



# higher education & training

Department:  
Higher Education and Training  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

## **Synthesis of the Report of the Independent Investigation Task Team on the Welcoming and Introduction of First Year Students at North West University**

### **Background**

Media reports published on 21 and 22 February 2014 by the Beeld newspaper prompted the investigation into the welcoming and introduction programmes of the first year students at North West University (NWU). The paper reported on initiation practices undergone by students at the Potchefstroom campus of the NWU. The article carried a picture (video stills from YouTube) of students performing the “Pukke salute Heil”, which was reported as proof of existence of “Nazi Culture” within NWU.

Following a letter from the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr B E Nzimande, the University Council appointed an “Independent Investigation Task Team” (IITT), to investigate the incident. In the letter, dated 4 March 2014, the Minister requested the university to “institute a thorough investigation on the initiation practices and acts of fascism and Nazism which seem to be led to exist at the institution under the tacit approval by the university management” and to report within three months. In this regard, the Minister pointed the council to Section 49A of the Higher Education Act, 1997 (Act No. 101 of 1997), which outlines conditions of intervention by Minister.

Dr Leon Wessels chaired the IITT. Other team members were Dr Bismark Mzubanzi Tyobeka, Advocate Rehana Rawat and Professor Somadoda Fikeni.

### **Terms of Reference of the Task Team**

The university council mandated the IITT to perform the following tasks, among others:

- Institute a thorough investigation into cultural/induction/orientation/initiation and other demeaning practices, “including acts of Fascism and Nazism that seem to exist at the institution”;

- Determine whether these practices “exist under the tacit approval by the university management”;
- Determine the level of malpractices (initiation or “ontgroening”) against first-year-students and determine the effectiveness of mechanisms to prevent these from occurring;
- Evaluate the respective welcoming and introduction programmes at all the campuses and do a benchmarking exercise to determine best practice nationally and internationally, in this regard, with recommendations on possible restructuring or abolishment;
- Determine the understanding and importance of traditions in the student community and evaluate the content of the present traditions and the sustainability thereof;
- Determine, as posed in the Minister’s letter, whether there is a “culture of intimidation, harassment, fear and purging” at the university against staff and students who try to take a stance against such practices.

### **Observations of the Task Team**

The IITT observed that there was “numerous reports on the subject of first-year orientation and welcoming programmes as well as informal initiation activities”. Two of these reports pertain to the higher education system in general, and these are:

- Report into Initiation Practices at Educational Institutions and Preliminary Report on Cultural Initiations, issued by the South African Human Rights Commission in October 2001; and
- Final Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions, issued in November 2008.

Three of the reports were institution-specific, and much more recent than the above-stated two, and these are:

- A Report on the investigation by the Ministerial Task Team into North West University, appearing in the Government Gazette Number 31863, dated 4 February 2009;

- Lourens de Koning's (SC) Report on the Investigation of the Alleged Irregularities During the Reception and Introduction of the First-Year Students During January 2011 and Related Matters, February 2011; and
- Report of March/April 2014 to the Rector of the NWU, Potchefstroom Campus, Relating to the Investigation of the Alleged Irregularities during and/or After the Reception and Introduction of the First Year Students.

The IITT does not make obvious deductions on the correlation of the number of such investigations and the institutional culture. However, the frequency of the investigations on the same or similar subject at the institution, specifically focusing on the Potchefstroom Campus of the university, is a clear indication that there have been recurring problems related to the Potchefstroom Campus' welcoming programmes for first year students, and initiation practices are a recurring feature of these. There is no reason to believe that such practices are no longer in existence, especially considering that one such report was issued in March/April 2014. It is also clear that these practices have been allowed to continue with the tacit approval of the university management at the campus.

The recurring themes across these reports are:

- initiation practices exist at the Potchefstroom campus of the university and are mainly directed at first year students;
- first year students remain vulnerable at all times;
- the initiation practices amount to the violation of human rights;
- some of the initiation practices have existed for a very long time to the extent that they have assumed a status of being cultural at the residences and are known to the residences management with some even actively participating;
- a culture of fear exists at the institution and people do not talk freely.

Over and above these reports, the IITT conducted interviews with various individuals and groups at different levels within the institution and visited its various campuses. The IITT observed, "there is clearly no noticeable effort made towards 'developing a unique

institutional culture and ethos' when it comes to the issue of student orientation or initiation practices”.

The IITT also observed that the initiation practices conducted by the university residences are exclusionary in nature and restrict access to the residences. The traditions are carried out in Afrikaans and non-Afrikaans speakers are marked out as different and unwelcome. The compulsory use of uniforms by some residences is also another way of barring students who cannot afford to buy such items, as well as a practice that attempts to take away individual agency and ensure buy-in to the dominant culture and traditions of the residences. This has an effect of creating primary loyalty to the residence, rather than the university as a whole.

The IITT also observed that whilst NWU is party to many relevant human rights documents, codes and agreements it is devoid of an ethos of human rights. It observed that the institution has a culture of suppression of human rights, “which disregards and distorts defining human rights codes as well as practices which embody the Constitution and the Bill of Rights”.

As with the reports that came before it, the IITT also established that there exists a culture of fear, which renders people unable to talk freely at the university.

The IITT also raised a concern on the structure of the merger of the institution. In its view, the federal model adopted by the university gives “more autonomy to each constitutive campus” rather than the opposite, which would be to create a common identity for the university. It concludes that the “campus autonomy model also renders institutional managers ineffective in their endeavour to introduce standard practices and achieve transformative objectives”. In other words, the campus model adopted by the university has the effect of ensuring that fundamental transformation does not occur.

## Recommendations

The IITT makes a number of recommendations, which are summarised below:

- 1. Radical normalization of the racial demographics in the student residences.**  
The IITT recommends that the tacit implementation of racial quotas at the Potchefstroom campus residences, which seeks to maintain an 80% white student composition, be removed and that the university should enforce the normalisation of the demographics of residences to accommodate everyone and thereby promote equality.
- 2. Reconfiguration of the market, communications and stakeholder office for greater effectiveness in image-redemption.** The IITT suggests that the current work of the Bemarkeng en Kommunikasie or Branding/Marketing and Communication Department (BEK) office is anti-transformation and therefore, should be reconfigured. In its reconfigured form “the entity must monitor and guide campus-based communication platforms to ensure that these are not used to undermine university transformation and human rights programmes, nor impede on the freedom of expression of staff and students”.
- 3. Review governance merger/organisational model of campus autonomy.** The IITT finds that the current institutional model emphasises campus autonomy over institutional integration and standardisation of programmes towards common institutional identity and culture. The IITT therefore recommends that a review of the institutional model is undertaken. The ideal model should be the one that promotes integration and a single institutional culture, rather than creating the conditions for the individual campuses to be territorial and hold onto old traditions and cultures.
- 4. Total ban on all initiation rituals and practices and affirmation of university-sanctioned orientation and induction programmes.** The IITT recommends that only the formal orientation programme sanctioned by the university should be allowed. Any deviation should be approved by the university management and must take place under strict supervision to ensure strict adherence to human rights values.

5. **Revision of university vision, mission and values to foreground transformation, integration and multi-cultural diversity.** The IITT recommends that the university review its vision, mission and values in order to reflect its refocus on human rights, transformation and to promote and embrace racial and cultural diversity.
6. **Revision of aspects of language policy that may inhibit integration and institutional cohesion.** The IITT recommends that the university language policy should be reviewed to ensure the promotion of linguistic diversity and to ensure that the promotion of Afrikaans is not used as a tool for exclusion in any form. It is also recommended that the student enrolment plan be revisited especially with respect to its racial and linguistic composition.
7. **University-wide dialogue towards implementation of a common and appropriate Reception and Introduction Programme.** The IITT recommends that an institutional summit comprising experts and practitioners from all the university campuses must be convened with a purpose to prepare for the arrival of 2015 cohort of new students. A Task Team of experts must then be established which must ensure that the Reception and Introduction (R&I) Programmes and related activities are in step with the reworked values of the NWU.
8. **Bringing closure to the Thabang Mogoang matter.** The IITT recommends that the university brings closure to the tragic death of Thabang Mogoang and recommends an annual memorial lecture in his honour to focus on human rights and diversity.
9. **Human Rights Committee rejuvenation for greater effectiveness in promotion of human rights.** The IITT recommends that the Human Rights Committee of the university, which must be independent, must be empowered to reach its full potential in the development and sustainability of a human rights culture at NWU. The Committee should issue a bi-annual report on Human Rights and Transformation at NWU, which could also serve to inform the Minister of Higher Education and Training on progress of transformation at the university.

#### 10. **Leadership exchange programme among campuses for greater exposure.**

The IITT recommends that campus leaders, managers, academics, house parents and all key role-players should be exposed to other campuses through exchange programmes.

#### **Implementation Strategies**

In order to circumvent non-implementation of the recommendations, as it has been the case with all other reports before this one, the IITT recommends an implementation strategy. In this regard, the IITT recommends:

- A consultative process that will generate a sense of understanding and ownership by all critical stakeholders;
- The changes should be championed by the university principal rather than being delegated;
- There must be a process map, project plan with timelines and resources allocated for the implementation of each of the recommendations which must be coordinated and led by a dedicated person and unit to each programme;
- A tool for monitoring and assessing the implementation and impact of these programmes should be developed;
- An effective communication tool which ensures transparency and commitment; and
- The submission, literature material received during the investigation be archived and made available for later use in academic research.

#### **Conclusion**

The report from the Council is welcomed, especially since it appears to be an honest introspection. The critical problem remains however that the Potchefstroom Campus has fostered a largely monocultural culture mainly for white Afrikaaners. It is particularly refreshing that there is tacit acknowledgement that the NWU model is one engineered to preserve the former culture of the Potchefstroom University on the Potchefstroom campus. The university should be fostering a culture on all its campuses that includes Afrikaans in an open and inclusive manner. The Council should be requested to ensure the implementation of the recommendations, and particularly to follow through on the

review of the institutional model, and the suggestion that regular reports to the Minister on progress towards transformation are provided.

The Minister should write to the Council acknowledging receipt of the report and indicating that he looks forward to them implementing the recommendations in the report, and to receiving biannual reports on progress.