

MEDIA STATEMENT

Approved for Public Release

Date: Wednesday, 20 September 2023

Unisa Management held robust engagement with media on the state of the university

Background

The Executive Management of the University of South Africa (Unisa), led by the Principal and Vice Chancellor, Professor Puleng LenkaBula, held a media briefing at the Unisa Main Campus, Pretoria on Wednesday, 20 September 2023. The purpose of the media briefing was to share with the media an update on the general state of the university, including successes achieved and challenges faced. The university also used the opportunity to engage with the media on issues of mutual interest. Amongst the issues addressed during the media briefing were the following:

The state of the academic project

Management affirmed the fact that the academic project at Unisa remains intact. The university is on course towards fulfilling its missional mandate of becoming a Comprehensive, Open Distance and eLearning (CODeL) institution that produces excellent scholarship and research, provides quality tuition and fosters active community engagement, guided by the principles of life-long learning, student-centredness, innovation and creativity. Through its efforts, Unisa contributes to the knowledge and information society, advances development, nurtures a critical citizenry and ensures global sustainability.

With over 1 million applications annually, Unisa enrolls over 350 000 students annually, thereby accommodating over a third of students in the country's higher education system and 90 per cent of the distance learning component. Unisa produces 20 per cent of the sector's graduates annually.

A robust quality assurance system is in place to ensure that the university's teaching and learning as well as its programme offerings adhere to the highest standards.

Unisa regularly subjects itself to a review process conducted by the Council on Higher Education (CHE), which requires of institutions of higher learning to adhere to a set of criteria which, if met adequately, renders their teaching and learning and qualifications fit for purpose. The last review conducted by the CHE on Unisa, whilst identifying certain areas where improvements need to be made, by and large found that the university's plans and contributions have recorded a significant growth in its core functions and overall good practices as a Comprehensive Open Distance eLearning (CODeL) institution. The outcome of this audit confirmed that the university is functional in 10 out of 16 standards,



with three commendations. Improvement plans have been put in place to address all areas identified by the audit.

Unisa participates actively in the regular audit exercises of the Commonwealth of Learning (CoL), an intergovernmental structure created for the promotion and development of distance education and open learning. In the last trial audit conducted in 2019, the CoL concluded that the integrity of Unisa qualifications was solid. It did, of course, mention issues that still needed to be improved, which the university wasted no time in attending to.

Like all institutions of higher learning, Unisa has also put in place additional internal mechanisms to safeguard the integrity of its qualifications. These include standard operating procedures within departments, quality assurance committees as well as college-specific peer review measures whose aim is to ensure that Unisa qualifications are up to standard. All these measures are applied with the necessary rigour and consistency.

Unisa is steadfast in its commitment to ensuring that the integrity of its examination processes is beyond reproach. In the era where the university's examinations are primarily conducted online, Unisa has deliberately introduced examination proctoring using intelligent invigilation systems. Proctoring and the verification of proctoring is carried out diligently and irregularities are attended to promptly; and where transgressions are picked up, requisite action is taken within the ambit of university policy. Management emphasised that this is the one area the university has no intention of compromising as the integrity of the Unisa qualifications is sacrosanct.

Unisa offers over 400 qualifications and programmes, from certificate to doctoral level. All its programmes, which are spread across eight colleges and 2 schools, the Thabo Mbeki African School of Public and International Affairs and the Unisa School of Business Leadership, are fully accredited and meet the standards of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and registered with the South African Qualification Authority (SAQA). The programmes are also accredited by relevant industry bodies such as SAICA, ECSA, SAVC, CIMA, ACCA, ISSA, SAIPA, etc.

On the quality of Unisa academics

Unisa has in its employ qualified and accredited academic staff. Of the 1823 permanent academic staff at the university, 1059 (60 %) are PhD holders. A total of 245 of these academics are NRF-rated researchers, made up of 3 A-rated, 17 B-rated, 182 C-rated and 43 Y-rated researchers. Many of its academics are affiliated with the Academy of Science and publish widely in journals. 70 NRF rating applications were submitted to the NRF in 2021 and of these, 68 were confirmed by May 2022. This exponential increase in the number of Unisa academics accepted as NRF-rated researchers provides testimony of Unisa's stature as a serious player in the sector.

Furthermore, Unisa academics continue to be recognised with national and international awards, particularly in the field of research. A recent case in point is the 2023 South African Women in Science Awards (SAWiSA) which took place earlier this month, where two of its women and black professors, flew the Unisa flag high. Professor Puleng Segalo from the College of Human Sciences was honoured with the 2023



SAWiSA award in the category of Distinguished Women Researchers in Humanities and Social Sciences. Professor Usisipho Feleni was a finalist at the awards. Another academic from the College of Human Sciences, Professor Fortunane Silinda, received the HERS-SA Higher Education Women's Leaders Award in the category of Young Emerging Leader, while Professor Katuu, also from the same college received the Outstanding Reviewer accolade at the 2023 Emerald Literati Award. These awards are on top of another sterling performance by Unisa academics at the 2023 NRF Awards held in August 2023, where three of the university's researchers received Special Recognition Awards for Research Excellence. Earlier this month, two Unisa academics, Ayesha Osman and Collen Nephumbada also represented Unisa in the semi-final round of the 2023 NRF-SAASTA FameLab SA competition.

The quality and stature of Unisa academics is also being affirmed by the continued appointment of Unisa academics to chair strategic bodies and organs in the sector, such as the recent appointment of Professor Geesje van den Berg from the College of Education as the Chairperson of the Commonwealth of Learning (CoL) and Professor Kerstin Jordaan from the College of Economic and Management Sciences as the Chairperson of the NRF Evaluation and Ratings Panels.

On benchmarking Unisa's performance

- For the fifth consecutive year, Unisa retained 8th position with regard to sector comparison of contribution to 2021 overall publication outputs. There were approximately 67 more publication outputs for 2021, relative to 2020.
- Unisa retained 8th position with regard to sector comparison of contribution to 2021 journal outputs.
- Unisa moved up one place to 7th position with regards to sector comparison contribution to 2021 conference proceedings.
- Unisa went up one place to 13th position with regards to sector comparison of Per Capita Research Publications Output for 2021.
- Unisa moved up from 5th to position 1 with regard to the 2021 ratio (0.90) of doctoral graduates to academics with doctoral degrees.
- Unisa retained 7th position with regards to the 2021 Research Masters Graduate Output.

On Research and Innovation

Unisa has made substantial progress in research and innovation, as evidenced by several external and credible scientific ranking systems, with the latest ones, the 2023 Webometrics and Shanghai Rankings, placing us in the top ten universities in the country.

- Unisa retained 7th position in Research Masters Graduate Output, with 578 Masters graduates in 2021.



- Unisa moved from 4th to 2nd position in Doctoral research graduates, with 421 Doctoral graduates in 2021.
- Unisa is ranked amongst the top ten research-productive institutions in the sector.
- Unisa has recently been invited to partner with the African BioGenome Project (AfricaBP), a coordinated pan-African effort to build capacity and infrastructure to generate, analyse and deploy genomics data for the improvement and sustainable use of biodiversity and agriculture across Africa.
- Unisa researchers in Agriculture, Science and Technology managed to advance a new solution to tackle multi-drug resistant tuberculosis.
- Unisa researchers in the College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences (CAES) are now leading the way and conducting cutting edge and bold research for Cancer Treatment.

Through the hard work and dedication of Unisa academics, the institution itself is recognised as a serious player in research globally, including, for example, winning the 2022 Zairi International Award for Excellence in Research Impact. In this case, Unisa emerged amongst 90 applications received from 52 countries across the world.

Financial stability and Governance Architecture

The financial health and sustainability of the university remains very strong, with the university attaining unqualified audits for five consecutive years (2017- 2021). The institution's reserves, under the current leadership, have grown from R9 billion to approximately R17 billion since 2021.

The Governance architecture at Unisa is robust and functional as attested to by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and Commonwealth of Learning (CoL) audits. The Unisa Council, Senate, Institutional Forum, Student Representative Council and Convocation are properly constituted. The Council in particular is compliant and functional and has been independently evaluated and verified by the Institute of Directors, South Africa.

This was also affirmed by the recent recognition of Unisa by the annual Top 500 publication, which named Unisa as one of South Africa's best companies, in recognition of the institution's outstanding performance and commitment to excellence.

On student services

The university reiterated its long-standing stance and commitment to continue improving student service delivery and support. It acknowledged that while there were challenges that still need to be addressed, a lot of work had been carried out to address these challenges, some of which are legacy and systemic challenges. Management pointed out that it had identified some of the challenges when it conducted an AS-IS analysis of the institution in 2021 and put in place mechanisms to mitigate against them. These



include, amongst others, beefing up and empowering the Student Communication Service Centre to enable it to respond rapidly to student enquiries as well as clearing the backlog on the delivery of outstanding certificates to students who graduated. The clearing of certificates backlogs was a successful project and the university is carrying on with the process, with the graduations team visiting the Unisa regional offices regularly, where students can come and collect their certificates.

On the Independent Assessor's Report

Management reiterated the university's stance on the Independent Assessor's Report and its predecessor, the MTT Report. Whilst the university co-operated with both processes and respected the reports, it differed with the findings of both reports that the institution was collapsing. However, due to the issues pertaining to the Independent Assessor's report and Minister's notice to place the university under administration being *sub judice*, the university has adopted an official position of not dealing with these issues in the public domain.

Ends/

ISSUED BY UNISA MEDIA AFFAIRS

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