



THE UNISA STATEMENT ON RACISM, RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AND ALL FORMS OF INTOLERANCE

Background

South Africa's higher education sector has been engulfed in accusations, claims and counter-claims about the prevalence, or otherwise, of racism and racial intolerance on campuses across the nation. The wake-up call was the by now well publicized outrage at the Reitz Hostel of the University of Free State. Appropriately, this is prompting a deep and necessary self examination by the higher education sector. No one can afford to be smug and self-righteous about a phenomenon which our country has singularly neglected to address for far too long.

Starkly, we are reminded that South Africa's higher education institutions mirror the state of the society in which we live, the challenges of our history, and the pervasive social attitudes that continue to characterise our human relations.

The Policy Environment

In a mere decade and more since the democratisation of South Africa in 1994, South Africa has proudly entrenched a new Constitution (Act 108 of 1996). The Constitution has elevated equality, human dignity and freedom to the level of treasured rights and values of our democratic system so that all may benefit from its fruits.

The Higher Education Act 1997 gives further effect to these values and seeks to nurture a South African citizenry and intellectual class that weaves together the social fabric of our society, promotes quality of life and contributes to all forms of human advancement and development.

Higher education institutions were remarkably left out of the process driven by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission even though academic institutions were, to various degrees, part of the formation and intellectual sustenance of apartheid. The cost may have been that higher education institutions were never challenged to introspect and to examine the challenge of transformation in a democratic future founded on constitutional values and human rights.

The Unisa Charter of Reconciliation and Transformation 2003

The University of South Africa and the institutions with which it was merged or became incorporated in 2004, has likewise not adequately addressed the imperative of an academic and intellectual community imbued with the principles and values of anti-racism.

In 2003, to mark the 130th anniversary of the University of South Africa, the predecessor of the merged new Unisa, the University Senate and Council adopted a Charter for Reconciliation and Transformation. In it the university acknowledged its social and intellectual progenitors and committed to seek by all means possible the creation of an academic community reflecting the values of the Constitution freed from the shackles of a racialised past, and to face the future with confidence and pride.

The Nature and Manifestations of Racism

In the new Unisa, however, we are very conscious that that has not translated into spaces of freedom and belonging by all in our university. We realise that the roots of racism are deeply embedded in the social fabric of our society, rooted in the learned social values and behaviour patterns, and in the persistent power relations that continue to define relations of inequality even in our institution. Racism is pervasive. It mutates in subtle and subliminal forms. Whatever the form, racism hurts.

We recognise that the social organisation that we have become all too comfortable with creates barriers to the recognition of the “other” and to a full appreciation of the humanity of the “other”. For an academic institution, however, the challenge and the pain are even more palpable because they are inimical to the values of academic freedom, the pursuit of knowledge, and the search for the truth on which any academic institution is founded.

Racism undermines free enquiry. The search for the truth and the discovery and generation of knowledge can hardly find expression in an environment characterised by denial of the “other”. To do so will lead, at best, to only partial knowledge.

The Challenge of Transformation: Towards an Inclusive and Non-racial Community

The transformation project, therefore, that this university has embraced since 2004, must reach the heart and mind of Unisa. Unisa has to truly and deeply value diversity and realise the diversity of pathways in the pursuit of knowledge.

In our endeavour to enhance racial understanding, the university will, along with all other forms of discrimination and intolerance, forthwith eschew all forms of racism and racial discrimination, create an academic and learning environment that is not alienating of the “other” but that is affirming and valuing diversity as well as the humanity of the “other”. This is an inescapable academic and moral imperative. Towards this end, the university will develop its training and development programmes to incorporate training in racism awareness, as well as adopt an Anti Racism and Racist Harassment Policy.

At this time when the Programme and Qualifications Mix of the university as well as the design of a new curriculum are under review, the university will seek to develop a race and culture sensitive approach to curriculum.

The renewal of Unisa must and will be built on a fully representative body of staff, academic and non-academic, at all levels. The Employment Equity Plan to be presented to Council in April will seek to alter the race, gender and disability demographics of Unisa staff and, more fundamentally, to transform the institutional culture into a genuinely inclusive one. By creating a sense of belonging everyone is bound to prosper and the university will earn its reputation as an African university of excellence.

*Towards **the** African university in the service of humanity.*

Pretoria, 26 March 2008