



*The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor*

## **PRINCIPAL'S STATEMENT TO SENATE**

At the last meeting of Senate, I recall sharing with Senate the Ministerial letter on Enrolment Planning. I remember rallying Senate to observe the challenges that the Minister had presented to Unisa and I expressed confidence that the targets set by the Minister were necessary and achievable. I now wish to spell out what those implications are and what needs to be done to meet them. I shall return to that later.

I have also previously expressed the frustration which many at Unisa often experience about the impasse with the Minister of Education, regarding the Merger Institutional Operating Plan, and the fact that the Policy on Distance Education continues with its lengthy gestation. I reported that Council was seeking an urgent meeting with the Minister in order to address all these issues and to bring settlement to Unisa's academic planning.

### *Reporting on Council Meeting with Minister of Education*

I am now pleased to report that the meeting with the Minister was held on 26 April 2007. The Unisa delegation was led by the Chairperson of Council, Dr Mathews Phosa. Also present was Dr Sebiletso Mokone-Matabane, the Deputy Chairperson of Council, accompanied by me as Vice Chancellor, and in attendance were Prof N Baijnath, Vice-Principal: Strategy Planning and Partnerships, and the Secretary of Council, Prof L Molamu. The result of the meeting was that the Minister agreed to reconsider her final decisions on the MIOP. She instructed Dr Molapo Qhobela, the Acting Deputy Director General (Higher Education) to undertake further consultations with Unisa, and to furnish her with a report so that she can look at these matters again. Of particular concern to us was the fact that our plan to develop the Florida Campus as a Science hub was rejected out of hand without any apparent understanding of our proposals.

We discovered that indeed the Minister had not understood the plan; neither did she appreciate the significance of Florida campus in this university's future development. She was less than convincing about her understanding of the practice of distance education as judged by her comments about the presence of students on campus, although she appeared to be aware of the enormous investment that Unisa has been making since the merger, in learner support and in advancing technology as a tool for distance education and academic management. It emerged that the Ministry had no intention of applying the multi-campus factor funds for Unisa nor was Unisa being considered to receive available funds for capital infrastructure development. The Ministry is very opposed to providing relocation costs for Unisa staff. Instead the Ministry has affirmed its support for Unisa by providing new resources for developing learning facilities and for the use of technology to advance learner support.

It is probably not appropriate to make any further comment until the further consultations with the department have been completed and the Minister's final report is at hand. In seeking to find answers, I can only surmise that the confidence levels between Unisa and the Ministry are at an all-time low. Unisa does not seem able to generate enthusiasm and support from the Ministry. Our academic output does not seem to generate appreciation or respect. I fear we have a long road to travel before we can earn some respect from the Ministry of Education. We are seen very much as an institution with much potential, but which chronically under-achieves. That explains why, I suggest, the Department will not invest in equipping this university with improved facilities for teaching and research in science and technology; why it does not consider it necessary to improve facilities so that the army of students who utilize our facilities as full-time students may experience a rewarding learning environment, and why there is no perceived

need for this university to address and bring to finalization the uncertainty and the cost of managing two campuses 75km apart, and to provide for the relocation costs that are a direct result of the merger.

### *On the Ministerial Letter on Enrolment Planning*

With that in mind, let us now turn to the Ministerial Letter of January 2007. The first thing to say about this is that we shall be presenting an analysis and a possible reply to Council at its meeting on 22 June. We have until end of June to present an institutional response to the Letter so that our plan may be finalized by July 2007. Because of the centrality of this issue to the sustainability of this university, I have invited Prof George Subotzky to do a presentation to Senate analyzing the implications of the Letter and outlining various options available in regard to addressing the challenges posed by the Ministerial Letter.

As Prof Subotzky will indicate in his report, the Ministerial enrolment and output targets for 2010 represent an important milestone in the planning and steering of the higher education system. By focusing simultaneously on size, shape and outcomes, the Minister clearly aims to ensure that the system produces the required number, range and levels of graduate outputs. This enrolment planning framework, together with the related frameworks of funding, quality assurance and the PQM, constitute the primary regulatory levers by which the HE system is being steered towards effectiveness and efficiency in achieving its goals. In meeting these targets, Unisa must play its rightful role within the overall system and the achievement of these goals. Faced as we currently are by increased enrolments and persistently poor success and throughput rates, these enrolment and output targets present us with a clear and timely set of planning parameters and imperatives.

It will be readily appreciated that meeting these targets is a complex task. The key challenge lies in reaching the overall aggregate absolute and proportional targets by carefully co-ordinating the internal components. Shifting one element changes the overall outcomes. This is particularly so with regard to the fields of study. In some instances, we are already above the target; in other cases, we have formidable ground to cover. Reaching the success and throughput rate targets will require concerted, carefully co-ordinated and highly effective interventions. Given the tight timeframe, we simply cannot afford anything else.

While we are in general agreement with the targets, we must challenge two aspects: the means of measuring throughput, and the timing. Regarding the first, the very rough proxy measure of throughput prejudices us in the light of the rapid recent enrolment increases we have experienced. Regarding the second, we must be very realistic about what can and what cannot be achieved by 2010. Clearly, preparing and negotiating co-ordinated plans, and developing and implementing the range of interventions required to achieve the targets will take some time. The impact of all this cannot be expected by 2010. Therefore we shall need time, and we shall need additional resources to dramatically transform our business processes and systems to meet the Minister's targets.

It seems to me that this university must adopt an immediate three-year plan if it is to have any remote chance of meeting the targets set out in the Minister's Letter. First, we must address immediately the complex challenge of enrolment planning. This means that Unisa can no longer continue as an open admission institution. A rigorous pre-enrolment information-awareness-raising, niche-marketing campaign must be undertaken. This campaign must be followed by an assessment plan (and please note, I do not wish to refer to this as an entrance test!) and an admissions plan that address the targets set. Second, our academic policy and practice must ensure that the students we admit will be active learners. To that end I have intimated to colleagues at ICT that we need a tracking system and applications for an integrated learning system that will facilitate academic management and administration, buttressed by a comprehensive network of tutors and academic staff who diligently support students in the learning process. This also means that we should adopt some credible and reliable assessment methods, for example, assignments, and an efficient examinations system that uses technology more effectively. Third, this means that we must grasp the nettle that is the Tuition Plan and a radically restructured PQM. Colleagues, it means that we can no longer prevaricate on the introduction of a semester system and the restructuring our academic calendar, nor can we delay the long-overdue process of restructuring those programmes that are no longer viable or strategic for our country, or to the benefit of the university. It is clear that the academic shape of this university will benefit from a major overhaul in terms of which we would drastically reduce the number of qualifications, promote more programmes, and enhance interdisciplinary studies as the norm and not the exception. Re-

engineering this university and its systems, demands time and resources, especially finances if it is to be truly fit for purpose.

I therefore plead with you colleagues, to give the Academic Planning Office our encouragement and support in the very difficult task they have of assessing and restructuring our academic programmes; that they may do so free from pressures, vested interests and unbounded idealism that camouflage a fear of the future. I also plead that Prof AH Louw be supported by all of us who have the future of this university at heart and who realize that the future depends on us all embracing our chosen mission of distance learning. We will continue to seek to benchmark this university against international best practice and to benefit from economies of scale. We remain hopeful that an ODL Implementation Plan will emerge by this time next year for possible implementation by 2009.

#### *The Quality Audits*

Part of ensuring Unisa's enhanced reputation and sustained credibility, not only with the DoE but also with our peers internationally and on the Continent, is clear evidence of Quality in all of our operations and our offerings. If we wish to be a leading edge institution then we must demonstrably be a Quality institution. Having said that, you will note that Unisa's 2007 Operational Plan, which is now available (and which you should have received with your Senate documentation this morning), has embedded Quality in every operational goal.

This focus on Quality is deliberate and gives expression to our stated mission, one of our values (excellence) and the objectives in our 2015 Strategic Plan. To this end, 16 June signals the commencement of the CoL trial audit which is being undertaken in preparation for the HEQC Audit which begins in August 2008. One of the key objectives of the CoL trial audit is to test the robustness of our systems and Quality Assurance regime through independent scrutiny, for subsequent comparison with the HEQC criteria. The CoL audit will also assist us to identify gaps and weaknesses and ameliorate these in preparation for the HEQC audit.

An active and visible awareness campaign has ensured that staff are not only sensitized to the trial audit (and ultimately the HEQC audit) but they have also been galvanized into a culture of Quality for this institution, which can only have long-term beneficial effects. Prof Baijnath will be delivering a report and presentation on the CoL trial audit, to Senate, this morning.

#### *On International Collaboration*

Our activities in international relations and collaborations, therefore, must be viewed as another means by which we seek to equip Unisa with the best means to grow into a reputable academic institution with international credentials. It will be recalled that this programme commenced some five years ago, when we began building up our contacts and collaborations with institutions and academics from across Africa. That work was less about student recruitment than it was about the repositioning of this university in the African academic landscape.

Last year we made a foray into Brazil, partly in order to benefit from the India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA) initiative. We were well received at all the institutions we visited and to date we have signed Agreements with 3 of Brazil's best academic institutions, the National University of Brasilia, the University of Sao Paulo and the Federal University of Rio do Sul in Porto Allegre. This should benefit our work in Latin American Studies, just as it should benefit our partners in African Studies. We should also build research collaborations in science and engineering with counterparts in Brazil. Recently we returned from a visit to India (and Thailand) which was designed to close the loop in our strategy of international collaborations, building on the IBSA initiatives. Some of India's finest universities, namely, Kolkatta, JNU and Mumbai have pledged to collaborate with Unisa. Outstanding institutions like the Institute of Management in Ahmedabad and the Institute of Social Science in New Delhi, as well as the international Asian Institute of Technology in Bangkok, are eager to associate with Unisa. These, in our view are measures necessary to address that confidence gap that I referred to in our relations with our Ministry of Education. By bringing about more active partnerships and associations we would create an academic environment and academic outputs that lend excitement to our endeavours.

### *Towards a Pan African Consortium of Open Universities*

Lastly, as a way of enhancing Unisa's reputation as a credible international distance education institution, we have begun an initiative which might lead to the creation of a Pan African consortium of ODL universities. Indeed, in time, this could result in a new Pan African university. The impetus for this comes from the difficulties that the AVU is currently experiencing. Having been approached with a view to a possible merger with the AVU, it seemed to us on reflection, that there could be no benefit for Unisa in such a move. Rather, it was felt that a better idea would be to explore the possibility that all African open universities could form a consortium with a common curriculum, share from a common pool of resources with specialist campuses across Africa, south of the Sahara while retaining some autonomy. I am due to present this plan to Council at its meeting in June. If approved in principle, I shall bring it back to Senate in August/September and thereafter I propose to convene a summit of African ODL universities with a view to adopting a plan of action that would include seeking political support from our governments and from the AU. Of course, I envisage this to be a medium to long-term plan which has no hope of implementation in less than three years.

### *Issues in Labour Relations at Unisa*

Finally, colleagues, I wish to take this opportunity to report on the state of the labour relations environment at Unisa at this time. It will be recalled that the university has been negotiating through the Unisa Bargaining Forum since February 2006. There was setback when APSA declined to join UBF, and, following an unfavourable arbitration award, took the matter for review. We await the finalization of that matter. Meanwhile the UBF has been continuing with negotiations.

According to the Constitution of the UBF all unions had to reach a membership threshold of 25% of all eligible staff within 12 months. Neither SAPTU nor NUTESA had reached that target by the deadline of 4 May 2007 and as such their membership of UBF lapsed, as did their attendant recognition by the university. Both unions have now intimated that they are seeking a mechanism to act jointly, and an application in that regard was received on 4 June. In the event that such application should be accepted, a new recognition agreement will have to be entered into with any such new entity.

Meanwhile, negotiations have got underway with the UBF on one side, and separately with APSA, on the Conditions of Employment. It is my understanding that the UBF negotiations are nearing completion but that slower progress has been recorded with APSA. I indicated to all parties that we have to put a May 31 deadline on all negotiation processes. That deadline has now come and gone. Management will now consider other options in order to bring this matter to a satisfactory conclusion, given that this hiatus is not in the interest of our university and has a persistently negative impact on labour relations at Unisa. We shall in due course be reporting to all the recognized unions on steps that management is ready to take in the light of the impasse. We shall then be in a position to organize information and briefing sessions with all staff in Assemblies across the institution, during the course of June/July.

### *Epilogue*

Colleagues, I trust that I have provided you with a frank assessment of the state of the university and the risks that we face. I implore all of us at all levels of this institution to desist from fiddling while Rome burns. I do not know what else one can do to bring to the attention of colleagues that these are very grave issues which we are capable of addressing if only there was a willingness to change some of our attitudes towards this university and to adopt new ways of working for the betterment of our life together here. For our part, I am satisfied that Council and Management are serious about allocating resources and managing human capital, financial resources and intellectual wealth prudently to benefitiate opportunities, add value to our dreams and give effect to our vision and mission. For any of that to happen and as such to secure a prosperous future for this institution, we need to act together now.

N Barney Pityana, GCOB  
PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR  
University of South Africa

Penang, Malaysia, 4 June 2007.