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MANAGEMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

The merger of historically disadvantaged tertiary institutions in South Africa: A case study of the University of Limpopo

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Abstract: Since the merger, few attempts have been made to interrogate the role of leadership on the operational stability of the new university. By employing a qualitative approach, this study allowed the participants to construct an accurate and, in-depth account of what really transpired during and after the merger. A case study design was used to focus intensely on the leadership challenges bedeviling the merger, using descriptive themes and qualifying vocabulary. Ten Project Steering Committee members of the merged institution were purposively selected to participate in the study. It was ascertained that most of the merger challenges related to poor communication, lack of stakeholder convergence, absence of buy-in from influential constituencies, lack of coherent strategies to deal with change and a lack of trust among the key drivers of the merger. It is recommended that government needs to ensure that future university mergers are stakeholder, rather than politically driven.

Subjects: Social Sciences; Economics, Finance, Business & Industry; Education

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The post-apartheid government inherited a plethora of higher education institutions (HEI), some of which were highly dysfunctional, resource heavy and a political decision was made to rationalise HIEs by merging some. Although these were involuntary associations, the mergers proceeded despite intense opposition from the entities affected.

From a study of the merger of two historically disadvantaged institutions, attempts have been made to interrogate the role of leadership on the stability of the university, using a case study design. Most of the challenges related to poor communication, lack of stakeholder convergence, absence of buy-in from influential constituencies, lack of coherent strategies to deal with change and a lack of trust among the key drivers of the merger. The primary lesson for government is to ensure that future university mergers are driven by leadership with little or no vested interest.

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1. Introduction and background

In South Africa (SA), the merger of Historically Disadvantaged Tertiary Institutions (HDTI) is riddled with controversies, structural inefficiencies and to some extent far-reaching strategic imperfections (Du Toit, 2014). Tilak (2011) noted that the post-1994 government adopted the merger model with the view to improve the operating and financial leverage of struggling HDTIs. According to Du Toit (2014) who cited Nkondo (2001) and Marginson (2010), the motive for such a move was always to create an even playing field. The SA government saw the higher education mergers as an opportunity to rid the post-1994 academic system of deep-rooted apartheid era distortions and inequalities in the broad education system. Confronted with a less lenient and unkind post-1994 socio-economic landscape, the fact is that many HDTIs opted to merge to remain afloat, relevant and competitive (Chipunza & Gwarinda, 2010). Du Toit (2014) argued that the merger initiative became the government's policy instrument to save the HDTIs from the challenges threatening their viability.

According to Higher Education South Africa (HESA, 2012), the argument in favour of mergers made a lot of economic sense, and Jansen (2004) noted that by pooling the material, intellectual and technical assets of HDTIs, a powerful and world-class learning institution would be without doubt effortlessly created. Despite all the known spinoffs of merged HDTIs, the merger path had its own setbacks and roadblocks, and Dominguez-Whitehead (2011) argued that owing to one reason or another, most merged HDTIs failed to make a meaningful impact.

Some critics of the merger like Vinger and Cilliers (2006) felt vindicated when the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) conceded that most merged HDTIs were facing challenges despite the injection of billions of rands into their operations. Tilak (2011), cited by HESA (2012) also confessed that the merger agenda dismally failed to ignite a spark. In diagnosing the major reasons behind the failure of most merged HDTIs, Tilak (2011) argued that weak leadership was behind most of the misfortunes that befell emerging universities. Chipunza and Gwarinda (2010) also laid the blame squarely on the doorsteps of HDTIs managers and leaders. Factually, most of those at the helm of the merged HDTIs were not ready for the merger challenges (Jack, 2007), and owing to the complexity of mergers, Jansen (2004) blamed inept leadership capabilities as the chief cause. The point raised by Chipunza and Gwarinda (2010) is that the government under-estimated the complexity of the task ahead.

Nolte (2010) argued that bringing two tertiary institutions sharing different historical origins, diverse value systems, racial and language persuasions, was not a fluke. Given SA's documented history of racially profiled poverty and socio-economic inequalities, Nolte (2010) noted that from the beginning, all merged HDTIs were founded on incoherent and illogical assumptions. The erroneous assumption was that those entrusted to drive the merger had the pedigree to effectively lead the process.

Although, the merger idea was laudable, Vinger and Cilliers (2006) lamented that the dearth of transformational leadership was the weak-link. Ironically, transformational leadership has been cited by Chipunza and Gwarinda (2010), and Jack (2007) as the secret weapon behind the success of any merger transaction, and they also argued that a lack of it (leadership) can easily cripple the operational efficiency of an otherwise winning merger deal. Dominguez-Whitehead (2011) also caution that without the exploits of remarkable leadership, many merged HDTIs experienced dire operational and budgetary constraints. He argued strongly that the burden of running merged HDTIs was not only complex and demanding, but so real and unprecedented.

A review of the leadership literature by Myatt (2013) shows that leaders can no longer escape scrutiny when the institutions they lead fall on hard times. Myatt (2013) argues that it is the primary duty of transformational leaders to steer the organisations they lead to high performance and productivity, even during times of chaos. According to Tilak (2011), what merged universities need are leaders with the pedigree to propel them into sustainable competitiveness and academic excellence even with little resources. The issue of whether leadership at merged universities had enough pedigree to transform the institutions into centres of excellence has not been properly examined, from the perspective of events that happened during and after the merger period.

In the view of Kahney (2008), the 21 leaders are considered the heartbeat of institutional success and their actions cannot escape public scrutiny. On the other hand, Albert, Kuper and Hodges consistently argue that leadership deficit is a cancerous liability organisations need to decisively deal with, if they are to remain relevant. What leaders do with public resources and legislative mandates need to be objectively assessed in terms of whether their actions and decisions yield desired returns on every rand invested in the public institutions they lead. In other words, given their strategic contribution to the broader nation-building agenda of SA, this study argues that all things being equal, merged HDTIs must be placed under the stewardship of capable, accountable and effective leaders. This study aims to provide a source of reflective knowledge on what needs to be done to proactively align leadership practices of merged HDTIs with acceptable codes of best leadership practices.

While extensive research has been done to profile and weigh the merits and demerits of merging HDTIs, little work has been done to investigate the transformational role played by the leadership in ensuring that merged HDTIs remain focused on building stable, sustainable and resilient centres of excellence. In light of the above, this article strives to critique the leadership which was prevalent in most HDTIs in SA during and after the merger, using the University of Limpopo (UL) as a case study. The aforementioned institution was the result of a merger of the former University of the North (UN) and the Medical University of South Africa (MEDUNSA). The origins of the merger are traced in terms of the founding statements, its contextual framework, leadership philosophy and other variables like lessons learnt, resource strengths and future opportunities.

More specifically, this article aimed to profile the transformational role played by the Project Steering Committee (PSC) which was mandated to conceptualise, lead and oversee the merger project between the UN and Medunsa. This article chronicles the challenges the leadership had to deal with during and after the merger, and in the process suggests measures the university might have adopted to address those challenges.

2. Research methodology

A qualitative methodology was preferred, because it presented an opportunity to investigate the underlying dynamics that influenced the way the PSC made certain merger decisions, using qualifying words and descriptive themes (Burns & Grove, 2009, p. 56). Unlike the quantitative method, the qualitative approach provided a platform through which the researcher directly interacted with certain participants who were intimately involved in the merger activity (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). In other words, through this approach, it was easier to target certain influential members of the PSC and in the process, committing them to share the UL merger story from their own perspective. However, as advised by Leedy and Ormrod (2010), reflective knowledge was used as a means to enhance the credibility of data collected from such individuals.

In this study, a case study design was used because it offered an authentic and detailed account of what transpired during and after the merger, more than any other research design could do. Leedy and Ormrod (2010) state that the aim of a case study design is to interpret and the research questions in terms of meanings people bring to them. Whilst the university staff of 240 employees constituted the study's population, only 10 participants were purposively selected to participate in the study. The purposive sampling technique was used because it offered the researcher an opportunity to target only individuals who were directly involved in steering and supervising the merger process. With the aid of semi-structured interview guides, data were collected through interviews and analysed narratively and inductively.

3. Findings

3.1. Profile of the participants

The position held within the university's decision-making hierarchy provided an indication of the measure of influence wielded by a particular individual during the pre-and post-merger period. Executive management comprised (25%), senior managers (33%), middle managers (17%) and line managers (25%).

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The issue of whether the participants had leadership experience, particularly within the narrative of a volatile university environment was deemed necessary for two reasons. Firstly, the study wanted to ensure that only participants with relevant leadership experiences were accorded an opportunity to tell the Limpopo University merger story within the context of their individual experiences. Secondly, it provided the participants the opportunity to construct the contextual meaning of the post-merger environment from the perspective of people who directly planned and implemented it. The vast majority (83%) of the respondents had 10 years management and leadership experience; 10% joined the university leadership between 11 and 20 years ago; 7% confirmed that they had more than 21 years' experience in managing a university environment. These data attest to the fact that the majority of the participants had some sort of "lived" experience in managing and leading a university's business operations.

3.2. Role of the university leadership

The primary aim of this was to gain insight into the "real" leadership challenges during the merger from the perspective of people who were directly involved in driving the project. The majority (60%) of the participants admitted that they were instrumental in driving the project's initiation phase, and all (60%) were involved in the project's conceptualisation phase, and performed various tasks of which the most notable included *inter alia*, attending stakeholder engagement meetings, preparing the merger concept document and travelling abroad on various fact-finding missions.

The planning period reflects the period when the merger concept was literally translated into a comprehensive and indicative project plan with time-framed deliverables and milestones. A team of technocrats drawn from various academic disciplines was mandated by the Department of Higher Education to craft a merger strategy and tactics document, which was later used to guide the merger roll-out process.

Only a small number of the participants (20%) played a notable role in shaping the merger's strategy and tactics document. By interpretation, those who participated in driving or steering the actual merger were in the minority. This was attributed to the fact that the planning function or activity was structurally reserved for those who originally occupied senior management or administrative positions.

Translation of the merger vision and goal into tangible or measurable outcomes is one of the core measures of leadership effectiveness. It became evident that some of those who were not involved in the implementation had only joined the university way after the merger was concluded.

When asked to specify the roles played during the implementation process, different activities were cited, depending on whether that particular individual was operating at a strategic, tactical and operational level. Those who were involved at strategic level were in the majority, (50%); followed by tactical level (30%) and lastly operational level (20%). Those who operated at strategic level were preoccupied with matters such as:

- Developing the guiding document that shaped and informed the whole structure of the merger.
- Providing transformational leadership, vision and oversight.
- Crafting the resource mobilisation plan and making resource allocation decisions.
- Collapsing cultural boundaries with the view to develop a single cultural framework.
- Strategic realignment, re-envisioning and value re-engineering.
- Steering or championing the change management agenda.
- Managing resistance to change and rallying internal stakeholders behind the new merger vision.
- Provide vital stakeholder interface particularly high-interest and high-influence stakeholders.

Those who were involved at tactical level confessed that they were responsible for driving the following activities:

- Conducting HR audits and placement decisions.
- Facilitating risk assessment workshops.
- Harmonising various policies across the two merging institutions.
- Directing the internal auditing effort of both campuses.
- Ensuring the marketing and communication functions of the two campuses were synchronised.
- Conceptualising the new entity brand and strategy.
- Reviewing the academic programmes of the two merging universities and developing a new academic structures.

At the operational level, the following activities were the most cited:

- Reviewing the status of business processes, work methods and procedures of the two campuses.
- Conducting data and harmonisation of filing systems.
- Synchronising the administrative charter of the two institutions.
- Asset re-evaluation and integrating the two institutions' asset registers.
- Harmonising security policies and procedures.

3.3. Merger vision

Van Tonder (2005, p. 45) asserts that articulating or selling a change vision to special interest stakeholders is one of the hallmarks of thoughtful leadership. The vast majority (80%) of the participants indicated that while the existence of a clearly defined merger vision could not be doubted, the vision was not properly communicated to stakeholders. Due to the lack of a winning communication plan, the participants were concerned that the merger vision received a "lukewarm" response from important constituencies, such as student organisations and trade unions. As expected, all the participants unanimously recognised the fact that putting in place a well-crafted merger vision was a critical success factor, and the presence of a shared vision was seen as instrumental or pivotal in rallying the support of different stakeholders behind the merger objective. One participant stressed that having a common merger vision was imperative in ridding the process of either real or perceived contradictions, misunderstandings, inconsistencies and ambiguities commonly prevalent in such large-scale "change" projects.

It became apparent that during the merger rollout period, no single leadership style was deemed dominant. The majority of the participants agreed that although to some extent leaders displayed some form of transformational leadership, they were instances where other leadership styles like situational and transactional leadership, were also at play. In short, the university leadership manifested a hybrid of transformational, transactional and situational leadership styles throughout the merger process. A strong emphasis on a vision-led merger agenda was credited for inspiring and rallying the stakeholders behind the new strategic path. Transactional leadership was clearly evident when various task teams drawn from the Merger Reference Group were dispatched to various constituencies to canvass support.

Situational leadership was noted when at some stages the leadership had to change some key elements of the merger at the last minute, due to pressure from unions and students. In response to such pressures, many concessions and compromises were made and as such the taskforce significantly amended or altered the merger original vision. One participant was quoted as saying;

I think the taskforce underestimated the level of contestations that comes with implementing such a complex transaction and as such, at some stage they were forced to make strategic adjustments in order to save the deal from total collapse.

At some point, due to unending disagreements on how the deal should be structured, the task team was compelled to make a number of compromises to appease those constituencies who felt the merger posed a danger to their future. The common concern raised was that stakeholder consultations were not thoroughly conducted during the conceptualisation phase of the merger. The low involvement of high-interest stakeholders like students and unions during the early stages of the merger was heavily criticised by some participants.

A number of participants commented that initially, the news about the merger was a closely guarded secret, and they argued that "the absence of an open-door engagement policy at the early stages unintentionally fed the 'rumour mill,' a development that threatened to scuttle the engagement process." One key leader who was directing the communication portfolio was quoted as saying "As gatekeepers of sensitive information, we were sharply rebuked by the hardliners for using heavy-handed tactics in controlling access to information."

The concern shared by many participants was that the absence of a proactive plan to actively engage the stakeholders during the initial phase of the merger nearly derailed its implementation. One participant recalled that "attaining constituency-wide convergence in an environment characterised by high-levels of organised contestations and institutionalised resistance to change was not an easy feat." At times, the taskforce was compelled to take bold and unpopular decisions and actions in order to accelerate the process and meet critical deadlines. One participant recalled that "whenever the task team took any tough stances, it was labelled by the 'anti-merger' hardliners as being too autocratic and undemocratic."

3.4. Merger challengers

Incidences of deep-seated mistrust and suspicion were reported during the pre-and post-merger periods. The participants reported that as soon as the merger process was officially launched, the relationships between the two institutions' employees was characterised by mistrust and allegations of horse trading. The breakdown in trust was fuelled by the fact that highly sensitive information about the merger was not tactfully communicated to people who were most likely to be affected by the merger. Allegations of failure to conduct a comprehensive and coherent skills audit which would in turn be factored into an inclusive HR structure were cited by the participants as one of the daunting challenges that haunted successive leaders of the university.

The redeployment of the two institutions' employees was cited as one of the daunting tasks that the taskforce faced. In the opinion of the participants, "one of the worst challenges that the new-look institution faced was the issue of integrating the employees using due labour processes." The following five factors made the integration process more complex: Firstly, the employees came from different cultural institutional settings. Secondly, their value and belief systems were different. Thirdly, the task team was embroiled in a controversial redeployment glitch, namely, employees from the two institutions were forcibly reassigned to different divisions without consultation. Fourthly, the reorganisation introduced an atmosphere of uncertainty and confusion. Those tasked with driving the merger process failed to agree on a coherent formula to distribute vacant posts evenly among the two institutions' former employees.

The fact that many key leadership positions were not filled immediately after the merger was highlighted by the participants as one of the principal reasons why the university failed to meet its performance deadlines. The lack of skilled and experienced personnel with vital change management skills was cited as the central concern by the participants. According to one of the participants, since most of the key positions like the Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor or Dean of faculties

were filled in an acting capacity, it was not surprising that the university failed to meet its key targets on time, as per the strategic plan.

It became evident that in the absence of a "scientifically-tested" process to rationalise the reward structure of the new entity, the taskforce battled to correct or realign the "perceived" salary disparities between the two institutions. The salary discrepancies among the employees operating at the same level were one of the contentious issues that pitted different groups against one another during the negotiation process. Despite convening numerous crisis meetings, the task team on HR constantly failed to adopt an agreed and equitable formula that would form the basis of the new entity's salary structure.

One of the challenges cited was that during the early stages of the merger, important information was not formally and tactfully communicated to the employees, and other key stakeholders like students and workers' unions. The participants commented that owing to the absence of a pragmatic communications strategy, the tensions between the employees and the taskforce spearheading the merger remarkably increased. Participants felt that the lack of an intelligent plot to sell or communicate the benefit propositions of the merger to the employees was the chief reason why the negotiations took longer than was anticipated.

The leadership had to grapple with the challenge of assuring increasingly anxious employees of the practical steps that they would follow to avoid the possibility of job losses due to the restructuring process. One participant reiterated that the news about the merger plunged the employees of the erstwhile institutions into paranoia and uncertainty. This was so because the merger was perceived by the unions as a subtle strategy by the government to retrench a significant number of employees.

The participants who were directly involved in the tightly contested negotiations conceded that the process was marred by one crisis after another. The ideological differences within the new entity were so profound, that the leadership literally spent the majority of their time attending crisis meetings. According to the participants, it was clear that the leadership of the two institutions were embroiled in an endless or fruitless leadership contest. The fact that the new entity lost four Vice-Chancellors within a short period of time, speaks volumes of the magnitude of institutional instability experienced during the period. It was also reported that the newly formed university operated for a lengthy period without the leadership of a properly constituted university council and executive management.

The merger was characterised by a high incidence of political meddling and interference. Participants reported that at some point, "political parties were allegedly at each other's throat with the view to influence how the interim leadership structure of the new university should be constituted." One participant recalled that "the jostling for top positions was so tense that it threatened to derail the entire merger process."

Participants lamented that most of the merger activities were not properly funded and as a result certain key project activities were either half done or abandoned at short notice. This led the task team to resort to "smash and grab" fundraising tactics in order to save the process from complete collapse. For instance, it was reported that the stakeholder engagement activity was not comprehensive as initially planned, because of the lack of sufficient funds. As a result the institution recorded subdued results on a number of fronts, and abandoned the Higher Education Quality Committee Audit exercise.

All the participants were united in articulating the fact that the merger was not an idea that originated from, nor sponsored by, the decision-making units of both the UN and Medunsa. Their view was articulated as follows: "Those of us who are conversant with the history of the merger know that the merger was imposed on the two institutions by the DHET. Initially, we raised concerns and resisted

the move because we foresaw its demise before it even started, but the DHET forced it upon us against our will." One participant was adamant that the merger presented a tough legal headache which the task team had to deal with on a daily basis. To start with, the appointment of the new institution's council and executive leadership, to give it statutory or legal effect, took some time. All participants reiterated that the voluntary liquidation of the two former universities which later paved the way for the creation of a single "mega" university could not have been possible without proper legislative amendments. However, everyone agreed that the drafting, adoption and promulgation of the relevant Act was not only a tedious issue, but rather a marathon and highly contested activity as well.

One challenge that the new leadership battled to address immediately after the conclusion of the merger was to harmonise the two former institutions' cultural and value systems which all participants agreed were initially "worlds apart." All participants admitted that collapsing the old cultural boundaries that used to define and shape the two former universities' ethos into a single and core cultural framework acceptable to all was not an easy feat.

3.5. Impact of the challenges

All the participants admitted that at the height of the intra-institution tensions, a number of employees were extremely stressed and visibly traumatised. Everyone agreed that the leadership had to propose extraordinary measures to deal with low levels of employee morale, and at least 50% of the participants conceded that the entire university environment was characterised by deep-seated resentment, frustration, suspicion and high levels of mistrust and uncertainty.

The participants bemoaned the fact that most of the middle and senior-level employees resigned "en-masse" due to the manner in which the redeployment was handled. To compound the situation, the interim leadership structure was also hit with a spate of resignations, as key individuals left in a huff before the expiry of their contracts. According to one participant, what triggered the resignations were "a strong suspicion within a certain section of employees that the merger process was nothing but a plot by the university leadership to rid the system of certain perceived enemies." Those who could not see their future in the "new look" institution saw the merger as an opportunity to look for opportunities elsewhere. At a time when the university desperately needed stability, it lost four Vice-Chancellors in a row in a very short period, and everyone agreed that the unannounced resignations at the top, plunged the whole merger process into a crisis.

Another issue raised was that due process was not followed to unwind the businesses of the two entities. By their own admission, the due diligence exercise which was supposed to be the precursor of the reorganisation was abruptly abandoned due to sharp differences in how the process should unfold. One participant who was a principal role player in the reconfiguration process complained that "due to political polarisation and ideological differences, a number of key elements of the merger process were not properly concluded." For instance, the important issue of how the resources were to be allocated between the two campuses was prematurely concluded as negotiators failed to agree on an acceptable resource allocation formula. The other bone of contention was how leadership positions were to be distributed between the two erstwhile universities.

One fundamental issue that was agreed on by the participants was that the merger initiative effectively divided the university stakeholders into two opposite fronts. One of the informants was quoted as saying "The unintended consequences of the merger initiative was that it caused major divisions as organised cliques and cabals worked flat out to out-flex each other with the aim being to control, or entrench their personal interests during the negotiation process."

"We had the anti-merger cabal which put up a brave fight to retain the status quo." This group made it clear that the merger was not internally driven, but a "forced marriage" imposed on them by the DHET. According to them, the merger of the two institutions was politically motivated and hence lacked merit from a rational perspective.

The respondents argued that the cost of the merger itself far outweighed its purported socio-economic benefits. In short, one participant who was directly involved in developing the guiding document stated that "the resistance against the merger was so fierce that some hardliners literally prayed that the merger talks would die a natural death." An observer who closely monitored the merger proceedings recollected that the task team had a torrid time in effectively selling the merger agenda to this anti-merger group. On the other hand, there was "this progressive front led by an external consultant who vehemently supported every progressive effort to accelerate the merger process." This group made frantic efforts to drive the merger vision and rally key groups around the merger, although they met stiff resistance from a more organised campaign against it.

The participants confirmed that at the height of the tensions, they often suffered open rebuke and ridicule from the anti-merger campaigners. One participant recalled that there were moments when people came close to exchanging blows during planning meetings as debates became fiercely contested. The resultant feature was that the two "fronts" ended up making strategic compromises which later on became costly and difficult to implement. According to some participants, one of the unintended consequences of the merger, which the new leadership had to contend with for some time, was to foster or instil a strong culture of accountability or to rid the new system of a growing tendency of impunity and indiscipline among the staff members. As one of the participants observed, the culture of impunity was so rampant that at some point, some elements within the university staff and student community thought they were untouchable.

An executive member of the university council stated that "the immediate test of the new leadership was to build a world-class university premised on the ethos of transparency, accountability and high levels of institutional integrity." He reminded everyone that, "there was a legitimate expectation from society for the new university to excel in its quest to balance the ethos of transparency, academic freedom, free speech and accountability."

The majority of participants consistently agreed that the act of unfreezing the merger literally plunged the university's service delivery machinery into perpetual paralysis. Two members of the current executive leadership who at some stage oversaw the transition process, recalled that at the height of the negotiations, many pipeline projects that were initiated during the pre-merger period were either unceremoniously abandoned or discontinued abruptly as focus shifted to the merger.

4. Discussion of the findings

It became apparent that the individuals who participated in the PSC had well-defined roles during the pre-and post-merger period, which were defined at three levels, namely strategic, tactical and operational. There are those who were influential in crafting the merger's project charter or founding ethos; these individuals operated at strategic level throughout the merger period, they were referred to as the "change strategists." According to Van Tonder (2005, p. 56) change strategists are "literally pioneers or drivers of the change agenda."

The PSC crafted a guiding vision that spelt out or visualised the strategic intent of the university's merger agenda. According to Le Grange (2011, p. 45), every taskforce mandated to drive the change agenda needed to ensure that any change initiative is premised on a well-crafted and articulated vision. While the PSC should be credited for ensuring the merger agenda rode on a well-written vision, Wright (2007, p. 234) warned that a vision alone without the backing of a sound or vibrant communication plan is bound to find no buy-in. It seems the PSC as the chief promoter of the merger agenda did not fully heed Wright's (2007) advice.

Even those who were directly involved in the merger process heavily criticised the manner in which the communication of merger-related matters was handled. The UL's Final Merger Report, (2005, p. 4) also sharply criticised the way in which the taskforce communicated the merger messages to key audiences like employees, unions and students. Thus, one of the key attributes of a transformational leader, namely, their "ability to visualise a compelling vision and then be able to

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excel in selling it to potential opinion takers," (Yukl, 1999, p. 45) was lacking, since the university leadership failed to maintain a single leadership style throughout the negotiation process. A close analysis of the views presented by the participants shows that although those tasked to drive the university's transformational agenda displayed some dominant attributes of transformational leadership, other leadership styles like situational or transactional styles were also displayed. The dominant view expressed by the majority of respondents is that due to the complexity of the merger and the level of resistance mounted by the anti-merger front, leaders were compelled to demonstrate a hybrid style of leadership. According to one member of the University Council, "one common factor that necessitated the adoption of a hybrid style of leadership was the fact that by its very nature, the merger represented a radical disengagement from the past." Everyone emphasised the point that relying on a single leadership philosophy and style was a risky venture. Whilst there were moments when the PSC had to dictate terms and impose its position, there were also moments when the same PCS had to present a democratic face in order to unlock extra value during the negotiation process.

On the other hand, transactional leadership was demonstrated when the PSC mounted a serious campaign in order to alert the stakeholders of the strategic necessity of the merger deal. This was achieved by crafting the project's strategic vision and overarching goals. This study noted that in the absence of a cost-benefit study, most leaders found it practically difficult to sell the benefits of the merger to an increasingly restive staff and student community.

One key player who acted as the "power broker" during the negotiation process confessed that due to the level of contestations, there were instances where the leadership had to use threats (authoritarian leadership) to unlock the stalled negotiation process. He stated that sometimes it was difficult to employ "democratic" principles because of the relentless pressure exerted on the PSC, by external partners like the DHET. In order to meet the stringent deadlines by the "Department," the leadership had no option but to employ dictatorial practices to fast-track the processes.

4.1. Leadership challenges

This study has shown that the PSC as the sole driver of the merger initiative encountered two major categories of challenges; namely internal and external challenges (UL Final Merger Report, 2005). These challenges and their impact on the university's leadership landscape are summarised in Figure 1.

Based on what was reported in the UL Final Merger Report (2005), and what Chipunza and Gwarinda (2010) noted, together with the views echoed by many participants who played an influential role in brokering the merger deal, it might be concluded that the merger between the former UN and Medunsa resembled all the features of a "forced marriage." The merger was also not backed up by sound budgetary support, and a failure to avail adequate funds to finance the merger process could be considered as one of the reasons why the merger failed to deliver on key targets.

Figure 1. Leadership challenges.

Internal challenges	External challenges	Impact of those challenges
• High levels of mistrust; • No comprehensive skills audit; • Unfillled vacant positions; • Disparity in salary packages; • Uncertainty about job security; • Protracted intra-conflict and long periods of instability	• Weak budgetary support; • Forced Marriage Argument; • Tedious legal procedure; • Cultural distance • Geographical distance	• Low employee morale; • Employee resignations • Unfinished business of the merger; • Divided the university into notable fronts; • Lack of accountability; • Poor service delivery performance

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The many challenges that bedevilled the new institution (UL) can be traced to the fact that there was no "change champion" with distinctive transformational leadership capabilities. One participant emphasised that "in the absence of such a charismatic leader in the team, the merger talks were void of the kind of energy and dynamism one would naturally expect to see in such a high-profile change phenomenon."

The members of the PSC were caught "off-guard" as they did not have any coherent strategy to deal with the sustained wave of anti-merger campaigns which at some point threatened to stall the whole process. While resistance to change is a well-known occurrence in every change initiative, the participants felt that the PSC as the chief promoter of the merger agenda would have known better how to tackle the increasingly influential anti-merger movement.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The South African case study was akin to the Chinese experience, where university mergers often take the shape of "hastily arranged marriages," rather than like in Sweden, where mergers are motivated by passion for collaboration and networking (Bladh, 2009).

Although the study focused on leadership challenges in a higher education merger context, the nature of the merger highlighted several management and administrative issues. Most importantly, it should not be assumed that higher education leaders are familiar with the "principles of mergers" which are common in the business world. Moreover, issues of "transformation," "change management" and "organizational culture" together with leadership, verge on the discipline of organisational behaviour and human resources management. The aforementioned are specialist areas which were not formally assessed among the PSC members who were tasked with a very important responsibility of creating a new higher education institution.

While there is no prescribed way to effectively address the leadership challenges confronting HDTIs, for mergers to be successful, leaders should adopt the following set of measures, which have worked well in Sweden, a country which has a history of implementing effective and successful mergers of tertiary institutions.

- Craft a shared vision for the future and remove both visible and invisible barriers of change.
- Ensure that the leadership structure during the change process remains the same.
- Create an atmosphere of collectivism and a culture of unity and coherence within the leadership structure.
- Build organisation-wide support and ensure the change process has the backing of high-level stakeholders.
- Where possible leaders need to cleanse the process of political meddling and interference.
- Ensure that the transformation process is guided by agreed policies.
- Ensure the merger process is adequately funded by provided adequate budgetary support.

While this study focused primarily on assessing critical forces that hindered the successful roll-out of the merger, future studies need to focus on whether this merger successfully achieved its intended objectives. Since a great deal of public resources were committed to the project, the new focus now remains to conduct a study that interrogates the qualitative and quantitative impact of the merger.

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Corrigendum
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