

MARCH/APRIL FOCUS

“Human Progress never rolls on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts of people willing to be co-workers.” Martin Luther King Jr

Higher education is in the midst of a very “political” dynamic. When I say *political*, I mean that in the broadest sense of the word. Various institutions, including Unisa, are being used as sites of activism under the guise of a variety of transformation agendas. While activism is to be welcomed given the traditional centrality of the academe in fostering debate and engagement and challenging the *status quo*, what started off as quite positive disruption has undoubtedly been hijacked along the way, by a small group with quite different agendas, to the extent I believe, that the original concerns and demands of our students, have suffered for it. Unfortunately, staff too is bearing the brunt of the ongoing disruption that has filtered into many parts of the university.

I have been taken aback by a general and unsubstantiated polemic by some individuals, aimed at discrediting Unisa's management and intended to tarnish my reputation. I believe that if their purpose is altruistic (and they purportedly assert it as such) then they would have requested a meeting with me. I am well-known across the University for my open-door policy, which I can assure you is very well utilized. But the conduct of these few individuals leaves me with little alternative but to guess that they have been canvassed by more entrenched interests bent on pursuing an entirely non-academic agenda.

Such theatrical posturing has become a feature of a small, but loud group of individuals at Unisa, whose motives are entirely disruptive and have resulted in criminal acts that have had to be stopped by legal interdict. The wanton destruction of property arising from their conduct cannot be tolerated when futures of 350 000 students are at stake and taxpayers money is being squandered. Unisa employs approximately 6000 staff members and the immature conduct of a few ill-informed and impressionable members of staff has resulted in *inter alia* acts of arson and the torching of vehicles and an office next to the Chemistry laboratory on the Muckleneuk campus, as well as harassment, intimidation and violence towards some fellow staff and students. Since universities are publicly funded, the University management is honour- *and* duty- bound to act against such criminal acts.

It is actually very surprising that those who have chosen the path of destroying this University claim not to know about my open-door policy. I am always available to discuss all issues with colleagues and many will confirm that I subscribe to, and practice, the precepts of Servant Leadership and institutional inclusivity. From my days as an academic in the Department of Sociology during the height of apartheid, and my later roles as Dean and Pro Vice Chancellor of the University, I have consistently encouraged open debate. The only conclusion that one is able to draw, fellow Unisans, is that such colleagues are incapable of conducting a rational and informed debate in the time-honoured tradition of academic engagement, or if that is not the case, that they actually have no interest in doing so, but prefer to advance uninformed diatribes via for example, social media.

The first five years of my tenure were spent embedding our institutional ethos, including the concept of Servant Leadership, and our inclusive institutional culture, which is based on the 11Cs plus one and our Charter on Transformation. We have amongst others, policies in place against bullying and harassment, and we have embedded an understanding of ethics across the institution. All of these are aimed at ensuring a conducive, caring and collegial working environment, which unfortunately, is sadly lacking right now. I therefore call on each and every one of us to reclaim and reinvigorate the our working

spaces, turning them into the kinds of environments that make us look forward to coming to work, and being proud and productive Unisans.