Nurturing human capital: A challenge for higher education institutions?

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Abstract  
In this article we argue that higher education institutions ought to be a reflection of society: its vision, values, conscience and ways of doing. It has as its task the production of human capital for participation in a global economy and by virtue of its position in society, ought to be able to do justice to that. In this article we draw on a case study of incorporation, as part of reshaping the Higher Education landscape in South Africa, not only to give voice to staff involved in an incorporation process, but also to explore the effect thereof on them. We discuss four themes that emerged from the data and draw some conclusions. Drawing on this example, we argue for prioritising the well-being of human capital by ensuring workplace wellness, in order to set an example and to make a real contribution to the well-being of society.

INTRODUCTION

We are now living in a global economy where technology and intense competition are driving our employees faster than ever … we are at risk of burning out our most important asset. We must do all we can to put wellness on the table as a business issue before it’s too late … (HRM Guide 2001).

Mergers and incorporations appear to have been a major and controversial theme in Higher Education for the past decades (Harman 2000), being a worldwide phenomenon aimed at streamlining for efficiency, with the focus on financial stringency (Agovino 1999). Smaller institutions seem to be swallowed up by larger
Institutions and experts believe this trend will still accelerate (Gudrun 2002; Kyvik 2002; Van der Werf 2001; Beasley and Pembridge 2000; MacNeil 2000).

This trend has also spread to South Africa. The Size and Shape document in the Government Gazette of 24 June (Republic of South Africa 2002) has propelled the change of the Higher Education landscape. It is clearly stated that the two key drivers for such reshaping were politics and economics. In a developing democracy such reasons are desirable and understandable, but not at the expense of human capital.

*Human capital*, being one of four types of fixed capital, and coined by Adam Smith, a pioneering political economist of the 1700’s, refers to the acquired and useful abilities of all the inhabitants or members of the society (Wikipedia). The acquisition of such abilities during education, study, or apprenticeship, is perceived as a capital fixed and realized in the person. These individual talents, however, are also seen as belonging to the society of which the individual is part. Although maintaining (and nurturing) individual capital (i.e. skills, dexterity in terms of the physical, intellectual, psychological, and judgment) may require financial input from the institution, it will be rewarded by increased profit (Wikipedia). The two concepts, nurturing and human capital have deliberately been used together to reflect the disjuncture between the higher education institution’s use of people and the required nurturing. Nurturing *human capital* in a higher education institution, we argue, stands to benefit the individual, the higher education institution, and society at large.

Harman (2000) reiterates that mergers and incorporations are traumatic experiences for the institutions and the staff. Patterson (2001) concurs that the human resource dimension requires the same level of attention as is given to financial, legal, strategic and operational concerns. If this attention is given, the human capital could feel nurtured and valued, and expectations of workplace wellness could be realised. Oshagbemi (1996) reiterates its importance, as it not only would ensure the physical and mental well-being of academics, but also contribute to their efficient functioning in the Higher Education arena.

South African academics have had to face change associated with the radical transformation of the South African society, which included the demand that education itself becomes transformed, while making a contribution to the wider transformation of society. While the needed social and political transformation is currently taking place in all spheres of society, the contemporary academic context in South Africa is also characterised by rapid change. The closure of some colleges of education, the incorporation of other colleges of education, the clustering of Further Education and Training Colleges, as well as the merging of universities with other universities or technikons, are examples of the transformation taking place in
Higher Education. It seems apparent that such major change could invariably impact on staff members and on workplace wellness in general.

Amidst the whirlwind of change that staff in higher education institutions are facing, stability needs to be created, as the current reality has become the ‘future shock’ that had been predicted by Alvin Toffler (Vermeulen 1999). How does an academic work amidst this ‘future shock’? How does an academic make sense of work and life? According to Vermeulen (1999, 11) human beings derive power from four main areas, namely the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. When human energy starts draining, the effect is clearly visible in a person’s declining health (physical area), poor relationships (emotional area), reduction in achievements (mental area) and less fulfilment (spiritual area).

Bensley and Brookins-Fisher (2003) explain various theories according to which people’s reactions to change can be explained, one being the Trans-theoretical Stages of Change Model. This model recognizes the following stages of adjusting to change, that is, 1) Pre-contemplation, where there is no interest in changing behaviour; 2) Contemplation, where change of behaviour is considered for some day; 3) Preparation, during which preparation for behaviour change takes place; 4) Action, involving activity to change over time; and 5) Maintenance, aiming at sustaining the behaviour over time. These stages give an indication of how people accommodate change and are significant where the work environment is radically transformed.

According to Hay and Fourie (2002) little research has been done in South Africa on the psychological experiences of academic staff in potential or completed mergers. This is also true for the incorporation of colleges of education into universities. However, Wyngaardt and Kapp’s (2004) research contributed in this regard with their work focussing on the human perspective on reshaping the Higher Education landscape. Van der Westhuizen (2004) too, made a contribution with the study on the impact of the incorporation of a college into a university on the attitudes, beliefs and perceptions of staff members, using Kubler-Ross’s bereavement theory as framework, as Kubler-Ross’s work is also applicable to people experiencing major stress. Olivier’s (2005) research on job-related stress of academics also complements the growing body of literature on the well-being of the human capital in higher education institutions, a growing body of knowledge all stakeholders in Higher Education should take cognisance of.

This article reflects on how an event, such as the incorporation of colleges into a university, is perceived to influence the psychological well-being and energy of staff immersed in such a process, as well as how they react to change. Wyngaardt and Kapp (2004, 200) conclude that the ‘badly wounded’ higher education system ‘has to produce human capital for participation in a global economy’ and we argue that
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if Higher Education cannot take care of and nurture its own human capital, by also ensuring workplace wellness, how can such a task be entrusted to them?

There isn’t a lack of literature raising the concern about what mergers, incorporations and acquisitions could do to the workforce, if we consider the following examples: Galosy’s (1990) *The human factor in mergers and acquisitions*; or Veldsman’s (1997) *People issues essential for corporate marriages*; or Price’s (1999) *Helping people to stay on their feet during mergers and acquisitions* or Greengard’s (1997) *You’re next: there is no escaping merger mania*. However, in spite of all the mergers and incorporations that have happened world wide, and all that has been said and written about it, it seems that lessons are not learnt! When will higher education institutions learn that it is of primary importance to treasure and nurture its own human capital if any real gains are to be made in society?

Prinsloo and Louw (2006, 297) quite aptly urge universities to ‘define anew what it means to be human’ and to allow it to be reflected in policy and praxis, in process and product and in management and interpersonal interaction. We argue for prioritising this notion into the higher education workplace and creating a welcoming and inviting work environment so as to serve humanity and assist in the ‘wider project of human progress’ (Le Grange 2006, 370). This issue cannot be underscored enough in changing a current hostile and uninviting academic environment to one conducive to the well-being of its academic staff.

Against the background of the above, we frame the research within workplace wellness, a field which is understandably gaining interest worldwide. Workplace wellness, according to Shain (in McKeown 2001) is an approach for protecting and enhancing the health and well-being of employees and which relies and builds upon the efforts of employers to create a supportive management culture on the one hand and upon the efforts of employees to contribute to their own well-being on the other hand, a dual responsibility of employer and employee. The rationale for such an approach is that a healthy workplace increases firstly the individual’s well-being, the overall morale of the workforce, but also productivity, efficiency and cost effectiveness (Community Health Services Department 2001). More often than not, a higher education institution places cost effectiveness and efficiency first and the individual’s well-being last, if anywhere at all. A rearrangement of priorities is therefore advocated.

Key factors that influence wellness in the workplace are, that is, a physical environment which is a healthy, well-designed and safe place to work; a psychosocial environment with a ‘culture’ that supports employee well-being and effective work practices; personal resources, such as having control over your work and health, being able to cope with stress and knowing that there is support available when needed; as well as personal health practices, with opportunities to make healthy lifestyle choices.
that support long term health and well-being (McKeown 2001). Furthermore, to facilitate the above, the Canadian National Quality Institute provides a framework for developing and sustaining a healthy workplace through four essential drivers, that is, leadership, planning, people focus and process management, whilst a fifth part, outcomes, is designed to reflect the results and effects of the organization’s healthy workplace efforts.

McKeown (2001) sites an example of a leading company competing in a global market, whose success comes through commitment to their employees. This is aligned with their business strategy through the belief that ‘basic human values go hand-in-hand with good business’. Their core values, considered essential to their success, are: mutual trust; genuine concern and respect for people; integrity and commitment to excellence. The employees of this particular company rate their workplace as the best. In evaluating the workplace, as the survey suggests below, it becomes clear that workplace wellness should be a priority, lest the workforce is to suffer burn-out!

In a recent national survey in Canada, (Buffett Taylor National Wellness Survey Report 2000) respondents identified main health risks and ranked stress the highest (cited by 83%), then ‘smoking’ (57%), ‘unable to balance work and family’ (55%) and ‘feeling of loss of control over work schedule and environment’ (53%). These findings can possibly be generalized to South Africa too, even more so in times of constant change and pressure to perform. Considering the above, facilitating workplace wellness becomes a necessity which would contribute to the well-being of the individual, the institution and society at large.

**RESEARCH QUESTION AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVE**

Against the background of the above rationale for this research, the research questions can be formulated as follows:

- What are the experiences of academic staff regarding the management of an incorporation process?

- How do they perceive the effect of the incorporation process on themselves?

We therefore intended to explore the experiences of academic staff regarding the management of an incorporation process, framed by workplace wellness.
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

A qualitative, explorative, descriptive, contextual and holistic research design was used (Burns and Grove 1993; Creswell 1994; Morse 1991; Mouton and Marais 1994). This approach is suited to the purpose of the study, namely to understand the deeper meaning of the personal experiences of academic staff with regard to the management process of the incorporation of colleges into a university. Qualitative research gives a rich description of the phenomenon under investigation (Vorster 1995). In this case study, three colleges of education incorporated into a university Faculty of Education, is used to achieve the above. This can only serve to highlight the demanding expectations the Department of Education has of the personnel in this faculty at this university.

Participants

We acknowledge that the full complement of staff at the colleges of education, as well as the receiving university, is affected by such an incorporation, but being academics ourselves, we focussed on the experiences of only the academic staff, thereby not ignoring, denying or minimizing the effect on the administrative support staff.

Table 1: Biographic information of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Years of experience in HE</th>
<th>Post Level</th>
<th>University/College background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Coloured</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Coloured</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>HOD</td>
<td>College &amp; University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>African</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Lecturer (and acting HOD)</td>
<td>College &amp; University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Coloured</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Coloured</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>HOD</td>
<td>College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>African</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>White</td>
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<td>College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>African</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>White</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
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<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Dean</td>
<td>University</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The fourteen participants were purposively selected for their ability to contribute rich information to the question under investigation (Creswell 1998). They were a heterogeneous group of seven male and seven female academics, African, coloured and white, ranging from lecturer to Dean, some from the colleges being incorporated and some from the receiving university. The participants were between the ages of 31 and 63, with experience at higher education institutions ranging from 3 to 35 years. Although there is a dearth of literature on how variables like the above influence job satisfaction and well-being of academics in times of transformation, we were more interested in exploring these participants’ experiences of the management of the incorporation. Informed consent was acquired from the participants and ethical measures, such as voluntary participation, confidentiality and anonymity were adhered to (Burns and Grove 1993; Creswell 1994).

Data collection and analysis

Individual interviews ranged from an hour to an hour and a half, and were held in a board room at the receiving university. Only one question was asked: ‘How did you experience the management of the incorporation of the college into the university?’ When necessary, further questions where asked to clarify what was said.

The interviews were recorded on audio-tape and transcribed. The transcribed data were analysed and coded according to Tesch’s method (Creswell 1994) and units of meaning were identified and arranged into four central themes, along with suitable categories. An independent re-coder (another researcher who is knowledgeable about qualitative analysis) also analysed the data, after which a consensus discussion was held (De Vos 1998). Measures of trustworthiness were applied, i.e., credibility (truth value), transferability (applicability), dependability (consistency) and confirmability (neutrality) (Krefting 1991; Lincoln and Guba 1985). This research, being qualitative in nature, does not aim to generalize its findings, but is exploratory in nature. Some guidelines are suggested in the conclusion to facilitate workplace wellness.
RESULTS

Table 2: Experiences of the management of incorporation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Categories</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 1: The incorporation was not well-managed</strong></td>
<td>● Communication</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Consultation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Psychological consequences of a lack of ownership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 2: Academics were not adequately prepared for the incorporation</strong></td>
<td>● Procedures were disorganised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Misconceptions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>● Division among staff</td>
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<td></td>
<td>● Stressful experiences</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 3: Academics have mixed opinions about support received during the incorporation</strong></td>
<td>● Supportive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Unsupportive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 4: Academics devise their own ways of dealing with incorporation challenges</strong></td>
<td>● Rationalisation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Strengthening relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Requesting support</td>
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<td></td>
<td>● Problem solving</td>
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</table>

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Themes emerged around an action (or lack of action) on the part of management and the consequential perceived effect thereof on the emotional and psychological well-being of the academic staff. The findings are presented, using direct quotations, and are substantiated by means of a discussion to recontextualise it in terms of relevant literature. This is done after presenting the categories of each theme.

Theme 1: The incorporation was not well managed

Communication

Botha’s (2001) 20-step model for mergers clearly point to the extreme importance of communication with the constituents and their involvement in the process, and that regular feedback needs to be maintained. This appears to be the key ingredient missing in this case study focusing on the incorporation of colleges, affecting the well-being of academics.

The lack of communication from the authorities in charge, be it the Department of Education or the management of the receiving Faculty at University becomes quite clear in the participants’ words, ‘The communication itself was virtually nil’
and ‘Even after we had applied here [for the posts at the University] there was no communication from Bisho saying that … “this is what we have decided”’. At the receiving institution the same problem occurred in that ‘… communication was lacking here [at the University]’.

**Consultation**

Besides not being informed, the exclusion from consultation or decision making contributed to the frustration of academics: ‘Besluite word geneem deur bestuur sonder dat jy geraadpleeg is’ (Decisions are taken by management without consulting you) (referring to the university context after academic positions had been taken up).

**Psychological consequences of a lack of ownership**

A further exacerbating situation was the perceived lack of willingness, on behalf of the Department of Education, to take ownership of the resulting problems, leaving the participants feeling burdened in that the incorporation and its confusion were perceived to become their own problem to solve, ‘… want toe’s dit nou my probleem en nie hulle s’n nie …’ (… then it became my problem and not theirs …).

The participants also interpreted the reasons for the silence from those in power in terms of its effect on their psyche. ‘They … played a psychological game …’ in that when rumours about the impending incorporation were heard and were questioned, they [the Department of Education] ‘… tried to put out the fires …’ and made it off by saying ‘… What do these people know?’ and thereby again devaluing the academic staff members.

The participants also perceived the timing of the announcement to be deliberately disabling, in that ‘… typically Government, they make sure when they do such things, that it is before a holiday – when people are spread out … away from the place …’. According to the participants the news of the incorporation only broke in the last week of the fourth quarter, ‘… we got communication from … the university saying that the Department has informed them that they are taking over the students … and that there would be posts … we can apply …’.

Discrepancies in the messages added to the emotional insecurity, as ‘… all [must] report back to the college in January next year … ‘ yet on ‘… the eighteenth of December, I received a phone call … to come to the University …’. Such mixed messages did not facilitate trust and caused insecurity about a core issue in any person’s life, namely his/her job. Pulling the carpet from under the feet of the staff caused ‘… verwarring … tussen die dosente van die kollege hulself …’ (confusion … among the lecturers of the college themselves) as previously they had ‘… felt reasonably secure … three nearest colleges were going to be clustered. Nothing was really going to change …’ and ‘… it was still going to be a training college’.
Further confusion and insecurity were caused by the potential work options: one possibility was retraining and then redeployment in the Department of Education, the other was taking up a position at the university. Both options contained its own uncertainties: The first option was untenable for most staff and their families as ‘… you have your home here … do I just lock up my house and hope for the best … they send you to the region …’. On the other hand, if they took up position at the receiving university, the insecurity of the future again became worrisome in that ‘… if you apply for a post here … what happens after the students have been phased out?’ The possibility of becoming redundant was raised as follows: ‘We help the Department out of their predicament to come and assist in the phasing out of students and now we are told that no provision has been made for us.’ Hence insecurities and questions about the future were foremost in their minds.

The work and opportunities at the receiving university were also not clearly spelt out, as specific job descriptions were lacking, ‘… gaan ons basies net vir Universiteitstudente klasgee of gaan ons net konsentreer op … Kollege-studente? … Sal ons toegelaat word om verder te studeer? Gaan ons navorsing doen en sulke dinge? (… are we basically only to lecture university students, or are we only going to focus on … College students? Will we be allowed to study further? Could we do research and things like that?). These issues, not having been clearly communicated, caused more uncertainty and contributed to staff insecurities. Surely one is entitled to know exactly what your position will entail and what your conditions of service will be. ‘It came at a time of great uncertainty’ as ‘… all we had to cling to … was a letter [from the Dean of the Faculty at the university] saying that … secondment has been granted for the year …’. ‘So we don’t know whether we took the right step’. Fears around such feelings are aptly summed up as follows: ‘… it’s scary to most people, because … we don’t know if you will still have your jobs’.

If the playing field was clearly explained (and levelled) and the rules of the game agreed upon through consultation and communication, the perceived difference in status of teaching at a college and at a university would not have caused feelings of inferiority to come to the fore, as in ‘… immediately the people looked down on us’ [the College lecturers]. The university staff saw it in a different light: ‘… some of them [College staff] came with an attitude of thinking that they are lower … trying to prove themselves … competing against us, because they feel inferior, because they come from a College’. Relating to new staff members added strain in that ‘I had to form relationships with the new staff and they had their ideas … at times it was a bit irritating for me’.

Considering the three categories above, it emphasizes that transformation and change contribute to increased job dissatisfaction and work-related stress and a decline in the commitment and loyalty to the institution, as Pienaar and Bester
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(2006, 581) also suggest. Such issues furthermore cause many uncomfortable feelings, which erode confidence in oneself as a person in general, but also as an academic in particular, which add stress and lack of emotional well-being (Olivier 2005). Academic staff should have a voice and want a voice in what happens at their institution and to them personally (Olivier 2005).

Poor communication from the institution authorities, existing authoritarian management structures, lack of consultation and top-down communication (Oshagbemi 1996; Olivier, De Jager, Grootboom and Tokota 2005), as well as the lack of a trusting relationship, as presented in the quotations above, do not encourage a sense of well-being. Such treatment tarnishes the public image and status of academics (Anderson, Richardson and Saha 2002), but also negatively affects their sense of self-worth. This subsequently contributes to dissatisfaction and frustration in the workplace, which as mentioned earlier, is related to academics leaving higher education institutions (Spector 1997) to find greener pastures elsewhere. The rate at which academics are leaving, according to Koen (2003), is cause for concern, as this has a direct impact on the viability and quality of higher education in South Africa.

The above also concurs with Broadbent’s (1997) findings that feelings of not being kept well-informed, and a loss of confidence in oneself and in management, co-exist during such upheaval in the higher education institution landscape. The experiences of an incorporation and or merger have similarities to an employee starting out in a new career, requiring communicating of clear expectations, information about policy, procedures, systems, structures (Schreuder and Coetzee 2006), and feedback to facilitate satisfactory absorption into the new institution. An additional problem is that most communication, when it happens, happens through the use of technology, specifically email, thereby curtailing the important face to face interaction which used to build a sense of cohesion amongst academics.

Many questions could therefore be raised: Why is it so difficult for higher education institutions to communicate with its academic staff? What do higher education institutions value? It is so bent on managerialism that it loses its purpose of developing human capital, for individual and institutional good, but also for public good? Higher education institutions are dependent on intellectual capital and commitment of their staff (Oshagbemi 2000) and its success and functioning depends on such human capital. It is therefore extremely urgent that research into the quality of worklife of academics be undertaken (Monnapula-Mapesela 2002), so that these issues could be earnestly acted upon.
Theme 2: Academics were not adequately prepared for the incorporation

**Procedures were disorganised**

Little smoothing is apparently done in preparation for an incorporation and neither the provincial Department of Education, nor the receiving university, seem to have a properly planned procedure in place, according to Wyngaardt and Kapp (2004). This also became clear from the case study, and it took its toll on the well-being of both the incoming and receiving institution staff, in that they perceived ‘… the handling of the process … putrid’, ‘… there was no preparation’, ‘and we were not ready for that …’, ‘… I think it was … disorganised for me, the whole management’, leaving them feeling bewildered. This concurs with Hay, Fourie and Hay’s (2001) findings.

**Misconceptions**

Inadequate preparation led to misconceptions in that staff were under the impression that colleges were to be clustered and felt ‘… reasonably secure … was going to be our sister college, so that was fine’. They were expecting that ‘… nothing was really going to change …’. Many meetings focused on securing positions at the College, but did not focus on preparation for being incorporated into the receiving institution. They were ‘… nie voorberei om na ‘n ander omgewing te gaan of by ‘n ander instansie in te skakel nie’ (. . . not prepared to go to another environment or to slot into another organisation). In retrospect, many hours spent in meetings ‘… was net tydmors … want niks wat ons daar bespreek het, het enige bydrae gelewer nie’ (… was just a waste of time … because nothing we discussed there contributed to anything). Oftentimes the many discussions at ‘grass root level’ intended as input were disregarded by the authorities, leaving the staff feeling fooled, ignored and not valued.

The lack of preparation necessitated the provincial department to make the decision public in the press, which was demoralising. This was another untenable situation, being informed about your future in the media (papers) in another city ‘… read the Daily Dispatch of East London?’ and ‘… we suddenly realised that it is no longer business as usual’, ‘I don’t think it could have been worse’. Information, which seriously impacts on a person’s livelihood, was communicated in an impersonal and uncaring way, and resulted in ‘We just felt, you know that … is this what people think of us?’ There was no ‘… emotional preparation and so on …’, ‘… we were scared …’ and ‘… the morale of the College was very low’.
Division among staff

Another dilemma presented itself in deciding whether to apply for the limited positions at the receiving institution, as this had the potential to divide the college staff, ‘… you can apply and then … the staff was divided’. Malice also reared its head, as some staff members who opted to be placed in the department said ‘… there’s a new organogram out now [by the DoE] and you people from the University [who took up positions at the receiving university] feature nowhere’. This implied that there was no future for them in the Department of Education if the positions at the receiving universities didn’t materialise.

Furthermore it was mentioned that the new redeployment list, was ‘… unfair …’ and caused ‘… onenigheid …’ (discord), ‘… jealousy …’, ‘… animosity …’, ‘… suspicion …’ and ‘… clashes …’ amongst erstwhile colleagues who had been friends. A surprising issue was raised in that one of the participants was accused of being ‘… a traitor … because I’m among white people now, I’m trying to behave white’. Had there been prior planning and preparation of the staff, on behalf of the Department of Education and the receiving University, these dilemmas could have been avoided, the damage minimised and the well-being not compromised.

Stressful experiences

For many participants ‘The first day was very traumatic …’ as they had been ‘… wrenched away from [their] comfort zone’. The lack of basic working space and tools to effectively execute daily tasks were linked to and interpreted in terms of their own value as perceived by the receiving University. ‘When we came here you didn’t have an office to go to, there was no furniture …’ and ‘… even to get the furniture downstairs, I carried each and every table …’. This was further exacerbated by ‘… die rekenaar wat ek het is nie geskik vir die werk wat ek veronderstel is om te doen nie’ (… the computer I have is not suitable for the work I am supposed to do), ‘My e-pos het nooit gewerk nie’ (My email never functioned) and ‘Ek kon nooit eintlik druk nie’ (I could never actually print). ‘Ek deel nou ‘n kantoor met iemand’ (I now share an office with someone). The above inadequacies in terms of provision of resources made ‘… dit vir jou moeilik om jou werk te kan doen soos jy wil’ (… it difficult for one to do your work as you want to do it).

The change brought its own moral dilemmas, for example according to Faculty rules only 10% of the students may be failed and ‘Ek voel gegrief daardeur’ (I feel resentful because of that), because ‘Dis nou ons verantwoordelikheid dat hulle moet deurkom …’ (It is now our responsibility that they pass …). This had to happen in order to hurry through the pipeline students, because the Department had not made sufficient provision for them, ‘… so we had to lower our standards to reach their
level’ and that was perceived as ‘… not fair to university students … because their marks were not adjusted’. ‘To be honest, we … I … felt very unhappy’.

The students too, were not prepared for the change, and the interaction with the ‘pipeline’ students who had to be accommodated at the university, caused further stress, as ‘… we had a lot of problems with the students …’. It was perceived that some of them were reluctant to accept the change and deliberately tried to cause problems for the staff: ‘… they didn’t want to come here in the first place …’ and ‘… they really went out of their way to make … life as difficult as possible …’ and ‘… they tried to get away with not doing their work’.

In spite of being pleased to attend a university, which was deemed to have a higher status than a college, the demands of this reality added to the woes of the staff in that the college students were ‘… excited to come here, because it was their dream to come to University, but now that they are here … they can’t cope’. Animosity from the receiving university student body also added fuel to the fire ‘… van die [varsity] studente het gesê: “Wat soek julle hier? Julle hoort nie hier nie, julle is Kollege-studente”’ (… some of the [varsity] students said: ‘What are you doing here? You don’t belong here, you are College students’). Racism also reared its head ‘… it is also about racism …’ and high levels of ‘tensions’ were experienced. It was to be expected that the upheaval caused interrelationship problems, which added to the tension.

The workload was huge as, besides trying to deal with the daily problems, there were a ‘… magdom van studente wat nog nie klaar gemaak het nie’ (whole lot of students who had not yet finished) who required extra time, planning and emotional energy, as for many of the pipeline students the university expectations were ‘… bo hulle vuurmaakplek …’ (beyond their reach).

The lack of preparation of the students and consequently all their insecurities became a dilemma the staff had to deal with, which often, due to the nature thereof, caused further tension and stress, ‘… discipline was sadly lacking and they [students] have tried to turn everything into a political issue …’, ‘… to them to be part of this kind of an institution was a cultural shock. They were confronted first of all with White lecturers and … they were scared to express themselves in English …’ and therefore ‘the language issue becomes a barrier’, ‘… a big issue …’.

The lecturers would try to accommodate the students in various ways, thereby increasing their workload. ‘I … gave them the opportunity to respond in their own language, Afrikaans or Xhosa’. More support was required as some students didn’t ‘… understand a word …’. Furthermore, if you were a Black lecturer, ‘… they expect[ed] you to do favours for them, because you are a Black person [lecturer]’.

The issue of availability of a curriculum also became a dilemma, in that the required preparation was lacking, as is seen in the following quotation, ‘… they are
in third year, but that you can’t do third year English with them. You must do second
year English with them’ because of the difference in preparation. Furthermore ‘I
was given x group to lecture and there was no syllabus forthcoming.’ So we ‘…
het rondgeval om die kurrikulums te kry … eers hier in einde Mei ontvang …’
(floundered about to find the curricula … only received by the end of May’) and ‘…
ons het ons eie geskep en ek het baie geleen’ (we created our own and I borrowed
a lot).

Considering the above categories, it becomes clear that at every turn the staff had
to perform reactively, had to improvise and all due to lack of thorough preparation
for the arrival of the staff and students, as well as a disregard for them as persons.
Regarding the students, Lillydahl and Singell (1993) also found that the quality of
the students extends the workload and fuels frustration (Olivier et al. 2005). The
lack of good quality infrastructure also exacerbates the situation, as Holland (2003)
highlighted. Olivier (2005), as well as Pienaar and Bester (2006), concur in this
regard that academics’ expertise must be appreciated, acknowledged, and supported
for example, with administrative assistance and by mentor colleagues, in so doing
eradicating the need for contingency management of presenting dilemmas and the
resultant feelings of being overwhelmed and overloaded.

The above points to the fact that it cannot be denied that institutional change
contributes to stress (Olivier et al. 2005), especially if the change is not well managed.
Furthermore, the increased workload exacerbated unhappiness and dissatisfaction
(Mammen 2006). An extremely important recommendation made by Pienaar and
Bester (2006), suggests that the tasks of academics need to be redesigned to address
the issue of overload, not only in mergers or incorporations, but in the higher
education institution landscape as a whole.

Theme 3: Academics have mixed opinions about support received
during the incorporation

In this theme there are two sides to the argument, one of perceived support and one
of lack of support.

Supportive

Some participants felt accepted and supported in the receiving faculty, as colleagues
and worthy human beings in the academic context of the university. ‘We were like …
very taken aback, because … right from the start we were referred to as colleagues’
and ‘… the human aspect … compensated for most of the other … inconveniences
that we were exposed to …’, ‘… so for me it was very positive to be here’. Working
with faculty members seemed satisfactory, as ‘Hulle was baie tegemoetkomend gewees …’ (They were very accommodating).

For some the working conditions were pleasant, such as a ‘… fantastiese kantoor … ‘n rekenaar …’ (fantastic office … a computer) and ‘… lieflike voordele … studeer, navorsing, kongresse’ (… wonderful advantages … studying, research, conferences). All of this contributed to a sense of well-being in that some were ‘gelukkig met verandering’ (happy with changes) and ‘… it was like being in heaven’. Some found it ‘… very refreshing … were invited to engage in all kinds of activities … worthwhile and rewarding …’ and ultimately ‘I think I am accepted on the staff …’.

**Unsupportive**

On the other hand some of the staff experienced it as unsupportive as ‘I do not think that I did get the support from the faculty, from management’. Some felt that the administrative support personnel were not briefed on or prepared for working with the incoming staff and that ‘… you could sense that some people didn’t really accept us …’. When asking for assistance in for example typing, the response was that ‘We are not here to do your typing …’, which resulted in that ‘… you felt that these people felt you were intruding here …’ and ‘… looked down on us’.

Another discomforting issue was that the participants felt that they had to abide by whatever decision regarding their teaching had been taken at the ‘top’ of the receiving university (top-down decisions), ‘… because it was a decision from above’ and that ‘… ‘n aankondiging gemaak is dat ek dit nou nie meer doen nie ….’ (an announcement was made that I now no longer did it) and then ‘just to be told that now “this will be happening” – you see, you were not actually involved’.

An important issue in the emotional well-being of academic staff is the perception that all colleagues are working together for the same good and that moral support is provided. In an academic environment, however, too often too much effort is put into developing an own academic career, not at the expense of the other, but most often neglecting providing moral support and encouragement to each other. This lack is mentioned as follows, ‘Hier is nou nie eintlik iets wat my geestelik ondersteun in daai opsig nie’ (I do not actually have something that supports me spiritually in that regard), and ‘… I simply would have liked to have more guidance’.

The above two opposing categories concur with Mammen’s (2006) statement that in the higher education discourse the academic as a human being and the support he or she requires to have job satisfaction, appears to be totally ignored when issues like academic restructuring, strategic planning, revision of programmes, quality assurance and total quality management are discussed. In this regard Olivier’s (2005) research highlights the importance of supporting academics, as more than
40% of academics in her study were of the opinion that the lack of support stressed them out. Williamson (1990) places the task of ensuring that staff is engaged in continuous professional development, on the shoulders of the chief manager of the department, school or faculty, so as to ensure satisfaction, a sense of being able to do the work well, and to experience a sense of well-being.

Trying to ascertain where the differences in perceptions (and experiences) of the same situation, that is, the incorporation come from, one could ask whether for some it is the draw of luck/bad luck? Is it a personal philosophy to envisage the positive in a situation and to work with what you’ve got? Or is it about agency? Is it about emotional strength? Or are some just so exhausted, overextended and stressed, that not one more bit of change could be handled? Referring to the dual responsibility of ensuring workplace wellness, what could university management do to contribute to workplace wellness, to ensure that the academic staff feel valued and supported in the challenges they face in a changing university landscape?

Theme 4: Academics devise their own ways of dealing with incorporation challenges

The incorporation process itself contained a variety of problems, which caused certain feelings to emerge, as discussed in the previous themes. However, the problems had to be dealt with in some way or another. Some of the participants mentioned how they went about trying to deal with the presenting problems, reflecting a sense of agency and self-efficacy.

Rationalisation

Some staff members rationalised that being incorporated into the university was a better deal for both staff and students from the college and that the new situation was a ‘… blessing in disguise … get more experiences at tertiary level …’ and for the students ‘… a great opportunity …’.

Strengthening relationships

In their own way the staff tried to facilitate the optimal functioning of the students by ‘… probeer help …’ (trying to help) and being accommodating in having ‘… a real open-door policy’. Such help was rewarded by gratefulness ‘… studente waardeer dit …’ (students appreciate this), which was reciprocated by ‘… be[ing] more sympathetic to them …’. In this way strengthening the existing relationships between staff and students was a reciprocal supportive strategy.

Incorporating the many students caused problems and strained the relationship between staff and students. In coping with this, the staff tried to make allies of the
students by arguing that ‘… the lecturers were also incorporated like the students … and were in the same boat …’. However, they highlighted that the students had the better deal in that ‘… their own lecturers did come to see them through …’. Hence trying to find allies appeared to be one way for some staff to deal with this problem.

**Requesting support**

Another strategy was to ask for support, as ‘… initially we didn’t get support, but when we approached … people in academic management level, they were prepared to guide us …’. Some of the receiving academic staff were singled out as being helpful and supportive, ‘… hy was rêrig ’n bron van inligting’ (he was genuinely a source of information).

**Problem solving**

Others had different ways of dealing with problems. Some were drawing on their own strengths, such as problem solving, ‘I had … my own means of dealing with the situation’ and ‘… I can find a solution, I’ll look for one’. An approach of if you can’t beat them, join them, worked for others, ‘I got involved with top management with the planning of programmes …’. Conflicts were resolved by either ‘I had to put myself in their position’ or ‘… gaan na persoon en praat dit uit …’ (go to person and talk it through), or to befriend and help ‘… so I share with them some of the coping strategies that I developed’.

The emotional strength of some staff was clear in their willingness to do the best under given circumstances, ‘… You just … go with your gut feeling and try to make the best out of it …’ and then to ‘… just keep on going …’ and ‘… adjust …’. It appeared that some were determined to make it work, ‘We decided … we’re not going to let this defeat us … going to make the best of it’.

It is also interesting to note that the transcendental realm was drawn upon, as is usually done in a traumatic or stressful situation ‘… and then of course what I normally do is pray … and that helps me …’.

It is important to note that the above categories reflect that staff not only saw the problems, but that they indeed were able to take charge and work towards a solution, creating a better deal for themselves and accepting their part of the dual responsibility referred to above. This concurs with Wyngaardt and Kapp (2004) in that one has to accept the real situation and then contribute to one’s own destiny in a positive way. In spite of their own strategies to cope with the challenges of transformation and change, literature such as Venter (1998) urges that leadership and management styles and skills of people in management positions be attended to.
The effect of inappropriate styles has been clearly revealed in this article. Van Tonder (1993) too, concurs and found that when management modified management behaviour, staff thrived emotionally and professionally. Furthermore, it is important that institutions counter the heavy workload and extreme responsibility which academics have, by creating comfortable, supportive environments (Horning 2007). Along the same line of argument Steyn and Van Wyk (1999), as cited by Mammen (2006), found in their study that there was considerable scope for eliminating sources of dissatisfaction in the work environment. We believe Johnson (2006, 67) touches on the key issue in higher education institutions, when in his study he bemoans the fact that ‘the social fabric … has disintegrated’ and that the absence of informal spaces ‘creates a vacuum in academic practice in which critical discourse previously developed and flourished’, but also where collegiality was appreciated, encouraged, where concerns were voiced and often resolved.

Filling this vacuum can recapture what once was deemed the most important in academia, namely developing the human, and in so doing enabling academic staff and students alike to approach the complex challenges of life. This might possibly help nurture intellectual and human capital, and also contribute towards retaining academics in the higher education institutions. That management invariably is the key to the wellness of an institution cannot be emphasised enough; they hold the power to create an academic environment that is nurturing. According to Johnson (2006, 68) institutions ‘do not need managerialism but a management that is close to staff and in touch with the local context and specific concerns’. This would ring in an acceptable and pleasant change in the work environment and workplace wellness.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Johnson’s (2006) notion that little research is available about how the process of institutional change (in this instance incorporation into a university) affects academic staff or what could be done to support them, alerted us to the dearth in research which this article has tried to fill. As suggested by Shain (cited by McKeown 2001) and referred to previously in the article, enhancing well-being of employees, and creating workplace wellness, is a dual responsibility of employer and employee. We have, however, seen that the academic staff most often felt that they had to fend for themselves as the management in the higher education institution did not fulfil their side of the deal. This becomes clear in the apparent mismanagement of the incorporation, including the lack of communication, consultation and ownership, along with its psychological consequences, clearly affecting the functioning and well-being of academics in the workplace. The inadequate preparation for incorporation resulted in disorganised procedures, misconceptions, division among staff and
traumatic experiences that impacted on the sense of well-being and self-worth of
the academic staff members and on workplace wellness as a whole.

They were left in the dark about decisions taken, were excluded from negotiations,
no preparations were made for them and they had to resolve dilemmas as best they
could on their own, by relying on personal resources to ‘help them stay on their feet’
(Price 1999). This has implications for the higher education institutions, not only in
merger or incorporation processes, but in every day dealings with staff members.
The importance of nurturing the academic staff in order to retain them in academia,
but more importantly to ensure their personal and professional well-being in the
workplace, clearly needs to be prioritised.

McKeown’s (2001) notion of an institution’s success through commitment to
their employees, built on core values such as mutual trust, genuine concern and
respect for people, integrity and commitment to excellence, suggests a first, but
gigantic step towards creating a work environment conducive to the personal and
professional well-being of academic staff. Moutlana (2006) sums up our research with
her suggestion of how to make implementation and management of transformation
and change effective, namely, to think and act in synch, harness people power and
communicate, be practical and flexible, all which adds up to workplace wellness.

Clearly it is important that nurturing the human capital can help address the multi-
facetted challenges that academics at higher education institutions face (Olivier
2005) and help facilitate change. Not only should policies and practices reflect and
take into consideration the well-being of persons working in the institutions, but
perhaps it is time to appoint workplace wellness managers, in line with practice in
industry elsewhere in the world and in South Africa. Might we reach a point where
higher education institutions run surveys to stay in touch with staff needs and then
act to make the working environment pleasant, as is done in industry (Du Toit, cited
by Horning 2007). Might we employ resident psychologists and counsellors for
personal and work-related stress, have a canteen for breakfasts and lunches (and
even for meals to take home!), have secure parking at no cost, and so on. Might
we join industry in evaluating our institutions, not only in terms of research output,
teaching, and community outreach, but in terms of being the best place to work at?

In times of constant change and transformation it is important to care and nurture
human capital through ensuring workplace wellness, as ‘education systems cannot
afford to sacrifice their very valuable human resources’ (Hay and Fourie 2002, 30).
Perhaps this is the key lesson to be learnt from this research?
REFERENCES


N. de Lange and M. A. J. Olivier


