



The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor

PRINCIPAL'S STATEMENT TO SENATE

Times of transition are characterised by anxiety, uncertainty and some confusion. This must be especially so following a rather lengthy incumbency as we are experiencing at Unisa at the moment. I am therefore addressing the university community through Senate in an effort to calm the nerves, and to keep us focused on our daily responsibilities. I am aware that unfortunately, the process for the appointment of the Principal and Vice Chancellor of Unisa has seen unprecedented lobbying and mobilisation, and caucuses meeting at all hours. There are some people at this university who are no longer attending to their duties, some of them rather senior academics, but are spending an inordinate amount of time in caucuses. One supposes that that can be expected. What is difficult to imagine, especially in a university, is the emergence of cliques, of threats and intimidation, of causing fear and despondency in some quarters – about job security, and about the future of this University. One would have expected that any contestation for the highest office in the Institution could be done with the appropriate dignity, with calm erudition and with dependable intelligence.

The process for the appointment of the Principal and Vice Chancellor of the University of South Africa is set out clearly in the Statute of the University. The appointment of the Principal and Vice Chancellor is the responsibility of Council. In order to do so, Council is required to undertake certain key processes including the appointment of a Selection Committee, consultation with Senex and the Institutional Forum, and the approval of the advertisement for the position. As we now know, the Selection Committee has submitted the names of the three recommended candidates to the Senex and to the Institutional Forum for their advice. As I understand it, that has now been done. Council meets on 18

June to deliberate on the report of the Selection Committee and make an appointment. The Chairperson of Council has been reassuring staff and students at Unisa, and the public at large, that the process will be honoured in a fair and transparent manner. He has now indicated to me that the matter will be finalised on 18 June according to the timetable already agreed. There does not seem to me to be any reason for anxiety about the process so far.

What is disturbing, however, is the campaign that is being waged in the media and by anonymous memos that are being widely circulated. It is truly disturbing that in a university where truth and integrity are supposed to be the pillars of defensible conduct, where open debate and dialogue ensures that one can express one's opinions freely, engage with others, listen to the views of others and shape and re-shape one's opinions according to the information and evidence that is available or emerging - in an institution that has boldly set integrity, fairness and justice as values in its Statement of Mission and Vision - that there could be some who will publish anonymous attacks, purvey lies and defame the characters of people who cannot confront the author(s) of such letters. Such campaigns have no place in a university community. Surely there must be some decency in the manner in which we conduct our affairs. But no, they merely seek and exercise power to exclude and silence. They are afraid of being held accountable for their opinions. I believe that they are also doing a grave disservice even to the one on whose behalf they purport to act. More seriously, however, they are the ones who are putting the carefully laid out plans and processes in the Institutional Statute and in the Terms of Reference for the Search and Selection Committees at risk. Ultimately, it is this university and its reputation that are being challenged. I am taking the extraordinary step of responding to some of the allegations in this matter precisely because there is media interest out there, not just in Unisa and the manner in which it appoints its Principal, but also on the effect this will have on the University's future and stability. But it also because it is self-evident that the authors of this letter are staff or students of this university and some may even be sitting at this Senate Meeting as I speak.

Let me make some preliminary points:

One, that I have never campaigned for any candidate to become Principal and Vice Chancellor of Unisa. I have never expressed my views on the merits of any of the candidates, except the only one who requested me for a reference. I have never expressed any "negative attitude" against any of the candidates, and I had no reason to do so in relation to their possible appointment as none was ever sought from me. It is rather far-fetched to suggest, as the anonymous authors assert, that I am against any appointment. To the best of my knowledge no appointment has been made that I could be against,

at least not until 18 June! Granted, I have views and opinions on the competencies of all the candidates. After all, they have worked with me: two since 2001, and one since the merger. As colleagues I have had a good and transparent working relationship with them, and have been grateful for their support in my leadership of this university. I am also very familiar with this university, its values and its aspirations. I have been part of the reconstruction of this university since 2001, and so have they. I shall, in due course, have opportunity to express myself on the candidates and exercise my fiduciary duty as a member of the Council of the University.

Second, it is rather far-fetched to suggest as some media reports do, that there is widespread corruption at Unisa, in which I am supposed to be complicit, also through selective disciplinary processes to protect some other miscreants. Nothing could be further from the truth. One must understand that Unisa has very clear processes for the investigation of all allegations of misconduct; Internal Audit ensures that a risk management regime is in place, and there is a Council Audit and Enterprise Risk Committee to whom I report, and to which I am also held accountable. Throughout my tenure at this university there has never been a qualified audit in our Annual Financial Accounts. At this university, the Financial Statements are presented and explained to the university community on an annual basis. The budget processes are participatory - including the presentation of the Budget at a University Assembly. No widespread corruption has ever been found at Unisa. Every allegation against members of staff has been investigated, and as appropriate, disciplinary action taken. I challenge anyone to prove that there is a prevailing culture of impunity at this university. That is exactly what we have been battling against for years. The allegations against some members of management, and instances where staff have been implicated are without foundation. The attack on the integrity of members of Council is simply shameful.

It does not help when those who wish to enlist the support of Council for a candidate of their choice then proceed to peddle lies, which are so easy to prove false. The Human Resources Department has improved by leaps and bounds since Dr Mala Singh became Executive Director. She has managed to recruit some of the best professionals in the industry – and the results show. The recruitment processes are set according to clear policy, and any evidence of appointments not according to policy must be reported so that they can be investigated. It is not good enough to simply defame by unfounded slurs. It is simply incorrect to say that the University is losing cases at the CCMA. The contrary is actually the case, as one might attest from many colleagues who have dared to take the University to the CCMA. We

win cases at the CCMA because we do not act in an unlawful manner and because we accept that we cannot allow a situation of non-performance or misconduct to affect the work environment.

Third, a very serious attack is made against the University itself. This is clearly designed to impair the integrity and reputation of this university – and that without any substance. Anyone who says that Council's investment in infrastructure is "useless expenditure" needs to have his or her head read. During the last five years and ongoing, this university has invested in major development projects to improve facilities - especially for students - and to provide for a new registration process in keeping with a modern ODL university. The entrance building will ease pressure on facilities and provide much needed accommodation for staff. Service to students continues to improve at Unisa, judging by the dwindling number of complaints. The UCC is on a turn-around curve, thanks to the energy of Prof Divya Singh and the work of the Merchants Consultants. The concerns about throughput and drop-out rates are not original. These have indeed been at the heart of the strategy of this university. Judging by the latest results Unisa has already met the graduate targets set by the Minister at 58%. Our enrolment plan is beginning to address the phenomenon of "unfunded students". With all the processes now in place we can only expect to continue to improve our success rate. There are serious challenges with our Learner Support, as the HEQC Audit Report has declared. The authors need to know that notwithstanding large sums of money being made available by Council for financial support to students, the money is regularly under-spent! We now envisage a redesigned and restructured portfolio to develop a sharper Teaching and Learning focus. I expect that our research output will continue to improve to the point where all Unisa academics will be research-active.

Why, I wonder, would all of this conniving be done ostensibly in support of the candidacy of one person for appointment as Principal and Vice Chancellor of Unisa? Nowhere do I find a sustained and informed exposition of the University and its role and place in the national, African and international higher education landscape; nothing about the expertise required to be an academic leader of repute as the advertisement attests; nothing about the ODL, teaching and learning, and technology drivers necessary for this university; nothing about active scholarship required of a putative leader of the academic community at Unisa. There is nothing about the content of a visionary leader beyond the mere assertion thereof, or about the understanding and strategy for transformation; not even about the vision of an ODL university of the 21st century – the engine of a radical epistemology, attentive to the developmental needs of the neediest, and shaping a future society; or about Africa and its unique sources of knowledge and the challenges for development and leadership crying out to be addressed. There is not a word

about fidelity to academic freedom and the defence of institutional autonomy. Very little is attested to about the capacity for creativity and uniting the university community around a shared vision. We hear nothing about the energy and devotion to service necessary for such a prestigious post. These are the matters that should be debated by the university community and engaged with in all honesty - not personalities, not a trading of insults and character assassination, not misrepresentations. That is the level of academic decency I believe these times are calling for. Nothing must be done which might only serve to render colleagues unable to work together again once the appointment is made and the dust has settled. In any event, the cohesion of the Institution must never be sacrificed at the altar of expediency, or for momentary gains, or for sheer populism!

N Barney Pitsoa Tsebe

PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR

Pretoria, 2 June 2010.