

“Define tomorrow”¹ Scholarly Professionalism

(in the Specific Context of the University of South Africa [UNISA]’s 150 Years² Journey)

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1. Background

First and foremost, it, indeed, is with distinctive honour, privilege, and pleasure that the given Alumni-Contributor dares to share the few thoughts under the specific caption. Most importantly, the specific undertaking emanates from the unwavering commitment to the life-long learning³ and optimization⁴ aspirations with deep indebtedness to the noble cause proper. Similarly, the humble position of Senior Physician – Scholar Assoc. Professor and ‘*Mature*’ Learner, with both the horizontal-lateral and vertical specialization tracks wisdom, is believed to lend valuable imputes to the given endeavour under the cardinal integral premise of what the given Alumni-Contributor loves to coin and widely promote with passion as “*Scholars Special Stewardship Scheme*”⁵. In the process, it can possibly serve the duality of purposes, namely colouring the UNISA’S momentous epoch 150-Year Anniversary and thereby also bolstering the common pathways to the endless scholarly professionalism future as UNISANS and far beyond.

2. Professionalism in Context

The Professionalism Concept: Professionalism is a complex concept. Different^{6,7,8,9,10} professional disciplines and streams conceptualise it differently. Based on a grossly expeditious digest, it is reasonable

¹ University of South Africa (UNISA) Online

² Ibid.

³ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2021. *Health Professions Faculty for the Future: Proceedings of a Workshop*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/26041>.

⁴ MULUGETA Betre Gebremariam. 2022. Health and Social Development Responsiveness Optimization: A Transformational Innovations Expedition Avenue (From ‘*the Cradle of Humanity*’ and ‘*the Land of Origins*’ to the World). Reach Publishers: Wandsbeck, South Africa (<http://mulugetabgmhsdresponsiveness.online/>)

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⁶ Professions and Professionalism Vol 12, No 3 (2022) Papers Series e4562-35030.

⁷ Daniel W. Porcupile (Contract Officer at U.S. Security Associates, Inc.) What is PROFESSIONALISM? What does Professionalism mean to you? Sep 9, 2015

⁸ Nihan Demirkasimoglu Defining “Teacher Professionalism” from different perspectives *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences* 9 (2010) 2047–2051 Available online at www.sciencedirect.com doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2010.12.444.

⁹ Rozita Ibrahim*, Ahmad Zamri Mansor & Latifah Amin. The meaning and practices of academic professionalism: views from academics in a research University. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 59 (2012) 520 – 527.

to understand professionalism as a qualified practice in the given context. In general, professionalism can be defined as a way of perceived, accepted or legitimized, systematic conduct, expertise, formats, patterns, proficiencies, practices, structures, etc. With professionalism inherently embedded are dynamic, formality, functionality, legitimacy, operationalisation, organization, proactiveness, production, structures, systems, etc. with a degree of entrusted autonomy, competency/expertise, and proficiency.

Cardinal Features of Professionalism¹¹:

Notable characteristics: Explicitly stipulated accountability, attitude, behavior, certification (accreditation), commitment, compassion, confidence, courtesy, emotional intelligence, freedom, humility, know-how, norms, respect, self-regulation, skills, social responsibility, sympathy, trust, value.

Identity domain: defined (recognized) autonomy, competence/expertise, credibility, ethics and integrity, independence, impartiality, manner, qualification quality, reliability, standard of practice, truth.

Practices (overt and covert) domain: systematic (able, coordinated, effective, efficient, etc.) execution, organization, plan, review/evaluation, and professional development (updates).

Distinctiveness of Scholarly Professionalism: Scholarly professionalism exhibits inherent peculiarities. As general expectation and rule, it is presumed that highest possible intellectual ... Systematic advancement of scientifically rationalized (reasoned) set of *par excellence* explicit ethics, critical curiosity, philosophy, principles/values, evidence-lead know-how proficiency norms, and imparting same (i.e., *science, solutions, and services* continuum¹²) with the life-long learning in a defined stream.

The Contemporary Scholarly Discourses and the Envisioned Future Landscape: Among others scholarly taxonomies such as ‘*Excellence*’, *Life-Long Learning*, *Role-Modeling* and similar frameworks are not uncommon in the contemporary scholarly discourse. Overall, the “Power of Knowledge”¹³ is presumed to stand at the highest demand to the unlimited future. Of course, the significance of knowledge-based competency and application is presumed to be embedded with the aforementioned. It also is worthwhile to appreciate the ongoing debates surrounding the noted taxonomies. Moreover,

¹⁰ Huili Cao, Yejun Song, Yanming Wu, Yifei Du, Xingyue He, Yangjie Chen, Qiaohong Wang and Hui Yang. What is nursing professionalism? a concept analysis. *BMC Nursing* (2023) 22:34 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12912-022-01161-0>

¹¹ Sylvia R. Cruess, MD, and Richard L. Cruess, MD Professionalism and Medicine's Social Contract with Society An overview of the origins of the social contract between physicians and society, with expectations and demands on both parties. *Medicine and Society Virtual Mentor*. April 2004, Volume 6, Number 4. doi: 10.1001/virtualmentor.2004.6.4.msoc1-0404.

¹² MULUGETA Betre Gebremariam

¹³ The Power of Knowledge. Springer Nature Group Sustainable Business Report 2020.

though, it is viewed very worthwhile to take critical note of the following observation from the most recent (contemporary) systematic deliberation by US National Academy of Sciences¹⁴:

“The global research and innovation system is highly competitive and narrowly focused on a set of short-term criteria for excellence, and often those criteria are imposed at the individual level rather than across a portfolio of activity. That creates incredible pressure on individuals and a stovepiping that segregates different parts of the system—research from innovation, and both from the wider society.”

The multifaceted implications for the scholarly professionalism are believed to be crystal clear and thus instructive with this incisive enough statement, though.

3. Scholarly Professionalism in the Specific Context of the University of South Africa’s (UNISA’s) Hundred and Fifty Years Journey

Understandably, UNISA is fully acquiescent and thus subscribes to the stipulations in the Higher Education Qualification Sub-Framework (January 2013)¹⁵. At the same time, to the given Alumni’s (and trust very same holds true to the many thousands more), UNISA is a very unique higher learning institution with limitless opportunities and possibilities such as:

- Its everlasting incisive “*Define tomorrow*” and “*Shape the future*” ethos legacy;
- Remarkable inspirational moral leadership heritages with the distinctive illuminators attendances: the World-Class Legendary Giant Alumna, the “*Long Walk To Freedom*” Struggle Leader and the First Post-Apartheid President N. Mandela (“*Madiba*”), Reverend D. Tutu, and the many more;
- Prominent Global Visibility with the Chancellorship Wisdom¹⁶ of Its Africa-wide Intellectual Giant and Honourable Elder Statesman, Former South Africa’s President, Dr. T. Mbeki;
- Blessed and graced with Prominent Female Executive Leaders all of the levels: The V/Chancellor and Principal, V/Principal for Research, Postgraduate Studies, Innovations and

¹⁴ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2023. *Transforming Research and Higher Education Institutions in the Next 75 Years: Proceedings of the 2022 Endless Frontier Symposium*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/26863>.

¹⁵ The Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework As Revised January 2013 ... (South Africa)

¹⁶ Speech of TMF Patron, Thabo Mbeki, on the Occasion of the His Installation as a Chancellor of the University of South Africa: UNISA Campus: Tshwane – 27 February, 2017.

Commercialisation, V/Principal for Teaching, Learning, Community Engagement and Student Support, and V/Principal for Information & Communication Technology together with the many Deans, Directors and Department Chairpersons;

- Truly MEGA, by several attributes, African and Global higher learning institution “*in the Service of Humanity*” mission;
- Remarkably African by its academic programme features;
- Leading Open-Distance Learning Hub across the World;
- Cross-, Inter-, Multi-, and Trans-Disciplinary College of Graduate Studies;
- Strategically Positioned Regional Learning Centre in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), which rightfully serves the African Diplomatic and Political Capital;
- Multi-Modal and Flexible System(s);
- Limitless Life-Long Learning (LLLL) and Continuous Professional Development (CPD);
- Etc.

In connection, it is believed that the 150-Year Anniversary is presumed to transmit a very powerful message to the world at large justifying the series of systematic re-accentuations and re-affirmations on periodically regular mode.

Notable Landmarks and Milestones: Overall, UNISA has made significant strides and hence has in its records remarkable accomplishments¹⁷. The notable convergence and merger in 2004 and “... *bestowed a status for the new UNISA as a single, dedicated distance education institution*”¹⁸ is believed to have had made the biggest historical difference. By the 150-Year Epoch Anniversary, UNISA¹⁹ prides itself with nearly a million of graduates and alumna, over 350,000 current students enrollment in its various academic programmes, and approximately 50,000 annual graduates. Similarly, with the first ever Ph.D. in 1969, UNISA prides for its 70 plus Doctoral Programmes by the turn of the 150 years of establishment.

¹⁷ Vice Chancellor and Principal’s, Professor Puleng LenkaBula’s Appreciations To Unisans (2022)

¹⁸ NATIONAL DOCTORAL REVIEW 2020 FACILITATED BY THE COUNCIL ON HIGHER EDUCATION *Repositioning quality of the student experience at Unisa* SELF-EVALUATION REPORT

¹⁹ <http://www.unisa.online/>

These are very grand accomplishments and hence milestones by the given parameters as well as standards.

Regional Learning Centres with the Special Emphasis on the Ethiopia Case Study: UNISA operates through and with strategically positioned Regional Learning Centres. One of such is the Ethiopian as;

“UNISA is operating in Ethiopia on the invitation of the Government to collaborate in high-level human-capital development ...”²⁰

“...UNISA’s Ethiopia Learning Centre is a testament to its vision as the Ethiopia Centre (Addis Ababa) supports more doctoral students compared to undergraduates, in the 2019 academic year, 83% of the student population at the Ethiopia Learning Centre were doctoral students.”²¹

It is to be noted that by 2020, UNISA was “*the biggest contributor of access to doctoral offerings with two thousand, three hundred and seventy-two (2,372) doctoral students which is the highest number in South Africa currently*”²².

Envisioned Strategic Pathways: “*As Africa’s leading open distance learning university, we strive to keep up with the constantly evolving Higher Education landscape in order to serve our students to the best of our ability. Our main aim is to harness the new and emerging potential in information and communication technology to catapult the university into a truly digital future. ...*”²³

²⁰ University of South Africa Ethiopia Regional Learning Centre Information on 2023 Admission Application ... https://www.unisa.ac.za/static/corporate_web/Content/Colleges/CGS%20-%20NEW/Media%20and%20events/Docs/FINAL%20Unisa_CGS_Ethiopia_Admission_Application_Information_A5_2023-11%20Nov%202022.pdf

²¹ <http://www.unisa.online/>

²² Ibid.

²³ <https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/About/Who-we-are/Our-strategy>

4. UNISA’S Endless Scholarly Professionalism Aspirations, Innovations, and Inspirations Frontiers^{24, 25}: In-house and Global Scales

“Our vision defines everything that we do. It describes our wish to serve every country on the African continent while transcending language and cultural barriers. We are 100% committed to the communities and individuals we serve.”²⁶

“The vision of the UNISA can be decoded as being Africa’s leading Open Distance e-Learning institution that offers internationally accredited qualifications with world-class resources that inspire learners to create meaningful futures in their own terms. Being the African university in the service of humanity that defines tomorrow, remains a compelling signifier of bold aspirations and unique positioning of the university.”²⁷

The key accentuation takeaways from the above statement are:

- Africa’s leading Open Distance e-Learning
- Internationally accredited qualification
- World-class resources
- Inspire learners to create meaningful future
- African university in the service of humanity that defines tomorrow

With all of its engagements, “UNISA aspires towards quality and thoroughness ...”²⁸ And, *inter alia*, the crucial hallmarks are as stipulated for Its Doctoral Programme are:

- Broad, well-informed and current knowledge of fields and discipline
- Stewardship, independent work & original contribution that advances the frontiers of knowledge
- Staying abreast of developments
- Scholarly disposition and critical and ethical integrity
- Being adaptive and an agent of intellectual advancement
- Etc.

²⁴ <http://www.unisa.online/>

²⁵ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2023. *Transforming Research and Higher Education Institutions in the Next 75 Years: Proceedings of the 2022 Endless Frontier Symposium*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/26863>.

²⁶ <https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/About/Who-we-are/Our-strategy>

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

In the same token, the much broader as well as latest US National Academy of Sciences most statement²⁹ provides useful consolidation in the specific respect as:

“In the 21st century, the answers involve multiscale, cross-sector, and cross-disciplinary systems. “We’re no longer looking at individual things—we’re looking at systems.” Regarding the content of science, these systems may involve ecosystems, energy systems, cellular systems, and so on. Regarding the organization of science, systems encompass skills, careers, infrastructures, institutions, funding, and other features of the science and technology enterprise. “The core of the challenge now is to view things in terms of those systems.””

By capitalizing upon and thereby expanding the aforementioned, the defining features of **UNISA’s 150-Year caption: “Reclaiming the African Intellectual Future”**³⁰ Scholarly Professionalism Aspirations, Innovations, and Inspirations may, therefore, better be anchored upon, explained by, and realized through the impassioned pursuits of Our Collective “*The Africa We Want Agenda 2063*”³¹ (and also to the limitless beyond) mission by ensuring:

1. Highest (MAX) Standards of Scholarship Dedication, Ethics, and Integrity
2. Maximally (MAX) Tuned “*Define tomorrow*” and “*Shape the future*” Mindset
3. MAX Inter-African Strategic Cooperation(s)
4. Patriotism-owned and Meaningful Global Collaboration Leadership
5. Optimally Interconnected Trans-System^{32, 33} Proactivism and Responsibility
6. “*Out-of-the-Prism*” (‘Unbound’) *Think-Act-Do-Tank* Sphere of Influence
7. Dynamic Creativity, Innovations, and Originality^{34, 35}

²⁹ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2023. *Transforming Research and Higher Education Institutions in the Next 75 Years: Proceedings of the 2022 Endless Frontier Symposium*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/26863>.

³⁰ UNISA 150-Year Anniversary Legend

³¹ African Union Commission (<http://www.auc.org>)

³² National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2021. *Global Change Research Needs and Opportunities for 2022-2031*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/26055>.

³³ National Academy of Medicine. 2023. *Emerging Stronger from COVID-19: Priorities for Health System Transformation*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/26657>.

³⁴ Directorate of Innovations, Technological Transfer and Commercialisation: *Unisa Innovation Challenge (IC) The Forge-Insimbi ilola insimbi “Iron sharpens Iron” 2023 Call for Applications*.

8. ‘Co-Creation Production’ Partnership and Synergy
9. Life-Long Learning (LLL) and Continuous/-ing Professional Development (CPD)
10. MAX proficiencies and productivity in the Best “Service of Humanity” in view of the quality of evidence to the complexity, diversity, dynamicity, equity, inclusivity, justice, optimization, etc.

As such, it is presumed that the UNISA Community of Practice³⁶ may be able to advance and lead the endless “**Define tomorrow**” **Scholarly Professionalism** voyage. In connection, standing at this landmark epoch and epic moment, this piece of work might perhaps render an introductory accompaniment designation to the specific effect.

Thank you for the “**Define tomorrow**” **Scholarly Professionalism** reaffirmation with endless blessed best wishes to the resolute pursuit of the intimately shared cause by UNISA’S epic standing.

With the patriotically principled passion as an unwaveringly Unisan,

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UNISA Alumni

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Concentration Streams: Child – Youth Health Care/Pediatrics, General Public Health, and Health and Social Development Responsiveness Study

Active Joint Appointments: School of Public Health – Home-base and School of Medicine – Adjunct

College of Health Sciences

Addis Ababa University

³⁵ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2018. *The Next Generation of Biomedical and Behavioral Sciences Researchers: Breaking Through*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. doi: <https://doi.org/10.17226/25008>.

³⁶ Speech of TMF Patron, Thabo Mbeki, on the Occasion of the His Installation as a Chancellor of the University of South Africa: UNISA Campus: Tshwane – 27 February, 2017.