



*The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor*

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

As we approach the end of the first quarter of 2010, we are mindful of a number of matters on the agenda of the higher education sector as a whole, and the University of South Africa in particular. First, we received the Ministerial Statement on Higher Education Funding for the triennial period 2009 – 2012, (dated 4 December 2009). The Statement signals some changes in the Funding Framework and gives notice of the intention to apply the funding formula already agreed with higher education institutions. This refers in particular to the phenomenon of unfunded students in the higher education system, and to a new mechanism for calculating teaching and research developments grants. This means that there is a move away from block grants to earmarked grants, and that all universities alike will be eligible for teaching and research output grants. More thoroughgoing changes can be expected, as the Minister has also announced a review of the higher education funding framework by a technical team within DoHET, which will report back to him by the end of 2010.

The second matter for our attention was brought about by the submission of the Final Report of the HEQC Institutional Audit 2008, in January 2010. We have been discussing this matter at various forums, cognisant of some of the critical observations and recommendations made by the HEQC Panel about key matters of policy and practice at Unisa, which can be summarised as follows:

1. that Unisa should review the fit between its social mandate, the pursuit of its African identity agenda, the available resources necessary to fulfil that mandate and the fit with declared national policy;

2. that Unisa should discover a common theoretical undergirding of its teaching and learning practice, and enable that theory to better inform and facilitate a shared understanding of the teaching and learning objectives of the University; and
3. that Unisa should review its aspiration to be among this country's top universities, especially in research, and focus more intently on the quality of teaching and learning.

It should be obvious almost at a glance that we are being confronted by two public policy and regulatory mechanisms that contradict each other. At one level the University is pursuing the goal of meeting the targets stipulated in the Ministerial Statement on Enrolment Targets. We are also confronted with teaching and research output norms which are not being met. Furthermore, the DoHET has resolved, for good reason, to phase out teaching development grants provided by means of block grants, in favour of earmarked grants on the basis of actual outputs. This means that the system becomes a lot fairer, and more output-oriented, and addresses the perception of inefficient institutions being funded despite their inefficiency. It should be borne in mind that institutional efficiency has long been a basic policy goal of a transformed higher education sector. It has therefore been resolved that:

*“the first cycle of teaching grants should be paid *only after plans have been submitted to and approved by the department.* Institutions should account for their expenditure of these funds through annual progress reports.”*

As a matter of interest, there is in the Ministerial Statement a reference to Unisa (without mentioning the name) in illustrating the fact that the calculation of teaching development grants was funding under-achieving institutions.

[The total available for teaching development was R345.4m, of which R228,7m (or 66% of the total) went to one university which had missed its benchmark targets by a wide margin]

The Minister also states that teaching development grants will only be utilised for purposes designated by the Minister “to improve the success and graduation rates of disadvantaged students...” It would be interesting to determine how Unisa had missed its targets by such a wide margin given that Unisa is making good progress towards meeting the Ministerial course success rate targets! Be that as it may, we are faced with an avalanche of performance targets which are not being met - which means that we are facing the prospect of a much reduced grant from the Department.

What is more important though, is that we should roll up our sleeves and be ready to take radical steps to address the situation. Fortunately, much of what needs to be done has been the subject of our strategic planning and action since 2008. But the starting point to transforming this Institution is for every member of staff at Unisa to examine their own commitment to its future as an academic institution of excellence. If we were to do that, then our approach would become less a matter of mere compliance with Ministerial dictat, and more a search to become part of a community that builds an academic institution of which we can all be proud. It means that we need a solid resolve to teach effectively and to offer our students care and supervision that will ensure their success in their studies. The academic reputation of all of us, and of this University, is in our hands.

I have said in other quarters recently, that at the heart of what is crying out for attention at Unisa, is a change of mindset - of attitude. This begins, I suspect, with ensuring that the quality of academic management at this university is improved - infused with integrity rather than accommodation, and with critical reasoning in planning to effect accountability with consequences. To be candid, we must equip our academic managers to manage more effectively than they currently do. As an institution, we are carrying too many members of staff who are coasting along with minimal or no research activity, and even less commitment to teaching and supporting their students to learn effectively. On the other hand, we have staff who are deeply committed to their tasks and who are working tirelessly in pursuit of personal and professional excellence, but they seem to be subsumed in a tide of mediocrity, and that has to change.

I have accordingly requested Prof N Baijnath to convene a management team to examine the Ministerial Funding Statement and make concrete proposals in that regard. Prof Baijnath will later make a presentation on the dimensions of such interventions. It is important, however, to always bear in mind that it is ever so easy to blame others and to decline to take responsibility oneself. My sense is that even before we do that we must put our house in order. Yes, of course, we must make representations to the Minister about the absence of an appropriate ODL Policy, but we must never allow the perception to set in that ODL is a less-than-effective teaching and learning method. We assert that we have no desire to be treated any differently when it comes to the quality of our academic programmes and the cognitive demands of academic programmes under ODL. Council has been consistent in making resources available to advance our academic enterprise. Yet, for all that we need a cadre of staff who are proud to be academics with the ability to be scholars of excellence, excited about their contributions to human

development and advancing the frontiers of knowledge, and dedicated and diligent in their support for their students to learn effectively and to succeed in their chosen studies.

Besides making representations to the Ministry we are of course serious about establishing this Institution as a dedicated distance education centre of learning. This entails taking a fresh look at our systems and processes, the better use of technology, reviewing our assessment methods, curriculum reform and the continuous review of our programmes and qualifications. The new enrolment system should go a long way towards enabling the University to attract quality students - students who understand distance education and who fit well with this institution, who have clear goals about what they wish to achieve, and who are dedicated and disciplined enough to be able to study in an ODL environment. That is the quality of student that the new enrolment system should determine. We shall then go a long way towards reducing and eventually eliminating the menace of unfunded students in our system.

Much is being done to improve facilities at Unisa. I am pleased to report that the Student Hub at Sunnyside will be ready for occupation on 1 April. With a dedicated undergraduate library, and e.learning facilities, study and lecture rooms, and having all student services on hand within the same environment, the student hub should provide a conducive environment for students to study and to learn. I am equally pleased to report that we expect to be able to turn the first sod at the Florida Science Facility shortly, as we will soon be finalising the appointment of building contractors and other service providers. We also expect to make progress in the training and development of technology competencies for all staff in an ODL environment. We shall dedicate resources to the training of academic managers, which should ensure better distribution of tasks between teaching and research, better quality learning support and assessment systems, and practices that are monitored to ensure that intended learning outcomes and objectives are realised. With the establishment of the Unisa School of Graduate Studies we are geared to ensuring better management, support and supervision of our postgraduate students across the University.

The Minister of Higher Education and Training is convening a *Stakeholders Summit on Higher Education Transformation* to be held at the Bellville Campus of CPUT on 22-23 April 2010. Among the stated objectives of the Summit are the following:

- To examine the role of higher education in national development;

- To identify key objectives for higher education...

The Minister has stated that the expected outcomes of the Summit are

- A forum for all major stakeholders... to meet, exchange views and debate some of the critical issues affecting higher education;
- To adopt a declaration elucidating a set of principles and understandings agreed to by the participants.

The Summit is designed to be a representative forum. Each institution will have five delegates:

- the Chairperson of Council;
- the Vice Chancellor;
- a member of Management;
- a senior member of the academic staff;
- the SRC President.

The issues we have been debating at Unisa since 2008 are definitely matters for serious consideration. These matters have received only partial acknowledgement in the *Soudien Report On Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions* (30 November 2009). A recent CHE colloquium also addressed precisely whether we can any longer claim to have any shared understandings and objectives for higher education in our country. In any event as a nation we are confronted with the greatest challenge in advancing our national development goals; namely, that our higher education institutions are not ensuring better access and success of students, that the drop-out rate has reached unacceptable proportions, and that the aspirations of many of our students are possibly not as they should be for our young democracy. It strikes me that at issue beyond the headlines, has to be the matter of whether our institutional cultures remain too alienating, whether our learning environment is failing to excite the imagination and curiosity of sufficient of our students, and whether our systems and processes are not stifling innovation and participation. I believe that Unisa must attend the Summit with very clear objectives about what should be achieved for higher education provided by means of distance education.

In conclusion, there can be no doubt that more than ever before, Unisa should be focused on its core mission of teaching and learning. All our efforts must seek to examine how effectively we teach and

enable effective learning. We must train and enable each other to become experts at teaching and we must discover the joy, excitement and sense of personal satisfaction derived from a job well done.

N Barney Pitjana

Pretoria, 17 March 2010.