

MEDIA RELEASE

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Unisa statement on student concerns raised about 2021 Academic year

Unisa has noted several concerns that students have raised in the mainstream and social media platforms about the commencement of the 2021 Academic Year and associated student academic support concerns.

The University management has not been unmindful of these concerns. It has sought to address these issues through the relevant governance, consultative and decision-making structures within and outside the university. Part of these processes have entailed consultations with the National Student Representative Council (NSRC) (which included a consultation involving the Department of Higher Education and Training) on the “2021 academic calendar changes.” UNISA has also directly communicated with Accounting students on the Certificate in the Theory of Accounting (CTA) matters.

Further engagements within the university decision-making structures have been taking place and emanating from these, the university wishes to provide clarity and its official position on the following matters:

On changes to the 2021 academic year

- The decision to make certain changes to the academic calendar has been necessary, not only to accommodate matriculants whose results will only be released on the 22 February 2021, but to also cater for NSFAS students whose funding will only be released in April 2021. This is meant to accommodate at least 250 000 students who are, currently writing examinations, supplementary examinations (and whose examinations will still need to be marked)., This is also aimed at aligning the academic calendar with the Ministerial directive for ALL universities to commence their academic programmes in March 2021.
- Importantly, this is not a Unisa-specific challenge, nor a decision occasioned by Unisa management, but rather a sectoral matter arising out of the need to properly manage the teaching and learning space in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic and the attendant national interventions in this regard. Similar challenges have resulted in changes to academic calendars internationally as well.
- In accordance with these changes, students are required to register for their first and second semester modules by 12 March 2021. This decision to combine the registrations is intended to recoup the time usually used for second semester registrations during July and will allow for extension of the two semesters to provide extended teaching time in the light of the academic year starting only in March 2021.



- Students who were expecting to complete their qualifications in the first semester will not be adversely affected by this decision. Instead, they will be identified and accommodated through relevant interventions at college level, including F1 concessions, to ensure that they could complete their qualifications in the first semester.
- Students will also not be adversely affected about the payment of fees as these will be staggered and paid at the same pace as they are usually paid. Importantly, while students will be required to register for both semester 1 and semester 2 modules by 12 March 2021, they will be required to pay their fees as they normally do for each semester, despite registering for both semesters simultaneously.
- To ensure that students have sufficient time to study for both Semester 1 and Semester 2 modules in the time available, the university will endeavor to release the Semester 2 study material once the students have finalised their registrations.
- The extended period for both semesters is intended to maximize on the time available for teaching and learning with a view to improve learning outcomes.
- The changes to the academic calendar do not affect post-graduate students and students studying for qualifications that are already year programmes such as those in the College of Education and the CTA students.
- To ensure that examination dates are sufficiently spread, so that students have sufficient time to prepare between their exams, the examination period will be spread out from September to December 2021.
- Official data indicates that for the past 10 years, the average number of modules taken by a student is between four and six. Also, many undergraduate assessments are continuous and not summative examinations, hence no student will have to write 12 exams in the same examination period as has been claimed.
- The decisions taken are to ensure that UNISA continues to uphold the quality concerns in line with the Council of Higher Education and South African Qualifications Authority standards.

On restricting the number of students to be registered in 2021

The DHET approved enrolment target for 2021 is 376 000. The university is required to scale back on first-time entering students in 2021, particularly in higher certificates as this generally and adversely affects the Technical, Vocational and Training Colleges enrolments. However, the number of students transferring from other institutions and the cohorts of returning students are unaffected by the enrollment targets.

On student communication and responsiveness

The university has long regarded the question of student support, communication and enquiries solution as critical to its interface with students, including to ensure agility in our response to students. To this effect, and at the behest of the new Principal and Vice Chancellor, the capacity of the Student Communication and Services Centre (SCSC) introduced in 2020 is being strengthened to ensure reliable availability and agile responsiveness.

The SCSC is available Monday to Friday, 08:00 – 19:00 and Saturday, 08:00 – 14:00. The centralised toll-free number is 0800 00 1870.



Further to this, the Principal and Vice Chancellor has directed that to complement the toll-free number and other general email contacts that Management set up an Ad Hoc Committee of Senior officials led by Prof. MS Mothata to expedite solutions to all student-related queries as they arise. This has thus resulted in, inter alia, to ensuring that students have access to all the contact details (including emails and telephone numbers) of specific functionaries in the departments responsible for Student Communication and Student support. These contact details are now available on the university website.

On CTA and related matters

All CTA examinations have been marked and moderated. There were instances where some scripts were flagged for suspicion of cheating and they accordingly had to be investigated. The university adopts such measures for all its examinations to uphold the integrity of Unisa's assessment processes and qualifications. In the case of the CTA programmes, we must adhere to the strict requirements of the relevant accreditation bodies, and thus ensure that we do not place the accreditation of our qualifications in jeopardy.

In instances where the investigations found no wrongdoing, the marks have been reinstated. The remaining suspicious cases are still being subjected to further investigations with the aim of concluding them expeditiously. In both instances, the university has communicated directly with all the affected students.

Students who want to raise further concerns in relation to their CTA studies or need more clarity on CTA related matters are urged to contact the College of Accounting Sciences (CAS) on the contact details posted on the university website as indicated above.

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For inquiries, please contact Senior Media Officers: Mr. Tommy Huma on 072 218 6197 / 012 429 3981 / humatm@unisa.ac.za OR Mr Edgar Rathelele on 063 731 5456 / 012 429 3981 / ratheme@unisa.ac.za

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