



PRINCIPAL'S STATEMENT TO SENATE

International Relations and Partnerships has become an essential part of the development of the academic reputation of any university. That has to do with the fact that higher education has become, especially in many developed countries, a major industry, a foreign exchange earner and a means of marketing the country concerned. Universities also have a brand value that must be nurtured and cultivated. In that regard, higher education is very much in the same league as manufacturing, tourism and services etc. The importance of this lies not so much in the number of students that are attracted to study at universities away from home (although that in itself is a remarkable phenomenon), as much as it lies in the exchanges and traffic among academics and researchers – the sharing of knowledge, participation in research undertakings, the standardisation of qualifications, the development of technical expertise in educational technology, and learning development. Interchanges among scholars have become a standard format by which higher education spreads across borders.

The most recent UNESCO report indicates that Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest outward-bound student mobility ratio of 5.9%, which is three times greater than the global average. One out of 16 tertiary students from the region studies abroad. There are countries where the student population studying abroad is more than the number of students studying at national institutions. What is the destination of these students? Again, it must be noted that every second student from the exporting regions goes to

Western Europe, and the second region is within Sub-Saharan Africa itself, followed by North America. Nine out of ten students studying abroad go to South Africa, especially those from the SADC region. This is interesting because South Africa is second to the USA as the most preferred destination for mobile students from Anglophone Africa. Zimbabwe has the largest number of students studying abroad (17000) followed by Nigeria (15000) Cameroon (15000) and Kenya (14000).

And yet, we share with the South African government, resistance to the developing ideology that higher education is merely another good or service in the international market that must be subjected to international trade rules like GATS in WTO. We affirm that higher education must remain a common good, the commodification of which must be limited and appropriately regulated, believing that it must remain a lever to advancing development goals.

At Unisa we have gone a long way in establishing a focal point for international relations and partnerships. In 2006, a dedicated directorate was established under Mr Nicolas Bwakira, the founding Director. Last year, Mr Bwakira left Unisa to become the Chairman of the AU Commission's Special Representative in Somalia. I am pleased to report that earlier this year we appointed Dr Joseph Diescho as the new Director. The Directorate falls under the Portfolio Strategy, Planning and Partnerships and Dr Diescho reports directly to Prof N Baijnath. I tell you all of this because I sense that there is little understanding at Unisa about the role of international relations in academic development and the outstanding work being done by colleagues in the Directorate International Relations and Partnerships.

Unisa is an international brand in its own right. Some 10% of our students are drawn from countries outside South Africa. One notices this during graduations and as we conduct graduations ceremonies in neighbouring states. Indeed, over 53000 students registered at universities in South Africa are from other countries, especially African states. Cross-border education has become a powerful driver for international trade. Unisa is sought after as a partner by many countries in the Continent, for advice and partnership in the establishment of ODL policy and institutions. Furthermore, we are active in academic conferences on higher education and ODL, a growing number of our academic staff are attracted to Unisa from across the Continent, and many African

scholars in the Diaspora see Unisa as a means of being connected to Africa. There is potential, for example, for Unisa Press to become a major African academic publishing house.

The International Relations and Partnerships Directorate coordinates this university's activities. Colleagues there study international trends in higher education and distance education, they look for interesting connections that may benefit Unisa, they seek to link the university with scholars in other institutions, they coordinate the signing of partnership and collaboration agreements, they seek to match Unisa with partners in a mutually beneficial manner, they monitor the performance of the agreements and they represent the best interests of the university. In all of this they are guided by the vision of the university, *towards the African university in the service of humanity*. The university also has a Policy on International Relations and Partnerships which regulates the work of the Directorate. In order to become a modern university it is essential that we are connected to the universal higher education community and that "brand Unisa" is visible and able to attract scholars to this university to attend scholarly activities, for sabbaticals, fellowships etc. Likewise, we encourage Unisa academics and professional and administrative staff to benefit from the connections we have established.

Unisa is very actively involved in the Association of African Universities. It is a founder member of the African Council for Distance Education, and it is active in the Association of Commonwealth Universities, in the Commonwealth of Learning and in the International Council for Distance Education. We constantly review our participation in these international bodies against the strategic objectives of Unisa. We were concerned, for example, about the ICDE until the recent constitutional and strategic planning changes now underway. We are also measuring the ACU against the same yardstick. We have very good links with UNESCO at various levels, and with the International Association of Universities. We value these partnerships but they would be without value if they did not assist us in advancing the strategic objectives of this university.

To illustrate the relationship between higher education and national objectives I can do no better than report on my recent visit to Shanghai, China, from 17-21 October

2008. Shanghai is a sprawling city of some 17m residents. There are several public universities in Shanghai. We visited the Shanghai Jiao Tong University, one of the oldest in China, as well as the East China Normal University and the East China University of Science and Technology. The Shanghai TV University hosted the ICDE SCOP Annual Meeting, which was followed by a Global Forum on Distance Learning. That, together with the Conference of the Association of Asian Open Universities held at Tianjin immediately before Shanghai and which was attended by Prof Dele Braimoh, presented a marketplace of opportunities in distance education. Many of the major practitioners and scholars in distance education were in attendance, scholarly papers were presented and exhibitions on the latest developments in technology appropriate to distance education were on display. I have reported elsewhere that we can foresee partnerships that should strengthen work in science, engineering and technology, in teacher education and in business management – that is if we can get over the language barrier! What this illustrates is that China universities are active in attracting world scholars to China. They also attract international conferences and events, and they actively forge partnerships with scholars from across the world.

I noted too, the magnetic pull of academia when we were at the Homecoming Revolution Exhibition in London 5-6 October. The Homecoming Revolution seeks to encourage and provide opportunities for South Africans living abroad to re-connect with their home country. It does so by encouraging employers to look to these expatriates as a resource for bringing skills and expertise back into the South African economy. For the first time we set up a stall at the Exhibition. During the 2 days we were overwhelmed with enquiries about Unisa, about employment opportunities at Unisa, and about our postgraduate programmes. There is no doubt, we found, that such an event is a marketing opportunity not just to the visitors to the Exhibition, but also to the other corporate and commercial exhibitors who take an interest in South Africa – admittedly, from a distance. At a reception in South Africa House on the 6th we were able to present Unisa to our friends from partner universities and institutions, the diplomatic community, donors and the public sector. We are also looking to strengthen our relations with King's College London and with the London Metropolitan University.

Zimbabwe on the other hand presents Unisa with a headache as far as our international partnerships are concerned. We have been agonising about how best Unisa can handle the crisis we are presented with in Zimbabwe. The situation is that our student enrolments from Zimbabwe have been growing steadily in recent years. At the latest count we have about 10 000 students from Zimbabwe. Not all are actually resident in Zimbabwe. We have reason to believe that a fair number of these students are in South Africa and Botswana. In any event, we are confronted with the situation where conditions are just not conducive to the pursuit of their studies whether they are in Zimbabwe, or in South Africa as asylum seekers or illegal migrants. We estimate that the university has lost revenue in excess of R100m in our operations in Zimbabwe. We keep hoping that the situation there will change. We have the support of Council not to abandon our students in Zimbabwe but we are confronted with the reality that educational activities are no longer possible in such an environment: studies are beyond what students can afford; travel is difficult where petrol is a scarce commodity; our providers there are cashing in on the situation and we find for example, that examination venues have become far too exorbitant; and study materials couriered to our students never reach their destination. It's hard not to ask the question: what are we doing there?

We are in consultation with various role-players about the situation. Prof N Baijnath and Mr Kenneth Mubu recently visited Zimbabwe where they held useful discussions with our partner agencies in that country. There is much understanding about the dilemmas Unisa is facing. And yet there is always hope that the situation must improve. We must also acknowledge that the country will need all the skills and educated elite necessary for its development. There is also a sense in which Zimbabweans are looking to South Africa to offer some means of rescue from a dire situation. In such a desperate situation education is an important avenue for helping the nation to pursue a rational path and for many, to keep their sanity. We are also in contact with the Minister of Education seeking some rescue support in these difficult times. We are in discussions with the crisis in Zimbabwe Group based here in South Africa. We are also talking to other donor agencies with an interest in Zimbabwe. We have caused this matter to be put on the agenda of the meeting of the Board of Directors of HESA tomorrow. As many an academic will tell, Zimbabwe has some very able students, and as educators, we should do everything we can to support them.

We are making this statement on the subject of our international relations and partnerships to Senate because we have a sense that there is not sufficient appreciation at the university, for the work we do internationally. I am also making this statement with a view both to informing and mobilising support for the work of the Directorate International Relations & Partnerships. I have often said that Unisa's approach goes beyond merely attracting students to enrol for studies at Unisa, important as that might be. We see our activities as necessary for enhancing the academic reputation of this university, for benefiting from the international significance of our country at this time, and for the prestige of many of our scholars and university management. Much of this work of course is undermined by a lack of knowledge about the academic cultures of our countries or the regulatory environment in other jurisdictions, or by our failure to appreciate how best we can position Unisa to make the best of our partnerships. For example, the university has established a fund to enhance collaborations with our partner institutions. This would enable scholars to be invited to Unisa as fellows and visiting scholars. The fund would also assist in regard to visits to other institutions.

We have asked the Directorate International Relations & Partnerships to prepare a database of scholars and research being undertaken in our partner institutions, and to interest colleagues with similar interests to make contact. It needs to be mentioned though, that we constantly receive unhappy reports from our partners who encourage their staff to register with Unisa at postgraduate level. I can for example, mention one instance where a Vice Chancellor reported to me that some of his staff have been waiting for confirmation of their registrations at Unisa for more than 18 months. Accordingly, we have been consulting with colleagues about transferring the management of international postgraduate applications to the Directorate International Relations & Partnerships. This should assist with support for the students, provide timely information, and take responsibility for channelling the applications through the institutional bureaucratic maze. For all that they will need the assistance of colleagues in the colleges responsible for postgraduate admissions.

2009 will mark the 5th anniversary of Unisa as a merged institution, established as South Africa's single, dedicated distance education and comprehensive university. I

have asked Prof N Baijnath with the assistance of Ms Jeanette Botha in my office to prepare a review of the last five years of the new Unisa. I am aware that Ms Botha will seek the assistance of colleagues to map out the highlights of their operations in the last five years. I would also like to believe that it would be appropriate to host an international conference later in the year to bring scholars and practitioners in ODL and comprehensive universities to Unisa for an academic and technical conference. I expect to be able to report more fully at the ceremony to mark the official opening of the university in January 2009.

It is appropriate, colleagues, that I end this address with a report on the death of Prof Es'kia Mphahlele this week. Prof Mphahlele is, of course, a well known, internationally acclaimed academic, scholar and writer. He was a proud alumnus of Unisa, having obtained the MA *cum laude* at Unisa in 1955. He has published widely, and in his heyday was associated with some of the most illustrious schools of African literature and thought. Having taught at universities in the USA for many years, he returned to South Africa in the 70s and took up teaching positions at Wits and later at the University of the North. I was honoured to have dinner with him at Polokwane earlier this year, at the dinner hosted by the Regional Director of the North-East Region during the graduations held in that city. He was well but ageing. He was enthusiastic about the plans for Unisa to establish an Es'kia Mphahlele Lecture in his honour. Prof Mphahlele was 88 years old. It had in fact occurred to me that the university should name the new registration building after Prof Es'kia Mphahlele in honour of a truly African scholar.

N Barney Pityana GCOB

PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR

Pretoria, 24 October 2008.