It will be a terrible distortion in the annals of the University of South Africa’s (UNISA) development, if Monday, 5th May, 2008 goes without a landmark record of the establishment of the Institute for Open and Distance Learning, (IODL) as a pertinent arm of the Institution which is expected, among other things, to revolutionize the principles and practice of ODL in UNISA, benchmarking such against the global best practices but with the by-product of enhancing research output among the academic and professional staff members.

The launch of this young but prosperous institute coincided with the UNISA INSPIRED week where IODL was formally launched by the Principal and Vice Chancellor, Prof Barney Pityana, at the ZK Matthews Great Hall of the institution while the Pro Vice-Chancellor of UNISA, Prof Mandla Makhanya, gave the keynote address.

The hallmark which any reputable tertiary institution should strive to achieve, includes among others, the production of high quality graduates, the attainment of sound quality staff and the maintenance of academic excellence as opposed to the promotion of mediocrity. Furthermore, such institution should operate effectively as a respectable centre of inquiry into the socio-economic and geo-political developments of the national economy, through the constant dissemination of truth and knowledge, aimed at solving societal problems. This daunting task, as it were, could only be achieved by simply “marrying town with gown” through the deliberate pursuit of pragmatic research, which will yield profitable dividend to the general public, for whom the universities apparently exist.

It must be noted right from the outset, that the days are over when Universities are considered sentimentally and parochially too, as the “ivory towers” thus alienating themselves from the societies which ordinarily do not either have access to the institutional activities or which are denied the opportunity to enjoy the benefit of the by-products of their research outputs.

As a catalyst of development and change, IODL is poised to collaboratively revolutionize the practice of ODL across all the five Colleges of UNISA, focusing particularly on stimulating research agenda among the academic and the professional staff members. Apart from engaging constantly in capacity building of UNISA academic staff members in the best ODL practices, the Institute will also embark on academic training at the Masters and the Ph.D. levels.

In order to engage in meaningful reflexive research, so as to improve academic quality and performance level as well as to contribute substantially to the improved living standard of the communities which UNISA serves, there will be a need for deliberate plans to initiate collaborative research projects involving the rural communities in salient and relevant areas of developmental needs where ODL can
play some pivotal roles.

Change is an unpleasant experience to human beings because of the problems of unknown associated with change, yet, it is an inevitable process of life. It is therefore, our mandate at IODL to re-orientate the mindsets of UNISA staff so as to be able to engage in deliberate, meaningful and constant research activities. This will not only enhance the institutional image and global credibility of the leading African virtual tertiary institution – UNISA – but also increase research output while throughput will considerably improve.

It is not an overstatement that research informs and improves our teaching activity as much as teaching directs our research focus. In this respect therefore, teaching and research are inseparable as they complement one another. Although experience, it is said, is the best teacher, we must be watchful that the experience of yester-years may become obsolete in solving today’s problems, hence, the need for persistent research effort, rather than thinking that all that is required of us as University lecturers is to teach, using the tattered lecture notes without generating new ideas to update our knowledge base. For effective teaching to be accomplished, there must be active research activity, otherwise, one may soon be qualified more, to be called a bureaucrat or at best, an armchair philosopher!

We subscribe to the saying that “Rome was not built in a day”. In essence, there is element of truth in the adult education philosophy that “we can teach old dogs new tricks”. The fact still remains, that even if we are not mandated to, or out of passion for our personal professional development, we are not attuned to engaging in research as University lecturers, that would therefore, not necessarily confirm that this kind of process is a ‘normal global practice’ in academia. We must certainly imbibe the principles of either “publish or perish”, and “swim or sink”, otherwise, we would not be proud to hoist our academic quality flag internationally. In this regard, we may simply remain local champions who apparently must have climbed to any higher academic ladder without any substantial academic output to show for such.

If we are open minded to be transformed as well as accept to serve as instrument of positive transformation of our societies, we must be prepared to engage in the process of learning to learn new ideas while we, at the same time, learn to unlearn the old habits and ways of doing things. Let us therefore, join hands in a positive manner, to start a rewarding transformation process by first transforming UNISA’s ODL practices, as Charity, they say, begins at home!