



The UKZN Griot. Of Discounting and End Users

BY:

As is now common knowledge, I am now a Distinguished Professor at the University of Johannesburg. This location returns me to my roots, close to where I got all my degrees, from Wits. Bit of rivalry between these two massive institutions that are within spitting distance of each other. This re-location also gives me a new take on Durban - indeed on UKZN itself.

When I was a student and a lecturer at Wits in the late 1960s and '70s, we all thought of Durban as being on the distant fringes of the universe; Pietermaritzburg was not even on our dial. Mooi River was a petrol station. It took 8 hours to get to Durban in the Chevrolet (aka folk singer Jeremy Taylor, remember him?) Incredibly, for the last outpost, Natal had the best highway stretch in the country. A Springbok rugby captain and Natal University graduate, Tommy Bedford, was relieved of his position for using this term ironically.

What fascinated us most, however, was Game. Game had a mystique for us upcountry bumpkins. That mystique was the practice of 'discounting'. No other province then permitted this form of retailing. I'd buy all my film stock from Game. Game lost this mystique when Dion Friedland opened his first store in Jozi - now it's a free-for-all and most discounters are now owned by Walmart.

My first serious academic job offer was from the Geography Department in Durban. In those days I was a numerical modelling genius, having mapped attraction factors of most of Johannesburg's and Sandton's shopping precincts in the early 1970s for the Johannesburg Council Town Planning division. Prof Rob Davies had wanted me to do the same for Durban. But I was already working in the film industry, so I suggested town planner Mike Kahn instead, with whom I had worked in Johannesburg. Mike seized the reigns and soon thereafter was head of the department. He's still in town, now growing bonsai trees. Not me, I'm at UJ, despite some fatherly advice from Prof Makgoba that I get "some rest" in my retirement from UKZN.

Gauteng universities have become something of a refuge for UKZN expats in recent years, and the narrative of exile circulates much like that popularised by South Africans who immigrated to Australia: escape from crime and grime into nirvana. But these new-born

Aussies all hanker for braaivleis, biltong and boerewors. And, God help you if you try to smuggle any of these into Oz (or the USA).

No matter, UKZN for me was a wonderful experience. My 30 years was tough, rough and exhausting. The institution was often maddening, inefficient and disorganised. And, this experience started way before the merger. In some ways things got much better as the years went by. We have short memories when it comes to resources, logistics and funding.

Through every decade I had the full confidence of top management, much as I irritated them, challenged them and engaged and enraged them. One time my colleagues could hear the campus director yelling all the way as he stormed from the Francis Stock admin building to MTB because he had just read a letter I had written him threatening to complain to the city's Health Division about the state of our suite of offices. He stomped in, was given a tour by a PhD student as I was away, and by the end of it, he commended us for our good humour in dealing with a clearly unpalatable situation.

James Trinder was always available for a yell, a debate and a friendly chat. In recent years, however, the endlessly increasing structural endistancing where line managers acted as alienated gatekeepers reduced my enthusiasm. Finding a sympathetic face was the problem. James was always available and always reasonable.

The UKZN narrative is an important one, documented in two books, each written in opposition to the other, though at different times. When read in conjunction, they offer fascinating and instructive narratives of how different constituencies perceived the conditions, tensions and conflicts during the time of the merger. When I tried to borrow the Makgoba and Mubangizi book, *The Creation of the University of KwaZulu-Natal: Reflections on a Merger and Transformation Experience* (2010), from the Library, I was told that this was not possible as it was in the locked books room. Why, I asked? I was at the book's launch and could have bought it there. Eventually, I managed to get it out but never found out why it was being held under wraps. It indeed is an anthology that everyone should read as it clearly explains management's perspectives.

The Chetty & Merrett analysis, *The Soul Of UKZN* (2014), reads like a thriller, one in which many of us are characters. It reveals how, when faced with communication restrictions, academics (as with any constituency) will always find alternative channels to discuss things. The infamous Change-List provided much of the diary that was applied to the analysis in this uncompromising counter-narrative. This column is not however the place to debate the respective merits of the two books. But an intensive and critical reading of each of them will help us deconstruct the mystique of what different groups considered to be transformation, and assist us to move on and build further on what has been concretely achieved in the past 10 years.

Let's not forget what we all accomplished even if we all were bruised and battered in the process. Pain, to paraphrase Afrikaner philosopher, Eugene Marais, is not only a condition of consciousness, but also of democracy, of the public sphere, and of development.

When Tony Leonard retired as Finance Officer from Natal University just before the merger, he and I parted the best of friends no matter the delegation of deans and professors that I had once led to explain to him and the executive the folly of his division's ways of doing some things. Think of academics and students as the "end users" of institutional services and

admin, teaching and research, and things will come right we explained. Once that basic principle had been accepted, things usually did go right.

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