



Unisa as A Home for Emancipatory Histories/ Herstories in Honour of the Pursuit of Human Dignity and Rights

Human Rights Day message from Unisa Principal and Vice Chancellor, Professor Puleng LenkaBula

In the new democratic dispensation post 1994, South Africa commemorates Human Rights Day to reinforce our commitment to the Bill of Rights as enshrined in our Constitution. Equality is one of the rights included in this bill which clearly states that “everyone is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law.”

The constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996, under chapter two of the Bill of Rights, section 29 (2b), refers to the “right to further education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible.” In line with the constitution, the South African National Plan for Higher Education spells out the actualisation goals set for the country. These goals entail more equitable student access, improved quality of teaching, learning and research, increased student progression and graduation rates, as well as greater responsiveness to social and economic needs (South African Ministry of Education, 2001). Academic freedom is also enshrined in the Bill.

As an institution of higher learning, and one that has been shaping futures in the service of humanity for 150 years, the University of South Africa joins the rest of the country and the global community in affirming that, indeed, all human rights matter.

Not only are we doing this by providing access to teaching and learning opportunities to a myriad of people from different backgrounds, but also by adopting practices that entrench a culture of the empowerment of women and people from disadvantaged backgrounds; as well as creating an environment accepting of all diverse groups, including the LGBTQI+ community.

Unisa has provided access to higher education to several people in South Africa, including those who were incarcerated for their political views such as Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, Dikgang Moseneke, Mosibudi Mangena, Jeff Masemola, and many more.

The notion of education as a human right has been articulated quite vividly in the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights Charter, Article 26, section 1 which states that "everyone has the right to education...Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. Considering the above, one can confidently say that the University of South Africa has played a critical role in realising these rights even though other rights were not honoured under the Apartheid South Africa until 1994 and specifically after the adoption of the new Constitution.

Collaboration between Unisa and the SAHRC

To promote and protect the rights in our constitution, UNISA has an exceptionally good relationship with the SARHC. The relationship has been strengthened by the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between UNISA and the Commission. The two parties have agreed to renew their MOA for another two years term until 2024, where the two signatories will make sure that the rights of all people in our country, as guaranteed by and enshrined in the Bill of Rights, will be respected, promoted, protected, upheld, and fulfilled.

A quick glimpse of work done in our various portfolios in the following paragraphs, reveals how Unisa as a home for emancipatory histories/ herstories is committed to the pursuit of human dignity and the rights of all,

RPSIC Portfolio

The RPSIC Portfolio fully subscribes and lives up to the University's social justice mandate which is demonstrated through the following elements:

Access to knowledge & information through open access publishing

UNISA holds that access to knowledge is a human right. Hence, we encourage and support publishing in open access, which makes local scholarly works freely available and reusable in all spheres of life – science, education, health care, public administration, politics, and others. Publishing open access makes articles easier to find, thus expanding their reach and the possibility of an increase in the number of citations.

Promoting human rights through transformative agreements

The university has signed several open-access agreements with scholarly publishers to live up to the University's value system of allowing as wide access as possible, to both students, UNISA staff and partners. The transformative agreements are negotiated to address inclusivity and social justice by promoting the accessibility of local research internationally. The agreements address the challenges in the dissemination of research output by South African researchers and remove any biases in accepting manuscripts based on geographic location. These agreements also include supporting developmental programmes centred around developing South African academic authorship and developing young researchers to be peer reviewers. The first such academy, the Wiley Researcher Academy, the launch is imminent in 2023. The UNISA Library will continue to bring more of these agreements in 2023, adding Springer Nature, Oxford University Press, and ScienceDirect to the existing list of publishers. This practice enables reclaiming of South Africa's intellectual futures. Aside agreements related to publishing, several universities within South Africa, the continent and beyond, have

experienced the implementation of MoUs signed between them and UNISA for capacity development, research, and knowledge sharing.

Promotion of transformation through events, seminar & webinars

The Directorate of Innovation, Technology Transfer & Commercialisation's programmes and activities aim at encouraging and supporting innovation among students and staff, a deliberate focus on identifying African solutions and strategic African focus areas and concerns.

UNISA Press: transformation work reports on both transforming the calibre of authors as well as the content published as evident from the following examples:

- Sisters in the struggle: Women of Indian Origin in South Africa's Liberation Struggle 1900 – 1994;
- Butterworth: A case study of Apartheid industrial decentralization and democratic de-industrialisation;
- Decolonising journalism education in South Africa: Critical Perspective
- Names fashioned by gender: Stitched perspectives.

In addition, the Portfolio continues to partner with indigenous and small publishing houses to play a developmental role and serve as a partner in publishing indigenous content.

Publishing accredited outputs on human rights

The RPSIC Portfolio oversees the capturing, analysis, and submission to the DHET various outputs about human rights, democracy, and social justice.

Books on human rights and promotion of social justice

UNISA Press is the biggest academic publisher in Africa. As the Press' role goes beyond the shores of South Africa, it demonstrates Unisa's commitment to human rights by publishing on human rights subject fields from authors within the country, the continent and beyond as is evident from the following few examples:

- Escape from Lubumbashi: a refugee's journey on foot to reunite he family (Estelle Neethling)
- Making the circle bigger: South Africa higher education, social justice and students with disabilities (Desire Chiwandire and Louise Vincent)
- (Un)Silence LGBTI: experiences and identities in institutions of higher learning in South Africa (Peace Kiguwa, etc)
- 'sisters in the struggle': women of Indian origin in South Africa's liberation struggle 1900 – 1990s (Kalpana Hiralal)

TLCESS

Persuaded by the justice-seeking nature of Unisa, TLCESS's contributions in propagating and realising the Human Rights agenda can be revealed from the following:

- PQM is diverse, vibrant, relevant, and responsive.

Our Programme Qualification Mix (PQM) is vibrant, relevant, and responsive. TLCESS ensures that there is continual improvement on current qualifications as well as an introduction of new relevant qualifications that address societal challenges and contribute to the

development and betterment of South Africa and the continent. Through yearly quality reviews, TLCESS ensures that it responds to the challenges that higher education is expected to respond to.

- The curriculum contributes to the making of a critical citizenry.

The epistemic premise of our curriculum is decolonial knowledge that is not afraid to foreground African thoughts, voices, and theories in the construction of knowledge and producing graduates that contribute to society.

- Our mode of delivery is sensitive to the different backgrounds that our learners come from

Not all learners have the resources to support their higher education studies. The TLCESS portfolio ensures that it humanises technology to fully support the learners. This is done through ensuring that lectures are recorded, there is tutorial support for the learners, and that glossaries in different African languages are created across the different disciplines.

- Creation of new academic departments to better respond to the Human Right challenges of our time.

An academic department is a community of scholars working on the production of a body of knowledge. The recently formed Department of Gender and Sexuality Studies demonstrates UNISA's unapologetic commitment to Human Rights. This new department will position UNISA's scholars to be among the leading thinkers in contributing to the national and international discourse on gender and sexualities studies.

- Lifelong learning is a justice commitment.

Through the UNISA Centre for Lifelong Learning (UCL), UNISA demonstrates its commitment to affordable lifelong quality learning.. Affordable learning is a justice stance and a commitment to ensure that the broader public can access higher learning. The Short Learning Programmes (SLPs) that UCL offers are affordable and start at different times of the year. These SLPs are responsive to the needs of our society.

Engaged Scholarship Projects Deepening Human Rights Praxis

At Unisa, we assert that Higher Education institutions exist for the preparation and formation of a well-equipped, critical citizenry who can contribute to the formation of systems and structures that deepen democracy and social justice. For this reason, our engaged scholars, departments, colleges, and regions defuse human rights consciousness and discourse, and develop partnerships and projects for the eradication of human rights violations across systems.

As an unparalleled African site for knowledge creation, research, innovation, human talent development and the promotion of civic engagement, Unisa contributes directly to the development of just, sustainable, and liveable societies by positioning our intellectual capacity and social networks in the direction of the critical social justice and development challenges of our world.

In 2023, we have a total of 119 projects that address a range of national, continental, and international development areas. It is noteworthy that all projects address social, economic,

and environmental development challenges and their associated social justice and human rights implications.

Projects address development and social justice challenges across a range of key foci. For each of the foci, our engaged scholars work with collaborators and partners to determine the nature of human rights infringements and its consequences. Together with our networks we mobilize knowledge related to the specific development and human rights area, inform advocacy campaigns with relevant and user-friendly data, and create robust communities of practice for enhanced human rights awareness and social justice outcomes.

Human Resources & Leadership and Transformation

Throughout the years, the university has provided all people with access to education irrespective of race, colour, creed or disability. Consequently, Unisa can proudly claim to be an African university in the service of humanity. In a move towards institutionalising the catalytic niche areas, the university commenced with the recruitment of Distinguished Scholars towards the end of 2022.

Unisa is making a difference and contribute towards advancing the academic project by improving the numbers of staff with PhD's, improving the number of rated researchers, increasing the throughput rate for Masters and Doctoral students, as well as increasing the student success rate.

In terms of persons with disabilities, UNISA has employed 81 (4 temporary) staff who have declared their disabilities, which is 1.2% of the total staff compliment. The majority of these are in the Professionally Qualified & experienced specialists/mid-management (20) and Skilled Technical & Academically Qualified / Junior Management / Supervisors / Foreman / Superintendents (56).

Operations and Facilities

The University has appointed a contractor to develop a state-of-the-art disability centre of excellence. The facility will make a significant contribution to inclusive education for people living with the following types of disabilities (a) intellectual; (b) visual; (c) hearing; (d) autism; (e) reading/dyslexia, and assistive technology units.

This contribution is in support of the human rights in ensuring that no one is discriminated against based on any form of disability. The centre will not only serve Unisans but also serve as a centre to collaborate individuals with developmental disabilities and their families to improve quality of life and community inclusion.

The Centre will also provide opportunities for staff to undertake cutting-edge research, disability diagnosis, development of research-based education interventions and training. Furthermore, the Centre will also serve as an extended support service unit of UNISA students with disabilities.

UNISA also recognised struggle veteran and South African human rights activist, such as Solomon Kalushi Mahlangu, by naming one of the buildings after the icon.

In 2022, Facilities Management completed OHS repairs at most of the buildings within the institution and Building Condition Assessments to ensure that the Human Rights for Unisa stakeholders are not violated by occupying buildings that are not compliant in terms of Occupational Health and Safety Act 85 of 1993.

Registrar

UNISA continues to build on its well-established history as a university that has created many opportunities for people of all standing, where hope for academic excellence and growth would have been, at best, almost an impossibility. We continue to be the largest institution, creating futures for millions of students in this country and in Africa. This year alone, we have already registered just over 300 000 students (just under 20 000 of them are students with disabilities) and the plan is to register and support more than 377 600 students in the 8 colleges of the university.

In doing this we are cognizant and fully supportive of section 29 contained in the Bill of Rights which states, in part: “Everyone has the right...to further education.”

The opportunity to exercise this right is brought to the grasp of every aspiring student regardless of their race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language, and birth.

As an institution, we jealously guard the freedoms of conscience, association, thought, opinion and of peaceful assembly and demonstration to the eleven Student Representative Councils (SRCs), one of which is at the national level, and the other ten located in our Regions whose physical addresses are in the Provinces of this Republic. The exercise of encouraging the accommodation of all opinions and agendas in the various organizations will hopefully make a notable contribution towards all in respecting, promoting, and protecting the rights of one another. We continue to recognize and acknowledge Human rights activists and their role through conferring Honorary degrees.

Apart from the doors of the University which are open to all in Tshwane and Florida, we have 26 additional doors standing ajar nationally. This footprint not only brings the university and its academic offerings and tutorial support closer to the people, but it also enables the progressive realization of their wildest dreams, without having them travel long distances to reach Unisa.

ICT

As a university, and through an agile IT system, we continue to be leaders in comprehensive open distance e-learning.

Unisa has been able to provide examinations successfully on the Moodle Learning Management System in three (3) sittings since May / June 2022. We have given students the ability to advance in the next step of their careers in acquiring necessary credentials to be effective participants in the country’s economy. Our virtual learning environment enables the curriculum to be completed successfully. Also, our commitment to provide connectivity access thereto for staff and students by provisioning monthly data, is critical to student success.

The ICT has upgraded the campus connected and wireless network and ensured a perimeter intrusion detection and management system (firewall) that is current and has effective support addressing vulnerabilities in the University’s cyber security posture.

SRAS

- Ensuring that students have the rights to education. Also, our Institutional Research provides the colleges with surveys on student performance in the examinations, on employers views of our graduates, as well as briefing reports on student success.
- SRA's planning to ensure that the disadvantaged students are offered an opportunity to access and succeed in higher education.
- Our quality assurance protocols and systems are designed to ensure that our students are provided with quality education.

In response to the call for Unisa to be a transformed institution, the SRAS portfolio has worked closely with the Department of Leadership and Transformation on the webinar which tackled a fundamental theme on toxic culture and identifying mitigation strategies to ensure that this portfolio is habitable for its staff.

Some of the recent initiatives which came as a result of such engagement were the SRAS toxicity survey which aimed to unbundle matters affecting staff morale. Institutionally, SRAS has administered the bullying survey that will also unveil some of the challenges that staff experiences. UNISA maintains the stance of Zero tolerance on matters of bullying, harassment, misogyny and any form of culture that dehumanises staff and students. With these dimensions, it is assumed that the findings from the bullying survey will inform HR of interventions needed to make Unisa a home away from home, a comfort zone.

Finance: Initiatives in Advancing Human Rights

In line with the provisions of the freedom charter which states that “the doors of learning and culture shall be opened” Unisa has kept its tuition fee low to ensure that the poor and the disadvantaged have access to quality higher education in South Africa. In this regard, Unisa's fees remains the lowest in comparison with all other Universities in the country.

Furthermore, to increase access to the marginalised and vulnerable, Unisa has also implemented an acknowledgement of debt (AOD) program which allows students who are owing the University to register and continue with their academic program despite their debt provided they commit to repay the University over time.

University through its foundation has also created a fund which is aimed at assisting students who have completed their qualifications but can't graduate and get their qualifications certificate to enable them to enter the mainstream economy by paying for their outstanding fees.

The university has also established a program where staff voluntarily contributes a portion of their salary towards a fund which assists students who either do not have funds to register or cannot settle their outstanding debts.

The university has implemented all these programs in order to advance the human rights of its students and the broader South African community.

Since the advent of Covid-19 in 2020, Unisa has also started to provide students with data to enable them to learn online in fulfilment of their qualification requirements with limited disruptions. Unisa has continued with this program of providing students with data even post the lock down period and has also improved this from only providing data during examinations to providing data on a monthly basis.

Conclusion

As we celebrate Human Rights Day, we recommit ourselves as the University of South Africa to honouring the bold and fearless women and men who marched on 21 March 1960, with 69 losing their lives on that fateful date. Their passing cannot be in vain, as we continue to ensure that the rights of the youth and the students, many of whom UNISA is the last recourse for a chance at a better academic future; the women - young and old - are upheld in this university.

I also urge you to join our Human Rights Month Seminar to be hosted by the Department of Leadership and Transformation on Thursday, 23 March 2023. Themed Fostering greater social cohesion, nation-building and a shared national identity, this seminar will focus on issues such as 150 years of Unisa's history and the notion of human rights, the Constitution from a Bill of Rights perspective, and the role of Unisa as the largest Comprehensive ODeL+ institution expanding access to poor and working-class students.

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