



*The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor*

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

It is interesting to observe that several articles have appeared in our newspapers recently reflecting on academics, intellectuals and higher education in our country. That got me thinking. Is it because higher education institutions are finding themselves facing an uncertain future? Or is it merely part of the social and political engagement that comes with political transition, with universities being drawn into the vortex of political contestations, and the necessary power play that goes with that?

You too may have noticed that within a few short weeks there has been some conjecture in the media on this matter. A column appeared in the *Higher Education Guardian* raising concerns about the visibility and effectiveness of the public higher education sector. The view that was expressed was that higher education institutions have become very timid, invisible when it comes to the public issues that concern South Africans; ineffective even, in what they are in the business to do; and unimaginative and without a vision for the future. The writer pointed to the experimentation that accompanied the establishment of the few private higher education providers in South Africa: CIDA City Campus, Monash, etc.

Last weekend, in the *Sunday Times* Prince Mashele of the Pretoria-based Institute for Security Studies wrote about black intellectuals who present themselves and their ideas for sale to the highest bidder. Granted, Mashele in this case was not referring to universities or academics per se. He was addressing the phenomenon of popular intellectuals who presented themselves as scholars and independent commentators.

Achille M'Bembe of WISER raises an even more challenging prospect about the challenges South African higher education must face: Can universities play a moral role in a fractured society? M'Bembe states that “universities will not play a leading role in our society if it does not address its moral legitimacy” (*Sunday Independent*, 24 August 2008).

It seems obvious to make the point that higher education in South Africa is under intense scrutiny at this time, as the moral integrity of our actions and our claims to existence under the protection of a democratic state come under the spotlight. It is part of the responsibility of leaders and managers of high-commitment, high performance organisations, say Russel A Eistat et al in *The Uncompromising Leader* (HBR, July-August 2008, p51) that “finding and holding a firm’s moral and strategic centre... is a calling and an art, not an engineering problem” (56). We are told that it is the responsibility of leadership to help steer a high performing organisation into developing a shared purpose, being inspired to aspire to a higher purpose, and building a better world. Reflecting on much that I have been hearing here at Unisa during my visits to colleges in recent weeks, I am reminded that “people want to go to a job that is fulfilling and that they get excited about.”

I wish we could build on the excitement that I sensed during the recent HEQC visit to Unisa. As we aspire to become a learning organisation we need to take for granted the imperative of disciplined reflection on the part of staff and students about the challenges we face together, and to build principled loyalty to the brand. What we aspire to become at Unisa is best stated by Amy C Edmondson in *The Comparative Imperative of Learning* (HBR, July-August 2008, 60ff) when she says:

Fostering an atmosphere in which trust and respect thrive, and flexibility and innovation flourish, pays off in most settings, even the most deadline driven. When managers empower, rather than control; when they ask the right questions, rather than provide the right answers; and when they focus on flexibility, rather than insist on adherence, they move to a higher form of execution. And when people know their ideas are welcome, they will offer innovative ways to lower costs and improve quality – thus laying a more solid foundation for their organisation’s success.

I quote Edmondson *in extenso* not just to evoke her poetic diction and turn of phrase, neither is it because I know how one achieves this utopian ideal she mentions, nor is it

because I believe that Unisa is anywhere near this ideal. Rather I do so because I believe that this is an aspiration worth pursuing, built on trust and a shared belief in our common future.

On 19 August I had the privilege of attending the inauguration of the Vice Chancellor of the University of Cape Town. It so happens that two out of the three UCT staff who were part of the HEQC Panel to Unisa approached me to say what wonderful staff there were at Unisa. They were most appreciative of the attitude of many of the staff they met, towards the HEQC process and the university, how much they were devoted to their work and how knowledgeable they were about their responsibilities. I was informed that Unisa has some of the most outstanding staff the panel has come across. I wanted to say that, because it is through members of staff that the institution gains its reputation.

I wish to thank the colleagues who managed the HEQC process from its beginning until now, under the leadership of Prof Narend Baijnath: Liana Griesel, Charles Poole, Louie Swanepoel, Rachel Prinsloo, and Wendy Kilfoil who took charge of the institutional Self-evaluation Portfolio. I wish to thank them all for managing the process from before the CoL Trial Audit last year up to the HEQC Quality Audit this year. I wish to thank them for their enthusiasm for the task at hand: for their positive approach to what could have been one of the most testing experiments in the life of this institution, their project management expertise, and their insight into our organisation and its people. They managed to present the best that Unisa could offer. I also wish to thank all those 350 personnel who also appeared before the panel. The panel was very impressed with the calibre and quality of the presentations they received. Perhaps, who knows, the HEQC Quality Audit could well be the tipping point towards the revival and renewal of Unisa? The HEQC Audit, I hope, was a rewarding, healing and a positive experience for the entire institution, especially those who rendered themselves the privilege of participating.

At the end of their visit the Panel presented us with a preliminary statement of their observations, commendations and recommendations. I believe that the final report will form the basis for the further development of Unisa. Prof Narend Baijnath will present a report on this process and the final statement of the panel. It is vital though,

that we should never feel defensive about all that the HEQC had to say. We gather that we will be receiving a draft report in due course. We shall interrogate that report and we shall submit our responses. The final report should take account of our corrections and further elucidations, which will contribute to its refinement and veracity. Whatever the final product though, we would do well to view the report as a contribution towards our change management strategies at Unisa.

Recently we had the privilege of having Dr Thirumalayaperumal Karunakaran, Director of the Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Rural Industrialisation at Wardha, India, as distinguished guest speaker for Unisa's 2008 Founder's Lecture. Dr Karunakaran is an eminent development scholar, a Gandhian philosopher and activist; a product of India's system of higher education specialist institutes, and erstwhile Vice Chancellor and teacher at some four such institutes. He brought with him a passion for a diversity of sources of knowledge, and privileging the poor with intelligence for their own development, as well as an insight into how universities could become relevant and responsive to the challenges society faces. Having listened intently to his address I became conscious that the sceptics among us would soon dismiss his ideas as inapplicable to South African conditions.

What struck me, though, was not just the passionate belief with which he espoused his theories, but that he lived in a society in India where it was possible for one to dare to experiment. I was struck by the fact that he was able to experiment with ideas and to seek practical application of the theories that emerged, and I was struck by the confidence with which his experience was received by society in India, particularly given the publications and awards he has received in India and abroad. I felt that what we lack in South Africa is that courage to experiment without regard to steering from the centre, and without risk to one's reputation as an academic. I am very pleased to note that Dr Karunakaran has been engaged by the Minister of Education as an advisor on rural schools in South Africa.

Yesterday Management emerged from a round of planning which was aimed at reviewing and refining the 2008-2010 Institutional Operational Plan, evaluating progress and performance during this the first year of this IOP planning cycle, identifying policy and operational gaps that need to be addressed, and reconsidering,

if necessary, our operational priorities in the light of this year's activities. We all have a sense that Unisa is performing well on all its strategic objectives. We observe that planning and strategy orientation has become rooted in our institutional culture. We are getting to a stage where planning will become second nature to all staff at Unisa. It is no wonder, therefore, that one of the high marks Unisa received from the HEQC Audit Panel is about the sophistication, thoroughness and appropriateness of our planning systems. While consolidation is necessary to ensure consistency and predictability in planning, we made the observation that our planning regime has not yet produced the desired results. We noted that perhaps we need to ensure that the planning mentality is proliferated across all levels of the institution. Clearly effective communication from Executive Directors and Executive Deans of Colleges has become a planning imperative, and we need to ensure that all Directors and managers at all levels should be equipped to function as project managers. We need to find a mechanism to percolate the management ethos from bottom-up as well as top-to-bottom.

We need to act on the immediate matters raised by the HEQC Audit. First, we have been advised that ICLD truly belongs to the Academic and Research Portfolio. We need to take immediate steps in this regard, inasmuch as this point was also among the CoL Recommendations. It must be noted that the Panel spoke in glowing terms about the effectiveness and expertise of our ICLD. I wish to congratulate Prof W Kilfoil and her colleagues on the work they are doing. In order to facilitate a smooth transition, we are asking the Vice Principals: Academic & Research and Learner Support to examine all the mechanisms necessary to give effect to such transfer by January 2009. Second, a rather persistent question is raised about the effectiveness of Senate and its committees. It may well be the case that a review of our committees is necessary. Rationalisation and amalgamation may be necessary. Even more significant, Committees should be engaged in policy, strategy and philosophical issues so that the fundamental theories of our strategic approaches can be shared. Towards that end I propose that we instruct the Rules Committee to review the effectiveness of Senate and Senate Committee with a view to restructuring, if necessary. In order to ensure that this is as inclusive and participatory as possible, I suggest that the Rules Committee should invite representations and comments from members of Senate and from the university community at large, and report back to Senate in November.

My colleagues in Management and I, are becoming confident that our university is taking steps to become more relevant and responsive to the challenges our society faces today. The steps we are taking are necessary to help us advance towards our 2015 goals. The student protest organised by the Young Communist League at our Durban Regional Learning Centre last week, however, makes no contribution to our desire to become an ODL institution where learning and systems are enhanced by technology, and where communication and consultations are undertaken with integrity. Sadly, a protest by a few students in Durban resulted in damage to university property; intimidation of fellow students who wished to learn; the cancellation of study classes and the Law Society examinations scheduled for last Thursday; the arrest and imprisonment of some 20 of the leaders of the protest; and tragically the reported death of Mr Mthokozisi Nkwanyana, a student at Unisa, who was reported to have died of natural causes, but nevertheless associated with the demonstration. The university was obliged under the circumstances to seek a court interdict against the YCL and its leaders in order to bring an end to the unlawful action. Ostensibly, the protest was about the recently announced new registration process. It is our observation, however, that if that was indeed the issue, then Mr G Magnate Ntombela's explanations, in his capacity as Regional Director, and the consultations undertaken - in which student leaders participated - should have been enough to have resolved the matter without the violence and the disruptions we experienced in Durban last week.

I wish to pay tribute to the members of the SRC nationally and in KZN for the manner in which they engaged their fellow students and facilitated alternative means of resolution of the conflict. I also wish to thank Mr Magnate Ntombela and his staff for the manner in which this disruption was handled. Having been forced to close our Durban facility on Friday, today, after further consultation with the SRC we have authorised that the Regional Learning Centres in Durban be opened. We wish to extend our condolences to the family of the late Mr Mthokozisi Nkwanyana who died in the course of the protests. Our prayers go out to his family and friends at a time of a most unfortunate death. Perhaps, there are lessons for both Management and the student leadership in this matter. Mr Ntombela has submitted a request on behalf of the Regional Management Team in KZN, that the university should, as a matter of

urgency, institute a commission of inquiry into the student protests in order to uncover the underlying causes of the protests, address the issues of concern. These are matters that deserve the serious attention of the university that they deserve. The university cannot afford to treat matters of such tragic consequences in a blasé manner.

Thank you.

N Barney Pitsoana GCOB

PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR

27 August 2008.