

APRIL FOCUS

The renewal of my term of office by the Council has given me much pause for thought; on the progress that Unisa has made in the last five years, and where we have not succeeded as we would have wished to. I have also reflected on different challenges that have come to the fore since 2011, and how we might tackle these effectively. Two of these are particularly worthy of mention.

In my inaugural address I asked: “..... what are the challenges, prospects and or opportunities that UNISA faces today, which we need to attend to? How do we position UNISA as an ODL higher education institution, for success?” One of the key challenges that I raised was *Our Research Agenda*. I feel quite proud to say that we have made some very significant progress in our Research and Innovation agenda at Unisa. There is in fact a vibrancy and dynamism in the portfolio and the institution that is making our fellow institutions and the country-at-large, sit up and take notice. Our focus on Science and Technology in particular has borne fruit with a number of collaborations with colleagues in the BRICS community and our sister institutions, amongst others, bringing with them prospects for an amazing array of innovative projects and research. We have also recorded very pleasing growth in our research outputs across most of our disciplines, and staff are being encouraged, via an array of wonderful incentivised opportunities, to improve and complete their qualifications and to grow their research capabilities. There are many other initiatives underway, some of which feature in this issue of Focus. Suffice it to say, I believe that this is one challenge that I raised at my inauguration, which we have tackled head on, with very satisfying results. I am confident that the impetus that has been created will accelerate into the future.

Turning to additional challenges that have arisen, one must surely make mention of the need for ongoing communication and engagement with staff and students. Recent events, such as the Rhodes statue debate serve to reinforce the need for open channels of communication, for creating safe spaces for engagement where the dignity of all is respected, and for open, transparent and honest engagement on matters which we feel should be debated and resolved.

The leadership style that we have embraced at Unisa, namely, *Servant Leadership*, and the institutional commitment to a *Charter on Transformation* that sets out a transformation statement and espouses the 11 Cs plus 1, have provided a context for open, constructive debate that nevertheless respects the dignity and worth of each and every person. We need to make use of the spaces that have been provided for such debates and discussion. Key amongst these are of course, my visits to staff at the main campuses and the regions, and my visits to the colleges and various institutional departments. Staff should feel free to raise issues of concern to them. However, in so doing, I would urge everyone to make sure that they are well informed and clear about what has or has not already been done on the issues that they raise. It has increasingly been my experience that a lack of information lies at the core of many unnecessary concerns and contestations at Unisa. Please read your Intcoms and the various Unisa publications and become an informed staff member. Above all, let us work together and with common purpose, towards a UNISA that embraces and nurtures all of its stakeholders! In so doing, we will undoubtedly be able to rise to, and overcome, any and all of the challenges that we face as an institution – now and in the future.

“We commit to constructing together a new DNA for Unisa, characterised by openness, scholarly tradition, critical thinking, self-reflection and the values of African cultures – openness, warmth, compassion, inclusiveness and community.” - ***The University of South Africa: Charter on Transformation***