

AN EVALUATION OF A DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRAMME for young academics at the University of South Africa: views from participants

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to evaluate and report on a developmental programme for young academics at the University of South Africa (Unisa). Unisa, one of the world's mega universities, is a comprehensive, open-and-distance-learning higher education institution in South Africa, which provides a combination of technikon- and university-type programmes. The university employs some 1 200 academics. An important challenge for the university has been its large cohort of ageing academics who have provided the institution not only with its academic memory, but also a substantial portion of its research output. Because of this challenge and the need for succession planning, the university decided to launch a Young Academic Programme to develop and build the capacity for young academics at Unisa.

Introduction

The University of South Africa (Unisa) is a comprehensive higher education institution that provides a combination of the philosophies and programmes offered by technikons and universities. As many as a third of all students studying in South Africa are registered at Unisa (Unisa 2008c, 3). The university provides a range of study programmes, from short courses and certificate programmes up to three- and four-year degrees and diplomas, with postgraduate studies offered up to doctorate level. Unisa has a specific social mandate to provide open access to its students – especially working, poor, rural and under-prepared students (Unisa 2008c, 3). The use of open distance learning (ODL) forms an integral part of the way that Unisa functions, communicates and provides higher education to students in South Africa, Africa and the rest of the world. The university reaches a large number of students and in 2009 had a headcount of some 280 426 students.

A major challenge that Unisa faces is its ageing academic workforce that has contributed considerably to the academic and research output of the university. In response to this challenge, the university developed a leadership programme to fast-track young academics in the areas of tuition, research and academic management and to provide them with the knowledge and skills required to be high achievers, not only within Unisa but also nationally and internationally. Following a needs analysis, the programme focused on the three key areas of academic development, research and management development within the South African higher education context and, specifically, within the Unisa open and distance learning context. The evaluation criteria include the programme's validity, content issues to which the young academics were exposed, quality of lectures and presenters and the time frame. The full-time programme comprised approximately three months and included both formative and summative assessment. This article will provide an overview of the Young Academic Programme at Unisa, the experiences of participants and the outcomes of the programme.

This article is based on a review of the most recent information and reports on the development, growth and profile of Unisa. Information about open distance learning (ODL) was also considered in order to obtain a better understanding of how the university uses ODL. The review and study of university policies and reports can be seen as the main research method for this paper. Literature, reports and articles on the Young Academic Programme were also reviewed and studied to obtain information about the programme.

Overview of Unisa

Unisa was founded in 1873 (Unisa 2008c, 4–12), in Cape Town, as the University of the Cape of Good Hope. Until 1916, the university served as an examining body for Victoria College, Stellenbosch and the University of Cape Town. In 1916, through a decree, the University of the Cape of Good Hope was incorporated into a federal University of South Africa. The structure of the university was radically amended. Control was vested in a council and senate, at which seven constituent colleges were represented. These colleges later became independent universities. In 1918, the university moved from Cape Town to Pretoria. The federal university did not teach private students; it merely examined them. Even before the disappearance of the University of the Cape of Good Hope, tutorial classes and correspondence colleges had been founded in South Africa to cater for the needs of students examined by the university. The Higher Education Amendment Act of 1946 enabled the university to undertake the tuition and guidance of the candidates for its examinations. In 1946, the University of South Africa became the first public university in the world to teach exclusively by means of distance education. Prior to 2004 the university incorporated two distance education teacher training colleges, when the decision was made for all teacher education to be moved to universities. The university underwent different “generations” of

distance education – from being a correspondence institution, to the incorporation of multimedia (radio, tapes, videos, videoconferencing), to introducing a tutor system and, finally, to developing its own online learning management system (LMS), Students Online (SOL). By making use of Students Online (SOL), students could do administrative tasks such as check results, change their address and submit assignments or access their study material – and, of course, chat online with other students. At the time of the merger, the university had 1 239 academic employees, 2 046 administrative and professional staff and 145 043 students, plus a nationwide regional infrastructure that included contact tutorials for students. The university was accredited by the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC) in Washington DC in 2002 and the merged institution was accredited in 2004 (Unisa 2008c, 4–12). During 2009, student enrolment increased to 280 426, thus confirming that Unisa was the university of choice for many students (Unisa 2009h, online).

The university's vision is "Towards *the* African university in service of humanity". To achieve this, Unisa is currently playing a crucial role in South African and African affairs and has an essential social mandate in that it serves people who would otherwise not have access to tertiary education – for financial reasons, because they are in full-time employment, because they live in remote areas, or because they suffer from some form of disability. The university seeks to build capacity and share expertise. This is also in line with the university's mission of being accessible to all learners, specifically those on the African continent and the marginalised – by providing a barrier-free environment through its ODL policy and approach – while still responding to the needs of the global market. Therefore ODL is an important part of how the university functions and operates (Unisa 2008c, 15–16).

Open distance learning (ODL) at Unisa

According to the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO 2002, online), the terms "open learning" and "distance learning" represent approaches that focus on open access to education and training provision, thus freeing learners from the constraints of time and place and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners. Open distance learning means increased access and flexibility and the ability to combine work and education. In addition, open distance learning means a more learner-centred approach and new ways of interacting with students. ODL reflects the fact that all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in time and space from the learner. The aim of this is to include greater dimensions of openness and flexibility, whether in terms of access, curriculum or other elements of structure. UNESCO states that open and distance learning is one of the most rapidly growing fields of education in the world. Open distance learning therefore plays a decisive role in, especially, the creation of a global knowledge society (UNESCO 2002, online).



According to the Vice-Chancellor of Unisa, Prof Pityana (2004, 4), "open" in distance education usually signifies that entrance requirements are simplified or judged on the basis of the individual candidate's readiness to undertake tertiary studies. "Open" also implies an ability to face up to the learning future and adapt and develop as circumstances dictate. "Distance" suggests that the learner and the educator undertake the transmission and learning tasks without being mediated by time and/or space.

The definition of open distance learning used by Unisa (Unisa 2008a) includes the following: "Open distance learning is a multi-dimensional system aimed at bridging the time, geographical and transactional distance between: student and institution, student and lecturers/tutors, students and courseware, and students and peers." An important point to understand about ODL at Unisa is that all systems – the strategy, what the university does, how the university does it (processes), what the university does it with (infrastructure: technological, human and financial) – have to be integrated to support the academic enterprise and the student. The open learning movement focuses on lowering entry requirements and then supporting students in their attempts to reach the desired outcomes. Open learning is an approach that embraces student-centredness in the following ways (Unisa 2008c, 4–12):

- ◆ lifelong learning
- ◆ flexibility of learning provision
- ◆ removal of barriers to access learning
- ◆ recognition of prior learning
- ◆ provision of student support
- ◆ construction of learning programmes with the expectation that students can succeed

Unisa has a written policy on ODL that states its intent on developing and using ODL. The policy has a strong focus on South African society's needs in that it

- ◆ provides quality general academic and career-focused learning opportunities underpinned by principles of lifelong learning, flexibility and student-centredness;
- ◆ undertakes research and knowledge development guided by integrity, quality and rigour;
- ◆ participates in community development by utilising its resources and capacities for the upliftment of the disadvantaged;
- ◆ is accessible to all learners, specifically those on the African continent and the marginalised, because it provides a barrier-free environment and, at the same time, responds to the needs of the global market;
- ◆ addresses the needs of a diverse student profile by offering relevant learner support, facilitated by appropriate information and communication technology;

- ◆ cultivates and promotes an institutional ethos, intellectual culture and educational experience that is conducive to critical discourse, intellectual curiosity, tolerance and a diversity of views;
- ◆ contributes to the establishment of a good and responsible society by graduating individuals of sound character and versatile ability;
- ◆ meets the needs of a global, competitive society by nurturing collaborative relationships with its stakeholders and other partners (Unisa 2008a).

Through the use of ODL, Unisa is providing quality distance education to significantly more students than would previously have had access to higher education. But to be able to use ODL optimally, the university needs a dedicated academic workforce that can reach and teach students in South Africa, Africa and the rest of the world.

Unisa 2015 strategic plan/staff profile

The *Unisa 2015 Strategic Plan* acknowledges the importance of Unisa's staff in implementing the vision, mission and policies of the university. The *Unisa 2015 Strategic Plan* states that "Unisa, like many other universities, has experienced a steady loss of some of its best talent. This is attributable on the one hand to mobility as a consequence of increasing globalisation and internationalisation. On the other hand, increased opportunities for those formerly discriminated against have also been a factor. The brain drain is also a result of better incentive and reward systems in the private and public sectors than those which the University is able to offer so as to attract and retain a diverse staff complement" (Unisa 2006, 3). The university sees human and intellectual capital as an important strength that enables the university to innovate, develop, do research and teach students. Human resources are identified in the *Unisa 2015 Strategic Plan* as an important challenge for the university. Apart from the university's representativeness and the difficulty in attracting and retaining high-quality black academic staff, succession planning is also difficult since many academic and administrative staff are nearing retirement age. It is important that the knowledge and skills embedded in an ageing academic cohort be passed on to a group of young academics that can carry the vision and mission of the university into the future. Another strategic objective of the *Unisa 2015 Strategic Plan* is to ensure an environment of stability and knowledge retention through deliberate succession planning, career pathing, skills transfer and knowledge transfer (Unisa 2006, 12). The development and implementation of the Young Academic Programme is an example of how the university is trying to address these human resource-related challenges at Unisa.

The young academic programme initiative

A pilot Young Academic Programme was proposed and planned for 2008 and was launched on 15 September 2008. The aim of the pilot project was to address some



of the challenges that the university faces in the *Unisa 2015 Strategic Plan* and to develop young promising and talented academics for the future, in terms of academic development and management. The aim was to provide the group of young academics with the knowledge and skills required to be top achievers, not only in Unisa, but also within the national higher education environment and on the global stage. The programme also sought to enable young academics to one day assume a leadership role within their academic departments, colleges and, in turn, the university (Unisa 2008f, 3–5).

The Young Academic Project sought to align itself with three key goals embedded in the *Unisa institutional operational plan 2008 to 2010* (Unisa 2008d) namely to

- ◆ identify and develop leaders, managers and improve staff capacity;
- ◆ recruit and retain high-quality staff in line with employment equity targets ;
- ◆ develop and implement appropriate leadership and management education and training programmes.

Candidates were selected from a pool of applications. A young academic is regarded as someone under the age of 36 (ie 35 and younger) who holds a minimum of a master's degree. The ideal candidate should be considering registering, or have registered, for a doctoral degree. Sixteen talented young academics were selected for the pilot project from across the five colleges at Unisa, from diverse fields of study and with an emphasis on employment equity targets. Prof Barney Erasmus, Vice-Principal: Operations stated that "we hope that the ideal graduate from this Programme will be someone who is in a position to achieve Excellence in Tuition Awards, produce high quality research and be an academic that others will look up to" (Unisa 2008e, 3).

The programme

The training programme consisted of 13 weeks and the selected young academics were exempted from their normal work duties during this period. The curriculum of the programme focused of three main areas:

- ◆ academic development
- ◆ research
- ◆ management development within the South African higher education context, but also specifically in the Unisa ODL context.

The programme began with a very successful team-building exercise which helped the individuals within the group to bond so that they all worked together and supported one another. The academic development part of the programme focused on an introduction to higher education, the nature and purpose of higher education, higher education policy and ODL. Teaching and learning were examined by including

curriculum planning and design, assessment practices and using technology to enhance the distance education experience. The Unisa student profile was examined, as well as registrations and alternative assessment methods. Prof Berhanu Abegaz delivered a lecture to the young academics on the interface between cultural knowledge systems and scientific research at African universities. The five different colleges at the university were visited to get an idea of the work they do. The Unisa Foundation also gave the young academics an overview of the history of Unisa (Unisa 2008f, 11–18).

During the research part of the programme, visits to research institutions such as the National Research Foundation (NRF), the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and the Human Science Research Council (HSRC) were included. This part of the programme also included qualitative and quantitative research techniques and the rules for writing publications. In addition, participants received information on indigenous knowledge; multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research; and bursary and fellowship opportunities (Unisa 2009g, 42).

The third part of the programme focused on management development and leadership. This included diversity management, employment equity and the work of a manager, including planning, organising, leadership and motivation. The participants attended a workshop entitled “Diversity as a life-skill”. Information was provided on some of the university’s strategic projects and financial planning. The programme provided the young academics with the opportunity to spend time with the principal, vice-principals and other members of management and to ask them questions about the university and to debate issues that the young academics felt were important. The time that management spent interacting with these young academics was appreciated by everyone.

The last week of the programme was used to attend the Higher Education as a Social Space conference, which was jointly hosted by the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA) and the South African Association for Research and Development in South Africa (SAARDHE) as part of the objective to promote scholarship of teaching in higher education (Unisa 2008f, 44).

Although the programme was demanding, Prof Rosalie Finlayson, coordinator of the group said, “The young academics now have a better understanding of tuition, research and academic management.” The programme included compulsory assignments for every participant and the assignment topics were as follows:

- ◆ Critically evaluate Unisa as an ODLI.
- ◆ How can I, my department and college improve teaching and learning at Unisa?
- ◆ My research and how it relates to the *Unisa 2015 Strategic Plan*.
- ◆ How can I contribute to my department and college’s management skills?

Apart from the assignments, the programme included compulsory presentations on specific topics some in groups while other presentations were on an individual basis. The tuition methods that were used in the programme included face-to-face teaching by means of interactive discussion groups, as well as mixed-mode teaching (computer-based training, printed media and discussion groups).

The assessment of young academics on the programme

It was agreed during the inception of the programme that assessment of the participants would be undertaken to determine the impact of the training, as well as to provide support to the group of young academics to ensure that skills and knowledge obtained would be built on and shared with other academics through mentoring and coaching. It was also recommended that the performance of the participants during the course be reviewed and realigned regularly. Candidates were assessed through compulsory assignments, presentations and a final portfolio. Participants in the Young Academic Programme were also assessed on the following criteria, giving them a mark out of 5 for all seven areas listed below:

- ◆ **Focus:** This area pertains to how dedicated the participants were to the programme, giving up other activities in order to focus on the Young Academic Programme. Participants were assessed on how they made time to go the extra mile to produce neat quality work and to concentrate and focus on the programme.
- ◆ **Participation:** Many of the activities in the programme were participative in nature. The participants were therefore rated according to how they participated in joint activities.
- ◆ **Projects and Presentations:** Collaboration was important and was also assessed as well as team building.
- ◆ **Creativity:** Innovation was encouraged and participants were marked as to how they initiated tasks and saw them through to their logical conclusion. Some group and individual tasks required imagination and hence participants were assessed according to how they applied their minds.
- ◆ **Growth:** Every individual that participated in the programme showed considerable growth and maturity as they completed each section of the programme and in the final analysis every participant scored high marks for growth.
- ◆ **Critical skills:** Question time encouraged critical thinking and skills. The participants grew in stature as they gained confidence and actively participated in the programme, asked questions and debated.
- ◆ **Leadership:** The programme provided ample opportunity for participants to demonstrate leadership skills, particularly during teamwork activities.
- ◆ **Punctuality:** This somewhat superficial area was nevertheless important when assignments were meant to be submitted and to ensure that presentations started on time (Unisa 2008f, 46–48).

Regular, action-oriented interactive discussions, debates and presentations to both internal and external audiences were also assessed, as well as group work. Each one of the participants in the Young Academic Programme performed remarkably well and it was difficult to assess them individually. The overall marks have been given as a percentage with marks ranging from 61% to 87%. Post-intervention assessment of the programme also continued to determine the impact of the project. Support will also be provided to the young academics to ensure that the skills and knowledge they have acquired are passed on to other academics through mentoring and coaching (Unisa 2008e, 2).

Views from participants

The responses following the presentation of the certificates at the end of the programme were warm and enthusiastic, as aptly summed up by Dr Genevieve James – one of the participants – in her address: “It is a privilege and an honour to speak on behalf our team: The Young Academics. Since the inception of this programme on the 15th of September this year, we have embarked on a journey of discovery of the practice and presence of our great institution. This journey was marked with moments of reflection, critical evaluation and productivity but most of all, new relationships and bonds. If the objectives of the Young Academic Programme were to educate, inform, mentor and encourage, then, the programme has superseded its expectations. The programme has facilitated a comprehensive exposure to Unisa as an ODLI and a baptism into the nature of higher education in a time of change.” Further, Denzil Chetty noted: “Amidst 3 months of gruesome tiredness, I can certainly say that the programme was a success also in my personal life – the proof is in my personal growth as an academic (and individual outside the circles of academia) and can certainly say that I am proud to be a part of the Unisa community. Sometimes in life in order for us to see and engage with the bigger picture, ‘seeing and calling reality’ for what it is, we need to set ourselves apart from our centres of confinement to the periphery and engage with an inward reflection from the outside. Three months ago, 16 young academics were enlisted and introduced to each other on the 10th floor of the TvW building. Many did not know what the journey would entail – including myself – however, with 2 weeks left to go in this programme, we certainly find that we are concluding this journey with different points of departure and with each one enriched, empowered and motivated to embrace a new journey” (Unisa 2008f, 45–46).

Other comments and views from participants in the pilot Young Academic Programme include the following:

- ◆ **Mpariseni Budeli:** “I benefited significantly from the Young Academic Programme. The programme equipped me with a unique opportunity for an in-depth understanding of Unisa, its functioning processes and procedures. It was inspiring and motivating.”

- ◆ **Paul Mbedzi:** "The Young Academic Programme was an excellent learning opportunity for me. I have grown immensely as a person and also as an academic through the vibrant interactions with my fellow bright and dedicated young academics. I feel most inspired and motivated."
- ◆ **Babalwa Mlati:** "Being nominated for the Young Academic Programme, representing my department and the College was a great honour for me. We started as a group of individuals from different departments and slowly became a TEAM of 'Young Bright thinkers'. Not only did the programme provide me with an opportunity to develop my academic skills but the experience also nourished my commitment and passion to continue in the field and to carry on researching and working on issues that are national priorities."
- ◆ **Tressella Nayagar:** "The Young Academic Programme has allowed me to view Unisa from a broad perspective. It has allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of its goals and strategic plan, the open and distance learning model as its business model and the various activities of the university, it has given me the opportunity to interact with senior managers at the university and my fellow YAP colleagues who are from different departments at the university."
- ◆ **Cliff Ndlangamandla:** "I found the critical engagements and reflections meaningful by exposing problems and solutions that Unisa is facing as an ODL institution. Most importantly, I realized that even though we are a mega-university there is a place for each person working in the university, each person is important."
- ◆ **Gugu Nkosi:** "The programme is highly intensive and demands a great deal of commitment and dedication from its participants. It is also well thought out, and well planned, and this is clearly demonstrated in the intensiveness of the scope of training offered."
- ◆ **Kedibone Phago:** "Participating in the Young Academic Programme has afforded me an exciting opportunity to learn more about Unisa's intricate administration and management system. This training has been wonderful in ensuring that I obtain a holistic view on the challenges the university is facing."
- ◆ **Malefa Rose Malefane:** "The Young Academic Programme has been an eye-opening journey for me, from which I gained excellent scholarly thinking and analytical skills, particularly within the context of academic development, research and management development in an open and distance learning institution."
- ◆ **Richard Moloji:** "YAP has been a most fantastic Programme for me. In particular, it has given me the opportunity to understand Unisa as a brand, its vision, mission and key strategies in order to achieve its goals. Meeting some members of top management and engaging them, watching how they do planning has been a great opportunity indeed, but most of all meeting my fellow peers (Yappies) has allowed us to bond beyond the corridors and to create an environment of friendship within this wonderful institution" (Unisa 2008e, 4-7).

All sixteen participants had positive and rewarding experiences on the programme and viewed the Young Academic Programme as a success; they all felt that the programme had enriched their lives. Almost all the young academics stated that a highlight of the programme was the friends they had made and the knowledge they have gained about Unisa is invaluable.

Outcomes of the young academic programme

The development of team cohesiveness and interpersonal relationships proved gratifying and was possibly one of the greatest lessons for the young academics. The ability to live and work together and support one another, despite our differences, was demonstrated in a very positive light, initiated by the team-building exercise at the beginning of the programme. Team presentations also contributed substantially to this cohesiveness. The subsequent proposal for the establishment of a Young Academics Forum – an initiative that came from the group itself – confirmed this goodwill and unity among members of the group.

Another important outcome was that the group developed a deeper understanding of the university and the higher education landscape in South Africa. The young academics expanded their knowledge of ODL, in particular, which included the following:

- ◆ a deeper understanding of Unisa's various colleges and support services;
- ◆ an awareness of the Unisa brand; change and organisational renewal; employment equity and social justice; and the Unisa Foundation;
- ◆ enhanced ICT skills, including how to do the following:
 - ◆ identify and comprehend the major macro-level (worldwide) ICT trends and developments relevant to Unisa;
 - ◆ identify, comprehend and analyse the major macro-level (South African) ICT trends and developments relevant to Unisa;
 - ◆ identify, comprehend and analyse the major micro-level (within Unisa and other South African higher education institutions) ICT trends and developments relevant to Unisa;
 - ◆ analyse how the major macro- and micro-level trends relate to all aspects of the business of Unisa, but particularly to Unisa as an ODL institution, and how these developments can be used to expedite and enhance strategy implementation;
 - ◆ utilise the principles described above to create a portfolio framework that aligns ICT developments – as a key driver of strategy implementation – with the implementation of operational and strategic plans and objectives.
- ◆ an awareness and understanding of Unisa's tutorial support services, including exposure to the tutor system, the discussion class directorate, work-intergrated learning, recognition of prior learning and *Thutong*;



- ◆ exposure to Unisa's regional hubs as part of Unisa's decentralised learner support model;
- ◆ enhancement of research skills and supervision capabilities;
- ◆ acquisition of general management skills: planning, organising, leading and control (first-line management training);
- ◆ budgeting and financial management skills.

The participants were very successful in achieving the outcomes of the Young Academic Programme and they indicated that it had been both a positive learning experience and an enjoyable programme. All the participants felt that they had benefited from the programme and had gained new skills and knowledge that they can use in the future. The Coordinator, Prof Finlayson stated that "the Young Academic Programme has indeed been an enriching experience for all and is highly recommended for the future" (Unisa 2008e, 2).

Conclusion

The pilot Young Academic Programme, which was launched in September 2008 by the University of South Africa, was – by all accounts – very successful. All the participants were positive about the learning experience, the curriculum and the time spent on the programme. The three month programme was evaluated and participants were assessed on their performance. The pilot programme was followed up in 2009, with two new groups of young academics undergoing the training. The Young Academic Programme at Unisa can therefore be seen as a positive initiative to address some of the human resource challenges that the university emphasised in its 2015 strategic plan and to build the capacity of young academics for the future of the university.

Notes

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