



The UKZN Griot. Of Institutions and Differences

BY: .

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I now know what it's like to have a split personality. Working at UJ but spending time at UKZN splits me between dryness and humidity; high and low elevations; a single cold concrete building vs. architectural diversity; different boiling temperatures, minibus taxis that ignore traffic lights and stop anywhere and Durban taxis that stop on red and on the side of the road; e-tolls that individuals don't pay and N2/3 toll booths where one has no option; biting cold vs warm winters; platteland vs. sea and jungles; family and bachelorhood; and completely different institutional structures and management styles. Special leave at UJ, for example, relates to staff representing UJ while playing sports, and there is no leave category for field trips, research, or conference attendance. One is simply assumed to be doing one's job, in different places. UJ staff elect their deans; UKZN selects them. UJ has no departmental kitchens while MTB initially lacked toilets. Not sure which is worse, especially on a winter's day when one's bum freezes to the seat – at UJ the toilets are located off unheated and draughty corridors.

These binaries got me to thinking about UKZN in different ways. At UJ academic staff who are sequestered down off-foyer corridors are protected by phalanxes of secretaries, graduate assistants and receptionists. Micro chipped card keys and electronic finger prints get one in and out of the parking lot (when working), through electronically controlled doors, into the library and the Humanities common room. Tea, filter coffee and bottled water come off departmental budgets and new appointments are warmly welcomed during a 100 minute gathering by the entire executive from the VC to deputy deans and heads of support divisions, followed by lunch. Man oh man, one welcoming dean with an open door policy even issues a weekly newsletter updating his citizens on matters of policy, practice and peer activity.

The attractions of UKZN (with the exception of parts of Medical School and Westville), are the subtropical trees and grass, the diversely unique architecture, heritage buildings and the lack of faded civil service linoleum floors, though stressed (and plumbing) staff are everywhere and angry students deface things, and once or twice a year chase their peers and lecturers out of classrooms.

UKZN has monkeys that mess with the bins, and mongooses and feral cats that have trained some voluntary minders. UKZN students smoke everywhere, not so at UJ.

Once in the UJ self-contained cold concrete building it's difficult to get out of the massive, bewildering, inter-reticulated multi-levelled labyrinth in which even UJ veterans still get lost, though my Durban office in TB Davis ext. was a floor above the dope smoking mob that huddled under the stilts. No wonder I got so creative. UKZN has a certain charm and most of all, air conditioning, though this was not always the case. I remember the MTB lecture theatres and 40 degree temperatures, which is why students wear so little in summer – much to the astonishment of some of our august visiting professors.

UKZN still delivers hard copy mail, and where its gate guards check car boots, the UJ guards, microchips notwithstanding and fingerprints, still check the ignitions. I and some colleagues received a notice telling us that we were biometrically mismatched and needed to be re-tagged. Some years ago an overseas UKZN post doc expressed his astonishment at the need for his personal information to be “captured” at registration. At age 66 maybe I also need a biometric walker also? Lose your card you lose your access, and expect congestion at the exit gates.

At Howard College – we have some really “artisanal” food kiosks, at UJ they have a large student food court, quirkily named restaurants, banks, a doctor, physiotherapist and lots of places for students to meet in clubs, to eat, talk and fool around. It's a case of informal sub-tropical colonial charm and some ancient buildings at UKZN compared to long cold windswept glass enclosed corridors. It's quite weird working within a single U-shaped seven-story building where everything is inside and within walking distance, much like the snake-like UNISA building that towers over the valley, that other '70s concrete civil service hangover. I often get lost in both buildings and I yearn for the familiar confusion that I know at MTB. No civil service residues here!

Perhaps I just got used to the mouldy TB Davis Ext suite with its dripping aircons that regularly resulted in floods, rotting carpets, the peeling paint and the men's toilet seat that remained unfixed for many months. Man, this place – UKZN - has character. Some years back a visiting NNMU professor got very agitated as he was led from MTB into what he called a dungeon – only to forget this description when he interacted with so many lively and enthusiastic inmates – our graduate students.

Drama in the street and corridors with thunderous toyi-toying and chanting students protesting something or other; squawking *hadedas* making noise like Jurassic Park, screaming students who seem to be deaf thanks to hearing damage caused by i-Pods and earphones; and of course the concrete lifelessness of Westville and the industrial surroundings of Edgewood stand out. PMB, but a toll road away, has the most convivial campus - always a calming experience for us stressed Howard collegers.

Back to my split, or more usefully, dual personality, separated by just 600kms, multiple toll booths and the smallest church in the world on Van Reenan's pass. Like UKZN, UJ claims to be just 11 years old and one of the few successful mergers. Having started my urban geography career as a positivist at Wits I am now a post-structuralist with some residual positivist tendencies. My conceptual free floating has emerged through the freedom of being a distinguished professor at one

institution, a professor emeritus at another, and I am now a tale between two cities. I have homes, but not wives, in both.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed in this column are the author's own.