

# Increase in union cooperation?

## A look at the University of Pretoria

In the public sector strike this year cooperation across unions from different traditions was very much alive. **Ruan van der Walt** looks at union cooperation in the tertiary sector which has had surprising success.

On 24 June 2002 the then Minister of Education, Kader Asmal announced his intention to disband Vista University and incorporate its seven campuses and one distance education campus into other tertiary educational institutions and the University of South Africa (Unisa). This included the incorporation of the Mamelodi campus of Vista into the University of Pretoria (UP).

The reasons given by the Ministry of Education for the incorporation were to bridge the apartheid gap between white and black institutions; to promote equity with regard to students and staff; to ensure efficient use of resources through eliminating duplication in academic programmes; and to consolidate existing academic programmes in response to regional and national needs.

The two universities targeted different student markets. Vista University, in general and the Mamelodi Campus of Vista in particular, targets black students, specifically those who cannot afford tertiary education at formerly "white" universities. Contrary to popular belief, the Mamelodi campus serves more students from other areas than Mamelodi. Students

come from rural areas all over the country and even as far as Botswana, Namibia and Malawi. The effects of Mamelodi students being poor, is felt by UP in different ways. Students pay their registration fees later in the year in order to save for it; students may leave campus for a year or two in their studies to earn money to continue; and students do not easily accept tuition fee increases.

It appears that the radically different institutional cultures of Vista University and the University of Pretoria were ignored. This neglect in a merger is not uncommon and can be why newly created organisations struggle for years to stabilise themselves.

The merger has impacted adversely on these Mamelodi students and has also seriously affected the staff of the Mamelodi campus. As common grievances have emerged at different campuses, trade unions have taken up the issues.

Unions however on different campuses have emerged from different traditions. Nevertheless they have been able to take up a number of grievances jointly. This type of cooperation is becoming more common with examples of inter-union cooperation at Sasol, South African Airways and more

recently in the public service strike.

### COOPERATION AT UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The staff on the Mamelodi campus consist of academics and administrative staff. The majority of these employees belong to either Nehawu (National Education & Allied Workers Union) or Uasa (United Association of South Africa), with a few non-union members. The service staff, that is cleaners and gardeners, were forced out of employment by UP management early in 2004, soon after taking over the campus. This was done by contracting out these functions to private companies.

Although the two unions belong to different union federations, namely Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions) and the Federation of Democratic Unions of South Africa (Fedusa), which come from different ideological backgrounds, the two union branches have been able to cooperate against the dictatorial style of UP's management.

The major disputes with management related to the alignment of conditions of service, promotions, job levels and job grades and the future of the campus.

Regarding the conditions of

service, Vista University had reasonably favourable conditions of service which originated in attempts by Vista, as an apartheid era institution, to attract academics and other personnel. According to both unions, the UP conditions of service are in many respects less favourable.

At the end of January 2004 staff received their first payslips under the new management. The employees on the Mamelodi campus discovered that they were no longer members of the pension fund. No consultation regarding this change had ever taken place and to date the university refuses to re-open the UP pension fund which was closed in 1997. Why was the UP management suddenly so keen to “align” conditions of service? It already had several different sets of conditions for employees and had implemented a separate set of conditions for ex-Vista staff for almost three years. The only conclusion that the unions could draw was that the UP management aims to reduce the more favourable conditions of the ex-Vista staff.

To further complicate matters, there is a dispute between the unions and the UP management regarding which version of the conditions of service is applicable. This dispute goes back to 2000 when the Vista management attempted to change conditions of service with a watered down and less favourable Human Resources Policies and Procedures Manual. The unions maintain that the unilateral changes were rejected by their representatives on the Vista University Council and that their members did not receive any written communication that their original conditions had to be changed.

As far as promotions are

concerned, the unions allege that Vista’s management prejudiced the careers of many of its staff by placing a moratorium on promotion for a number of years due to Vista’s financial position. Once again, workers paid the price for the incompetencies and possible corruption of senior Vista management. As a result of the dispute on promotion, very few ex-Vista employees have been promoted by their new employer.

Dissatisfaction has also arisen regarding the job levels proposed by the UP management, especially of the non-academic staff. The academic positions were relatively easy to agree on as the level of, for example, an Associate Professor is the same in all South African universities. However, the UP management attempted to slot the various Mamelodi Campus positions into the UP’s job level hierarchy based on the Peromnes Job Grading system, whereas Vista University used the obscure Job Manager system. Dissatisfaction with this exercise has already led to a case being referred to the CCMA and the commissioner ordering the UP to do a proper job grading of the position.

Another concern for Nehawu and Uasa is the future of the Mamelodi Campus. This Campus, just as the previous seven campuses of Vista University, was situated in a black township. One of the things the apartheid planners got right was placing the Vista Campuses close to its customer base, namely the workers and children of the working classes. The admission requirements were less onerous and the tuition fees lower to cater for this target market. Through this approach, many black working class students were given an opportunity to achieve a degree.

Many of the past graduates have gone on to make a name for themselves in their respective careers, one graduate, for example, is the black chairperson of the Institute of Chartered Accountants.

The two unions feel particularly aggrieved as many of their proposals regarding the future of the Mamelodi Campus are in their words “simply wiped off the table” by the UP management. The UP management was adamant that the Campus would close at the end of 2006, contrary to the agreement with the unions that the campus would close at the end of 2008. Through student protests and the involvement of community structures, management reluctantly agreed to reopen discussions on the future of the campus and even agreed to admit a new intake of first year students in 2007.

This case study illustrates that two unions with different cultures have managed to cooperate in order to protect and advance the interests of their members. The key to successful cooperation in this case between Nehawu and Uasa seems to lie in the understanding between them that they will work together where possible and when necessary as a united front, but each retains the right to disagree and express their own views. LB

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