

MEDIA STATEMENT

UNISA PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR'S RESPONSE TO RECENT MEDIA REPORTS ABOUT UNISA

For immediate release

22 November 2019

BACKGROUND

As many of you may have seen, there has been a lot of highly unpalatable news cast in the public space about our university recently. Although very shocking and downright deflating this may be, these occurrences have also given us time and a resolve to examine ourselves and to fully understand what we are as an institution as well as to make sense of the kind of forces that assail against the well-intentioned core duty of the university to offer education and knowledge to its students in an honest, fair and ethical manner.

As they say, when thunder strikes, and the water falls through the roof, the house dweller always gets to know best where the hole is and where the rafters need replacing. Having studied this situation, as a university, we have resolved that it is absolutely essential to deal decisively with these matters that are hurting the soul of our university and tarnishing our brand and reputation.

We ask ourselves, is this our own "*annus horribilis*"? Tempting as it may be, to cast this an *annus horribilis*, it is our firm belief that it is far from being a horrible year.

One would be naïve to believe that these events are unfolding naturally and in a vacuum. This is far from true. In fact, UNISA is onto something so fundamentally important for a post-apartheid academic epoch, something so just and so long overdue for the betterment of the lives of the marginalized, that its origination at UNISA has fundamentally incited an irritation that rebuffs by peddling negative publicity.

It is thus my reflected view as Principal and Vice Chancellor, that there is a tactical psychological warfare that is being stirred up to undermine the strides we are making in transforming the spirit of the historically colonial university culture that celebrated the



marginalisation of Africanism and encouraged the warring factions amongst the marginalized. The timed-release of the deluge of negative reports on leaked examination, plagiarism or academic fraud, and cases of sexual harassment are very concerning. This is not to suggest that UNISA tolerates unethical handling of its examination processes and is tolerant to plagiarism and sexual harassment - not at all. But the timing of the release of these incidents begs the question in innocent coincidence.

Strategies of handling the three issues

As indicated above, there are critical issues that need to be addressed swiftly. First, it is the leakage of the examination material. This is a criminal act. As a university we are engaging the country's law enforcement agents to deal with the culprits once they have been exposed. Similarly, the act of plagiarism has no space in the University of South Africa. Wherever it has been uncovered in the past, this breach of the highest order of the academic code of ethics has been dealt with decisively by the university's disciplinary processes. I wish to emphasise that the university shall not tolerate any action that undermines the validity of its academic programmes.

The third matter is the sex scandal. First and foremost, I must state that the university has never avoided handling matters of sexual harassment. This is why as a university we have seen it critical to have policies that protect victims of sexual harassment, racial segregation and bullying (This can be accessed in our *Harassment Policy*). In addition to the Harassment Policy, which is primarily for the protection of staff, there is a *Sexual Harassment Policy* which caters for our students.

It is my observation that the leaks of examination material, the publicizing of sensitive matters and other similar incidents in the course of the year are calculated "newscast" whose ultimate aim is to undermine the volumes of good work that we do and to bring down the name of the university.

The foregoing said, I still maintain that it is not all gloom and doom at this university.

UNISA has done exceedingly well in steering transformation of:

1. the hegemony of colonialism in the university culture
2. the curriculum
3. accessibility of learning material through translated examination papers, study guides and Tutorial Letters 101
4. the development of glossaries, and
5. the language of communication, *inter alia*.



Without meaning to sound like one who is defending the wrong, I merely wish to put it on record that there is more good, valuable and credible work that this university is doing. For instance, this year (2019) we shall be honouring 61 Doctoral students in Addis Ababa, under our UNISA-Ethiopia project. This is the highest number we ever produced since the project started in 2007. Our academics and students, on the whole are hard at work and producing good results for the university.

SPECIFIC INTERVENTIONS

UNISA is a committed institution of higher education whose aspiration is to yield a quality academic project delivered by well trained and respectable academic and professional staff. In this regard, we take a dim view of all unbecoming behaviour such as plagiarism, fraud, sexual harassment and dishonesty in discharging professional duties as all these will undermine our aspiration to be a high-performing, quality driven and responsive organization.

Regarding the alleged criminal offences, we are working with the Hawks to bring the culprits to book and those who are sabotaging the university by leaking examination papers and protected information will be dealt with severely.

UNISA is a victim-centred institution in line with its values such as Student-Centredness (*Baithuti Pele/Students First*) and Dignity in Diversity where we protect and promote the dignity of all. In our resolve to root out the spots of evil that mar our hard-earned reputation, we are setting in place several measures as outlined below.

Internal Initiatives

1. We are looking at the effectiveness and appropriateness of the Ethics Policy and Code of Conduct - to ensure their effectiveness in impacting the envisaged ethical culture and the fitting corporate citizenship behaviour.
2. The university shall affirm its brand and protect its reputation which are being tarnished by leaked examination question papers, plagiarism, cases of sexual harassment and the flagrant acts of sharing confidential information by staff and students with the media.
3. The university shall deal decisively with offenders. The university shall invoke the prescribed disciplinary procedures without delay, particularly as they relate to criminal behaviour such as sex-offenses and the leaking of question papers and plagiarism and leaking of confidential institutional information to the media. There is a perception that the university disciplinary processes are slow and too lenient.



4. The University will take the concerted effort to name and shame offenders after they have gone through the disciplinary processes. The University is adopting a zero-tolerance against unbecoming behaviour that undermines its reputation and threatens the safety of students and staff. In the process of naming and shaming the university will encourage those whose names are mentioned in serious cases of sexual harassment, plagiarism, fraud, *etc.* to *urgently clear their names* over and above the internal disciplinary processes that may be going on.
5. The university will put in place taut mechanisms that will prioritise exigent cases to make sure that these cases are dealt with speedily and in a fair and just manner e.g. sexual harassment, racial discrimination, fraud, *inter alia*, are dealt with immediately.
6. The University's Grievance Procedures will be re-examined to clarify the processes of lodging grievances/complaints. This should strengthen the victim-centred approach to dealing with grievances, for example:
 - a. when a student or a staff member lodges a complaint, s/he is immediately offered counselling depending on the severity of the case, s/he is then assisted in deciding whether to lodge a formal or informal complaint; and,
 - b. the university will rigorously review the complaints handling structures to ensure that they are aligned with the institutional ethos, values and ethics of *Botho/Ubuntu*.
7. All managers shall be trained on how to deal with exigent high-profile cases which also violate fundamental human rights, for instance:
 - a. concomitantly, the university will develop a capacity building programme to sensitize and train all staff and students on human rights violation issues and the consequences thereof; and,
 - b. the university will take urgent steps to engage all stakeholders to lead anti-Gender Based Violence Campaigns to make UNISA a GBV-free institution.

Collaboration with External Stakeholders

In addition to the engagements with the SAHRC, the university will also engage with the Gender Commission to seek advice in reviewing all policies that relate to the management of gender-based violence.

The university will strengthen its relationship with the SAPS on matters that border on criminality e.g. rape, sexual harassment, fraud, money laundering, vandalism and theft, *inter alia*.



The University of South Africa continues to uphold its ethos of being a home to all who study and work in it and they remain protected under the code of conduct of the institution and the laws of the Republic of South Africa.

The Way Forward:

It is my plan to engage the matter further and employ certain instruments of the university such as:

1. The Department of Institutional Advancement (DIA) – to solicit the actual position of the media on Unisa. The DIA should assist us in outlining the statistics of sexual occurrences as well as trends in the university to enable us to reach an informed position about this scourge in the University. I wish to emphasise that as a university we condemn sexual violence in all its forms.
2. Similarly, it is our aim to also source quantifiable data from our Employment Relations Directorate (ERD) as well as the Legal Services – this is to help us examine data-driven cases of bullying, the healing journeys of the victim as well as to ascertain the extent of bullying at UNISA with the view to gauge if the trust deficit between the employee and the Health and Wellness desk has changed.

I am making reference to these structures because I am bent on bringing forward an objective evidence-based status of the university regarding the malaise of sexual harassment. If we are presented with those employees who are perpetrators, the set procedures of discipline in the university codes shall be invoked for action.

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Issued by:

**UNISA MEDIA AFFAIRS
DEPARTMENT OF INSTITUTIONAL ADVANCEMENT**

