

COMMENT TO *THE MAIL AND GUARDIAN* BY NWU ON REPORT OF THE MINISTERIAL TASK TEAM INTO THE AFFAIRS OF THE UNIVERSITY

General Statement

The Council and management of the NWU have taken this report very seriously. It is also regarded as a valuable mechanism for ongoing introspection, especially against the background of the institutional audit by the HEQC during March this year.

The NWU reconfirms its commitment to make the merger a success, and we have in our own assessment made strong progress in this regard. The Task Team's report confirms this notes the better than average performance of the NWU over the past 5 years.

Three awards won by the NWU during 2008 further attest to this fact:

- PANSALB's award to the NWU as the university contributing the most towards multilingualism and nation building in the last 10 years.
- Winner of PricewaterhouseCoopers' best governed university; and
- The Innovation Fund of the Department of Science and Technology named the NWU as the most innovative university in the country.

However, the NWU must put on record certain concerns and reservations about the appointment and working procedures of the Task Team:

- The appointment of such a Task Team outside the provisions of the HE Act is seen as irregular.
- The Task Team did not spend enough time to do an in-depth investigation – two days per campus were not enough to be able to arrive at credible findings and fundamental recommendations.
- The report takes untested and hearsay evidence, often based on perceptions and allegations, and uses it to arrive at fundamental findings and conclusions. These findings then formed the basis of very substantive recommendations.
- Various discrepancies and factual errors occur in the report.
- Despite its written request, the NWU was not afforded the opportunity to comment on various clear errors of fact in the report, before the report was handed to the Minister.

The Executive Committee of the NWU Council, after consultation with the Institutional Management and senior management of the NWU, submitted an initial response to the Minister. A detailed response will be made available before the end of March 2009, after Council's prescheduled strategic session.

The North-West University reaffirms its commitment to the cause of quality and efficient higher education and the need for a transformed higher education sector. “We believe that the balance between these two concepts has been the core of our success up to this point, and we want to stress our commitment to take this to even higher levels in the coming years”, Council Chairperson, Mr Peet van der Walt said.

Comment on specific issues

In commenting on specific issues, Vice-Chancellor Theuns Eloff made the following comments:

- *Archaic initiation practices on the Potchefstroom Campus*
The NWU rejects any practice or action that infringes on a student or staff member’s human rights. Any such illegal practices will and are being dealt with seriously in terms of the University’s disciplinary procedures.

The incident referred to in the Report occurred 8 years ago (and incidentally happened to a white lecturer, not a black one). No such initiation practices are allowed and for the last three years student leaders received intensive human rights training after their election in September, with very good and positive effects. In addition, first year students and their parents are given SMS emergency numbers to report any problems. And during the year, first year students are asked to complete questionnaires on their first months at the University, to evaluate this period and report any problems. This is done on an anonymous basis.

- *Allegations of racism on the Potchefstroom Campus and allegations that there are efforts to “preserve” Potch as a white Afrikaans campus, amongst others by making other students feel unwelcome*

The statements of widespread racism are devoid of any truth. So is the allegation that black students are made to feel unwelcome. Access to the NWU (including its Potchefstroom Campus) is open to any academically qualifying student, regardless of race. The NWU actively visits schools to recruit black students specifically for the Potchefstroom Campus (for example in accounting, engineering, teaching, pharmacy and nursing).

The so called quota for black students in residences is actually a minimum target of 15% black students for the 1200 places in residences available for first years. This is adjusted upward every year. Members of residence committees include black students, and in 2008 the first black chair of a residence committee was democratically elected in one of the male residences. This would not have happened if black students were made to feel unwelcome at the Potchefstroom Campus.

The allegation that students are diverted to the other campuses to keep Potchefstroom “white and Afrikaans” is also devoid of any truth. As stated

above, the Potchefstroom campus actively recruits black students. It is standard practice for all campuses that if the number of students allocated in terms of the enrolment plan (agreed with the Department of Education) have been reached, applications are sent to other campuses, lest the NWU loses those students to other universities.

- *Staff transformation at both Potch and Vaal campuses is low*
It is no secret that staff transformation remains a challenge, especially at historically white and historically Afrikaans universities. The NWU has an employment equity plan and targets for this purpose. This (and progress made) was made available to the Task Team, but no specific reference was made to this. The NWU is confident that it is on track with its self-established targets and that there are various strategies (including an employment equity fund) in place to achieve these.
- *A recommendation that the Mafikeng Campus management needs to be restructured or even redeployed as there is mistrust and break down of communication*
The Council appointed a Committee to investigate allegations made against the Campus Rector by students. The finding was that there was not a single ground for any of the allegations and that they were indeed slanderous. The Campus management has done very well in the face of huge and complex challenges and Council has expressed its support for management. More support will be given by the Institutional Office, but no restructuring or redeployment is envisaged.

It must also be said that it is strange and even irregular for a task team to spend less than 2 hours with a campus management group and then find that it must be restructured or redeployed. This flies in the face of the most basic of labour relations principles.

With regard to the alleged breakdown of communication, this is simply not true. Management communicates on a regular and transparent basis: newsletters (both electronic and hard copy), meetings (ordinary and breakfasts) and the staff intranet. Where relevant, copies have been provided to the Task Team. It was pointed out to the Task Team that some members of the Staff Association have, despite having access to the facts, chosen to keep repeating rumours of management's alleged intent to close down the campus. The fact that management has invested almost R100m in infrastructure and maintenance in the last five years on campus, seems to escape them.

With regard to the alleged mistrust, it is also not true for the majority of staff or students. A small minority of staff and students thrive on rumours and unfounded allegations. To blame this on management (as if the mistrust is their fault) is at least ingenious and at most malicious.

The fact that the campus, despite three closures during 2008, has been able to complete the academic year successfully, attests to the fact that management was (and is) able to communicate and inspire trust amongst the majority of staff and students.

- *Alleged high turnover of deans at the Mafikeng Campus*
There are five deans on the Mafikeng Campus. One has been acting for a year, and the position will be filled on a permanent basis within the next two months. Three have been serving for more than two years, and one was appointed permanently recently, after having acted for 6 months. She replaced a dean that had been found not to be able to do his job – after several complaints by staff and students.

Therefore, there have been some changes in the last two years, but all of them for the better. For the first time since the merger, stability has been achieved in the last two months with regard to senior management (deans and vice-rectors) at the Mafikeng Campus. This is hardly something to complain about.

- *“Evening out” of disciplinary procedures across the three campuses and allegations that students were treated unevenly when charged and found guilty (Facebook and counselling)*
There is only one disciplinary code for the whole of the NWU. Disciplinary procedures are managed at a campus level, with assistance from the Institutional Office. We are re-looking at consistency within this system.

The allegations made by students are (again) untested and untrue. For instance, the students who were charged on the Mafikeng Campus in March and found guilty in May 2008, were allowed to write exams in June, pending their appeal (that was only heard in August). Only after the appeal failed were they asked to leave campus. In the Facebook episode, the students were charged before the November exams, but only brought before a disciplinary after the exams (due to the availability of external members of the hearings). They were therefore also (consistently) allowed to write exams.

The counselling “allegation” is based on an off the cuff remark attributed to management that, if found guilty, students should receive counselling for harbouring racist attitudes. No one received counselling with a view to their disciplinary hearings! This is a typical example how (some) students on the Mafikeng Campus spread rumours, and on what kind of allegations and perceptions the Task Team based their findings and recommendations.

Theuns Eloff
Vice-Chancellor

11 February 2009