

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA AND PIPELINE STUDENTS

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1. INTRODUCTION

The new University of South Africa (UNISA), resulted from the merger of three distance teaching institutions: Technikon SA (TSA), Vista University Distance Education Centre (VUDEC) and the existing University of South Africa. UNISA has reached an advanced stage in the process of merging, having established a common vision, mission, values and strategic objectives as well as a 2015 Strategic Plan, and is thus well placed to play a leading role as South Africa's dedicated distance education institution. However, to get to this point in the merger process has required much thought and planning, with the ultimate consideration of the students and UNISA's core business at the heart of these deliberations.

It is hoped that this paper will provide guidelines for 'best practice' from which others may benefit, and also that UNISA itself can learn and, where necessary, improve on its current practices. It provides a step-by-step description of the merger processes embraced by the three institutions, addressing the context within which pipeline students are situated and such aspects as student academic support, recognition of prior learning, quality assurance, links with professional bodies and the integration of a multi-campus structure.

Pipeline students are defined as those students previously registered for a qualification at one of the three pre-merger institutions who wished to continue with their studies at the merged institution. Legally, these students have to be accommodated within 'the pipeline' to complete the remainder of their qualifications or to migrate to new modules. This is explained in more detail in this article.

2. PRE-MERGER PHASE

An intense and phased pre-merger process, consisting of complex structural arrangements and processes that included meetings, presentations, consultations and negotiations, was managed by three merger managers. The process was supported by a Joint Declaration, which was signed by the Chairpersons of Council of TSA, VUDEC and UNISA. Through this declaration, all three institutions committed themselves to a merged institution that would 'take the best from the existing institutions and would focus on the future needs of South Africa and its students' (TSA, VUDEC and UNISA, 2003: 1). The Executive Committees of the Councils of the three institutions unanimously approved the name of the new institution (University of South Africa – UNISA), together with a Memorandum of Agreement and an

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agreement on the composition of its Interim Council. There followed a joint submission to the then Minister of Education, Kader Asmal, which contained recommendations on the new institution's name, physical address and members of the Interim Council. The Minister responded with a press statement giving details on mergers and the names of the new merged institutions. Hence, the newly formed institution, created by merging TSA and the former UNISA on 1 January 2004 and incorporating VUDEC on 2 January 2004, would be known as the University of South Africa – UNISA.

A Joint Merger Office was situated on the UNISA School of Business Leadership (SBL) campus. From the original individual institutional task teams, Inter-Institutional Task Teams (IITTs) were put together and their facilitation and coordination began. Feedback and planning sessions were held with the deans, deputy deans and merger managers of the three institutions, along with the conveners of the IITTs. A Vice-Chancellors' Forum (VCF) was constituted to help move the merger forward. The VCF liaised closely with the Joint Merger Office and the legal advisers. The Interim Council that had been established held its first workshop on 23 November 2003 at the Kopanong Hotel and Conference Centre in Benoni. This council addressed such issues as the governing of the new institution during the merger phase, the consolidated budget, the merger project and priorities for 2004 and the issue of VUDEC's legal successor. Members of the interim management were then announced by the Chairperson of the Interim Council, Dr Mathews Phosa, with Professor NB Pityana being appointed as the Principal, Vice-Chancellor and the Chief Executive Officer of UNISA. Professor Neo Mathabe was appointed Pro-Vice-Chancellor to share the leadership of the institution with the Vice-Chancellor. The overall responsibility for the merger/incorporation and integration processes was assigned to the Vice-Principals, who were appointed to lead each specific functional area, namely, Academic and Research, Finance, Learner Support, Strategic Planning and Student Administration.

The responsibility for the academic process and procedures lay with the Vice-Principal (Academic), Professor Chris Swanepoel, who, together with the academic Priority Task Team (PTT), devised a specific plan for integrating academic programmes and dealing with pipeline students. These issues caused some real difficulties for the merging partners.

3. MERGER PHASE

To deal with these difficulties, meetings were held with the various stakeholder bodies and proposals were made on the definition of 'pipeline student' and the alignment of academic programmes. Clarification of certain basic concepts was needed as there were a number of different interpretations of the same terms. For example, it was ultimately agreed that 'academic programme' means

any course of study that leads to an approved tertiary qualification(s) registered with the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). It need not have an overt vocational purpose, but it must prepare students for participation in society as well as the economy. A programme is therefore defined as 'a coherent combination of units of learning (modules) expressed in an outcomes based format which leads to one or more qualifications, which serve an academic and/or vocational purpose. (Kilfoil, 2000: 6)

In the Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF), a **programme** is defined as follows:

A programme is a purposeful and structured set of learning experiences that leads to a qualification. Programmes may be discipline-based, professional, career-focused, or trans-, inter- or multi-disciplinary in nature. A programme has recognised entry and exit points. All taught higher education programmes should have core and elective elements. This requirement is optional for research-based programmes. The internal organisation of programmes is otherwise not prescribed by this document. (MoE, 2004: 2)

It should be noted that the Department of Education proposes a 1:1 correspondence between a programme and a qualification, a deviation from the earlier and more strategic South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) definition of a programme. A **qualification** is the formal recognition and certification of learning achievement awarded by an accredited institution. In the outcomes based approach intrinsic to the NQF, a **qualification** signifies and formally certifies the demonstrated achievement by a student of a planned and purposeful combination of learning outcomes, at a specified level of performance.

4. DURATION OF PIPELINE PROGRAMMES AND RETURNING OR REPEATING STUDENTS

Within the scenario presented above and following intense discussions among stakeholders of the three institutions mentioned, agreement was reached on certain general principles of alignment. These principles made provision for various categories of students, such as returning students, new students registered at the merged UNISA in 2004, former VUDEC students and a narrower consideration of pipeline students.

4.1 Returning students

It was agreed, in principle, that all returning students, i.e. those who had registered at any one of the three institutions, would return to their programmes as defined above and would complete them according to the rules and structures under which they had originally registered. The certificate issued to successful students would be in the name of the new institution, but would also reflect the institution under which the student had originally registered. Provision was made for 2003 VUDEC students to write promotional or supplementary examinations in January or February 2004. UNISA's Bureau for Management Information (BMI) helped the Academic Programmes Task Team (APTT) and academic departments determine the equivalence of modules or courses to facilitate decisions on transfers. Where there were teaching departments or units for which no counterpart existed in the new institution (e.g. Agriculture), these were incorporated into the relevant college with both their staff and learning programmes.

At the newly merged institution tuition continued as is. Where counterparts existed in teaching departments or units, these were incorporated into similar or near similar departments of the new institution, with staff and pipeline learning programmes for pipeline

students. However, all staff members in each department were employed by the new UNISA and enjoyed equal standing. Some difficulties arose over the perceived marginalisation of certain staff members who felt disadvantaged by being located at a distance both geographically and psychologically from the core functioning of a department or unit and by having to deal with subjects, courses or modules in apparent isolation. It was stressed that those staff members who had duties associated with pipeline students should not be disadvantaged by the new institution. It was strongly recommended that monthly meetings should be held to review workloads and to ensure full integration of all staff into their relevant departments.

Precise information on exemptions and transitional arrangements among the merging institutions were initially proposed by the APTT and the PTT and were passed on to the Student Services Task Team for implementation via the Vice-Chancellor's Forum. Care was taken so that students received due acknowledgement for credits received. Any pipeline students who felt prejudiced by the way the incorporation arrangements were applied could appeal in writing to the Registrar (Academic). The written notice needed to contain a brief exposition of the grounds for appeal. To understand the status of the student body more clearly, the various categories of students needed to be carefully defined. Among the difficulties were new registrations for both the university type and technikon type programmes and the pipeline students.

4.2 New registration of students for the new UNISA in 2004

- 4.2.1 All programmes offered by the former TSA and the existing UNISA were open for registration at the new UNISA in 2004.
- 4.2.2 Structures to accommodate and facilitate deliberation on courses or modules between the merging institutions and the process of the courses on offer, for example, from Tuition/Curriculum Committee level through to College and to Senate etc., were decided on as soon as the new Senate was constituted.
- 4.2.3 Where there were common programmes in the existing UNISA and former VUDEC, the UNISA programmes were followed for the first year of new registrations. This ensured that duplication and overlapping were kept to a minimum.
- 4.2.4 New registrations of students were allowed for unique programmes, majors and modules previously offered by VUDEC that formed part of the new institution's courses on offer.²
- 4.2.5 To enable departments to benefit from the possible strengths of all three institutions' courses on offer, all programmes that had equivalents were regarded as forming part of the course offered by the new institution by 2006.

² VUDEC's opinion was that until an academic audit of all programmes and until the criteria and benchmarks for establishing 'viability' had been jointly agreed upon, there was no need to justify 'uniqueness'. These programmes were accompanied by a description. The definition of 'unique' was understood to be those programmes that had different outcomes and different access requirements.

4.2.6 Duplicated courses or modules could be rationalised after agreement among the merging institutions.

4.3 Specific recommendations with regard to the former VUDEC/UNISA scenario

There were two major categories with regard to recommendations for subject alignment for these two former institutions:

- Those applicable to a whole faculty.
- Those applicable to specific subjects, subdivided into two components:
 - a) New intake students.
 - b) Those students who wished to migrate voluntarily from VUDEC programmes and register for new open courses in 2004.

In terms of (b), equivalence of modules or credits was determined by the relevant departments. To this end, departments completed a template indicating clearly what they considered to be equivalents. This also facilitated the speedy transfer of students to the new institution. Such recommendations were itemised by the Student Services Priority Task Team to inform students on registration.

4.4 Pipeline students

4.4.1 Pipeline students included any student who had completed the equivalent of at least 50 percent of first level requirements during and before 2003 and who was enrolled for a course that had been closed to new registrations. Legal advice was that the Higher Education Act gave no guidance as to who would be considered a 'pipeline' student. It was submitted that the receiving institution had discretion in this regard; and this discretion needed to be exercised in a fair and reasonable manner, taking into account possible prejudice against students, the viability of the programme, and other relevant considerations. If the point of departure in interpreting the continuation clause was in the interests of the students who had registered for a particular programme (the so-called 'pipeline' students), the question arose as to whether the continuation clause required the receiving institution to allow *new* registrations for such 'continued' programmes. The decision was that this was for the receiving institution to decide. Programmes for students already registered ('pipeline' students) needed to be continued, but the receiving institution was given the discretion to decide whether it wanted to take in new entrants. This discretion was exercised in a fair and reasonable manner.

Programmes that were closed to new registrations were all VUDEC programmes that were also offered by the existing UNISA. This implied that students on levels two and three or more needed either to complete the remainder of their first level within the context of the arrangements of common programmes and the unique programmes, or

be given the option of migrating to a new programme. These students were provided with all the relevant information (including any financial implications) if they migrated to open or new programmes. Credits were given for completion of equivalent modules. Pipeline students are allowed until 2008 to complete their courses. Students with incomplete qualifications will be presented with different ways to migrate in 2009.

4.4.2 Pipeline tuition and learning has thus been continuing from 2004 for each pipeline level, except in cases where the degree of correlation between study materials in the respective institutions has rendered pipelining *unnecessary*. In such cases, proposals were formulated by the relevant departments, units or colleges, and formed the gist of the submission to the Vice-Chancellor's Forum, for approval by the Interim Council. Where duplication occurred, departments were encouraged to pool resources by using one set of study materials. They were also requested to send out general guidelines to the students stating that such materials were the relevant ones for the registered course code.

4.4.3 Pipeline students needed to be identifiable as pipeline students in order to meet the legal graduation requirements of the Higher Education Act as amended in 2002.

5. ADMISSION REQUIREMENTS AND FACILITATING ACCESS

Special arrangements for pipeline students were carefully set out in an Academic Process and Procedures document that was approved by the UNISA Council on 4 December 2003 and distributed to all structures for implementation. However, given these arrangements, UNISA also needed to acknowledge certain important principles for all its students. These included aligning its enrolment, student mobility and graduation targets with national and international trends. It was also important to understand that while pipeline students are recognised and accommodated within transitional arrangements, UNISA nevertheless determines its own admissions criteria as approved by Council, on the recommendation of Senate, and taking cognisance of legislative obligations. In addition, entry requirements for admission to UNISA are defined by the Higher Education Act, No. 101 of 1997, and by SAQA. The intention was to effect systemic change aligned to South African higher education and to formulate minimum entry requirements to effect the socio-cultural mix of students as expressed by UNISA's vision and mission statement. The rules for admission and supported pathways are determined by a college or school.

The pathways that both pipeline and new students take at the merged institution include the provision of access and foundation programmes that respond to the social, political, economic and cultural needs of communities through lifelong learning. At the merged institution, basic issues such as lifelong learning and integrated learner support have begun to play a more prominent role. Lifelong learning implies flexibility so that students can choose to study at UNISA at any stage of their lives and enter a programme of learning at an appropriate level, with a suitable workload and in the desired stream. Each learning programme is credit bearing and is accredited by the authorising body, credits being the key to determining the next entry level. A matrix of credits and weights was developed. These credits were of vital importance in aligning qualifications among the three institutions. Credit matrices were drawn up to assist the academic departments. Templates were completed to indicate how pipeline students could be accommodated, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Credit matrix

Module passed	Credits accumulated	Outstanding modules	Credits required

However, overseeing the admission of all students is the responsibility of the Academic Registrar. Enrolments are managed by:

- (a) granting academic status to prospective South African students registering for the first time, as decided by Senate and approved by Council according to agreed admission requirements;
- (b) granting academic status to prospective foreign students registering for the first time, as decided by Senate and approved by Council according to agreed admission requirements;
- (c) granting academic status to returning South African and foreign students according to the requirements for continued enrolment into programmes/courses, as decided by Senate and approved by Council;
- (d) capping wastage of resources both for the students and the institution caused by students who drop out and do not complete their course; and
- (e) carrying out research and sharing findings with other higher education institutions on enrolment intervention and management.

6. MANAGING DUPLICATION AND OVERLAP BETWEEN PROGRAMMES

In the context of the existing courses that pipeline students brought to the merger process, and to assist with the logistics of ‘migrating’ these pipeline students, draft guidelines were distributed to colleges to help with the academic process of duplication and overlap between modules, majors, programmes and qualifications. To deal with the operational and procedural difficulties, it was agreed that a full academic audit should be conducted at each college.

The UNISA academic audit and the processes adopted to contribute to the colleges’ re-curriculation plans were based on the principles contained in the structural programme models. In reconceptualising and aligning the academic programmes offered to the vision and mission of ‘the African university in the service of humanity’ the following five points were emphasised:

1. Identifying the benefits of pooling ‘offerings’ and resources.

2. Aligning, consolidating and integrating programmes that may overlap.
3. Differentiating and diversifying technikon type and university type [programmes] where this is justified.
4. Planning and initiating new programmes and qualifications.
5. Ensuring the most appropriate product range.

The procedures for such a process were carefully explained by the Academic Planning Office and recommendations were made as to how to process the academic audit templates. It was deemed necessary to consolidate the programmes offered by the pre-merger institutions that would form the basis of re-curriculation in the comprehensive institution at all levels. Special task teams at each college, and at departmental up to school level, ascertained and continue to ascertain which of the courses offered are

- a) common or have high, low or no levels of correspondence (i.e. there should be integration where there was overlap between technikon and university types);
- b) complementary and require a differentiated curriculum (there should be an indication as to which interdisciplinary pathways are feasible to signal the comprehensive characteristics);
- c) duplicated (outcomes should be compared for possible rationalisation);
- d) unique small programmes (justification of strategic value should be indicated); or
- e) shared (offered across schools and/or colleges – their relative strengths and weaknesses should be assessed).

Carefully supported recommendations are included in college submissions for

- 1) the retention of modules/courses;
- 2) a rationalisation of modules/courses;
- 3) a conflation of content/modules; or
- 4) the differentiation of content/modules.

Recommendations were also required for the necessary transitional arrangements to phase in the re-curriculation process. In evaluating what was on offer and in making recommendations, colleges were reminded of the following important subsidy and academic issues that needed to be taken into account:

- Classification of Educational Subject Matter (CESM) category to second level.

- Level descriptors (i.e. NQF 5–8, but it was recommended that the new HEQF ten-
ning levels also be considered).
- Curriculum and study material.
- Entry and course combination requirements.
- Module/course level (NB always funded at the lowest level at which the module is
offered, e.g. if offered at master’s level, but also at honours level, then funded at
honours level).
- Learning Outcomes (specific outcomes and critical outcomes of module/qualification
in terms of skills, knowledge and/or values).
- Target group/student profile for the various courses offered.
- Tuition method (e.g. where, in consultation with the occupational field representative,
it is agreed that the learning outcomes would best be accomplished through Work
Integrated Learning).

It was suggested that the analysis of courses on offer could be carried out in a series of steps. The following constitutes a draft guideline framework that was suggested as a point of departure for each college task team and that could be customised to meet the specific needs of any college:

Step 1 – As each course/module on offer recorded in the audit templates contained a considerable amount of detail relating to what was on offer, the referencing could be by module/course code. This could be recorded in a table (see Table 2) for ease of cross-referencing and for reference to information in the detailed discussions about the audit templates.

Step 2 – A worksheet could be used in a similar way to a proposed matrix, where the courses/modules on offer, referenced by module/course code, are placed on a vertical axis, and a set of headings, such as ‘common’, ‘duplicated’ and ‘unique’, are placed in the columns on the horizontal axis. In this way, each course/module on offer could be analysed and a recommendation recorded in a column of the worksheet.

Table 2: Template for course analysis

Course/ module code	Level	Credits	Student numbers	Common	Comple- mentary	Dupli- cated	Unique	Shared	Recommen- dations 1, 2, 3, 4 cf. above	Comments
e.g. ABC 101	1	12	10 000	ABC101 XYE101 etc	MBC102	XYZ01			1. Retain ABC101 2. Rationalise XYZ101 3. Conflate ABC101 & XYE101	Discussions held and agreement on these recom- mendations – signed off

In this process, what was on offer was compared in terms of a set of considerations to be selected by the task team concerned. The list of considerations, some of which are given above in Table 2, such as CESM category and different unit standards, could be used for this exercise. After due deliberation, each task team could then record their findings on the worksheet drawn up. Where specific comments were necessary, for example to explain reasons for the groupings or give justification for uniqueness, a last column could be used for this purpose. The worksheet would enable each task team to discuss the course/modules being offered in a more focused manner, leading to suggestions and recommendations.

Step 3 – A sheet illustrating a summarised set of findings could then be compiled to record the relationships or lack thereof among the various courses on offer. These findings would ultimately form part of a final report that would represent the recommendations towards academic alignment per college, and that would go through the relevant structures, and finally be sent to Senate.

Step 4 – A preliminary report on each re-curriculation plan for each college was then compiled for College Boards, the Senate Executive Committee and Senate. This first report, however preliminary, was ready to go through the relevant structures by February 2005. More substantial reports from each college, giving clear indications of its re-curriculation plan, have been presented at subsequent Senate Meetings. This is an ongoing process.

7. INFRASTRUCTURE FOR ACADEMIC AND RESEARCH PROGRAMMES

The academic and research portfolio lies within the Pro-Vice-Chancellor cluster as depicted diagrammatically in Figure 1:

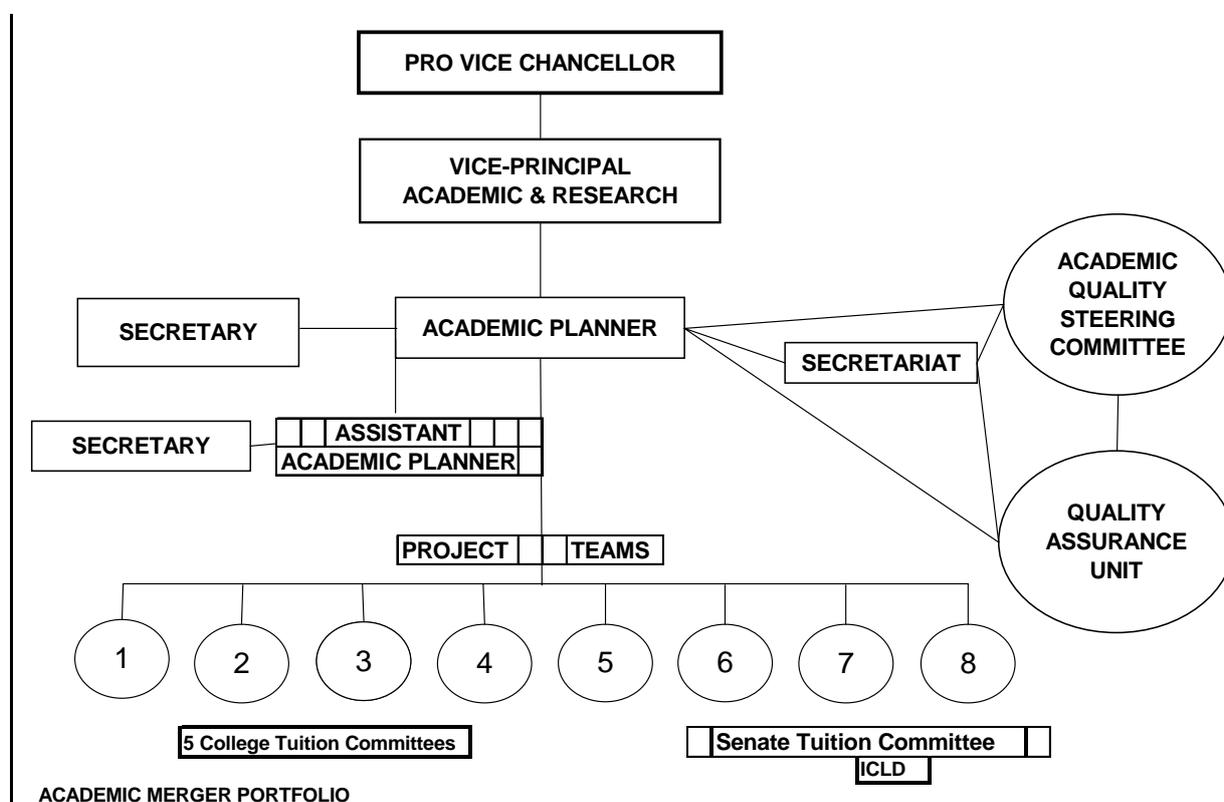


Figure 1: Infrastructure for academic and research programmes

As part of the mobilisation of the academic audit and re-circulation, eight Project Teams were set up to provide the necessary infrastructure and backup information to support the colleges so they could proceed with the merger. These Project Teams are driven by the office of the Academic Planner and include

1. a comprehensive [view] within the context of the college;
2. the academic process, procedures and quality assurance;
3. Africanisation;
4. the curriculum and external liaison (credits, course levels, funding groups, tuition models, registration (SAQA/NQF), accreditation (Higher Education Qualifications Committee [HEQC])/Interim Joint Committee [IJC]);

5. the subsidisation of learning programmes (Department of Education [DoE]/ Programme Qualification Mix [PQM]/ Higher Education Management Information Systems (HEMIS), small disciplines and cross-subsidisation;
5. courseware production (academic programmes review cycle, scheduling of study material and prescribed books);
6. defining/identifying 'active student': access, admission, throughput and pass rate; and
7. a review of UNISA's programmes and qualifications and overall quality assurance.

An overarching Academic Planning and Quality Steering Committee coordinates and consolidates feedback from the various task based project teams and will, in time, prepare an institutional Academic Planning Framework and Implementation Strategy. The Academic Planning Office works closely with college/school/Senate Tuition Committees, the programme registration and accreditation officer in the office of the Registrar (Academic), members of the planning office of the Vice-Principal (Strategies, Planning and Partnership), the Institute for Curriculum and Learning Design (ICLD) and Learner Support in preparing new or revised proposals of learning programmes for submission via the Tuition Committees to College Boards, the Senate Tuition Committee, the Senate Executive and then finally on to UNISA Council (see Figure 2).

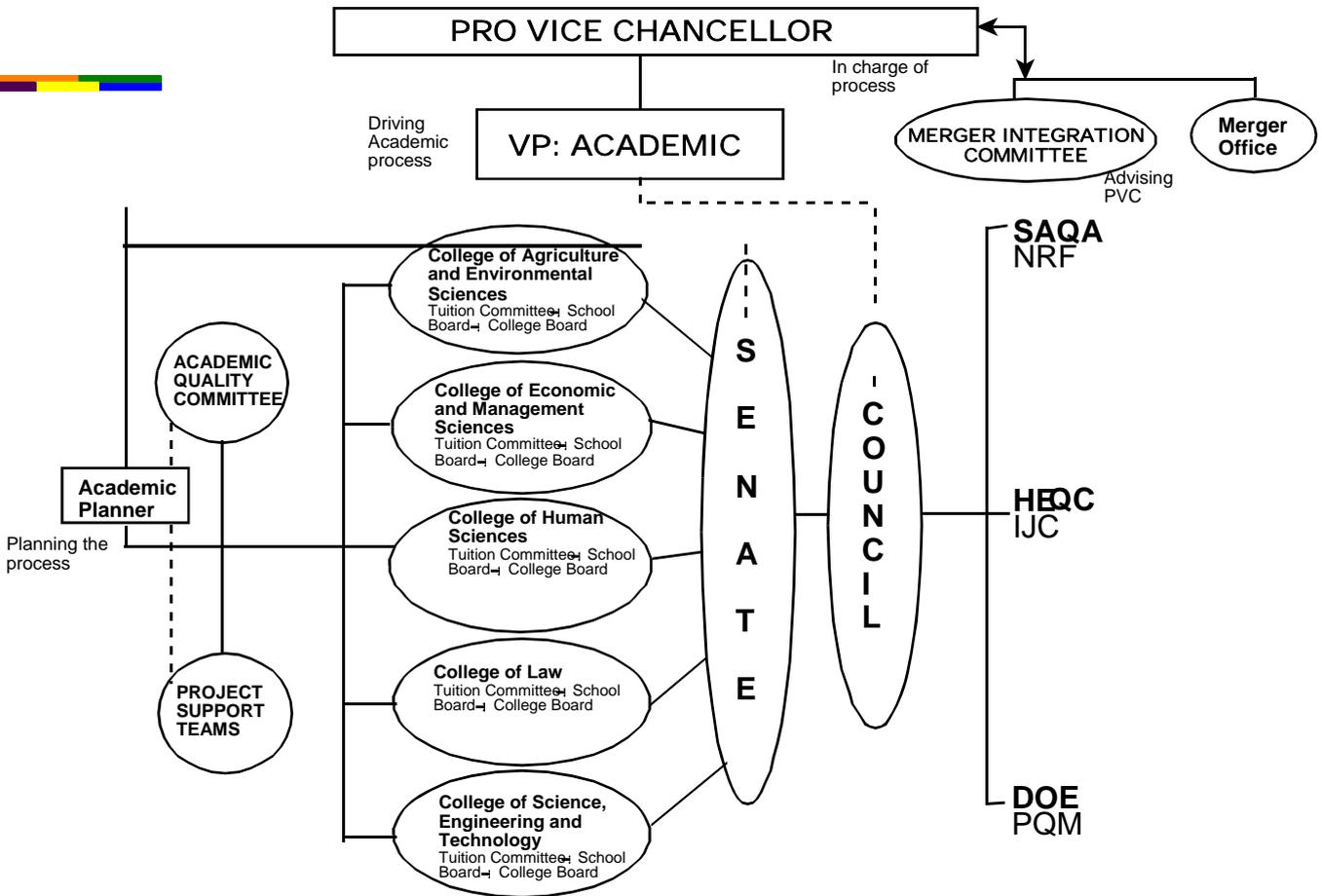


Figure 2: Mobilization of academic audit and re-circulation process, 2004–2005

After completing the internal process, the Academic Planning Office will guide the (re)registration of programmes at SAQA, accreditation by the HEQC and approval of the Programme and Qualification Mix (PQM) by the Department of Education. To this end a submission has already been prepared on the recent HEQF document issued by the DoE.

8. THE UNISA QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK AND TRANSITIONAL ALIGNMENTS

The merger phases are not always easy to distinguish one from another; for example, the pre-merger, merging and post-merger eras are inextricably interwoven, with influences from decisions made during the pre-merger phase being felt at the newly merged UNISA. Pipeline students are a thread that is woven through the phases. The Academic Planning Office, in consultation with the Executive Deans, is drafting the accommodation of pipeline students, who are still entitled to complete the qualifications for which they enrolled prior to 2006. Sets of transitional arrangements and rules for migrating from the old system to the new and harmonising credit transfers are being established.

8.1 Credits and weights

Within the new UNISA, a Credit Accumulation, Alignment and Transfer (CAT) policy is being formulated in order to

- use a credit accumulation and alignment system that will allow students to move freely and seamlessly in a knowledge based society between higher learning institutions, fields of study, qualification streams, specialisations, sectors, organisations, occupations, contexts, communities and countries;
- encourage a programme based approach to rationalising the comprehensive institution's curriculum by creating a seamless transfer of credits on a continuum of diverse UNISA qualifications in which students can freely exit, 'cash in' or move their credits in different directions to improve and widen participation and reduce non-completion;
- seek and sign agreements with African universities, in particular in the Southern African Development Communities (SADC) region, to regulate reciprocal articulation and credit accumulation and transfers of higher education courses and qualifications;
- designate a typology of modules, courses and modes of assessment, that will enable UNISA students to move between a cognate general education track (degree), a general career focused track (diploma) and a specific occupational track (certificate) via integrated assessment and credit accumulation and transfer within a programme;

- implement constructive assessment focusing on the deep learning of an active learner in various dynamic interactive learning environments in which a variety of assessment types, such as diagnostic, dynamic, formative, summative and integrated, complement one another in a quality care process;
- provide a common means of describing and recording all individual achievement, including the potential for a harmonised format for all records of achievements and transcripts;
- integrate academic development in the mainstream or develop credit bearing academic development modules in an extended curriculum approach; and
- award credits and align Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as an accredited institution which will be recorded for each student on SAQA's national Learners' Database.

8.2 Student academic support

Distance education has been transformed in recent years from the old correspondence model to a more blended approach to teaching and learning. At the new UNISA, which is an open learning as well as a distance learning institution, learning facilitation and learner support have come to play a central role over the past decade to ensure that access translates into success. The fact that UNISA now has a Vice-Principal (Learner Support) is one indication of the importance accorded to this aspect of UNISA's core business. Included in this portfolio at present are the library, the tutor provision department and a department for student counselling, career guidance and study skills support. These core support departments are represented across South Africa in regional learning centres, which also fall into this portfolio. The Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Directorate is central to all business in the university, but is located in the Learner Support portfolio so that the university's technology model supports the core business of teaching, learning and research. ICT is also used to track and identify students 'at risk' so that timeous interventions can be planned. The portfolio has a dedicated research function and, among other issues, research has been conducted into courses in which students are underperforming, and ways to address the problem have been formulated. This will apply equally to pipeline students.

The newly merged institution has made a thorough re-examination of learner support. The intention of the Learner Support portfolio is to integrate learning facilitation and learner support from the curriculum planning stage. To this end, the university has a project team approach to curriculum design and materials development. In addition to lecturers, project teams include learning developers/instructional designers, career counsellors, student academic support specialists, tutor provision staff, librarians, graphic designers, editors and relevant ICT staff.

9. RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (RPL)

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a relatively new concept in South African higher education, and it is continually being modified as critical contextual issues emerge from

practice. UNISA is still in the initial phase of RPL implementation. In general, prior learning assessment is used for access to, or advanced standing with award of credit in, a UNISA course or module leading to a UNISA qualification. The implementation of RPL processes and procedures had been slowly gathering momentum from its inception in 2002 at all three institutions. The original plan for introducing RPL to the old UNISA was to draw up a policy, implement the RPL programme during the 2002–2003 period and evaluate it before adapting an RPL programme for wider application. UNISA now has a general RPL policy, although the actual implementation varies depending on the unique challenges and needs of each academic department. With the approved policy in place, a more focused evaluation is being facilitated in order to draw up more refined regulatory procedures for RPL in the new UNISA. The policies used include

- a) a general RPL Policy;
- b) an appendix to the general policy: Assessment and Accreditation of Degrees and Higher Degrees; and
- c) recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for Mature Learner Assessment: Entry Level NQF 5.

The Policy on RPL – developed as the initial guiding tool – has been approved by the UNISA Council. This new policy states that

[S]ince there must be a close symbiosis between **academic** judgement and processes on the one hand, and **student support** on the other, RPL must be institutionally positioned close to both these major functions in a higher education institution. Decisions made regarding the preparedness of a non-traditional student to enter higher education cannot be made by an administrative official based on paper evidence of formal training alone, but must be the result of a carefully designed and implemented assessment process of the individual profile of the RPL candidate.

Pipeline students are equally affected by this policy.

10. MULTI-CAMPUSES

As an open and distance learning institution, the newly constructed UNISA has a number of hubs on multiple campuses. The three main campuses of the merging institutions for the time being remain as they originally were geographically; that is, the Florida Campus in Roodepoort of the former TSA, the Skinner Street Campus of the former VUDEC, and the Muckleneuk (Tshwane/Pretoria) Campus of the pre-merger UNISA. The process of merging structures and disciplines means planning the movement of certain colleges so they are no longer fragmented on a number of campuses but a unified group on one campus. Therefore, for example, the College of Science, Engineering and Technology and the College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences will form a Natural Sciences hub and be located on the Florida Campus. Certain support functions are also being coordinated to be located more centrally.

Interaction with students is facilitated not only through these three main campuses but also regionally through learning centres in all nine provinces. Further, students are assisted by seven fully functional branch libraries at regional centres in Durban, Cape Town, East London, Johannesburg and Polokwane, with the Science Library situated on the Muckleneuk Campus and the Talaris Services Business Language (SBL) Library in Midrand.

11. MANAGING POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS IN THE NEW CONTEXT

All postgraduate VUDEC qualifications ceased to exist with this institution's incorporation into the new UNISA. As has been mentioned, undergraduate students who had completed more than half of the study units prescribed for the first year of a VUDEC qualification during or before 2003 were deemed to be pipeline students and as such are able to complete such qualification under the auspices of the new UNISA until 2008.

At master's level, three unique VUDEC qualifications were identified and listed in the Calendar as 'new' UNISA qualifications for which first registrations were allowed: the MA (HIV-AIDS), MCS (Master's in Consumer Science) and MHE (Master's in Human Ecology). There was also provision for current students to continue these studies.

All other doctoral and research master's degrees are now incorporated into the new UNISA, with pipeline students continuing with the research topic originally approved and under the guidance of the originally appointed supervisor/promoter. These now become new registrations at the new comprehensive institution and not pipeline registrations, although they could be a continuation of research begun at the former institution. It is a vested policy of UNISA that a student should always continue research under the uninterrupted guidance of a supervisor/promoter, even if such a supervisor/promoter should leave the employ of the University. This category of 'new-old' students is being investigated; and it is anticipated that they will be handled in the same manner, by retaining the supervisors/promoters where possible and remunerating them even if they are not part of the staff involved in the merger process. The merger has afforded a larger pool of supervisors/promoters to whom students may be directed and from whom students may benefit.

The intention therefore is that no pipeline cases should exist at master's and doctoral level.

12. PROFESSIONAL BODIES

The newly emerged UNISA found itself with a range of current relationships with professional bodies through programme groups: the Engineering Council of South Africa (ECSA), the South African Institute of Chartered Secretaries and Administrators (ICSA), the Health Professions Council, the Nursing Council, the Psychological Society and the Institute of People Management (IPM), all of which add quality to teaching and learning. Institute Advisory Boards are another source of concerted professional body engagement. While this interaction was perhaps more common at the technikons, where stakeholder bodies were regularly consulted, the new UNISA has encouraged this engagement.

UNISA considers professional bodies as key stakeholders in its planning initiatives. This has been demonstrated, for example, by the involvement of certain professional bodies at the

second UNISA Qualifications Framework Workshop, which was arranged to consult these bodies and invite formal responses to UNISA's emerging frameworks. Apart from influencing and adhering to the CHE/HEQC strategy for formalising memoranda of understanding with the various professional agencies, professional bodies are considered essential elements in understanding market needs in the preparation of study material.

Professional bodies are also considered important since they play a role in quality programme reviews and programme accreditation, both of which are academic quality assurance activities. The design of UNISA's programmes will need to meet the requirements of legitimate external stakeholders, such as professional and potential employer bodies. In planning for the future, where appropriate the university is continuing its scientific and academic research into expressed industry needs and identified competencies. How UNISA handles its pipeline students and the accommodation of their qualifications will also be monitored by professional bodies. Academic drift from the more vocational/professional type of course towards more general formative courses is one of the dangers that must be taken into account at the new UNISA.

13. AMENDING OR RECONCILING DIVERGENT RULES

During the merger process, a number of different policies have needed to be reconciled and harmonised. Within the academic portfolio these include policies on

- assessment;
- Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL);
- tuition;
- Work Integrated Learning (WIL);
- short learning programmes;
- access, admissions and articulation;
- the concept of 'active student';
- credit alignment and transfer;
- language;
- plagiarism; and
- learnerships.

Special task teams were formed to develop and formulate the new appropriate harmonised policies, a number of which have already been approved by Council. As with all merging processes, policies are important. However, perhaps even more important is the procedure for

their implementation. To this end manuals of the implementation procedures for these policies are currently being drawn up.

14. MANAGEMENT INFORMATION AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY (IT) SYSTEMS

Management Information is, by its very nature, dependent on other sources, such as operational (transaction) systems. The university has therefore had to ensure a close link between Management Information and IT systems.

Within the merger process, it has been important to take the needs of the different constituencies of the new institution into account to ensure consistency of information provision in order to support decision making and planning. More specifically, the metadata (data about the data) has needed to be aligned and data elements mapped to ensure consistency of alignment. Fundamental issues that have had to be considered are the coding structures and business rules to be applied. Ideally, there should eventually be one business rule governing each aspect, but this needs to be balanced against the existing rules and business processes. Provision has had to be made for old and new codes, for instance, old course codes and new course codes, old departments and new departments, and so on.

Extracting and aligning information from more than one system has required special attention. Specific attention has had to be given to the phasing out period and the processing of pipeline students, courses and qualifications. The transitional arrangements, especially when considering duplication and overlap between programmes and courses, as outlined in the section above, have had to be considered with regard to the course levels, SAQA credits and HEMIS course credits (weights) in order to ensure that the HEMIS course credits add up to the required totals for the qualification. The qualification type and course levels have had to be considered carefully when duplication and overlap between programmes and course levels are considered, because subsidy levels may be affected. Specific attention had to be paid to courses offered across more than one course level.

Another crucial consideration that has had to receive priority has been transitional arrangements for aligning student fees.

In addition, when integrating courses across university type and technikon type qualifications, specific care has to be taken of statutory obligations for entry requirements, for example, a Matriculation Certificate (with exemption) or a Senior Certificate, since this may affect the HEMIS reporting and have subsidy implications. For university type qualifications, a Matriculation Certification (with exemption or conditional exemption) is required to ensure that the applicant is counted as a student for reporting and funding purposes, while this is not necessarily the case with technikon type qualifications. The issue of incomplete and interim qualifications obtained by pipeline students has therefore had to be taken into serious consideration.

15. QUALITY ASSURANCE ISSUES

The new comprehensive university is very conscious of the general objectives of the programme accreditation criteria recommended by the HEQC. Quality assurance plays a fundamental role and, following intense discussions during the preparation of academic process and procedures for the new UNISA, various criteria were noted for the institution to broadly assist lecturers in their preparation of academic programmes. Briefly, some of the more practical criteria that have been noted for a programme are

- its motivation, i.e. whether it conforms to regional and national goals for higher education;
- the academic staff involvement;
- the admission criteria;
- enrolments and size;
- the credit value;
- the educational outcomes;
- the design;
- the type of assessment;
- the types of learning activities;
- the library resources available;
- the computer equipment available;
- the experiential learning involved; and
- an Advisory Committee for the programme.

The overall criteria also include institutional policies and procedures and whether these comply with the NQF framework and the SAQA Act for Higher Education.

It has been recommended that all academic units and departments should ensure that the following kinds of documented evidence are deliberately made available on an annual basis as part of the internal quality assurance systems:

- (a) Academic planning processes.
- (b) Policy implementation and policy evaluation reports.
- (c) Rigorous academic programmes development and review processes.
- (d) Rigorous curriculum design and review processes.

- (e) Reports on the evaluation of teaching and learning that go beyond the assessment of educators and facilitators.
- (f) A review of RPL policy implementation and tracking of students who have gone through this process.
- (g) Student surveys and feedback reports.
- (h) Evidence of external stakeholder involvement in programme development and curriculum review.
- (i) Student throughput/success rates analysis.
- (j) Graduation rates analysis.
- (k) A review of students' evaluation processes.
- (l) Graduate tracking and feedback systems.
- (m) Employer surveys and feedback systems.
- (n) Robust staff appraisal/performance evaluation processes.
- (o) Reports on learning resources evaluation and reviews.
- (p) Reports on reviews of teaching and learning policies, procedures and practices.
- (q) Impact assessment studies on various intervention programmes.
- (r) Performance indicators and benchmarks to monitor standards and improvement.

16. ASSESSMENT

As part of the process in the newly emerged institution, a new Assessment Policy was drawn up. This policy notes that

The function of formative assessment in Open Distance Learning (ODL) is to provide contact, support and structure to the learning experiences of students often unfamiliar with and alienated by the distance learning experience. It is a key motivator of learning. On an administrative level, assessment provides a reliable basis for the award of credits and for the eventual certification of students in relation to outcomes of particular qualifications. Students' assessment of lecturers will be seen by lecturers as feedback on teaching criteria and standards as part of systematic monitoring of quality assurance. Assessment is a means of learning about students' misunderstandings so teaching can be modified accordingly.

It is noted further that

[T]he institution should also use assessment data as part of a wider 360 degrees self-evaluation system to inform decision-making. Assessment data identify at-risk modules, completion rates for modules, etc. In addition to these purposes, a recent directive from the Department of Education requires proof of ‘active learning’ as a criterion for receiving subsidy for students. The submission of assignments is one way of proving that a student is active.

In its post-merger phase, the new UNISA has had to pay particular attention to sound educational and pedagogical principles and practices. Considerable concern has been expressed about satisfactory interaction with the students on their courseware, including sustained formative accompaniment and assessment by lecturers and tutors, learner support, and the subsequent improvement of pass and throughput rates. This is being taken care of within the newly emerged institution with the recommendation of a more protracted delivery space in the academic calendar.

17. CONCLUSION

This article has briefly traced the merger, from a fragmentary three-institution operation during the pre-merger phase to the present newly emerged unitary institution. The process of situating pipeline students within the mainstream of UNISA’s academic programmes and qualifications structure has not been without hiccoughs, but it is now well advanced. The merger, initially considered a daunting challenge, has begun to take shape in the post-merger phase and the ownership of the process by all stakeholders under the new UNISA brand has rooted itself in five colleges. Pipeline students are beginning to shed the ‘pipeline image’ as they begin to take ownership of and assume the new identity under a common vision of ‘*the African university in service of humanity*’.

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