



The Office Of The Principal and Vice-Chancellor

PRINCIPAL'S STATEMENT TO SENATE

Since the adoption by Council of the Institutional Operational Plan 2008-2010, I have had the privilege of addressing various sectors of the university community. I have made presentations to the junior academic staff, to new staff members, to the Black Forum, the Women's Forum and to the Institutional Forum. In the Eastern Cape last week, I addressed staff at our East London office. I have appreciated the candour with which colleagues have engaged me on a variety of the challenges that the university faces. But what is most pleasing is the spirit which I sense, speaks to an awareness of a mood for change and renewal at Unisa.

One of the observations of the CoL Trial Audit last year was about the "dysfunctional" nature of Senate at Unisa. I recall how jolted I was by such an expression. It had never occurred to me that Senate was operating in any manner that would give cause for such judgment. I believed that Senate was truly exercising its mandate; that management brought full disclosure on how policy was developed and applied and that many challenging matters were brought to the attention of Senate. I sensed that the committees of Senate functioned adequately and by all accounts members of Senate participated freely on all matters affecting the academic life of the university.

I must also disclose though, that there have been occasions when one felt that vital matters were receiving only cursory attention. That, I argued, was the product of a representative body that only met quarterly. But that need not be so. In order to enhance participation, we have resolved that at least one meeting of Senate will deliberate on matters in some depth. To that end, this first Senate meeting of the year

will break into workshops for in-depth discussion on at least three matters of policy and development confronting the university. I trust that members of Senate will engage in the process and present their own insights into how best the renewal of this university may proceed.

It will be recalled that last year DISA commissioned the first-ever Staff Satisfaction Survey at Unisa, which was conducted by BMR. The results will be presented to Senate this morning. By all accounts results show that staff perceptions paint a bleak and negative picture of this university and management, and there is also evidence of a deep-seated and low morale. Naturally we are concerned about the negative sentiment in respect of our management of the institution. The survey also displays the divisions and fault lines that have bedevilled any efforts at cohesion and a common approach to our academic mandate. On behalf of my colleagues in the Executive Management of this university I can say that to some extent the negative sentiment was to be expected, particularly given the tensions around the finalisation of the Conditions of Service, the breakdown in relations with the unions, the placement process and the voluntary severance scheme. That cannot however be the full explanation of the sentiments expressed. What it does point to, without being defensive, is the fact that after four years of the newly merged Unisa there remains contestation about the shared vision and mission of the university, about the application of policy and about the drive towards transformation. We shall be studying the reports in some depth, but we have already taken steps to address some of the concerns – especially the apparent communication breakdown. We intend being resolute in the implementation of the Conditions of Service, in pursuing employment equity, in establishing and entrenching an ethical management system with zero-tolerance for unbecoming conduct, in ensuring the maintenance of the best interests of the students, in being faithful to the mandate entrusted to us by government, and in fulfilling the legitimate expectations of society.

In his book **THE TIPPING POINT: How little things can make a big difference;** (London: Abacus, 2000), Malcolm Gladwell affirms that institutions and societies reach a “tipping point” when change appears to happen in a dramatic fashion. He goes on to say that “sometimes big changes follow small events, and sometimes these changes can happen very quickly” (p.11). The “tipping point” is the moment of a critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point, in Gladwell’s language. That becomes the moment or

occasion where the balance of forces tips in one direction or another and change happens. “The world of the Tipping Point is a place where the unexpected becomes expected, where radical change is more than a possibility...” (p.14). Gladwell seems to suggest ways in which we could be more observant about the imperceptible changes in our society, about points of hope and change; about the way in which we view our reality and how the relationship between the institution and the staff is constructed. We need a fresh approach to human relations at Unisa driven by a common or shared commitment to the values espoused in our Mission and Vision statement: *Unisa 2015: An Agenda for Transformation*. Somehow we should find it in ourselves to create a values-driven environment and life system. From the discussions I have had with many colleagues in recent weeks I believe that we are getting there. I believe that Unisa is reaching a “tipping point” where change will no longer be a mere aspiration but a lived reality: in the quality of relationships, in collegial relations, in the quality of our academic products and in our approach to students and upholding their well-being.

Of course, you are all aware that the higher education sector has been rocked by the video savagery at one of our institutions. This has caused much alarm nationwide. It really raises questions yet again about the benefits of higher education, about the transformation of our institutions and about the culture in our institutions, which perhaps we have avoided addressing and taken for granted. I have no recollection that I have ever addressed the issue of racism at our institution. Yes, I have received various allegations by colleagues against the treatment they receive among us; yes, students have complained about racist treatment at the hands of colleagues; yes, I have been aware that on occasion the appointments process has raised charges of racism, and some white colleagues have even gone to the CCMA alleging discriminatory treatment. Last week I attended a meeting with colleagues from one of the academic departments at Unisa. Once again, racism was the most expressive language colleagues could muster to explain the treatment they received and their non-relationship with white colleagues.

At Senex recently we spoke about the reasons for many black staff leaving the university so soon after appointment, and we were told that the environment was alienating, and colleagues felt unwanted and unappreciated. I also studied the latest figures from DISA about our employment equity profile for the three years from 2004-2007. The picture is that over that time, white males continue to be over-represented in the senior ranks of

our academic, professional and administrative departments. Black staff are over-represented in the lower ranks. Likewise this university has an ageing population. We find that staff in the age-range 60+ who occupy the most senior academic and professional ranks, and who are the most productive researchers are at the point of exiting from the higher education system. Are we doing enough therefore to develop younger scholars and professionals?

The figures in themselves do not exactly paint an unhopeful picture, provided that we have the resources and the goodwill to turn it around. What is regrettable is that black staff at such levels do not believe that they are mentored or nurtured to succeed; they feel that they may well be viewed as threats. We recruit promising black staff but we do not retain them. That, of course, is not the point. Neither is it the case that this university seeks to remove or under-value the contributions of all staff, not excluding white staff. It is necessary, however, that as an institution we value inclusivity and diversity as a state to be cherished and which goes to the essence of academic enquiry. We would like - no, we are obliged - to create an environment of mutual affirmation where all our staff prosper and excel in their academic or professional pursuits. The Draft Employment Equity Plan will be presented briefly at this meeting. We can observe that dramatic action is demanded; that attention will be paid to recruitment, especially in regard to filling existing vacancies, to interviewing processes, to advancing initiatives underway to enhance the flexibility of our new remuneration system by rewarding excellence and scarce skills, to instituting accelerated advancement for designated groups, and career-pathing for all junior staff. The Employment Equity Plan will be presented to Council on 18 April.

Instead of embracing the challenge posed by pervasive racism in our institution, one must guard against mere moral outrage and defensive postures. In a recent paper entitled *Denying Racism: Discursive Strategies by the South African Media*, Kevin Durrheim and his colleagues at the University of KwaZulu Natal,¹ commenting on the South African Human Rights Commission's investigation of racism in the media, observe the strategy of denial adopted by the media at the time, and state that the media "were mapping out a new terrain of racism that normalised their own practices... mapping out the boundaries of reasonable prejudice" (208). The discourse on racism

¹ With Michael Quayle, Kevin Whitehead and Anita Kriel in *Critical Arts* 19 (1&2) 2005; 192-211.

was altered in such a manner that the blatant and direct racism, a la Reitz Koshuis, could not be distinguished from genuine racial distinction which has no moral perversion; what Durrheim calls “simply a reasonable, unavoidable, and defensible prejudice.” The researchers conclude that “these denial strategies worked to reconstruct and renegotiate the shared meanings of ‘racism’ in the public arena in such a way that racial bias can be defended in non-racial terms, or as benign, necessary, socially acceptable or commonplace.” (209).

Instead of all this, I believe that we should aspire to an open language of discourse and free expression. It means that, as racism often manifests itself, it is necessary to recognise the “other”, to listen deeply, empathetically, to “feel” what they “feel”, and hear the language they re-call to express their feelings of pain and hurt. By so doing we could blot out the “ignorance” that Langston Hughes refers to as “an ignorance at a certain level of life which no one has ever respected or it’s never been real in America” (Bigsby: 94). I know, like James Baldwin did, that what we are asking for may well be impossible at the human level. But that is exactly what we are demanding.

You know, in order to be a writer you have to demand the impossible. And I know I’m demanding the impossible. It has to be - but I also know it has to be done.²

That is the measure of the task that is confronting us. But it can and must be done. The alternative, as the former apartheid Prime Minister John Vorster was wont to say, “is too ghastly to contemplate” (and look what he did!!). I was however struck by the response of one of the senior colleagues at the meeting I referred to earlier. At the end of the meeting, he stated that he had been at a loss for words because of the shock at what he heard. He could not answer save to observe that the department had reached a low point in its existence. He believed that the only rational thing for all members of the department to do was to go back and talk. I hope that they did, because were they to do so they would discover the humanity of the “other” and in the process recover their own humanity.

Today, Executive Management will present a statement for discussion and debate and hopefully adoption, a Statement on Racism, Racial Discrimination and All Forms of Intolerance. We trust that the statement will focus our minds on the cancerous

² Bigsby CWE: THE BLACK AMERICAN WRITER: Vol. 1 Fiction; 1969: Penguin, p101.

character of racism, and will fire our resolve to root out racism, create an academic environment at Unisa which will attract the best scholars, and which could become the cradle for the advancement of African scholarship. We also trust that the debates will not just end here among members of Senate, but will shape the discourse at all departments and directorates towards the creation of new and healthier relationships.

May I now take this opportunity to thank everyone who sent us messages of support during our recent bereavement. It is fair to say that we were overwhelmed by the kind considerations of many at a time of unspeakable grief. On behalf of my family and I, I thank you.

It now gives me great pleasure to formally welcome Prof Mandla Makhanya to his new role as Deputy Chairman of Senate. Prof Makhanya assumed office as pro Vice Chancellor on 1 January this year and by virtue of that office, as the Institutional Statute provides, he becomes Deputy Chairman of Senate. I have already had reason to call on him for support when he chaired Senex in February during my visit to Cuba. I look forward to a partnership with Prof Makhanya in the leadership of Unisa during my remaining years three years of service.

I wish us all a very exciting day ahead.

N Barney Pitsoa Tseko
PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR
University of South Africa

Pretoria, 26 March 2008