview 14).

References were made to losing status and colleagues: ‘No-one has escaped the effects . . . you’ll be a stranger in a place after working for years where you were a respected colleague . . . People don’t know your background, they don’t have that

respect for you. Even those people who did get posts or were redeployed have major emotional issues to work out' (interview 8).

The respondents' reactive depression was more apparent than the preparatory type. The reactive stage was marked by a loss of self-confidence and feelings of incompetence, especially after the interviews – even before successful applicants' names were announced. In the preparatory stage respondents concentrated mainly on impending financial losses, the loss of status associated with entering a new workplace and the loss of colleagues with whom they had built up relationships over many years.

Stage 5: Acceptance

The majority of people who have had enough time to work through their anger and depression, eventually reach a stage of acceptance. According to Kübler-Ross (1986), this stage is often almost void of feeling.

Among the respondents only two complained that they had not achieved closure with regard to losing their posts: 'Someone should have called together those who were to leave and said "man, life is unfair, I'm heartbroken because you're leaving and I think you are good enough to do the work, etc."' Then we would all have been better able to accept it' (Interview 2) and 'I still can't accept what happened to me. Perhaps I just need some time' (Interview 14).

Yet another said: 'I've now reached a point where I'm beginning to accept that I have closed this chapter of my life . . .' (Interview 4).

Redeployment to a district office seemed like an attractive option for someone who felt that it was better to leave the institution and make a 'clean break without the baggage of the past two years' (Interview 5). Another reached the acceptance stage after he had been informed that he hadn't been appointed: 'I felt better a week after I found out I didn't have a post because then I knew I could move on' (Interview 1).

For someone who, until then, had been extremely negative about his non-appointment, the reading of the book, *Who moved my cheese* by Spencer Johnson, was the turning point: 'I realised that I had to move . . . One can't sit crying in front of a closed door . . . I shifted my goalposts and accepted it . . . I now wonder why I didn't make a break even sooner' (Interview 7).

Clearly, some interviewees had, by the time of the interviews, not reconciled themselves to their fate. They surmised that perhaps they would be able to accept the situation if more time elapsed. One individual with 30 years service at the college, was in the fortunate position of being able to choose between redeployment and a university post. She opted for redeployment to escape petty conflicts in her department, which resulted from the incorporation process, and to earn a larger pension package. The same respondent arranged a private farewell at her home as she, like others (Interviewees 8 and 10), felt management had neglected to arrange an appropriate function. Someone else found acceptance on

hearing that she had not been appointed as she realised that she had no choice but to move on. An outside factor, the reading of a book, contributed to the realisation by another that he should move on – he now regards himself as better off financially and emotionally than those who were appointed. Ironically, he has recently been appointed at the university on a short contract.

INTERVIEWERS' REFLECTIONS

The fact that the interviewers were in the same situation as the interviewees, at least until the names of successful applicants were announced, was an advantage, as the interviewers perceived aspects that outsiders would not have been able to – 'We could even make a judgement on what wasn't said . . . We could get a more holistic picture because all this was part of us over a long period' (Interviewer 1); 'I learnt how to read between the lines to see what people were actually screaming out by concealing' (Interviewer 2); 'Gesture and facial expressions spoke volumes' (Interviewer 4). One interviewer felt 'drained after the raw emotion of the interview' (Interviewer 2) while another said, 'I could identify with their emotions, so they really bared their souls' (Interviewer 3).

An incorporation process is said to take five to seven or ten years to complete (Buono & Bowditch 1989). The interviewers experienced it as follows: 'I realised during the interview that the process was still ongoing and not in the past . . .' (Interviewer 4).

Ironically, all the interviewees who maintain contact with the interviewers, have stated that they feel they are 'better off' than the interviewers at this stage and happy with their current situations. One actually said she gloated at the thought of the interviewers' changed working conditions and accompanying pressure.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this research was to gauge the impact of the incorporation on college staff who had been unsuccessful in being appointed in posts at the receiving institution. The research is unique in that the interviewers and the interviewees were colleagues at the time of the interviews and all the interviewers had been appointed in permanent posts at the receiving institution. This reality did not, however, affect the interview process. In addition to the free attitude interview protocol the interviewers wrote a brief reflection of the interviews they conducted.

Interviewers agreed that the familiarity among themselves and their subjects actually contributed to the validity, as the interviewees would not have offered the same level of openness to strangers.

The data were easily classified according to the stages of grief reaction described by Kübler-Ross (1986). It is clear from the data that people experiencing major change in their lives need to feel that they are part of the process, albeit in a consultative capacity. Issues such as the loss of confidence and self-worth caused

by the skewed interview and appointment protocol, the lack of coping mechanisms and the general mismanagement of the process should be addressed so that people living through transformational processes may be spared the unnecessary trauma and anxiety experienced by the interviewees.

The effective management of the human side of mergers would have a positive impact generally, thus allowing merged institutions to function more effectively and affording those losing their posts to leave with their self-confidence and dignity intact.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The contribution of the following fellow researchers is hereby acknowledged: L D Beukes, L J de Jager, A Engelbrecht, A C Niemann and R Swart. The research group wishes to thank Prof Jonathan Jansen and Dr Neil Roos for their invaluable encouragement and support.

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