COUNCIL ON HIGHER EDUCATION

CONFIDENTIAL

INSTITUTIONAL AUDIT REPORT
ON THE

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

(17 May 2023)

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ACRONYMS

ACHRAM	Academic Human Resources Allocation Model
APP	Annual Performance Plan
ASACoC	Academic and Student Affairs Committee of Council
B.Ed.	Bachelor of Education
BI	Business Intelligence
BRP	Best Reflective Practice
CHE	Council on Higher Education
DeL	Distance e-Learning
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DIQAE	Department of Institutional Quality Assurance and Enhancement
DPQA	Department of Planning and Quality Assurance
DQAP	Directorate: Quality Assurance and Promotion
HCert	Higher Certificate
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Committee
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
IF	Institutional Forum
IQMAF	Integrated Quality Management and Assurance Framework
IR	Industrial Revolution
IT	Information Technology
LMS	Learning Management System
MOOC	Massive Open Online Course
NDP	National Development Plan
NPR	Normal Pass Rate
NSC	National Senior Certificate
NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
NSRC	National Student Representative Council
ODeL	Open Distance e-Learning
OEP	Open Educational Practices
OER	Open Education Resources
PMS	Performance Management System
PoE	Portfolio of Evidence
QA	Quality Assurance
QA&E	Quality Assurance and Enhancement
QIP	Quality Improvement Plans
QMS	Quality Management System
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SBL	School for Business Leadership
SER	Self-Evaluation Report
SoTL	Scholarship of Teaching and Learning
SRU	Student Retention Unit
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
STLCEC	Senate Teaching, Learning and Community Engagement Committee
TLCE&SS	Teaching, Learning, Community Engagement and Student Support
UNISA	University of South Africa
UQC	University Quality Committee
UQEI	Quality Evaluation Instrument
VP	Vice Principal
WIL	Work-Integrated Learning

Executive Summary

The Council on Higher Education (CHE) was established through the Higher Education Act (No. 101 of 1997, as amended) primarily to assure quality in the South African higher education sector and to advise the Minister on aspects of higher education. The National Qualifications Framework Act (No. 67 of 2008, as amended) conferred additional responsibilities on the CHE as the Quality Council for higher education, with overall responsibility for the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF). The CHE executes its quality assurance responsibilities through its permanent committee, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC). The CHE, through the HEQC, exercises its quality assurance function using a variety of mechanisms, one of which is institutional audits that are mandated by the Higher Education Act.

The *Framework for Institutional Audits* (2021)[1] and its attendant *Manual for Institutional Audits* (2021)[2] are key instruments to regulate the implementation of institutional audits. These documents are also aligned in important respects to the new Quality Assurance Framework (QAF)[3] that was approved by the HEQC and Council in September 2020 and which will be implemented in the medium term by the CHE. Institutional audits are strongly influenced by both the specific context within which each HEI works, and by the national transformational agenda within which higher education functions. The HEQC has identified a need to do full audits of all HEIs in South Africa. A full audit of an institution determines whether or not, and to what extent, an institution's IQA systems, policies and procedures ensure the effective provisioning of good quality higher education that enhances the likelihood of student success through quality learning and teaching, research opportunities and integrated community engagement. The emphasis is less on ensuring that required standards are met at a particular threshold than on the deliberate, continuous, systematic and measurable improvement of the student experience, as well as on building reflexive praxis to develop quality cultures in institutions.

The following principles guided the institutional audit of the University of South Africa (Unisa):

1. The primary responsibility for internal quality assurance rests with individual HEIs. Each institution is responsible for the establishment, implementation, maintenance, improvement and enhancement of its own quality management and assurance systems.
2. The uniqueness of each institution's size, shape, location, context and mission is recognised.
3. The value of institutional audits rests on the compilation of credible, contextually relevant and reliable information that is required for internal quality-related planning and self-evaluation, peer review and public reporting (for example, by publishing executive summaries).
4. Student experience, student engagement and participation and the student voice are central to an evaluation of an institution's quality management system.

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[1] https://www.che.ac.za/publications/frameworks/framework-institutional-audits-2021
[2] https://www.che.ac.za/publications/frameworks/manual-institutional-audits-2021
[3] https://www.che.ac.za/publications/frameworks/quality-assurance-framework-qaf-higher-education-south-africa

5. The institutional audit is a peer-driven and evidence-based process to ensure that the HEQC and its audit panel reports are transparent, informed and consistent.
6. Institutional audits are developmental and intent on supporting continuous quality improvement and enhancement.
7. Institutional audits are required to balance their developmental character with the regulatory requirement that the CHE and the HEQC act on poor provisioning where institutions have no clear commitments, processes, practices or plans to improve.
8. Institutional audits are a key component of the HEQC's broad-based quality assurance mandate.

Aligned to international practice, the HEQC uses a review methodology consisting of an institutional self-evaluation report (SER), and an external peer review which verifies, triangulates and validates the institution's self-evaluation. The external peer review consists of a document analysis of the SER and institutional portfolio of evidence, as well as a site visit at which interviews are conducted with constituencies, and physical infrastructure is visited. This audit report forms the outcome of the institutional audit of UNISA.

UNISA was established in 1873 as an examination centre, and later evolved into a fully distance-education "correspondence" organization in 1946, primarily to provide education opportunities to employed adults who were not able to attend face-to-face classes at traditional contact universities in South Africa. In this form, UNISA played an important role in widening access to higher education to South Africans who, for reasons of racial exclusion, unaffordability, unavailability of seat space in local contact institutions, or out of choice and personal circumstances, would otherwise not have been able to obtain higher level academic qualifications. UNISA later also became attractive to international students, particularly on the African continent but also more broadly, including the South African diaspora living and working abroad.

The past 20 years has seen a significant growth in student enrolments at UNISA which has been driven by two important factors. The first of these was the 2004 merger of the then-Technikon South Africa and parts of Vista University with UNISA. Secondly, the capacity at the 25 traditionally contact universities in South Africa has not been sufficient to absorb the increasing numbers of learners who complete the National Senior Certificate well enough to enter higher education studies. The result is that UNISA enrolled 343 800 students in 2019 (from 133 500 students in 2001), of which 30% are self-declared as being unemployed. The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS)-supported student numbers (160 000) suggest that a very large proportion of the 70% who did not self-declare their employment status have not been in formal employment or in post-school studies before. This profile of student enrolment is important because it has had a significant impact on UNISA's support strategies for teaching and learning for its academic staff and its students.

In 2019, 95.3% of UNISA students were enrolled in qualifications between National Qualifications Framework levels 5 to 8 (Higher Certificate to Honours Degree levels) and 2.2% of students were in Masters- or Doctoral degree programmes. The remaining 2.5% of students were registered as occasional students studying for non-degree purposes. Students were registered across nine Colleges, of which the highest enrolment (31%) was in the College of Education and, together

with the Colleges of Law (18%); Economic and Management Sciences (17%) and Humanities (14%), accounted for 80% of enrolments. Local students are drawn from all nine provinces in South Africa with Gauteng accounting for 78% of students enrolled. UNISA also manages 6 regional hubs and 28 regional centres around South Africa, with one centre in Ethiopia, where students can find administrative and academic support and facilities.

There were 8 442 full-time staff members at UNISA in 2019, of which 1 844 were permanent academic staff members. Full professors made up 16% of the academic staff while 37% were lecturers and junior lecturers. 69% of the total staff complement are recorded as non-professional staff which included staff in service divisions such as security and cleaning. There were also 9773 part-time staff members, 53% of the total staff complement, many of whom are in part-time lecturing positions. This gives UNISA the characteristic of having a relatively low ratio of full-time equivalent academic staff to head-count academic staff of around 50%.

In the area of research activity, UNISA supports eight research chairs and 10 research institutes. There are 231 NRF-rated academic staff and the university graduated 737 Masters and 304 Doctoral students in 2019. As with all of its areas of institutional operation, UNISA has made good progress with gender and race transformation of academics involved in research activities.

The institutional audit panel consisted of the following members:
    Prof Yunus Ballim (Panel Chairperson)
    Mr Hugh Amoore
    Prof Norman Duncan
    Prof Khaya Mfenyana
    Prof Som Naidu
    Mrs Kalawathie (Bella) Sattar
    Dr Mamoraka Caroline Selepe
    Prof Alan Tait
    Prof Antoinette Deirdre van der Merwe

The on-site visit by the panel members was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, the audit panel met in-person, undertaking simultaneous online interviews at the main campus of UNISA in Pretoria over a five-day period and involving around 400 interviewees. In some sessions, when the group being interviewed was particularly large or when multiple groups were to be interviewed on a similar area of enquiry, the audit panel chose to split its members to allow parallel interview sessions to be conducted. In the second phase, a selected sample of five of UNISA's regional centres was visited over a two-day period. A structured set of interview sessions was held at each of the regional centres visited that involved senior management at the centre, the academic support staff, the students who regularly use the facility, and some alumni and stakeholders. It is also important to mention that none of the interview sessions during the audit were recorded nor was a designated scribe included in the interviews. In compiling this report, the audit panel relied on their internal discussions and their own notes made during the interviews.

In all these meetings with staff, students and external partners at UNISA, the panel appreciated the active engagement during discussions and the generally frank and open way in which matters were raised. Also, while there were some technical difficulties with the clarity of the sound for the

online participants, the organisation and administrative arrangements for the visits were well-managed and members of the audit panel were thankful of the time and care shown by the UNISA team that took charge of the process.

The reflections and recommendations in this report are intended to point to areas of enhancement and development as UNISA strengthens the quality of its student development activities. The reader will find in the body of this report, a wide range of reflections and suggestions for quality improvement in the ways that UNISA develops its students to successful graduation. Where the matter was considered by the audit panel to be of sufficient importance or the impact to be of sufficient gravity, the suggestion has been elevated to the status of a recommendation that requires a more active and directed response from the institution. The recommendations are clustered around each of the 16 CHE Standards.

The SER formed an important part of the assessments and judgements that are presented in this report from the audit panel. The SER was also the main basis for preparation of the panel's preparation for the visit to UNISA and its regional offices, and for the questions and issues that were a focus of discussions during the audit visits. However, the panel noted that the SER would have benefitted from more care and attention during its preparation and review. The SER contained many editorial and typographical errors, incorrect internal references, diagrams and illustrations that bore little relevance or usefulness to the argument presented in the text and, in in some cases, important statements that, upon further interrogation, were found to be factually incorrect or of interpretation that was not supported by internal staff during interviews.

The audit panel also noted with concern that, despite the evidence of preparatory consultations within the institution, the range and depth of consultation for input during the preparation of the SER appears to have been quite limited. During the interviews, a number of stakeholder groups, most notably the National Students Representative Council (NSRC) and Council, indicated that they did not contribute to the development or review of the SER and only received the final copy. This is a concern since Council is expected to critically engage with a document as important as the SER and to give final approval for its submission to the CHE. Of course, it is possible that the NSRC members interviewed did not participate or were not aware of the preparatory consultations since they would not have been in office at the time.

Given the importance of the SER to the work of the audit panel, it is possible that these concerns about the preparation of the SER have had a distorting influence on the analysis and judgements that are presented in this report. The panel have tried hard to be alert to this possibility and to avoid references to statements in the SER that were found to be questionable in factual accuracy. UNISA is an important institution in the South African higher education sector and one that faces unique and complex challenges. The focus of this report is on the quality of teaching and learning activities at UNISA. While it is the panel's view that much in this core aspect of UNISA's operations is intact and working well, some areas do need attention for improvement. This report necessarily focuses on the areas in the teaching and learning function that are in need of attention, in the expectation that it will assist UNISA in strengthening its plans for continuous quality improvement into the future.

Two high level observations stand out: firstly, UNISA achieved the near-impossible in managing to continue successful teaching and learning in 2020/2022 despite Covid-19, successfully catapulting itself almost overnight from a Distance Learning institution to a Distance e-Learning one; secondly, given the changed make-up of its student cohorts, UNISA must find ways to address and improve the progression and throughput rate of its students to graduation.

Our report commends UNISA for good practice and contains recommendations that will, we believe, help in consolidating and strengthening the teaching and learning process.

The following is a summary of the audit panels commendations and recommendations for the UNISA.

Focus area 1: Governance, strategic planning, management and leadership support the core academic functions

The four standards in Focus Area 1 concentrate on the role that an institution's *governance, strategic planning* (as contained in its *vision, mission and strategic goals), management and academic leadership* play in its quality management in order to enhance the likelihood of student success and to improve the quality of learning, teaching and research engagement, as well as accommodating the results of constructive, integrated community engagement.

Standard 1
The institution has a clearly stated vision and mission, and strategic goals which have been approved by appropriate governance structures, subject to comprehensive stakeholder engagement.

The vision, mission and strategic goals in the strategic plan approved by Council are clearly stated. Although UNISA had already committed itself to move from being a Distance Learning institution to an Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) institution, Covid-19 forced it to move faster on this path. The scale of the challenge has clearly been immense. The teething problems with the transition to ODeL have been apparent, not least with the move – at very short notice – from venue-based exams to online testing and exams. Many of these problems have yet to be fully overcome and the challenges have been exacerbated by the adoption, in the midst of the pandemic, of a new Learning Management System.

UNISA strongly expresses its identity as a student-centred, open, African University that emphasises its commitment to being Africa-focused and Africa-centred, with a "Pan-Africanist" agenda. However, discussions on this matter with academic and administrative staff and with students during interviews confirmed that the claimed identities were understood with different levels of depth and clarity within the university. It was also not clear how the understanding of these identity concepts find expression in the university's operational aspects that would mark them as unique or distinguishing features of UNISA.

The audit panel was concerned – and this was acknowledged by members of the UNISA's leadership – that the institutional vision, mission and strategic plans may not have been developed with sufficiently rigorous, engaged involvement of students. These concerns about the

levels of student engagement in such processes at UNISA were also expressed by students in regard to the process of preparing the SER for the CHE audit visit.

UNISA has struggled to manage its enrolment size and shape within the agreed plans. Undergraduate diploma and certificate candidates make up 25% of current enrolment and UNISA considers this to be disproportionately high. Furthermore, the profile of enrolled students has significantly changed over the recent past and drop-out rates from three-year degree and diploma programmes are very high, which points to the need for UNISA to manage the relationship between its enrolment plans and the levels of learning support needed by its admitted students much more carefully.

Recommendation

1. UNISA must undertake an initiative to better define the understanding of its identity, particularly in light of the changing character of its students and their learning needs, and to advocate this understanding amongst its internal and external stakeholders in order to ensure that all sectors of the institution have a sense of a common purpose in their operation.

Standard 2
The stated vision, mission and strategic goals align with national priorities and context (e.g. transformation, creating a skilled labour force, developing scarce skills areas and a critical citizenry, and contributing to the fulfilment of national goals as informed by the NDP and related national planning), as well as sectoral, regional, continental and global imperatives (e.g. Africa Vision 2063 or the Sustainable Development Goals).

UNISA's vision, mission and strategic goals are well aligned with national priorities and the panel found that this was generally the case. A range of institutional planning and academic departments showed evidence of good and thorough engagement with important strategic priority documents such as the Sustainable Development Goals, the South African NDP as well as Agenda 2063. An important feature of this alignment is the significant contribution that UNISA makes to South Africa's annual cohort of teacher education graduates. However, while the quantum is impressive, the panel was not required to assess the quality of the B.Ed programmes at UNISA.

Recommendation

No specific recommendations.

Standard 3
There is demonstrable strategic alignment between the institution's quality management system for core academic activities across all sites and modes of provision and its vision, mission and strategic goals, as well as its governance and management processes.

The quality management system is well articulated in the strategic plan as part of the strategic goals. The operational plans are realistic and subject to regular reviews. The panel was concerned about the parameters and measures used to determine strategic priorities and targets and to assess the effectiveness of its strategic plans.

General criticism of the UNISA funding allocation model was evident from interviewees' questions and opinions about the fundamental assumptions of the model. Those departments wishing to grow their enrolments felt disadvantaged by the logic of the funding formula. There were concerns about the fact that 80% of students are enrolled in four of the nine colleges since cost demands for quality management and student learning support are not linearly related to enrolment numbers at the department and module levels.

UNISA appears to have a strong performance management system for post levels 1-4 but acknowledges that the approach is not well-developed for post levels below 4. Workload is a concern for many academic staff members and their performance management, which is based on a workload model, is seen as unrealistic in its assumptions.

Staff and students at regional centres raised a range of concerns that negatively affect student performance such as limited student support, a sense of a muted student voice, NSFAS administrative problems, student registration problems, limited access to internet, connectivity challenges and cumbersome processes for responding to student concerns because of the 'over-centralisation' of authority at the main campus in Pretoria. Students at regional centres also felt that their learning experience was not as rich and engaged as that of students who have access to the Gauteng campuses.

Recommendations

2. UNISA must address its acknowledged need to strengthen the relationship between the institutional strategic goals and the quality management and assurance system. This process must include improvement and development of the quality management arrangements for teaching and learning at regional centres as well as the structural arrangements for receiving and responding to student views on matters relating to the quality of teaching and learning - in equal measure for students who are attached to regional centres.
3. UNISA must address the identified gaps in performance management for employment posts below Level 4.

Standard 4
There is a clear understanding of and demonstrable adherence to the different roles and responsibilities of the governance structures, management and academic leadership.

UNISA has a properly constituted and functioning Council, Institutional Forum, Senate and a Student Representative Council. The relationships between Executive Management and academic leadership are well-structured and supported. The audit panel was concerned about

Council's role in academic matters that should be within the authority of Senate, and about the ambivalent character of the Board of the School of Business Leadership. Both these matters require a review of the UNISA statute.

UNISA struggles with a seemingly annual failure of governance or management or both, leading to failures to start the [academic] year at the intended time and to resolve student issues related to registration in good time. This has a knock-on effect on the academic calendar and is seen as a result of management's failure to resolve industrial- or student disputes in good time.

The scale of UNISA's operations suggests that the current, deep levels of academic and operational governance *are* needed but there appears to be scope for further delegation. There is also much room for higher levels of delegation of authority from Council to the Vice-Chancellor and the Executive Team, particularly to improve the agility of operational processes in the institution.

Recommendations

4. UNISA must review the role of ASACoC to ensure that Council does not exercise decision-making authority over academic matters and that such authority remains with – and is properly exercised by – Senate.
5. The Council of UNISA must review the range and levels of delegation of authority to the Vice-Chancellor and executive management with a view to minimising administrative blockages and improving the agility of operational processes.

Focus area 2: The design and implementation of the institutional quality management system supports the core academic functions

The four standards in Focus Area 2 concentrate on how the *design and implementation of an integrated quality management system* in the institution enhances the likelihood of student success and improves the quality of learning, teaching and research engagement, as well as accommodating the results of constructive, integrated community engagement within the context of the institution's mission.

Standard 5
A quality assurance system is in place, comprising at a minimum, of:
>   *(i)   governance arrangements*
>   *(ii)   policies*
>   *(iii)   processes, procedures and plans*
>   *(iv)   instructional products*
>   *(v)   measurement of impact*
>   *(vi)   data management and utilisation*

as these give effect to the delivery of the HEI's core functions.

Barring a few notable exceptions, a thorough suite of policies, processes and procedures support the implementation of the Quality Management System across the core functions of teaching and learning, research and community engagement. However, there was much evidence that policies are not subjected to regular review, with the result that policies often do not adequately respond to changing contexts or circumstances. Academic interviewees expressed particular concern that teaching, learning and assessment policies do not take full cognisance of the specific and changing needs of programmes in the different colleges.

UNISA relies on a five-year cycle of programme review, while student module evaluations (SMEs) are conducted annually on selected modules and improvement plans developed accordingly. The schedule of programmes to be reviewed annually is approved by the Senate Teaching, Learning and Community Engagement Committee. However, How the outcomes of these reviews are used to develop strategies for improved quality of the taught programmes is not clear, nor is the impact of any such initiatives.

The panel found that, in practice, the structures and reporting lines of authority and accountability for quality management are much more complex, less coherent and less integrated than indicated in the Self Evaluation Report. Operational reporting lines on quality matters to Senate appear duplicated and it is not clear where the actual responsibility lies. Furthermore, Council's role in approving academic matters also makes Senate's responsibility for quality oversight uncertain.

UNISA has implemented an approved Performance Management System that is considered as an integral part of its quality assurance system. However, the institution does not have a systematic approach to lecturer evaluations and there is a sense amongst academic staff that, for the purposes of promotion, the Performance Management System considers research activities as being more important than the depth and quality of teaching activities.

Student representatives expressed a view that academic support structures for students are largely dysfunctional and that the relationship between the university leadership and student representatives is weak. Both staff and students acknowledge that the most important negative characteristic of this relationship is the poor level of communication between students and the institution. Concerns about communication were wide-ranging and included matters such as the troubled channels for electronic or online communication, the poor levels of response to student queries, no or poor representation of students in planning and implementation processes for quality management and the limited channels for a more general and disinterested student voice to be heard on academic quality matters.

The significant growth in enrolments in Higher Certificate programmes has resulted in a large number of students who see this as a 'bridging programme' that will allow them to articulate into diploma or degree programmes at UNISA. While UNISA's strategic intent for the Higher Certificate is not explicit, it does not appear to be intended as a bridging programme. However, student representatives have taken to understanding the qualification as a bridging programme and indicated that successful students in these programmes expect automatic vertical articulation

to other cognate programmes. There clearly is a lack of proper communication with students on this matter, which is essential to ensure that their expectations of possible programme articulation are realistic.

Recommendations

6. UNISA must ensure that there is a documented procedure for the development, approval and review of all policies, and that a comprehensive consultation process is included to ensure proper alignment of the related policies with the quality management framework. Mechanisms must be in place to ensure that policies are reviewed accordingly. Consideration should also be given to the adoption of an overarching Institutional Assessment Policy and associated guidelines that comprehensively deal with online assessment and acknowledges variations in approaches at the department- and college levels.
7. UNISA must develop policy and associated procedures for the approval, recording and monitoring of changes to academic programmes.
8. UNISA must review the arrangements for Senate membership of the senior professoriate to ensure that the voices of senior academics are appropriately heard on academic matters at Senate.
9. UNISA must develop and implement a formal approach to lecturer assessment that is guided by best practice in the ODeL sector and that is primarily used to support and develop good teaching practices amongst academic staff members.
10. UNISA must improve the integration of student governance structures – at all academic and institutional levels – in its quality management processes. Such integration must include structural arrangements for reporting to students on quality responses to formal feedback received from students. This process must include implementation and effective communication of a complaints procedure that is easily accessible to students. In this context, the appointment to the position of Ombud at the university should be finalised as a matter of urgency.
11. The university must ensure that applicants and enrolled students in the HCert programmes are properly informed about possible articulation arrangements to diploma- and degree programmes. Where articulation is possible, the university must ensure that there is a clearly described and transparent selection process.
12. UNISA must develop a more rigorous process for managing the implementation of its agreed enrolment plan, in a manner that allows for proper consideration and agreement about flexibility and deviations.

Standard 6
Human, infrastructural, knowledge management and financial resources support the delivery of the institution's core academic functions across all sites of provision, in alignment with the concomitant quality management system, in accordance with the institution's mission.

The number of senior and experienced staff to implement and develop the quality management

system seems to be adequate at all management levels, even if it sometimes appears to be duplicated. The increase in student numbers over recent years has caused academic teaching workloads to increase with a consequent distraction of their attention away from the quality management aspects of their work, and academic staff expressed concern about a growing compliance approach to quality management.

Quality management is financially well-resourced at UNISA and the necessary capacity is in place. However, the measures of the effectiveness of this resource allocation are not always clear.

UNISA has put much by way of human and financial resources into development and support of its ICT systems, but there is urgent need to improve its functionality, particularly at the staff- and student-user interfaces. This problem seems to manifest most strongly in the functionality of student communication systems (including call-centre operations) and the learning management system. The transition to a new learning management system has not gone well, in part due to inadequate planning for the implementation and transition to the new system. UNISA has a generally adequate provision of computers, specialist equipment and laboratories for the needs of students and academic programmes. Computer facilities at the regional centres are well equipped and this is very helpful for students who are able to access the regional centres and who do not have computers or proper data access at home.

UNISA has a policy on Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), but the panel could not identify a clear WIL management strategy. There were also reports of a shortage of staff to support students for WIL placement, monitoring and assessment, and the university has stated its plans to employ more staff in programmes which have WIL modules.

UNISA libraries at all campuses and centres are well-resourced and appreciated by staff and students. Also, UNISA has entered into collaboration agreements with municipalities and higher education institutions active near their regional centres for shared library facilities offered to students.

There was general agreement amongst staff and students that UNISA needs to improve the reach and accessibility of network connectivity to students in order to support the e-learning intentions of the institution.

Adequate provision of academic staff development is in place for the foundational aspects of professionalisation of teaching. The division for providing academic staff development programmes is adequately staffed and it regularly offers a suite of teaching development programmes. However, no evidence was presented to the panel to indicate that the possible links between student learning performance and the results from module evaluations are monitored and analysed to guide the teaching development needs of academic staff.

UNISA does not appear to have a reliable instrument to regularly survey or measure the satisfaction and wellness of its staff. The audit panel heard mention of a range of concerns that do not seem to have been identified by the survey instrument being used. These concerns relate to the increasing pressure on academic staff due to the growth in student numbers, the demands

on research productivity, the current transition to full e-learning and the poor functionality of the electronic and administrative systems that are meant to support academic staff in their teaching and assessment tasks. Academic staff mentioned serious personal wellness concerns and the sense is that this is a contributing factor to resignations in some departments.

Commendation

a. UNISA is commended for the quality of its library resources and for the quality of library services that students receive. UNISA is further commended for developing collaborative agreements with other higher education institutions in providing shared library services to students at its regional centres.

Recommendations

13. UNISA must redouble its efforts to improve the functionality of its ICT systems for teaching and learning support to academic staff and students. The ICT system in place has serious negative effects on the learning experience of students as well as on UNISA's aspirations for being an e-learning institution.
14. UNISA must invest in training for both staff and students on the invigilation system in order to avoid injustices and other risks associated with the use of the software. In addition, alternative methods to validate integrity of the online assessments for large numbers of students should be investigated. On a related matter, the university must find ways to significantly improve the access that students have to devices and internet connectivity, particularly to achieve its objective to become a fully ODeL institution.
15. UNISA must ensure that the management of WIL is improved, appropriately resourced and is aligned with the needs of the relevant programmes.
16. The senior leadership for Teaching and Learning at UNISA must monitor the teaching development needs of academic staff, to ensure that all those who teach are competent at developing and delivering modules as well as assessing student learning on e-learning platforms. Academic staff should regularly be exposed to the fundamental debates and current thinking on these and related aspects of their work.
17. UNISA must implement an appropriate and regular assessment instrument for monitoring the wellness and satisfaction of its staff. This must be complemented by the necessary systems and strategies for responding to individual and collective concerns about staff wellness.

Standard 7
Credible and reliable data (for example, on throughput and completion rates) are systematically captured, employed and analysed as an integral part of the institutional quality management system so as to inform consistent and sustainable decision-making.

UNISA has a variety of sources of data which it uses to prepare for HEMIS reporting, improve teaching and learning and monitor student success amongst others. However, the panel found that, while the data is available and properly stored, it is not well used to monitor and improve teaching, learning and student success. While it was stated that student data was held in a 'data

warehouse', it was not clear that this data is integrated in a manner that allows for selective analysis to provide evidence bases that may inform policy and strategy on improving student learning. The recently established Student Retention Unit is developing new and innovative approaches to maximise the benefits of UNISA's rich data resource for directing strategies to improve teaching and learning. This is at an early stage and not yet fully integrated into the university's quality management system.

The most important parameter used by UNISA to measure student learning performance is the module Normal Pass Rate. However, during interviews it was not clear that staff understand the use-value of this parameter and the limitations of its use given the basis that UNISA uses for its calculation. UNISA needs to expand the range of indicators that it uses to monitor student performance and to ensure that there is deeper understanding of the forms of interpretation of such indicators amongst staff in the quality management and assurance divisions.

Recommendations

18. UNISA must improve its capacity for analysing its student data as the evidence base for responding to student learning needs. An important part of this development is the need to better integrate all the academic and administrative units that process student data with those who should use the analyses for teaching and learning support. The analysed student data should be accessible to all staff members with responsibility to track, monitor, support students and report on general student performance in the academic and administrative departments.
19. UNISA must develop and provide regular reports on the academic performance of students and modules using parameters that are well understood and can be interpreted in ways that properly guide strategies for learning development of students.

Standard 8
Systems and processes monitor the institution's capacity for quality management, based on the evidence gathered.

UNISA has a business intelligence dashboard which provides information such as the analysis of student performance conducted after examination periods to determine trends and identify modules that are underperforming in terms of Normal Pass Rates. However, access to the dashboard is not uniform and managers at regional centres particularly complained about a lack of access to such information.

The panel was positively impressed by UNISA's ability to sustain its teaching and assessment programmes during the Covid-19 restriction conditions of 2020 and 2021. It was clear that the university had harnessed its resources together with the goodwill of staff and students to ensure that students continued to engage with their learning and assessment tasks and to progress through their study programmes with as little disruption as possible.

Members of the management team at UNISA were of the view that their pre-Covid-19 experience with blended teaching and learning had given them a head start in managing teaching and

learning during the pandemic restriction conditions and that it has also spurred a leap to ODeL modes of delivery. It will therefore be important for UNISA to carefully document and reflect on its experiences with online forms of pedagogy and assessment as a rich resource for strategic planning with ODeL.

Recommendations

20. UNISA must address the risks that have been identified in the progress report on the 2020 online examinations.
21. The University must implement an online tool for monitoring and reporting on plagiarism and unacceptable support in online assessments. This should include a review of the online proctoring system to improve its functionality.

Focus area 3: The coherence and integration of the institutional quality management system supports the core academic functions

The four standards in Focus Area 3 concentrate on the coherence and integration of the various components comprising the institutional quality management system and on how these work in concert to support the likelihood of student success and improve the quality of learning, teaching and research engagement, as well as accommodating the results of constructive integrated community engagement in accordance with the institution's mission.

Standard 9
An evidence-based coherent, reasonable, functional and meaningfully structured relationship exists between all components of the institutional quality management system.

UNISA has an extensive system in place, referred to as the integrated quality management and assurance framework. This system is based on an approved schedule of reviews of modules, programmes, departments, and portfolios. Furthermore, the monitoring and evaluations of the quality management system for teaching and learning, research and community engagement are done by means of the UNISA Quality Evaluation Instrument and peer reviews which occur through programme reviews and departmental reviews. Despite the extensive framework for quality management and assurance, UNISA's leadership acknowledges the challenges around the implementation of these quality evaluation instruments, including a lack of buy-in from internal stakeholders, the alignment of the instrument to academic processes rather than to support and administrative processes, difficulty with interpreting the results and the perceived lack of alignment between programme reviews and module reviews.

In consideration of staff performance evaluations, it became clear during the interviews with academic staff that lecturer evaluations and teaching loads are often used as the only indicators to measure the quality of the core academic functions. There are no formal criteria for good teaching practice in place against which a lecturer's performance can be judged.

Although UNISA states that its monitoring systems for quality assurance have been effective, the institution acknowledges that the monitoring systems create contestations and that the perceived competing roles need to be streamlined to optimise their effectiveness in quality assurance. This could also lead to lack of clarity about the ultimate responsibility and accountability for the overall quality assurance system because reporting lines are to two different committee structures of Senate.

The wide-ranging nature of the Integrated Quality Management and Assurance Framework at UNISA appears to cause duplication, additional bureaucratic burden for staff, potential tensions and difficulty in actively monitoring which improvements have been implemented. This extensive administrative system could also lead to increased workloads for academic and support staff without necessarily improving the quality of the core functions.

Recommendations

22. UNISA must accelerate its efforts to address the quality management and assurance of student support services (e.g. IT, administrative) to provide an effective one-stop support point for students.
23. Within the devolved model of quality assurance in the colleges and departments, clear role descriptions and responsibilities must be formalised for each of the roles (e.g. Tuition Managers, Research Heads, Academic Quality Heads and Quality Champions) in the institutional quality assurance system.
24. UNISA must review its Quality assurance committee structures (Senate and Council committees and reporting lines), support structures (Department of Quality Assurance and Enhancement, the Directorate Institutional Quality Assurance and Enhancement and the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Unit) and VP reporting lines to ensure greater streamlining, reduced duplication and clearer lines of responsibility and accountability for the overarching quality assurance and management system.

Standard 10
Evidence-based regular and dedicated governance and management oversight of the quality assurance system exists.

It was not clear to the audit panel whether Council or Senate are ultimately responsible for quality assurance in respect of the academic project. The panel was also concerned that full professors are not automatically members of Senate but are rather represented through a relatively small number of elected members.

UNISA does not appear to have a formal process or set criteria for identifying good practice in teaching and learning and community engagement. Only the process of reward is explained in the SER. None of the staff members interviewed could point to criteria used in the performance evaluations or the recognition and reward for these activities.

The regional centres have done well in implementing the Best Reflective Practice initiative as

well as establishing the Regional Community of Practice to share good practice and reflect on improvements required. Unfortunately, it does seem as if insufficient strategic direction is provided by the central UNISA office for such initiatives.

UNISA acknowledges the "structural inefficiencies" that result from duplication of reporting on quality management and assurance matters. On the one hand, the structures that manage quality are decentralised at college-, department- and regional levels but are also centralised around institutional portfolios that report to Senate sub-committees that in turn report to Senate.

Recommendations

25. UNISA must investigate and resolve the apparent role ambiguity and ultimate accountability of Senate and Council in the governance and management oversight of the quality enhancement systems.
26. UNISA must ensure that institution-specific criteria for good teaching and community engagement are reviewed, properly communicated to staff and used as the basis for reflecting on the academic performance of staff and for reward and recognition of good performance.

Standard 11
Planning and processes exist for the reasonable and functional allocation of resources to all components of the institutional quality management system.

There are substantial budget allocations to quality assurance at UNISA and it is clear that this function receives proper attention in the budgeting process. It was difficult for the panel to determine how annual allocations for the institution's quality assurance commitments are calculated and how it is distributed across entities. This was mainly because of a lack of detail in respect of any systematic efforts at monitoring and evaluating the quality management interventions implemented.

The budget allocation instrument used drew criticism from Deans and other staff members. Nevertheless, while some of the parameters of the model may require consideration and adjustment, the model appears logical and, on the face of it, can indeed ensure suitable allocations in pursuit of the institution's student success, research and community engagement ambitions.

UNISA acknowledges that its approach to academic workload allocation needs review and improvement. Workload issues impact on quality management because the dimension of quality oversight is compromised by heavy academic workloads. Inefficiencies in the system have overloaded academic staff with administration duties and the generally-expressed experience is that the administrative departments do not sufficiently support academic staff. It is also not clear how rising student-to-staff ratios have been considered in the allocation of teaching loads to academic staff.

Recommendations

27. UNISA must finalise its revised workload framework as soon as possible so as to address both the actual anomalies and the sense of unfairness in the current workload allocation model.
28. UNISA must review its Human Resources strategy and related support departments to improve the effectiveness of their responses to the needs of its academic entities, in ways that enhance its quality assurance capabilities.

Standard 12
The quality assurance system achieves its purpose efficiently and effectively.

The systems used to resource the quality management processes at UNISA appear to be logical and appropriately aimed at improving the quality of teaching and learning. However, Senior Management acknowledges the need for more focused assessment of the impact of the resources allocated in adding value to general quality enhancement at the institution.

UNISA relies on a range of stakeholders for views and contributions to the institution's quality management processes and such stakeholder engagement appears extensive. However, an important weakness in this regard is the inadequacy of the communication channels available to students to register feedback in respect of their general learning experiences, beyond their contributions to regular module evaluations. The institution has recently launched an intervention aimed at addressing this challenge.

Recommendations

29. As suggested in the SER, UNISA must undertake a comprehensive impact assessment to ascertain whether the resources allocated for quality management are effectively employed.
30. UNISA must ensure the implementation of a process aimed at the systematic monitoring and evaluation of all quality management interventions implemented.
31. UNISA must evaluate whether the turn-around strategy aimed at improving the channels available to students to provide the institution with feedback on the quality of its academic offerings and support services is having the desired effect.

Focus area 4: Curriculum development, learning and teaching support the likelihood of student success

The four standards in Focus Area 4 concentrate on how effectively the institutional quality management system enhances the likelihood of student success, improves learning and teaching and supports the scholarship of learning and teaching. These standards drill down in greater detail in Focus Area 2.

Standard 13
An effective institutional system for programme design, approval, delivery, management and review is in place.

UNISA's ambition to be a comprehensive Open, Distance e-Learning institution is positive and marks it as a pioneer in the use of open and distance learning methods for programme design, development and delivery. UNISA has also signalled that it is no longer an alternative destination only for adult or mature-age learners without any prior formal higher education and training, but an institution of choice for both adults and first-time entry tertiary education students. UNISA's plans and contributions in this regard are not only ground-breaking but clearly different from that of other South African public tertiary education institutions. There are significant challenges ahead for UNISA on this development path and the institution as a whole will have to reflect carefully on the meaning of the core concepts and their implications for curriculum, pedagogy and operational aspects of student learning development.

Commendations

b. UNISA is commended for the manner in which arrangements were put in place to sustain its teaching and assessment activities despite the Covid-19 restrictions. The commitment of students and staff at UNISA to ensuring the functionality of the process is also to be commended.

Recommendations

32. UNISA must develop a clear and consistent message about its core operational model for programme-design and -delivery along crucial dimensions of open, distance and e-Learning on matters such as open access, open learning, open scholarship and open educational practices.
33. UNISA must also clearly articulate and communicate its core business model for programme-design, -development, -approval and -management from the Executive and Senior Management through to regional Centre Directors. This must include communication of a clear roadmap for the adoption of ICT in teaching and learning, especially in its online learning management system.

Standard 14

There is evidence-based engagement at various institutional levels, among staff, and among staff and students, with:

> a. *curriculum transformation, curriculum reform and renewal;*
> b. *learning and teaching innovation; and*
> c. *the role of technology (1) in the curriculum, (2) in the world of work, and (3) in society in general.*

The panel found that there is significant variability in understanding among academic staff about what comprises the curriculum, how best it can be developed, taught and learned across the various disciplines. UNISA has chosen to use a Team Approach to the design and development of the curriculum which is a positive development. It seems however, this this approach is evolving and there are a number of principle- and operational issues that need to be better articulated and resolved to improve and guide the effectiveness of the Team Approach.

As a comprehensive Open, Distance and eLearning institution, UNISA's signalling the role of eLearning in its operational model is a positive development. However, the implementation of this agenda across the colleges currently remains aspirational. Also, UNISA needs to develop a coherent and integrated institution-wide policy which is benchmarked against internationally recognised standards and criteria, and one which clearly articulates the attributes of technology-enhanced learning and teaching.

UNISA's positive adoption of the idea of Engaged Scholarship—Transforming the Academy appears to include the scholarship of teaching and learning. The panel's view is that this will require a comprehensive and carefully articulated plan for roll-out in each college so that scholarly contributions to engagement, teaching and learning are valued equally alongside other academic pursuits and embedded in appointments and promotions processes.

Recommendations

34. UNISA must review its policies and processes around curriculum design and development to ensure that these adequately reflect the university's claims and aspirations as a comprehensive ODeL institution. This should include the development of clear and consistent messaging around issues such as "epistemic justice" and "decolonisation" of the curriculum.
35. The use of a team approach to curriculum design and development must be more clearly articulated in its adoption processes and its acculturation across the institution.
36. UNISA must undertake a review and renewal of policies around learning and teaching to include clarity on the roles and responsibilities for the adoption and integration of ICT and technology-enhanced teaching and learning. This should be benchmarked and continuously evaluated against internationally recognised standards and criteria. The renewal process must include a plan for the integration of ICT in teaching and learning, especially for on-boarding and developing academic staff and students.
37. The staffing and the promotion value of scholarly contributions to teaching and learning, alongside 'traditional' research and other academic pursuits, needs to be established and made clear. This will include how these contributions are assessed and recognised in the appointment and the promotion of both academic and support staff across the university's colleges.

Standard 15
The students' exposure to learning and teaching at the institution, across all sites and modes of provision, is experienced as positive and enabling of their success.

It is clear that the registration process at UNISA is not well aligned with institutional capacity planning. Registrations are accepted at a very late stage even well after semesters start, which it is feared leads to poor chances of success for significant numbers of students. This is part of a range of challenges that contributes to the poor student success and qualification rates, as generally acknowledged by the institution itself. However, some innovative practices are emerging such as the use of a massive open online courses (MOOCs) before students commence their studies at undergraduate level, which are directed at student preparedness for study and combines the use of new technologies for learning in a targeted way that bears positively on student success.

Some modules – identified as 'at risk' modules at undergraduate level – are allocated a tutor to provide student support. This category is applied to a small number of modules deemed to be at risk because of low pass rates. However, the requirement for this 'at-risk' categorisation is set quite low and only about 2% of UNISA modules actually fall into this category. Tutor support is widely regarded as essential in modern distance and online learning to provide a bridge between learning materials and individual and group support of a personal kind.

Undergraduate students were consistent in their complaints of *not* having had a good learning and interaction experience at UNISA. Students were particularly distressed by the complexity and unresponsiveness of the Student Support systems, and expressed particularly strong comments about not receiving timely replies to emails over extended periods – or not at all. Many did not understand how to access the services they needed. UNISA acknowledges its complexity as a factor inhibiting the quality of the student experience.

UNISA seeks feedback from students at the end of taught modules. The practice is widespread but not complete for all modules taught. Nevertheless, the panel was not able to establish that analysis of this data has led to quality enhancement of modules and programmes, or that students receive institutional feedback to their comments. Equally, while UNISA collects a wide range of data about students, this data is not organised or analysed for trends in student performance using parameters such as gender, geography, occupation, disability, area of study, etc. to guide the implementation of student learning support strategies.

The student voice on matters relating to their learning experiences does not appear to be consistently heard at all levels and across all parts of the university. In interviews with members of the UNISA National Student Representative Council, they clearly had serious and well-reasoned contributions to make to the improvement of services to students. On the other hand, at levels in the university with more direct student interactions and in Regional Centres, it seemed that students were more active in discussion with academic and support staff and that their opinions were more seriously considered.

Commendation

c. UNISA is commended for the innovative use of MOOCs and online learning platforms for the academic orientation of first-year students to help prepare them for teaching and learning in an ODeL environment.

Recommendations

38. A major review of the organisational structures, management reach and lines of accountability for Student Support must be undertaken as a matter of urgency with a view to improving integration, coherence and consistency of quality from the student perspective. This review should particularly include improvement of the services for students with disability.
39. The tutor system currently in place for 'At Risk' modules must be extended to *all* undergraduate courses in UNISA. This could be done incrementally, starting with modules with the lowest student success rates but should become normal practice in the medium to long-term.
40. UNISA must undertake a review of its promotion and reward criteria to remove the perception that excellence in teaching and student learning support is of lower priority than activities such as research and community engagement.

Standard 16
Institutions engage with and reflect on the employability of their graduates in a changing world.

It is clear that UNISA has a serious commitment to the employability of its graduates, and has used a range of approaches to deliver on this commitment. These include employability studies and Graduate Destination surveys. The colleges are expected to submit improvement plans as a result of employability surveys and it is clear there are systems to allow a competent review of practice as a result of the survey evidence. Nevertheless, UNISA acknowledges that a more systematic approach is necessary for Graduate Destination Surveys and that these surveys should seek to include employer views. In the spirit of quality enhancement, UNISA should develop its survey design process for both Graduate Destinations and Employability Studies by benchmarking its standards against those conducted in other universities to ensure that best current practice is in place.

UNISA notes the existence of significant Work Integrated Learning components in a range of colleges, with study-employment placements for students supported by relevant quality assurance measures. What is described as experiential learning in the workplace will, if well managed, greatly enhance employability.

UNISA provided little information on support arrangements for unemployed students, such as a curriculum offering specifically to support the unemployed. It is reported that 10% of UNISA's alumni are unemployed, as are most of its enrolled students. This is therefore a major student life context and deserves some focus from the university. It is important that UNISA reflects on what employability and graduateness means for all its programmes, not only those which have a clear vocational outcome, especially in light of UNISA's observation that only 23% of graduates from the College of Human Sciences were employed in their field of study.

Recommendations

41. UNISA must ensure that its graduate survey instruments are benchmarked against those of other, similar higher education institutions, locally and internationally.

42. UNISA must consider how it can better prepare students for employment, both before and after they graduate, through initiatives that strengthen their employability and expose them to employment opportunities. In this regard, it is important to develop a coherent, institutionally developed approach that incorporates the work of regional centres and allows for region-specific variations.

1. Introduction

The Council on Higher Education (CHE) was established through the Higher Education Act (No. 101 of 1997, as amended) primarily to assure quality in the South African higher education sector and to advise the Minister on aspects of higher education. The National Qualifications Framework Act (No. 67 of 2008, as amended) conferred additional responsibilities on the CHE as the Quality Council for higher education, with overall responsibility for the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF). The CHE executes its quality assurance responsibilities through its permanent committee, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC). The CHE, through the HEQC, exercises its quality assurance function using a variety of mechanisms, one of which is institutional audits that are mandated by the Higher Education Act.

The *Framework for Institutional Audits* (2021)[4] and its attendant *Manual for Institutional Audits* (2021)[5] are key instruments to regulate the implementation of institutional audits. These documents are also aligned in important respects to the new Quality Assurance Framework (QAF)[6] that was approved by the HEQC and Council in September 2020 and which will be implemented in the medium term by the CHE. Institutional audits are strongly influenced by both the specific context within which each HEI works, and by the national transformational agenda within which higher education functions. The HEQC has identified a need to do full audits of all HEIs in South Africa. A full audit of an institution determines whether or not, and to what extent, an institution's IQA systems, policies and procedures ensure the effective provisioning of good quality higher education that enhances the likelihood of student success through quality learning and teaching, research opportunities and integrated community engagement. The emphasis is less on ensuring that required standards are met at a particular threshold than on the deliberate, continuous, systematic and measurable improvement of the student experience, as well as on building reflexive praxis to develop quality cultures in institutions.

The following principles guided the institutional audit of UNISA:

1. The primary responsibility for internal quality assurance rests with individual HEIs. Each institution is responsible for the establishment, implementation, maintenance, improvement and enhancement of its own quality management and assurance systems.
2. The uniqueness of each institution's size, shape, location, context and mission is recognised.
3. The value of institutional audits rests on the compilation of credible, contextually relevant and reliable information that is required for internal quality-related planning and self-evaluation, peer review and public reporting (for example, by publishing executive summaries).
4. Student experience, student engagement and participation and the student voice are central to an evaluation of an institution's quality management system.

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[4] https://www.che.ac.za/publications/frameworks/framework-institutional-audits-2021
[5] https://www.che.ac.za/publications/frameworks/manual-institutional-audits-2021
[6]https://www.che.ac.za/publications/frameworks/quality-assurance-framework-qaf-higher-education-south-africa

5. The institutional audit is a peer-driven and evidence-based process to ensure that the HEQC and its audit panel reports are transparent, informed and consistent.
6. Institutional audits are developmental and intent on supporting continuous quality improvement and enhancement.
7. Institutional audits are required to balance their developmental character with the regulatory requirement that the CHE and the HEQC act on poor provisioning where institutions have no clear commitments, processes, practices or plans to improve.
8. Institutional audits are a key component of the HEQC's broad-based quality assurance mandate.

Aligned to international practice, the HEQC uses a review methodology consisting of an institutional self-evaluation report (SER) and accompanying Portfolio of Evidence (PoE), and an external peer review which verifies, triangulates and validates the institution's self-evaluation. The external peer review consists of a document analysis of the SER and the institutional portfolio of evidence, as well as a site visit at which interviews are conducted with constituencies, and physical infrastructure is visited. This audit report forms the outcome of the institutional audit of UNISA.

2. Brief Overview of the Institution

UNISA was established in 1873 as an examination centre, and later evolved into a fully distance education "correspondence" organization in 1946, primarily to provide education opportunities to employed adults who were not able to attend face-to-face classes at traditional contact universities in South Africa. In this form, UNISA has played an important role in widening access to higher education to South Africans who, for reasons of racial exclusion, unaffordability, unavailability of seat space in local contact institutions, or out of choice and personal circumstances, would otherwise not have been able to obtain higher level academic qualifications. UNISA later also became attractive to international students, particularly on the African continent but also more broadly, including the South African diaspora living and working abroad.

The past 20 years has seen a significant growth in student enrolments at UNISA, driven by two important factors. The first of these was the 2004 merger of the then-Technikon South Africa and parts of Vista University with UNISA. Secondly, the seat space capacity at the 25 traditionally contact universities in South Africa has not been sufficient to absorb the increasing numbers of learners who complete the National Senior Certificate well enough to enter higher education studies. The result is that UNISA enrolled 343 800 students in 2019 (from 133 500 students in 2001), of which 30% are self-declared as being unemployed. The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS)-supported student numbers (160 000) suggest that a very large proportion of the 70% who did not self-declare their employment status have not been in formal employment or in post-school studies before. This profile of student enrolment is important because it has had a significant impact on UNISA's strategies for teaching and learning support of its academic staff and its students.

In 2019, 95.3% of UNISA students were enrolled in qualifications at National Qualifications Framework levels 5 to 8 (Higher Certificate to Honours Degree levels) and 2.2% of students were in Masters- or Doctoral degree programmes. The remaining 2.5% of students were registered as occasional students studying for non-degree purposes. Students were registered across nine colleges, of which the highest enrolment (31%) was in the College of Education and, together with the Colleges of Law (18%); Economic and Management Sciences (17%) and Humanities (14%), accounted for 80% of enrolments. Local students are drawn from all nine provinces in South Africa with Gauteng accounting for 78% of students enrolled. UNISA also manages a number of centres and regional coordinating hubs around South Africa, and one in Ethiopia, where students can find administrative and academic support and facilities.

There were 8 442 full-time staff members at UNISA, of which 1 844 were permanent academic staff members. Full professors made up 16% of the academic staff while 37% were lecturers and junior lecturers. 69% of the total staff complement are recorded as non-professional staff which included staff in service divisions such as security and cleaning. There were also 9 773 part-time staff members, 53% of the total staff complement, many of whom are in part-time lecturing positions. This gives UNISA the characteristic of having a relatively low ratio of full-time equivalent academic staff to head-count academic staff of around 50%.

In the area of research activity, UNISA supports eight research chairs and 10 research institutes. There are 231 NRF-rated academic staff and the university graduated 737 Masters and 304 Doctoral students in 2019. As with all of its areas of institutional operation, UNISA has made good progress with gender and race transformation of academics involved in research activities.

3. Audit Findings for UNISA

The following sections provide the findings of the audit panel based on an analysis of the submission by the institution (its SER and PoE), as well as observations during the interviews and physical site visit of the institution.

Focus area 1: Governance, strategic planning, management and leadership support the core academic functions

The four standards in Focus Area 1 concentrate on the role that an institution's *governance, strategic planning* (as contained in its *vision, mission and strategic goals), management and academic leadership* play in its quality management in order to enhance the likelihood of student success and to improve the quality of learning, teaching and research engagement, as well as accommodating the results of constructive, integrated community engagement.

Standard 1

The institution has a clearly stated vision and mission, and strategic goals which have been approved by appropriate governance structures, subject to comprehensive stakeholder engagement.

UNISA has, as each university must have, a published strategic plan and, for 2022, a Council-approved annual performance plan (APP). The 2022 APP commits UNISA to

- accelerate the shift towards becoming a leading African, Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL), comprehensive university in teaching and learning, research, innovation, and community engagement based on scholarship.
- Be agile and embed an innovative, collaborative, efficient and sustainable institution
- build an organisational ICT 4th and future IR technology capability to enable the transformation of learning and knowledge creation, to enable high performance, service and quality to all its communities
- accelerate the transformation of governance, student and workforce composition, the research agenda, and the curriculum

UNISA as an Open Distance e-Learning Institution
The vision, mission and strategic goals in the strategic plan approved by Council are clearly stated. Although UNISA had already committed itself to move from being a Distance Learning institution to an Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) institution, Covid-19 forced the institution to move faster on this path. The scale of the challenge has clearly been immense. Some students, especially those coming straight from high school, did not have the experience nor access to the necessary technology to enable them to cope with online learning. This is more evident at regional centres and the surrounding disadvantaged areas. Some staff members felt that this model is widening the gap between economically advantaged and disadvantaged students. Sufficient free data access is being provided to students only during examination periods. The interviews further revealed that academic staff members are also at different levels of acceptance of this model as some still resort to old modes of teaching. The evolution from being an open distance learning institution to an open distance e-learning institution resulted in other challenges including: ICT-related challenges, the e-part being introduced without proper training especially for the more senior academic staff; compromised learning opportunities for students disadvantaged in terms of ICT access; increased plagiarism; increased disciplinary cases related to the online examinations; students sometimes being unable to participate in examinations due to electricity load-shedding and then being granted the right to sit for supplementary examinations. The university was not adequately prepared to meet these challenges.

The teething problems with the transition to ODeL is apparent, not least with the move – at very short notice – from venue-based exams to online testing and exams. Many of these problems have yet to be fully overcome and the challenges have been exacerbated by the adoption, in the midst of the pandemic, of a new Learning Management System (LMS). Nevertheless, what was apparent to the panel was how much progress UNISA has managed to achieve on this transition path in a comparatively short period of time. UNISA's transformation from being a distance learning institution towards being a distance e-Learning (DeL) university is well on track but, as UNISA acknowledges, it is not there yet. Covid-19 required this acceleration, and the

implementation process was not uniform, but UNISA deserves credit for what the institution, its staff and students have achieved. It now needs to address the challenges that we have noted.

UNISA as an African and Open University

The institution defines itself as an African university that emphasises a "deep commitment to being an Africa-focused and Africa-centred university". However, with the exception of Ethiopia, enrolment in recent years has been small outside the Republic and some SADC states. The exception of Ethiopia is noteworthy, and the production of masters' and PhD graduates represents an important contribution to development on the continent. Nonetheless, for UNISA to sustain its claim to be an African university shaping futures in the service of humanity, it will need to expand its continental footprint. This observation in no way diminishes the importance and appropriateness of UNISA's commitment to being Africa-focused and Africa-centred in teaching, in research, and in innovation.

UNISA further defines itself as "a higher learning institution with a Pan-Africanist agenda". Although the uniqueness of UNISA is appreciated, such an institutional posture carries risks of limitations in the ways in which the academics at UNISA are to engage in the world of ideas. During interviews, the panel found that these risks were not fully anticipated or appreciated, and it appears that this aspect of UNISA's identity needs deeper engagement, debate and advocacy within the institution.

Although UNISA further defines itself as an Open University, it has not truly operated as an open university in the sense of being more flexible about its admission requirements and about its registration times, than traditional contact universities. Applicants seeking admission to UNISA are required to present the minimum achievement levels set down by the Minister in terms of the Higher Education Act, and the times that students are meant to register for modules and programmes are still fixed on a calendar-based academic year. 'Open' universities are expected to be much more flexible in both their admission expectations of applicants and in the times at which they commence their studies during the calendar year. UNISA is not on the path to greater flexibility in student admissions and has not been able to negotiate with the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) to admit all who meet the minimum admission requirements. UNISA is ambitious about developing IT-based systems to support pedagogical approaches that allow for more flexible student enrolment times and progression rates. Its rapid growth in the past two decades is evidence of its willingness to accommodate students at these minimum admission levels.

UNISA as a Student-Centred University

In its mission statement, UNISA describes itself as being "… guided by the principles of … student centeredness …", a principle repeated in a number of its documents and in the SER. As a component of its identity as a university, the idea of its student centeredness is expanded in the Curriculum Policy and in the ODL Policy to mean that "… UNISA places the student at the centre of the entire learning process from the moment the student intends registering through to graduation and continuing on through to its alumni …". The audit panel found little guidance in this and similar official statements on UNISA's understanding of student-centeredness and the ways in which it manifests in the relationship between the university and its students that would mark it as different from the operations of any other university that is serious-minded about the learning achievements of its students. Discussions on this matter with academic and

administrative staff during interviews confirmed that there was a little clarity in understanding of the idea of student-centeredness as a unique or distinguishing feature of UNISA's identity as a university. For their part, students interviewed were not clear on the intended meaning of the concept and felt that, based on their experience of teaching, learning and administrative interactions with the university, they would have difficulty describing it as a student-centred institution.

The Student Voice at UNISA
The vision, mission and strategic goals may have been developed without a sufficiently rigorous involvement of students. The institutional reflection on this matter, which was also confirmed during interviews, reveals the views of some students who stated that the institutional strategy had not been properly communicated to students for them to fully engage and understand it.

Regarding the development of the SER, the institution had several committees including the steering committee, a planning team to operationalise the tasks of the steering committee, and six working streams. The working streams comprised academic staff, professional staff and staff members from support- and administrative departments, but there is no mention of student involvement. Further on in the SER, the panel notes that no student input was received even on the design of the curriculum. Students interviewed believe that although they are given a chance to reflect on the curriculum during module reviews, they cannot tell if their views are taken seriously. The SER states it as a weakness that the response to feedback from students is left to the individual lecturer to act upon. The university's reflections in the SER also highlight "the lack of formal engagements with the students on the transformation and renewal of the curriculum". These points raise questions about the institutional understanding of the idea of a student-centred university, as stated in its mission statement.

Admissions, Size and Shape of the University
The Annual Performance Plan (APP) commits UNISA to "an appropriate size and shape for a comprehensive university through programme and student registration as per the DHET approved plan" and a goal of being within 2% of the 2021 negotiated enrolment number. The implementation plan (of October 2020) shows that UNISA's plan for the six years (2020 – 2025) is to maintain the shape and size achieved in 2020, both in terms of the spread of qualification types and the fields of study in which students are registered. However, the panel heard in interviews with academic and management staff that UNISA is concerned about the role and growth of enrolment in Higher Certificate qualifications because undergraduate diploma and certificate candidates make up 25% of UNISA's current enrolment, and this is considered to be disproportionately high. If the status quo is to be maintained for the immediate future, the implication is that these concerns are not to be addressed within this time horizon.

Enrolment plans at a university are integrally linked to its admissions policy. UNISA's admissions policy is written at a fairly high level and does not engage with the detail and complexities normally associated with such a policy. The published admissions requirements on the UNISA website, and which are not listed in the admissions policy, indicate this area requires serious attention. For example, the minimum admission requirement for the B.Ed degree in Mathematics Education is a National Senior Certificate (NSC) with Mathematics or Maths Literacy at level 4. That is, a student can be admitted into this qualification without having taken Mathematics as a

NSC subject or equivalent school-leaving qualification. On the face of it, little consideration seems to be given to the relationship between the admission requirements and the academic demands of particular programmes.

The panel's overall impression on this matter is that staff at UNISA have no shared understanding of the strategic development direction of the institution. The fact that the university is now admitting students with no higher education or employment experience after high school, in addition to the traditional, employed students, requires more intensive communication and development for the cohort of 'full-time', post-secondary school students, so that they can better understand and anticipate the learning expectations at an ODeL institution.

Recommendation

1. UNISA must undertake an initiative to better define the understanding of its identity, particularly in light of the changing character of its students and their learning needs, and to advocate this understanding amongst its internal and external stakeholders in order to ensure that all sectors of the institution have a sense of a common purpose in their operation.

Conclusion for Standard 1
The panel found UNISA to be functional in the area covered by this Standard.

Standard 2

The stated vision, mission and strategic goals align with national priorities and context (e.g. transformation, creating a skilled labour force, developing scarce skills areas and a critical citizenry, and contributing to the fulfilment of national goals as informed by the NDP and related national planning), as well as sectoral, regional, continental and global imperatives (e.g. Africa Vision 2063 or the Sustainable Development Goals).

UNISA 2030
UNISA has a number of policy documents and guidelines that were "utilised to formulate UNISA's alignment with its vision, mission and Academic Project". Based on monitoring and reviews, UNISA scrutinised these documents and the process led to a revised and approved *UNISA 2030 Strategy* in July 2020, which draws strongly on teaching, research and community engagement responses to national, continental and global development plans. This 2030 Strategy is the main driver of the academic project. The APP targets are set to achieve online offerings by 2030, which seems to the panel to be too modest. For example, UNISA also needs to identify a higher number and range of measurable targets in relation to the third focus area of the 2022 APP, namely, to ensure the implementation of a 'robust, stable, cutting-edge ICT-infrastructure and platform" that a DeL UNISA is obliged to have.

Alignment with National Priorities
The institution claims that its vision, mission and strategic goals are aligned with national priorities and the audit panel found that this was generally the case. A range of institutional planning and

academic departments showed evidence of good and thorough engagement with important strategic priority documents such as the Sustainable Development Goals and the South African NDP. However, there was an aspect of UNISA's claimed response to national priorities that the panel considered an important area of concern. In support of its statement on alignment with national priorities, the university highlights the production of teachers, which is "the highest" in the country. While UNISA certainly makes a significant contribution to the number of teacher graduates in South Africa, the panel did not get a sense of the quality of the teacher education programmes at UNISA, particularly in light of the unusually high graduation rates in these programmes. The panel was also not able to understand the reasons for – and the implications of – UNISA's decision to cease enrolments for the HDE and to concentrate its teaching education efforts on the integrated four-year B.Ed programmes. This lack of understanding was mainly because of the poor engagement of the leadership and academic staff from the College of Education with the audit panel during the interview process.

Recommendations

There are no recommendations related to this Standard.

Conclusion for Standard 2
The panel found UNISA to be functional in the area covered by this Standard.

Standard 3

There is demonstrable strategic alignment between the institution's quality management system for core academic activities across all sites and modes of provision and its vision, mission and strategic goals, as well as its governance and management processes.

Alignment of the Quality Management System with the academic project for student success
The strategic plan has strategic goals with measurable objectives and clear time frames. The quality management system is articulated in the strategic plan as part of the strategic goals. The operational plans are realistic and subject to regular reviews. The panel focused on the way in which all this is operationalised towards student success and how student success is measured.

The APP commits UNISA to "an Enhanced Student Success Rate by improving the Proxy Graduation Rate from 13% to maximum possible of 16% for a part-time distance education provider" and to improving the retention rate of first-time entering students from the 2019 baseline (where 47% dropped out by the end of the year) to a 44% drop out in 2022. These appear to be the sole measures of student success targeted by the APP. While the Department of Higher Education, Science and Technology still quotes and seemingly still uses this proxy graduation rate, it is not a useful measure because it is based on the number of students enrolled in the year under consideration. In a period of rising enrolments or of changing patterns of enrolment in programmes with different completion times, as UNISA has experienced over the recent past, this graduation rate changes, even if general student performance remains the same.

UNISA also uses what it terms the *normal pass rate*, or *NPR* which, at the module level is defined as the number of students who pass the module as a percentage of those who wrote the exam. At first sight the improvement in the NPR in 2020 (at 79.7%, the highest for five years) is worthy of note. While this measure is useful on one level, it omits the impact of dropouts and no-shows to the examinations. As an example, in 2020, 9.1% of those admitted to the exam failed to write, a significant change from the four prior years where this number was between 2.8% and 3.9%. This factor and its possible interpretation will not be recognised in the NRP measure. UNISA needs to consider a wider range of student performance measures to better inform its strategic responses to improving student progression, retention and graduation.

In interviews, the audit panel heard evidence of a possible perverse incentive that may be affecting full-time undergraduates who enrol for the full load of modules, in order to maximise their levels of NSFAS allowance support. If correct, this will direct weaker students to take a bigger study load than they can manage and either drop out or have to repeat one or more modules, with attendant academic, time and financial costs to themselves. This aspect requires more careful assessment, particularly in the general relationship between student workload and student success and in particular, the character of these relationships in the enrolment patterns for NSFAS-eligible students.

The second measure of student success is provided by cohort analysis. The panel received data for 360-credit diplomas, three-year degrees, and four-year degrees, where the analysis measures the performance of those entering UNISA in 2012. These data are mixed, suggesting poor success of around 30% (as measured to graduation) for three-year qualifications but with excellent (82%) success for four-year qualifications, which is understood to be UNISA's flagship Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) programmes. The panel noted the absence of a cohort analysis for the 120 credit Higher Certificate qualifications, even though numerically, students enrolled for these make up about 30% of UNISA's undergraduate enrolment.

In a review of its approach to monitoring student success, UNISA should consider discontinuing its use of the proxy graduation rate as a measure on which to base its APP target. Instead UNISA should consider a range of other parameters that allow interpretation of factors that may be influencing student performance. Among these are (i) module pass rates (the ratio of modules passed to module enrolment, weighted if necessary); (ii) the numbers and proportion – per module and in aggregate – of enrolled students who do not write exams in modules for which they are registered, and the reasons for not doing so; (iii) UNISA's NPR but having regard to all enrolled students as well; and (iv) to cohort studies per qualification and in aggregate by qualification type. Doing so will give UNISA a better sense of the necessary interventions and the effectiveness of such interventions in supporting student learning, and to inform strategy. Also, this will be essential to respond to UNISA's acknowledgement that there is a "need to strengthen the relationship between the institutional strategic goals and the quality management and assurance system".

The internal funding allocation model
While the funding allocation model used appeared reasonable and rational at face value, the various academic groups interviewed were generally critical of the model used for internal funding allocations. While this form of contestation is common in universities, criticism of the UNISA

model was more generalised and raised questions about the fundamental assumptions of the model. Those departments wishing to grow their enrolments felt disadvantaged by the logic of the funding formula.

The panel also identified a broader concern in regard to internal resource allocation at UNISA, in that 80% of students are enrolled in four of the nine colleges. In consideration of quality management and student learning support at the department and module levels, cost demands are not directly related to enrolment numbers. UNISA should analyse this aspect of the resource allocation to its quality management system and the opportunity costs incurred by having many programmes and modules with relatively low enrolments.

The Performance Management System
UNISA has a strong performance management system for post-levels 1-4, but acknowledges that there are gaps at levels below 4. The ratio of staff to students is about 1:800 for some academic staff members, and yet these staff members are expected to be productive in research too, as UNISA also aspires to be a research-intensive university. The workload is therefore a concern for many academic staff members and their performance management, which is based on a workload model, is seen as unrealistic in its assumptions and not sufficiently sensitive to the actual work pressures that they experience.

The Academic and Student Experience at Regional Centres
The panel visits to the regional centres served well to amplify and give perspective to the reports and comments received during the visit in Pretoria, regarding the academic and student experience. These visits identified concerns relating to communication issues between the regional offices and the central campus in Pretoria. A range of issues such as limited student support, a sense of a muted student voice, NSFAS-administrative problems, student registration problems, limited internet data and suitable devices for connection, were all stated more sharply as problems that negatively affected student performance. The fact that students registered for programmes requiring laboratory work are required to travel to Pretoria for laboratory access was identified as a problem for students in the Eastern Cape. Also, students required to attend disciplinary processes have to travel to Pretoria at their own expense, including the cost of accommodation and this was an operational area that staff at regional centres thought could be addressed by decentralisation. There was a general view that, at the management and administration levels, there is too much centralisation of authority in Pretoria and that much could be improved were the Regional Director to have authority on many issues without being required simply to relay matters to Pretoria. It was further stated by student leadership that their concerns are taken more seriously and more readily resolved by UNISA leadership if they take the initiative and travel to Pretoria, mostly at their own expense.

Students are rarely involved in community engagement projects associated with the regional centre. The view was expressed that many students using the regional centre facilities do not understand the difference between teaching and tutoring. The regional centre provides on-site and online tutorials, but students arrive unprepared and expect the tutor to provide classroom-style teaching, even if online. It is clear that the staff and student experience at regional centres is not of the same level and quality as that of staff and students at the main or regional campus in Pretoria.

Recommendations

2. UNISA must address its acknowledged need to strengthen the relationship between the institutional strategic goals and the quality management and assurance system. This process must include improvement and development of the quality management arrangements for teaching and learning at regional centres as well as the structural arrangements for receiving and responding to student views on matters relating to the quality of teaching and learning - in equal measure for students who are attached to regional centres.
3. UNISA must address the identified gaps in performance management for employment posts below Level 4.

Conclusion for Standard 3
The panel found UNISA to be functional in the area covered by this Standard.

Standard 4

There is a clear understanding of and demonstrable adherence to the different roles and responsibilities of the governance structures, management and academic leadership.

The roles of Council, Senate, the Institutional Forum (IF), and the Students' Representative Council
UNISA has a properly constituted and functioning Council, a functioning IF and, despite the challenges of constituting a Student Representative Council for a distance institution where so many of its students are from centres and rural areas dispersed around the country, and distant from the central offices in Gauteng, a functioning NSRC is in place. The panel met with members of the IF and it was clear that Council takes the advice of the IF seriously and complies with the legislated requirements to provide written responses to the IF in regard to advice submitted by the IF and reasons where Council has not accepted that advice.

The roles of Management and Academic Leadership
The management structure consists of the Vice-Chancellor and an executive management team that has seven vice principals and the university registrar. The executive management becomes an extended management team when it includes the executive deans, the deputy registrar and executive directors. The management team is responsible for the management of the academic project including the distribution of resources. The academic project at UNISA is governed by the college model comprising of academic schools, made up of academic departments. Executive deans are academic and administrative heads at the college level. Deputy executive deans, directors of schools and academic chairs of departments support the executive deans in managing the academic project.

Council's role in academic matters: the provisions in the Institutional Statute, the terms of reference and role of Academic and Student Affairs Committee of Council (ASACoC), and governance of the School for Business Leadership (SBL)

It is common cause that the Senate in any public university in South Africa decides academic questions. These include but are not limited to curricula, syllabuses, and whether or not a student qualifies. Senate is accountable to Council but only in the sense that Council must be satisfied that Senate is exercising its responsibilities. Council's role in this is to hold Senate to account for its role. It is never Council's role to second-guess Senate's decisions on academic matters.

It was thus with some surprise that the panel found provisions in the UNISA Institutional Statute, for the existence and terms of reference of a Council Committee (ASACoC) and in examples of the work of ASACoC that, on the face of it, places important academic responsibilities of Senate into the hands of Council. In so doing, this provision in the Statute fails to observe the important separation of roles between Council and Senate.

The Higher Education Act provides:
> *28. (1) The senate of a public higher education institution is accountable to the council for the academic and research functions of the public higher education institution and must perform such other functions as may be delegated or assigned to it by the council.*

The audit panel was concerned that the wording in Paragraph 22 of the UNISA Statute describing Senate's role as found in the institutional statute elides the nuance present in the Act and may be the basis for UNISA's ASACoC. Be that as it may, the panel believes that ASACoC's name, its terms of reference and, from at least two examples that the panel saw, place in the domain of Council, matters that are strictly the preserve of Senate. The panel recommends that UNISA review this and define a renamed ASACoC as the structure mandated by S27(3) of the Act.

A second concern relating to the UNISA Statute is that Paragraph 21 considers the Board of the SBL to function as both a governing body in that it acts as a Council Committee in regard to some SBL matters such as its budget, which is properly the province of the Council, but also functions as a UNISA College Board, exercising the functions of a College Board (analogous to those of a faculty board in many universities). As such this provision in the statute is problematic. When questioned on this matter, the Registrar accepted that the paragraph in the Statute presented a problem and acknowledged that a review was necessary.

Governance and the start of the academic year

UNISA is not alone among South African public higher education institutions in being subject to periodic operational disruptions caused by occurrences such as external service impacts or internal protest actions. However, a repeated theme in the panel interviews pointed to a seemingly annual failure of governance or management or both, leading to failures to start the [academic] year at the intended time and to resolve student registration issues in good time. January has become referred to as 'strike season' at UNISA, which has a knock-on effect on the academic calendar and is seen as a result of management's failure to resolve industrial or student disputes in good time. Student registrations are delayed for policy reasons (registration is not effected until the initial payment is made), and there appears to be a lack of co-ordination between UNISA and NSFAS with regard to NSFAS eligible students. During interviews the audit

panel heard evidence from several interviewees of students whose registration for first semester modules was only resolved in the second week of April 2022, when assessments were soon to be due.

UNISA must give priority to starting the academic year on the advertised date and to resolving all but the most intractable student registration issues before this date. The failure to do so is clearly a probable contributing factor to student failure and student drop-out.

Centralisation and decentralisation
UNISA's academic governance model has three levels below Senate: there are the College Boards, the School Committees, and there are the Academic Departments. The scale of UNISA suggests that these are needed, but there would appear to be scope for further delegation.

At an operational level, there appears to have been an increase in the centralisation of decision-making authority. As noted above, in visits to the UNISA regional centres, the panel heard suggestions that many matters could be expedited if authority were delegated to the regions; an example was student discipline. The panel was not able to test these suggestions but there appears to be scope for improvements in the effectiveness of processes with greater delegation of responsibilities.

Delegation by Council
The schedules of delegated authority were provided to the audit panel and time permitted only a brief review of those arrangements. However, on the face of it, the range and levels of delegation seem limited for an institution as large and as strongly established as UNISA is. This is particularly stark in the unreasonably limited levels of financial and operational authority vested in the Vice-Chancellor as UNISA's Chief Executive Officer. The working relationship between Council as the governance authority and the Vice-Chancellor as the executive authority, is best expressed through mutual trust and respect for each other's functions. The levels of detailed Council oversight on the functions of the Vice-Chancellor's office gives a sense of a troubled relationship between Council and the Vice-Chancellor. Furthermore, this must lead to inordinate administrative distraction in seeking Council's approval for a large number of relatively small processes and transactions, causing undue process delays**.**

Recommendations

4. UNISA must review the role of ASACoC to ensure that Council does not exercise decision-making authority over academic matters, and that such authority remains with – and is properly exercised – by Senate.
5. The Council of UNISA must review the range and levels of delegation of authority to the Vice-Chancellor and executive management, with a view to minimising administrative blockages and improving the agility of operational processes.

Conclusion for Standard 4
The panel found UNISA to be functional in the area covered by this Standard.

Focus area 2: The design and implementation of the institutional quality management system supports the core academic functions

The four standards in Focus Area 2 concentrate on how the *design and implementation of an integrated quality management system* in the institution enhances the likelihood of student success and improves the quality of learning, teaching and research engagement, as well as accommodating the results of constructive, integrated community engagement within the context of the institution's mission.

Standard 5:

A quality assurance system is in place, comprising at a minimum, of:
- (vii) governance arrangements
- (viii) policies
- (ix) processes, procedures and plans
- (x) instructional products
- (xi) measurement of impact
- (xii) data management and utilisation

as these give effect to the delivery of the HEI's core functions.

Policies, policy development and implementation
The panel found that UNISA has an approved Quality Management System (QMS) in place. The QMS for each related department is documented and the standard operating procedures specific to each department are recorded. Some of the standard operating procedure documents seem incomplete, e.g. specific quality standards and the criteria used by the Directorate Programme Accreditation & Registration are not fully recorded.

A suite of policies, processes and procedures are in place to support the implementation of the Quality Management System across the core functions of teaching and learning, research and community engagement. There was no evidence of a Certification Policy although the process for certification is briefly mentioned in the standards which appear in the UNISA Quality Evaluation Instrument (UQEI). Notwithstanding the confusing comment on page 68 of the SER, it was confirmed during interviews that it is normal practice for all policies to be approved by Council.

It is considered as good practice for policies to be reviewed every three years and the Quality Assurance (QA) policy indicates that this is applicable at UNISA. However, it is unclear that this applies to all policies as there does not appear to be a documented process for the development, approval and review of policies. Information available to the panel indicated that many policies have not been reviewed for more than 5 years. As examples, the Curriculum Policy was last revised in November 2012, and the Tuition Policy in April 2013. The Assessment Policy is due for review in June 2022 and the panel was informed that the Assessment manual is being reviewed. There was also no description of the stakeholder consultation process required in the development and review of policies.

Interviewees expressed concern that teaching, learning and assessment policies do not take full cognisance of the specific needs of programmes in colleges. An example cited was the lack of provision for the appropriate use of open book exams or supplementary assessments in different types of modules. It is not always clear that policies allow sufficient flexibility for the rules of academic practice at college- or department levels to accommodate such contextual variations. The SER indicates that provision has been made for students who miss exams due to national electricity loadshedding. However, interviews with staff indicated that there are no guidelines or policies for dealing with students who are impacted by such electricity outages during online exams and who may then be obliged to repeat the module. This is an example of implementation of practice that is driven by urgent need but the necessary adjustments to policy were not effected and approved to ensure that such amended practices are properly considered.

While there are policy and associated systems and processes to support the design and development of new academic programmes, the audit panel noted that no policy exists for managing changes to academic programmes, and that such changes are not formally documented. This is an area of risk for the university as incremental changes to academic programmes could result in the programmes no longer being aligned with CHE accreditation and South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) registration of the affected qualifications. The panel was informed that the university is in the process of developing an online system for tracking changes to academic programmes.

Regarding the policy on academic staff promotions, flexibility allows colleges to have different promotion criteria, based on guidelines approved by the Senate. The university has a performance management system and a workload allocation model, but there was often expression of dissatisfaction with the operational aspects of these systems. The panel heard that the workload allocation model was in the process of being revised. A particular concern in this regard was the often-expressed view that the quality of academic activities in teaching and student learning were not sufficiently acknowledged for academic promotion.

Academic staff are generally aware of the quality management systems and their implementation, and expressed the view that good systems are in place and that policies are well considered. However, they appear to experience challenges in the integration between the QMS and academic functions. They reported that processes are not mindfully followed and there is a compliance approach to implementation of the QMS. For some academic staff, quality assurance is treated as a bureaucratic, administrative and managerial hindrance. Academics felt overwhelmed by administrative tasks, time-consuming processes, and duplication of reporting. At junior or emerging academic levels, staff appear to be disengaged from quality assurance and there was a lack of awareness of the relevant policies and processes.

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, UNISA has had to adopt internet-based applications for proctoring or invigilating online examinations remotely. While there was general support for the use of these systems, academic staff and students were concerned about the functionality of the systems and the interpretation of evidence gathered. This resulted in challenges such as delays in starting examinations due to students not being able to upload the Invigilator App, and delays in releasing examination results due to considerating possible disciplinary action against students suspected of plagiarism by the Invigilator App. Some students missed exams because they did

not have suitable devices to upload the Invigilator App. It was clear that the assessment policies and procedures do not make provision for the use of these proctoring systems, nor did UNISA anticipate the challenges.

Furthermore, the institution has a Community Engagement and Outreach Policy which also covers the ethical and legal requirements for such academic activities. UNISA is ambitious about the scholarship of engagement and its relevance to the 'community'. In discussion with the panel, community engagement partners indicated strong and constructive relationships with the university through research. These included documenting dispute resolution by a Tribal Council, assisting schools that underperform in mathematics and a programme where a mobile vehicle was used to support communities without science laboratories in schools. However, it was not clear how such partnerships and engagements impact on teaching and learning as the engagements were mainly focused on research relationships with academic staff.

Plans and processes to support implementation, monitoring and enhancement of the QA system
UNISA relies on a five-year programme review cycle, while student module evaluations (SMEs) are conducted annually on selected modules and improvement plans developed accordingly. The schedule of programmes to be reviewed annually is approved by the Senate Teaching, Learning and Community Engagement Committee (STLCEC). The purpose, methodology and reporting on SMEs is documented and evidence has been provided in the Portfolio of Evidence (PoE) which includes the status report and plan for student module-evaluations (November 2021). However, the panel was unable to find evidence or information on the outcomes of the evaluations, how these outcomes are used for the development of the associated quality improvement plan and the process for report-back to students. HoDs have controlled access to the data from the evaluations, and evaluation reports serve at the STLCEC and Senate. Progress on improvement plans is monitored at the college level and reports serve at the STLCEC. There is limited evidence that the Bureau of Market Research conducts surveys among students or provides a report on their levels of satisfaction with modules and programmes. There is also very little evidence of lecturer evaluations being conducted (as separate from module evaluations) and it is clear that UNISA has not given significant consideration to an approach to lecturer evaluation, and the use-value of such assessments in enhancing the quality of teaching and learning.

Quality Improvement Plans (QIP) at module level are monitored by the relevant schools and together with module evaluation reports, are also included in programme reviews. There are various levels of interrogation of QIPs before submission to the Department of Institutional Quality Assurance and Enhancement (DIQAE) and subsequently to the relevant university committee. QIPs are prepared by the custodian department programme or qualification and monitored by STLCEC and the University Quality Committee (UQC). Evidence was provided of a status report on QA to Senate for activities in the period January to May 2019. Monitoring is done by the relevant committees on a quarterly basis. Resources for the QIP are allocated in the annual planning process and discretionary funds are also available where required for implementation of the QIP.

Lines of authority and accountability in the quality management system

UNISA presented a schematic diagram of what it refers to as an integrated quality assurance and quality management model. However, the panel found that, in practice, the structures and reporting lines are much more complex and less integrated than indicated in the diagram. The actual structures appear to operate on both a centralised and decentralised model: there is a separation between quality assurance in administrative units and academic units in ways that create duplication of operations as well as gaps in oversight that are not indicative of an integrated and coherently functioning QMS. The Department of Institutional Quality Assurance and Enhancement (DIQAE), located in the portfolio of the VP: Strategy, Risk and Advisory Services, has an Executive Director and three areas of responsibility – (i) institutional QA; (ii) monitoring and evaluation; (iii) project management. The Directorate: Academic QA&E, located in the portfolio of the VP: TLCE&SS focuses on academic QA, operates at college level and has an acting Director. The two structures interact at the UQC level, where their reporting lines converge. This seems to be an added confusion as it was indicated to the panel that the UQC mainly concerns itself with quality assurance matters pertaining to administrative departments. Each college has a Head of QA who is the chairperson of the college QA Committee.

The university also has Quality Committees for administrative support departments and at each of the regional hubs. However, there is a lack of clarity on the reporting lines for these committees to the next tier of committees indicated in the diagram on p. 62 of SER, which all report to Senate and thence to Council. Also, the fact that the UQC and the STLCEC both report independently to Senate may result in distracting priorities for Senate in its intended academic focus. Furthermore, this arrangement seems to result in increased attendance at committee meetings since membership of these committees overlap. Lastly, the QA regional offices report to the UQC and it was explained that this is because the regions have an administrative function only.

As mentioned earlier, the role of ASACoC in approving new programmes and qualifications on behalf of Council is a matter of serious concern to the audit panel since it means that Senate's role in the quality management system – and its views on academic matters – are considered as advisory by Council. This appears to be a serious erosion of the authority of Senate as the primary custodian of academic matters at the university. The panel's concern was deepened by the fact that full professors are not automatically members of Senate and, following an amendment to the Statute, are represented as one of the constituencies at Senate by having one elected professor from each academic department serve as a member of Senate. UNISA should give serious attention to the fullness of the academic voice at Senate and the appropriateness of organisational arrangements to give Senate the proper authority over matters of academic quality.

UNISA has also established a cohort of "Quality Champions" in each of the administrative and support departments. The Quality Champions are members of staff in the operational unit who have taken on this role in their departments at the central office as well as in the regions. These individuals see their role as intermediary between their respective departments and quality structures within the university. The Quality Champions indicated that they reviewed the implementation of the quality standards for their respective departments, developed a report and identified areas for improvement. The director of the administrative department is responsible for monitoring the Quality Improvement Plan, and quarterly reports are submitted to the IQAE.

The quality champions do not have the formal authority to make or recommend changes to practice and see themselves as having a mainly facilitation role. During interviews, it emerged that they considered their ability to influence practice for improved quality to be determined by the current standing of the individual quality champion within the hierarchy of the department concerned. The more senior the individual, the greater the authority wielded which impacts on effectiveness. In addition, the location of the department or unit in the hierarchy of the university structures also influences the status and role of the champions. In general, the champions only identify challenges and refer these to the director who decides on the relevance of the issues raised and reports to the STLCEC accordingly. This also results in delays in effecting improvement.

At the regional level, there are communities of practice for quality enhancement that share good practices and challenges. An observation by the panel members during the regional site visits was that these communities of practice are active and contribute positively to quality enhancement at the regional level. The UQC has a supportive role at regional level but interviewees argue that the regions would be better served if they had dedicated QA staff for academic and support functions.

In interview discussions, UNISA staff generally agreed that a priority for improvement of quality management and quality assurance would be to have a single point of accountability. The separation of academic and administrative QA is seen as artificial and needing convergence. In the SER, the institution acknowledges that "…the duplication in reporting imposed by structural inefficiencies place great strain on institutional leaders…". The impact on academic staff workload should also not be underestimated as many of the same staff members are required to attend the STLCEC, UQC as well research committees with the attendant duplication of effort.

Structures for accountability of participants in the quality management system
UNISA has implemented an approved Performance Management System (PMS) which it regards as an integral part of its QA system. The PMS is a component of the promotion criteria, and the panel scrutinised performance reviews from previous years. The outcomes of module evaluation are also used in the promotions process. However, staff indicated that the criteria for promotion favour research output more than teaching and learning activities.

As mentioned earlier, UNISA does not have a well-developed and systematic approach to lecturer evaluations. Its ambitions to be more strongly focused as an ODeL university will demand a carefully considered approach to lecturer evaluations, the ways in which student opinions are valued and incorporated into the assessments and the ways in which lecturer assessments are used in enhancing the quality of individual and collective teaching at the department level as well.

The problem of institutional arrangements for quality management, discussed in Section 5.3, also requires mention here. The lack of clarity in the functional separation of the quality management structures and the areas of reporting overlaps make it difficult to identify lines of accountability and to hold the correct office or persons responsible for performance of different aspects of the QMS.

Acting positions appear to be symptomatic of the university and impact negatively on quality

assurance accountability. The following are examples of acting positions at senior levels: Acting Dean of Students, Acting Director Academic Planning, Acting Director Programme Accreditation, Acting Director Academic QA&E. The panel was informed that the process for substantive appointments was underway but that there were internal delays in finalising permanent appointments. The audit panel felt that this matter needed the focused attention of Senior Management at UNISA.

Engagement with the QEP process and its focus areas
This issue was not directly engaged by UNISA in the SER nor in the audit panel interviews. However, the panel did note that the establishment of Heads of QA in each of the colleges is a structural element that emerged from the QEP.

Quality of delivery: teaching, learning, research and community engagement

The student learning experience
The National Student Representative Council (NSRC) felt that academic support structures for students are largely dysfunctional and that the relationship between the university leadership and student representatives is weak. Both staff and students acknowledged that the most important negative characteristic of this relationship was the poor level of communication between students and the institution. Concerns about communication relate to aspects such as the troubled channels for electronic or online communication, the poor levels of response to student queries, and the lack of clarity in communications from the university to students. It extends to no or poor representation of students in planning and implementation processes for quality management and enhancement of the student academic experience, and to the limited channels for a more general and disinterested student voice to be heard on academic quality matters. Student representatives were of the view that the student leadership is substantially consulted only when there is a critical challenge that the university needs to resolve. Otherwise, students felt a general sense of disengagement from their university. The panel noted that the Dean of Students had been seconded to another unit in the university and that the office was being managed by an acting appointment. This factor may well contribute to the troubled communication environment.

The quality of student services provided by the university was raised as an issue by the NSRC and also emerged in the student experience survey. The senior management team acknowledged this, and indicated that investigations are underway and that the university vision is to have zero complaints from students. In this regard UNISA aims to: ensure that lecturers are accessible to students, identify design element challenges in assessment and stabilise the LMS to be able to better respond to student needs. The university acknowledged that a large part of the challenge regarding student support were related to ICT problems that must be resolved. During the interviews, it was clarified that each college has 2 to 3 people responsible to direct student enquiries to the correct individual, and that they are also responsible for monitoring these issues. Issues that are not addressed directly to these individuals at college level could be lost or unresolved. However, the panel was informed that students were either not aware of or had only a vague idea of the proper channels for lodging different types of queries and for escalating these queries when the response was considered unsatisfactory.

The result is that students lodge their complaints at multiple and often inappropriate points where

the matter may be ignored because the recipient is unable to respond to – or not responsible for – the query raised by the student. UNISA has a call centre that is meant to receive and direct student queries. However, too many calls are dropped, and many queries are seemingly often misdirected. This adds to the loss of student confidence in the call centre, so adding to the problem of inappropriate, simultaneous and multiple receiving points for student queries.

In engagement with postgraduate students, some of the students interviewed were also employed as academics at the university. Notwithstanding this, they resonated with the NSRC views expressed regarding the student experience at undergraduate level. The problem of poor communication was a repeated concern and students felt that lecturers need to put more effort into reaching out to them as the delays in response to their formative assessments and projects in general was unacceptable. Online exams were a challenge especially with the troubled functionality of the proctoring system. Both academic staff and students indicated that there were capacity challenges related to personal knowledge on how to use the system as well as technical ICT problems. On the other hand, students felt that there was a significant communication improvement at the master's and doctoral levels because of individual contact with a supervisor. The students indicated that resource provision for the needs of their research programmes was adequate.

The audit panel's engagement with recent graduates was largely with current staff at UNISA and included only one interviewee who was external to the university. All the interviewees had completed either a Master's or a doctoral degree at UNISA. This group felt that, whilst the university plays an important role for people who cannot study full-time, inadequate and declining attention was being paid to vocational programmes due to a greater focus on being a research-intensive university. Their sense was that the university was trying to be too broad in its offerings, without the necessary functionally effective systems to support its planned development. Students interviewed at the regional centres also emphasised the importance of – but also the lack of vocational programmes in the UNISA Programme and Qualifications Mix. In addition, students felt a need for the university to deepen its partnerships with industry for the purpose of creating work integrated learning and future employment opportunities.

All the students interviewed expressed strong negative views about the poor administrative support that they experienced at UNISA. Where internet connectivity permitted and provided that the students had suitable data access, students preferred the delivery of learning materials through the online platforms, as it was found to be more effective than hard copy deliveries. Library resources at undergraduate level were generally considered as adequate and suitable information literacy training was provided to students. The combined main and regional library collection is extensive. Students interviewed in Pretoria and at the regional centres found personal librarians to be helpful and willing to facilitate inter-library loans when needed. The requirements for student practical learning tasks, where applicable, have adequate budget and provision was sufficient for the number of students.

The university has an Ombud position that reports to VP: Strategy, Risk and Planning, but it was vacant as the university needed Council approval of the new appointee.

A further problem identified is that this one-person office was not effective as reported matters

took a very long time to be resolved.

Enrolment planning and quality enhancement
UNISA mostly manages its enrolment planning process well with appropriate consultations at academic levels and proper approval at Senate and Council. However, as was illustrated in the successful 2021 High Court challenge against the University's enrolment decisions, the process is not always thoroughly considered and consulted among stakeholders. Furthermore, while enrolment plans are reported, discussed and agreed with the DHET according to the normal processes, the detailed level of the actual enrolment process is not always well-managed. As an example, enrolment of students in Higher Certificate (HCert) programmes has apparently grown at uncontrolled rates in recent years. The panel heard that UNISA's enrolment plan had been reviewed and the enrolment of students in these programmes was decreasing. The panel was told that particularly strong external pressure was applied in 2019 for UNISA to expand access and to increase enrolment, which had led to this growth. However, the unplanned growth in enrolments also resulted in UNISA being penalised for exceeding its agreed enrolment numbers.

The demography and profile of students at UNISA has changed significantly over the years and the audit panel was struck by observation in the SER that "UNISA is a university of the youth with some matured [sic] adult learners … [with] students below 35 … who need more support to cope". The trend towards this student makeup has accelerated in the past five years, possibly as a result of the government's 2017 announcement of fee-free higher education for the poor. During interviews with staff, it was suggested that this change is evidence of institutional mission drift from the focus being on primarily affording higher education opportunities to employed adults. However, UNISA sees this as an institutional response to a key societal challenge in South Africa. The SER observes that this approach (inter alia) that sees UNISA meeting its social justice mandate. UNISA should give careful consideration to the meaning of this argument since the approach has the potential to reinforce social class differentiation patterns in higher education enrolments.

Nevertheless, the reality is that UNISA *does* provide opportunity for higher education studies to many students who would otherwise not find place at the contact-based public universities in South Africa. It seems that the vast majority, and possibly as many as two thirds of UNISA's undergraduate students, are full-time students. The data in the SER suggesting that only 4.3% of UNISA's 2019 enrolment was made up of full-time students is misleading. In interviews, that figure seems to be a count of students who self-identify as full-time, and UNISA agreed that its historic method of classifying students as full time is in need of review. It was also noted that only around 30% of the 2019 enrolment of 342 707 students were employed while over 160 000 of UNISA's students in 2022 – over half its undergraduates – are supported through NSFAS funds. The panel does not accept – and this point was conceded by UNISA management during interviews – the conclusion in the Institutional Profile that "the academic project must factor in that most of the students are indeed employed and that a minority of the students are full-time." It would seem to the panel that UNISA needs to have a clearer understanding of the profile and characteristics of its undergraduates, and to adapt its enrolment and student learning support strategies accordingly.

Student learning at UNISA is often negatively affected by inadequate (often unintended)

enrolment management and in managing the closing dates for applications and registrations. The panel heard that, in at least one instance, mid-level administrative staff make arbitrary decisions on accepting and then enrolling late applicants to programmes. It was also reported that, during the week of the audit visit, students were being enrolled for programmes with first-semester modules, when the first round of assessments were as close as two weeks away. The panel was informed that Council had taken a decision in 2020 to keep applications and admissions system open throughout the year, without a closing date. During discussions on this matter, executive leadership of the university indicated that a plan was in place to enforce fixed closing dates for student applications and registrations in the 2023 academic year.

The apparently unplanned growth in enrolments in HCert programmes (mentioned above) has also had negative consequences in regard to student expectations of their studies at UNISA. While it is an exit-level qualification, the HCert was perhaps tacitly conceptualised to act as a bridging programme. While UNISA did not explicitly state this intention, the NSRC understands the HCert to be a bridging programme, and confirmed at some of the regional centre visits. Students confirmed the challenges associated with enrolment into the HCert programmes and the lack of clarity around the arrangements for their expected vertical articulation into diploma- and degree programmes, either with some credits being recognised for the higher-level qualification and/or with advanced standing. It is clear that, in increasing enrolments in the HCert programmes, little consideration was given to the capacity of the existing diploma and degree programmes to absorb the successful HCert students, in addition to their normal first-time entry enrolments – with significant implications for lecturer capacity and the quality of students learning.

Recommendations

6. UNISA must ensure that there is a documented procedure for the development, approval and review of all policies and that a comprehensive consultation process is included to ensure proper alignment of related policies with the quality management framework. Mechanisms must be in place to ensure that policies are reviewed accordingly. Consideration should also be given to the adoption of an overarching Institutional Assessment Policy and associated guidelines that comprehensively deal with online assessment and acknowledges variations in approaches at the department and college levels.

7. UNISA must develop policy and associated procedures for the approval, recording and monitoring of changes to academic programmes.

8. UNISA must review the arrangements for Senate membership of the senior professoriate to ensure that the voices of senior academics are appropriately heard on academic matters at Senate.

9. UNISA must develop and implement a formal approach to lecturer assessment that is guided by best practice in the ODeL sector and that is primarily used to support and develop good teaching practices amongst academic staff members.

10. UNISA must improve the integration of student governance structures – at all academic and institutional levels – in its quality management processes. Such integration must include structural arrangements for reporting to students on quality responses to formal feedback received from students. This process must include the implementation and effective communication of a complaints procedure that is easily accessible to students. In this context, the appointment to the position of Ombud at the University should be finalised as a

matter of urgency.

11. UNISA must ensure that applicants and enrolled students in the HCert programmes are properly informed about possible articulation arrangements to diploma- and degree programmes. Where articulation is possible, the university must ensure that there is a clearly described and transparent selection process.

12. UNISA must develop a more rigorous process for managing the implementation of its agreed enrolment plan, in a manner that allows for proper consideration and agreement about flexibility and deviations.

Conclusion for Standard 5

The panel found that UNISA needs substantial improvement in the area covered by this Standard.

Standard 6

Human, infrastructural, knowledge management and financial resources support the delivery of the institution's core academic functions across all sites of provision, in alignment with the concomitant quality management system, in accordance with the institution's mission.

Number, experience, and seniority of staff to execute, support and promote the quality management system

The number of senior and experienced staff to implement and develop the quality management system seems to be adequate at all management levels. The existence of many QA committees indicates that UNISA has tried to embed quality promotion and management accountability across the institution. As noted in the SER, quality management structures are de-centralised to college and region levels, but also centralised around senior portfolios within the institution. This results in duplicated reporting processes with attendant inefficiencies in the quality management processes, and staff find themselves distracted with sometimes unnecessary processes.

Staff also expressed concern that the support unit responsible for formatting learning material no longer supports academic staff with online learning material, which is deemed to be the academic's responsibility. It appears that the department still exists but there is a lack of clarity among academics on its role.

With the increase in student numbers over recent years, academic workloads have increased and the institution has therefore contracted external consultants to develop modules where required. While the module leader is to be an internal staff member who has responsibility for quality matters, pedagogy, the curriculum and the content of the module, it was not clear how the external consultants are appointed or what competencies are required of such consultants.

Financial resource allocation to support the quality management system

At the institutional level, resources for operational costs are allocated based on the Academic Human Resources Allocation Model (ACHRAM). Deans have expressed concerns with the parameters of the model and the model is currently being reviewed for possible future

amendment. In the model, financial resource allocation is assigned as central and regional administrative functions, including the needs for these levels of the quality management system. The levels of financial support are sufficient to support the necessary capacity for quality management.

Information and communication technology infrastructure, and the quality management system
Given UNISA's historical identity as a distance learning institution and its current ambitions to be a fully ODeL institution, it is expected that the university will have competent and reliable information and communications technology (ICT) systems as foundational infrastructure to its mission. UNISA has put much human effort and financial resources into the development and support of its ICT systems but the need to improve functionality is urgent, particularly at the staff- and student-user interfaces. This problems seem to manifest most strongly in the functionality of student communication systems (including the call-centre operations) and the LMS.

At the time of the site visit, the university was in the process of migrating its LMS to a new platform and this process had not gone well. There was general agreement at UNISA that the migration process had been implemented too rapidly and plans were afoot to stabilise the system and its functionality. A related challenge was caused by insufficient attention to the change management needs of the staff and students who have to use the new system.

UNISA has recently increased its senior ICT leadership capacity, and at this level, it is acknowledged that the university should perhaps have administered two parallel learning management systems until the new platform was fully implemented, and with staff and students able to use it confidently. Furthermore, a view was expressed that, in the implementation planning, technology was put ahead of pedagogy and that this has impacted on the functionality of the ICT systems. Whilst the training of lecturers was in place, the rapid transition did not allow for sufficiently intensive training in the new learning management system. It is important to note that UNISA remains convinced that the functionality of the new platform better suits their needs and the university is committed to ensuring its successful implementation.

As noted above, the imperatives of the Covid-19 pandemic saw UNISA implementing electronic invigilation or proctoring software for its online assessments. The system was new to staff and students, and it requires a sophisticated ICT network and devices. The proctoring system was advocated by the College of Science, Engineering & Technology as being critical, and whilst all the colleges were using it, use was restricted to exit level modules. Both staff and students experienced challenges with using the system and the panel heard both strong support and strong concern expressed about its continued use. The system appeared to have merits and the university should carefully consider the risks associated with online invigilation, so that students are not exposed to unfair or discriminatory practices caused by different levels of access to the necessary network and device technology.

Appropriate infrastructure for student learning is available and sufficient
The panel heard that, in general, UNISA has adequate provision of computers, specialist equipment and laboratories for the needs of programmes. Computer facilities at the regional centres are well equipped and this is very helpful for students who are able to access the regional

centres, and who do not have computers or proper data access at home. Because of the operational impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, there were regional ICT facilities for students that were significantly under-utilised at the time of the site visits. However, it was thought that the facilities would return to full utilisation when attendance restrictions are eased.

Students who are registered for programmes with laboratory work are required to travel to regional centres where laboratory facilities are located. The Florida campus is dedicated to the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) programmes and has good quality practical and computer laboratories for undergraduate and postgraduate studies. The laboratories are adequate to support the STEM qualifications and programmes but require students to be physically present at the Florida campus.

WIL is suitably organised and supervised
UNISA has a policy on Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) but the panel could not identify a clear WIL management strategy. A shortage of staff to support students for WIL placement, monitoring and assessment was reported and the university stated its plans to employ more staff in programmes which have WIL modules. The panel learned that the funding arrangements for WIL at the university were not clear and that funds were not specifically directed to this learning activity. The university needs to ensure that the management of WIL is improved and in line with the needs of the programmes and that it is resourced appropriately.

UNISA did not place students for WIL but identified placements and approached companies or workplaces accordingly. Staff described a troubled WIL experience for students and stated that improved communication with students was needed in this regard. There was a feeling amongst students that UNISA did not manage WIL well and they felt that the institution should establish a formal WIL management system that takes greater responsibility for the placement of students. Students indicated that UNISA should establish strong networks with industry so that opportunities could be created for WIL placements and employability. This needed to be addressed at both undergraduate- and postgraduate levels for programmes that require WIL.

UNISA is also a significant contributor to the national cohort of graduates in teacher education, where WIL is an important part of student learning development. Unfortunately, it was difficult for the panel to get a view of the management of WIL for the teacher education programmes in the College of Education, because this aspect was not particularly reported on, and the relevant interview sessions were generally not attended by staff from the College of Education.

Library services and resources that support the core academic functions
The staff and students interviewed indicated satisfaction with the UNISA library facilities to support teaching, learning and research. The library services are mostly available online but there were reports of some challenges experienced with the services during the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions.

Libraries at the regional centres visited were well resourced and staff and students were complimentary of the level and quality of support and services received. In some cases, UNISA shares library facilities with local universities in the region, who may also have students remote from their main campuses. This arrangement seems to work well and is a good example of

institutional collaboration within the sector.

Adequacy of ICT facilities for both students and staff

Management and staff indicated that, notwithstanding the system instabilities mentioned above, the availability of ICT facilities in the form of hardware and connectivity at UNISA was adequate. Most students interviewed were satisfied with the ICT facilities available on campuses. However, a significant challenge for them related to the availability of data for internet connection, and for those based in more remote or rural areas, the quality and availability of internet connection, even when they do have available data. UNISA provides free data bundles to students only during the assessment periods and some students expressed concern that this limited their access to instruction and learning materials in the intervening periods.

The regional centres have adequate ICT facilities for use by students. A large proportion of UNISA students rely on NSFAS funding for their studies, and UNISA expects that they will buy their own electronic learning devices. Students noted that NSFAS funding usually arrives late and particularly for 1st year students, and so they are unable to buy devices at the beginning of the academic year. Where this is accessible and within reach, students without electronic devices use the facilities on campuses and regional centres.

There was general agreement among staff and students interviewed that UNISA needs to improve the reach and accessibility of network connectivity to students in order to support their e-learning intentions.

Adequacy of the academic environments

The facilities observed by the audit panel at the main and regional campuses were certainly appropriate and conducive to student academic interactions where this is needed. As a distance learning institution, UNISA does not have a significant stock of classroom teaching infrastructure. Where this is needed for tutorial or lecture support to student learning, the facilities are adequate. UNISA is also not a residential university and does not own or manage such facilities. However, students from homes in remote areas do occupy private residences that are close to regional facilities to be able to better access computers and learning resources. Such students are generally in full-time study and not otherwise employed.

Academic staff development for the professionalisation of teaching in various modalities

According to the SER and confirmed during the interviews, there is adequate provision of academic staff development for the foundational aspects of professionalising teaching. The division that provides the academic staff development programmes is adequately staffed. The professional development programmes are delivered through blended approaches and short learning programmes are in place for training academic staff on practical aspects such as the operation and functionality of the LMS. Training is conducted online three days a week and staff are required to book for the sessions. There are professional training specialists linked to colleges, one specialist per three colleges and there are 24 specialists allocated to support academics on the use of the LMS. As mentioned earlier, the transition to the new LMS presented challenges on account of the need for rapid training of academic staff in the use of the new system.

In 2021, a competency questionnaire was administered, and a Linked-in Learning Licence obtained which allowed staff to undertake additional professional development in their own time. During the interviews, the panel also learned that not all academic staff members participated in the teaching professional development programmes and that the Covid-19 lockdowns had a negative impact on the services of the Centre for Professional Development. Importantly, there was no evidence presented to the panel to indicate that the possible links between student learning performance and the teaching development needs of academic staff was being monitored for analysis. There was also no evidence that the effectiveness of teaching development initiatives was being monitored or measured with a view to better responding to the development needs of academic staff.

The panel learned from students that academic staff used online-assessments frequently and predominantly in multiple-choice question mode – an approach that is thought to encourage superficial rather than deep learning. There is a possibility that some academics have not adequately reflected on the relationship between learning and assessment, particularly in the context of e-Learning platforms. There is a risk that the approach to assessment may have a negative impact on the quality of student learning and this is a matter that requires consideration by staff in the teaching development unit.

Mechanisms for evaluating and acting on staff wellness and satisfaction
UNISA does not regularly survey or measure the satisfaction and wellness of its staff. There is reference in the SER to use of a 'Kirkpatrick's Model for Return on Investment' which appears to measure aspects such as employee retention, productivity and morale of staff. However, the results from such a measure were not available and it was not clear how UNISA intends to use the results in response to staff wellness and satisfaction concerns. Nevertheless, on face value, it seems that this measure is not appropriate for academic activities at a university.

In interviews with staff, the panel often heard about academic staff being overloaded with teaching and administrative duties, and finding it difficult to cope with the demands and expectations of the university. This was attributed to the growth in student numbers, the demands on research productivity, the current transition to full e-learning and the poor functionality of the electronic and administrative systems that are meant to support academic staff in their teaching and assessment tasks. Academic staff mentioned serious personal wellness concerns and the panel had the sense that this is one of the contributing factors to resignations in some departments. It was also often stated that the current workload model at UNISA was not sufficiently sensitive to demands of online teaching and assessment. This is an area in need of senior management attention at UNISA.

Commendations

a. UNISA is commended for the quality of its library resources and for the quality of library services that students receive. UNISA is further commended for developing collaborative partnerships with other higher education institutions in providing shared library services to students at its regional centres.

Recommendations

13. UNISA must redouble its efforts to improve the functionality of its ICT systems for teaching and learning to support academic staff and students. The ICT system in place has serious negative effects on the learning experience of students as well as on UNISA's aspirations for being an e-learning institution.
14. UNISA must invest in training for both staff and students on the invigilation system in order to avoid injustices and other risks associated with the use of the software. In addition, alternative methods to validate the integrity of the online assessments for large numbers of students should be investigated. On a related matter, the university must find ways to significantly improve the access that students have to devices and internet connectivity, particularly to achieve its objective of becoming a fully ODeL institution.
15. UNISA must ensure that the management of WIL is improved, appropriately resourced and is aligned with the needs of the relevant programmes.
16. The senior leadership for Teaching and Learning at UNISA must monitor the teaching development needs of academic staff, to ensure that all those who teach are competent at developing and delivering modules, as well as assessing student learning on e-learning platforms. Academic staff should regularly be exposed to the fundamental debates and current thinking on these and related aspects of their work.
17. UNISA must implement an appropriate and regular assessment instrument for monitoring the wellness and satisfaction of its staff. This must be complemented by the necessary systems and strategies for responding to individual and collective concerns about staff wellness.

Conclusion for Standard 6
The panel found that UNISA needs substantial improvement in the area covered by this Standard.

Standard 7

Credible and reliable data (for example, on throughput and completion rates) are systematically captured, employed and analysed as an integral part of the institutional quality management system so as to inform consistent and sustainable decision-making.

According to the SER, UNISA has a protected, integrated electronic, and legally compliant data management and retrieval system. In addition, the SER indicates that UNISA has a variety of sources of data used to prepare for HEMIS reporting, improve teaching and learning and monitor student success amongst others. However, during interviews with different groups of staff members, the panel found that, while the data is available and properly stored, it is not well used to monitor and improve teaching, learning and student success. Also, while it was stated that student data was held in a 'data warehouse', it was not clear that this data was integrated in a manner that allows for selective analysis to provide evidence bases to inform policy and strategy on improving student learning.

In some cases, the analysis initiatives are duplicated because different interested support units were unaware of each other's plans. The academic support staff were particularly concerned about the silo nature of such operations and the negative impacts that this approach has on the work they do to improve student success. Staff at regional offices were concerned that information used to identify students-at-risk was not readily available to them. For example, staff interviewed were not able to provide an analysis of the reasons that B.Ed. pass rates were significantly higher than other general UG qualifications. Management confirmed that no sustained analytical study of the characteristics of successful or drop-out students had been conducted on a cohort basis.

As mentioned before, it appears that the most important parameter used by UNISA to measure student learning performance is the module NPR (Normal Pass Rate). This parameter is used to inform decisions about modules in need of teaching and learning support and, when averaged over clusters of modules in individual programmes, is used as a measure of general student performance. However, during interviews it was not clear that staff understand the use-value of this parameter and the implication of basing the calculation on the number of students who sit for the examination and not the number of students who register for the module. While both rates are of interest, the former method of calculation ignores the rate of drop-out of students, either voluntarily or through the assessment rules. If used on its own, this could result in an incorrect interpretation of the meaning of the measure.

The panel was informed that the performance of first-year students in their first assessments is used as the basis for identifying students at risk for First-Year Experience programme interventions. Identification of students at-risk is done by the academic departments and a list of affected students is forwarded to the academic development unit of the relevant college. Colleges have their own academic intervention approaches for students at-risk. However, academic support staff were not aware of policy or guidelines on identifying students at-risk.

The Student Retention Unit (SRU) used a recently developed data analysis system which is not linked to the LMS. The Business Intelligence Unit hosts the data storage and retrieval system and, while they provide the data, they do not undertake the kinds of analyses undertaken by the SRU. The regional centres were unable to provide information or resolve queries because they do not have access to some data systems. It is clear that UNISA has yet to maximise the benefits of a rich data resource in directing strategies for improving teaching and learning.

The panel was informed that an electronic system to track the student performance was in development but not yet fully operational. A part of this was the problems being experienced in the transitions to a new LMS. UNISA expects that the new LMS will have improved functionality for data analytics to aid in more directed and more agile responses to student learning needs. Some of the academic departments used business intelligence (BI) learning analytics to analyse assignments as a basis for introducing interventions to support student learning. Staff at the regional centres indicated that they did not have access to such learning analytics.

The SRU seems to be taking a new and innovative approach to the analysis of student data and using this as a basis to inform strategies for improved student learning support, with early indications of small but positive impact. However, it appears that their work is not well integrated

into the work of central- and college level academic support units. The panel also learnt that the SRU operates as a separate project and is not structurally integrated into the overall quality management and enhancement system at university. SRU is also not linked to the Dean of Students or to any of the academic support units. In addition, the SRU uses data from the Directorate of Business Intelligence but their work is not undertaken in collaboration with this Directorate. It is the view of the panel that the approach and work of the SRU should be expanded and better integrated with the student learning support efforts of offices and divisions such as colleges, deans of students, the BI Directorate and the DVC for Teaching and Learning.

Recommendations

18. UNISA must improve its capacity for analysing its student data as the evidence base for responding to student learning needs. An important part of this development is the need to better integrate all the academic and administrative units that process student data with those who should use the analyses for teaching and learning support. The analysed student data should be accessible to all staff members with responsibility to track, monitor, support students and report on general student performance in the academic and administrative departments.
19. UNISA must develop and provide regular reports on academic performance of students and modules using parameters that are well understood and can be interpreted in ways that properly guide strategies for learning development of students.

Conclusion for Standard 7
The panel found that UNISA needs substantial improvement in the area covered by this Standard.

Standard 8

Systems and processes monitor the institution's capacity for quality management, based on the evidence gathered.

Access to data and information for decisions on quality management of academic functions of the institution
The SER indicates that information can be accessed "by managers at all institutional levels upon request". It also states that the Power-BI dashboard, which provides information such as "comparative analysis of student performance conducted after examination period to determine trends and modules that are underperforming in terms of pass rates" can be accessed with proper approval. As mentioned earlier, this was not the case at all levels of the institution and, at the regional level, there are challenges pertaining to managers having access to data. Student registration information could not be provided by the regional manager because this appeared to be centrally controlled.

There is good evidence that UNISA had a rigorous system in place to protect the integrity of their

assessments, especially during the production and distribution of examination papers. The analysis and reporting of examination processes is sufficiently detailed and there is confidence in the oversight mechanisms. However, the pandemic-induced decision to move to online assessment and exams has introduced new challenges. A report to the University Management Committee, dated February 2021, highlights 14 risks that have been identified with UNISA's online examinations. These risks relate to issues that also emerged during the interviews and it seems that the institution has not fully addressed the concerns raised. For example, the panel heard that the ICT infrastructure is unable to cope with the large number of students during assessments; that there is inadequate support for academic staff and students during examinations; question papers are sometimes not available online and electrical load-shedding during examinations resulted in some students having to re-register and repeat the affected modules.

The panel also heard from HoDs and lecturers that the quality management system is rigorous at college-, academic department- and module levels. Module evaluations are generally conducted every two years, with selected modules assessed annually and the policies for quality management exist and are clear. Academic departments are able to use student data to improve modules. The main concern is that the QMS processes are not integrated across the university but exist as units or communities of good practice, thus creating silos for knowledge and practice of quality management in the university. Colleges have different approaches to quality management, and this is sometimes related to staff capacity for quality management in the colleges and departments.

Engagements among staff, and among staff and students, on quality management
The audit panel found little evidence to meaningfully comment on engagements among staff or staff and students on all aspects of quality management at UNISA. The issue is not considered in the SER and no related evidence is presented under Standard 8 in the portfolio of evidence. The issue was also not satisfactorily clarified during interviews with staff responsible for quality management.

Monitoring of systems and processes for quality management during times of disruption
The panel was positively impressed by UNISA's ability to sustain its teaching and assessment programmes during the Covid-19 restriction conditions of 2020 and 2021. It was clear that the university had harnessed its resources together with the goodwill of staff and students to ensure that students continued to engage with their learning and assessment tasks and to progress through their study programmes with as little disruption as possible. While UNISA managed well under the very difficult conditions, the situation had its problems.

Electronic information systems have focused the university's attention on plagiarism in student assessments around the world. Online examinations, rapidly implemented because of the Covid-19 restrictions, added a further dimension to this problem, namely, the difficulty of ensuring that students present their own work without support and advice from others. UNISA does not seem to have a platform for routine monitoring of changing patterns of plagiarism in student submissions, which presents a serious risk to the quality of student learning. The rapid implementation of online learning and assessment during Covid-19 was not accompanied by suitable staff capacity development in the use of these systems and pedagogies. In response to

this concern, the online proctoring system was implemented in the examinations for selected modules. However, as stated elsewhere in this report, many staff and students struggled with the functionality of the system. In some cases, the audit panel heard that students were allocated a mark of zero in an exam, based on the report from the proctoring system and this mark was made available to the student. Following complaints from the affected students, the mark was changed without explanation, which caused students to be suspicious of the revised mark too.

Members of the management team at UNISA were of the view that their pre-Covid-19 experience with blended learning had given them a head start in managing learning during the pandemic restriction conditions and that this has also spurred a leap to ODeL modes of delivery. It will therefore be important for UNISA to carefully document and reflect on its experiences with online forms of pedagogy and assessment as a rich resource for strategic planning with ODeL.

Recommendations

20. UNISA must address the risks that have been identified in the progress report on the 2020 online examinations.
21. The university must implement an online tool for monitoring and reporting on plagiarism and unacceptable support in online assessments. This should include a review of the online proctoring system to improve its functionality.

Conclusion for Standard 8
The panel found UNISA to be functional in the area covered by this Standard.

Focus area 3: The coherence and integration of the institutional quality management system supports the core academic functions

The four standards in Focus Area 3 concentrate on the coherence and integration of the various components comprising the institutional quality management system and on how these work in concert to support the likelihood of student success and improve the quality of learning, teaching and research engagement, as well as accommodating the results of constructive integrated community engagement in accordance with the institution's mission.

Standard 9:

An evidence-based coherent, reasonable, functional and meaningfully structured relationship exists between all components of the institutional quality management system.

An approved system monitors and evaluates the quality of the core functions of learning and teaching, research, and community engagement in the institution
The integrated quality management and assurance framework (IQMAF) is described in the SER. This system is based on an approved schedule of reviews of modules, programmes,

departments, and portfolios. Furthermore, the monitoring and evaluations of the QMS for teaching and learning, research and community engagement are done by means of the UQEI and peer reviews which occur through programme- and departmental reviews. From this description and from the interviews, it appears as if an extensive system is in place. However, as mentioned earlier, some of the policies have not been subjected to review in accordance with the required time cycles.

It was not clear was what quality management and assurance systems are in place to monitor and enhance student support and general student services. Student support seems to be an area that requires serious attention both in terms of information gleaned from the SER as well as from student and staff feedback during the earlier peer review panel visit. The audit panel interviews indicated that the university has a strong resolve to address the student support issues. It is clear that students are not always aware of the process for reporting issues or concerns, and even if they do know where and how to report such issues, they are not confident that their requests will be timeously addressed, if at all. They then typically contact the lecturer, placing additional burden on the academic staff to solve administrative and IT issues that are not necessarily their specific responsibilities. From the interviews, it also appeared that students are not aware of mechanisms to escalate complaints or queries should they not be satisfied with the response from the designated office.

Despite the extensive framework for quality management and assurance, the SER acknowledges the challenges around the design and implementation of the Quality Evaluation Instruments, including a lack of buy-in from internal stakeholders, the alignment of the instrument to academic processes rather than support and administrative processes, difficulty with interpreting the results and the perceived lack of alignment between programme reviews and module reviews. There also appears to be no structured assessments to identify problematic teaching and, where this occurs, it is unclear what strategies are in place to support and develop academics who are identified as being in need of teaching development support. These challenges were also confirmed in the report produced by an independent external panel of reviewers in 2021 on the UQEI (as included in the Portfolio of Evidence). In responding to the recommendations of the reviewers, UNISA should pay particular attention to:
- A closer internal alignment to limit areas of overlap and duplication to reduce the burden on stakeholders.
- The definition of the student's total learning experience.
- The unit of analysis (the module or the student's learning experience) should be clarified.
- Investigate the alignment of the instrument with departmental reviews.

Performance management of staff engaged in core and support academic functions
According to the SER, "… staff performance is tracked through an integrated PMS that is cascaded down to all members of staff that receive bi-annual reviews". However, the SER also acknowledges that the system does not cater for "performance development" as well as the "gap at levels below post level 4", i.e. "the need to align the templates to ensure that performance management is streamlined across the university". This lack of alignment and inconsistencies in the application of the performance management system between schools, colleges and departments were confirmed during the interviews with staff members. The SER also admits that "[w]hereas formal feedback sessions on performance between the staff and their line managers

are supposed to take place regularly, these are intermittently applied across the institution. The only feedback sessions that are taken seriously are the mid-year and end-of-year assessments as they are linked to incentives in the form of performance bonuses and salary notch adjustments". Even when these discussions take place where staff are held to account for the quality in the core academic functions, it became clear during the interviews with lecturers that lecturer evaluations and teaching load are often used as the only indicators to measure the quality of the core academic functions. There are no formal criteria for good teaching practice in place against which a lecturer's performance can be judged. Without a structured performance discussion using teaching criteria, potential areas for development of individual lecturers cannot be identified and specific measures and strategies cannot be put in place to support individual lecturers.

Although the devolved model of quality assurance in the schools is commendable to allow for a distributed system of quality assurance, the SER mentions duplications of roles and uncertainties in the functions allocated to each of the role players in quality (e.g. Tuition Managers, Research Heads, Academic Quality Heads and Quality Champions). This was further confirmed during the interviews, where the various role-players were also unclear about their specific responsibilities and the lines of accountability within the bigger institutional quality assurance system.

Integration of quality assurance measures with monitoring and enhancement of such measures
At the level of committee structures, the STLCEC and UQC are respectively responsible for academic quality matters, and quality matters pertaining to support and administrative departments. Although the SER states that the two monitoring systems have been effective, it does mention that it creates contestations and that the perceived competing roles need to be streamlined to optimise their effectiveness in quality assurance. These contestations and the lack of clarity were also confirmed in panel interviews during the site visit. This lack of streamlining can also lead to 'silo thinking' with regard to quality assurance matters and the inability to recognise the interdependence of different components of the quality assurance systems for academic- as well as support and administrative quality matters. This could also lead to lack of clarity of the ultimate responsibility and accountability for the overall quality assurance system because the reporting lines are to two different committee structures of Senate. Reporting on quality assurance matters also take place via the two different Vice-Principals. Although there is regular reporting at committee level, how the implementation of QA measures on ground level are measured and monitored remains a concern and the panel was not able to obtain assurance that quality assurance measures were suitably integrated with quality monitoring and enhancement taking place.

Evidence supports the notion that the quality management system in and across the core academic areas are integrated and not contradictory
The extensive and devolved nature of the existing IQMAF can both be a strength and a weakness. The strength resides in the evidence of extensive committee structures, policies and procedures being in place. However, this wide-ranging system also causes duplication, additional bureaucratic burden for staff, potential tensions and difficulty in actively monitoring which improvements have been implemented. This extensive administrative system could lead to increased workload of academic and support staff *without* necessarily improving the quality of

the core functions of the university. The duplication of lines of responsibility and accountability (committee structures and reporting lines) also causes the risk that if everyone is responsible for quality assurance, ultimately no-one takes on the final accountability for quality assurance. The recommendations above will hopefully assist UNISA to move to a more coherent, rationalised, functional and meaningfully structured relationship between all the components of the institutional quality management system.

Recommendations

22. UNISA must accelerate its efforts to address the quality management and assurance of student support services (e.g. IT, administrative) to provide an effective one-stop support point for students.
23. Within the devolved model of quality assurance in the colleges and departments, clear role descriptions and responsibilities must be formalised for each of the roles (e.g. Tuition Managers, Research Heads, Academic Quality Heads and Quality Champions) in the institutional quality assurance system.
24. UNISA must review its quality assurance committee structures (Senate and Council committees and reporting lines), support structures (Department of Quality Assurance and Enhancement, the Directorate Institutional Quality Assurance and Enhancement and the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Unit) and VP reporting lines to ensure greater streamlining, reduced duplication and clearer lines of responsibility and accountability for the overarching quality assurance and management system.

Conclusion for Standard 9
The panel found that UNISA needs substantial improvement in the area covered by this Standard.

Standard 10

Evidence-based regular and dedicated governance and management oversight of the quality assurance system exists.

Lines of authority and accountability of staff involved in quality management and quality-related functions
In terms of the governance and management oversight, UNISA's SER states that "UNISA statutes make provisions for the establishment of joint committees of Council and Senate in the management of the Academic Project". However, it was not clear to the audit panel, neither from the SER nor from the interviews, which of these bodies are ultimately responsible for quality assurance in respect of the academic project. This matter has been discussed above but in the context of this standard, the concern bears repeating that the joint responsibility of Council and Senate over academic matters creates the possibility of role ambiguity in accountability for the governance and management of the quality enhancement systems.
The panel was also concerned that full professors are not automatically members of Senate but rather represented through a small number of elected members. The panel was informed that an important reason for this arrangement was the large number of full professors at UNISA.

However, there were 301 full professors at UNISA in 2019 which did not seem to be unusually large to warrant the decision. The significant reduction in the number of full professors present raises the concern that Senate, where the ultimate academic oversight should reside, may be dominated by management and staff not directly related to the core academic project. It was argued that many of the managers or senior administrators who are members of Senate are themselves professors. However, this does not resolve the concern since such members join Senate in their management capacity, as 'ex-officio' members, rather than as senior academics, accountable only for the quality of the core academic project. The panel was of the view that this matter requires further consideration and possible review by UNISA.

Reporting and celebrating good practice at various levels of the institution
The SER does not provide any formal process or criteria to identify good practice in teaching and learning and community engagement. Only the process of reward is explained in the SER. None of the staff members interviewed could point to criteria used in the performance evaluations or the recognition and reward of good teaching, learning and community engagement. It was therefore unclear to the panel how good practice is recognised in the absence of such criteria.

Non-compliance with the quality assurance system is identified and dealt with appropriately at various levels of the institution
The regions have done well in implementing the Best Reflective Practice (BRP) initiative as well as establishing the Region Community of Practice to share good practice and reflect on improvements required. Unfortunately, it does seem as if insufficient strategic direction is provided by the central UNISA office to the regions who often feel that they have to develop their own initiatives to address challenges in the quality of student learning, especially during Covid-19 restrictions.

UNISA admits the need to include mechanisms for the quality assurance of community engagement as well as in the full range of work of the Research Innovation and Commercialisation Department. The Audit panel urges UNISA to do so as a matter of urgency.

Accountability of the executive management for all components of quality management of the institution
In the SER, UNISA refers to the "structural inefficiencies" that are a result of the duplication of reporting. On the one hand, the structures that manage quality are decentralised at college, department- and regional levels but are also centralised around institutional portfolios that report to Senate sub-committees that in turn report to Senate. This duplication and the resultant-inefficiencies were confirmed during the onsite interviews. As alluded to in the discussion of Standard 9 as well, this duplication is a serious quality risk and, according to SER, "creates obstructions and sluggishness in the quality enhancement system, which limits the institution's agility and flexibility in managing its quality processes". While executive managers at UNISA are subjected to annual performance reviews for the functions in their portfolios, in this environment of ambivalence around accountability for quality management, the audit panel is concerned about the value of the performance review as a mechanism for ensuring accountability.

Recommendations

25. UNISA must investigate and resolve the apparent role ambiguity and ultimate accountability of Senate and Council in the governance and management oversight of the quality enhancement systems.
26. UNISA must ensure that institution-specific criteria for good teaching and community engagement are reviewed, properly communicated to staff and used as the basis for reflecting on the academic performance of staff and for reward and recognition of good performance.

Conclusion for Standard 10

The panel found that UNISA needs substantial improvement in the area covered by this Standard.

Standard 11

Planning and processes exist for the reasonable and functional allocation of resources to all components of the institutional quality management system.

Annual budgeting process and funding for quality assurance measures

The SER provides suitable information on a series of budgetary allocations for the design and implementation of the institution's quality assurance measures and processes, which were confirmed during the panel interviews. For example, the panel was informed that in 2019, R 2.8 million was provided for the Commonwealth of Learning audit, the precursor to the CHE institutional audit. Additionally, in 2019, R15 million was allocated for "the promotion and enhancement of quality" in the university's colleges. Furthermore, the SER indicates that the university's Academic Quality Assurance Department annually budgets for all internal quality assurance processes. This was confirmed during the interviews conducted with staff members. These are substantial budget allocations and it was clear that institutional quality assurance receives proper attention in the budgeting process at UNISA.

Nevertheless, the panel felt that insufficient information was provided in the SER, and during the interviews, on measurements for the effectiveness of such budget allocations, that would allow for more targeted budget allocation to the quality assurance function in the future. UNISA should give thought to assessment and analysis of the intentions of the funded project and an evaluation of the impact on quality assurance. It was also difficult for the audit panel to determine how annual allocations for the institution's quality assurance commitments are calculated and how it is distributed across entities. This was mainly because of a lack of detail in respect of any systematic efforts at monitoring and evaluating the quality management interventions implemented.

Budget allocations and institutional value for quality management

The institution uses the ACHRAM to determine and fund its academic human resources needs. Despite the reservations expressed by deans and other staff members interviewed by the panel, while some of the parameters of the model may require consideration and adjustment, the model appears logical and, on the face of it, can indeed ensure the "optimal allocation and utilisation of the university's academic human resources" in pursuit of the institution's student success, research and community engagement mandates. As mentioned above, the budget allocations to quality management are substantial and, on its own, reflect a significant commitment on the part of UNISA to improving the quality of its academic activities.

Annual planning of the academic workload

According to the information provided in the SER, planning of the workload allocation for academics takes place on an annual basis and largely at the level of the institution's colleges. Furthermore, it is reported that the workload allocation of academics "takes into consideration reasonable staff-student ratio [and] the time required for research and community engagement". The academic workload allocation also takes place through consultation. However, weaknesses in the university's workload allocation system, such as the following are highlighted in the SER:

- The institution's academic workload allocation system appears "to have many grey areas and unequal distribution of work, which tends to favour the most senior academics".
- Due to poor communication between the university's Human Resources department and academic departments, the appointment of external moderators and markers tends to be onerous and "hindered by delays". This obviously has an impact on the actual work allocation of the university's full-time academics.

Workload issues also impact on quality management at UNISA. At the college- and department levels, it seems that the quality management role of academic staff is compromised by a heavy academic workload. Inefficiencies in the system have overloaded academic staff with administration duties, and the generally expressed experience is that the administrative departments do not sufficiently support academic staff. Students refer administrative enquiries to the academic staff because of lack of response from the administrative units; academics often receive requests to submit reports or information that are already available elsewhere; the administrative workload is not properly accommodated in the workload model; academics spend undue time following up with support departments on matters such as delays in release of student results; workload is added incrementally without consultation; academics do not have access to the marks management system and often have to follow up on issues such as students incorrectly being recorded as having missed examinations. As an example of the problem, the panel heard of an instance where 1st year students were registered for 3rd year modules after being told by the registering administrative staff that pre-requisite requirements were to be ignored due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, 250 students had to be de-registered from modules and academic staff were required to communicate with students. Furthermore, the pressure to be a research-intensive university carries a risk to quality in that, with this level of workload, academic staff may decide to focus on their research activities and pay only minimum attention to teaching and learning to meet performance requirements.

While the frank account of the academic work allocation in the SER (as well as in the draft report, *Towards the development of the Institutional Work Allocation Model*, contained in the PoE) is acknowledged, the information provided raises the following questions:

- What are the norms that guide the allocation of students to academic staff members in colleges and the support that is provided to academic staff in relation to the number of students they teach and assess?
- When will the university's revised workload framework be finalised and will it address the unequal work distribution referred to in the SER?
- Given the 2022 reality of the undergraduate student make-up of UNISA and the increased demands that this places on the university staff, should this not be a basis for an engagement between UNISA and the DHET about an improvement in the funding model for UNISA as a distance mode institution?

Allocation of academic workload in relation to staff-student ratios as well as research and community engagement expectations

As indicated in the relevant documents in the PoE, the institution has, on the surface, a fairly considered workload allocation model. Furthermore, as indicated above, the institution reports that the academic workload allocation takes staff-student ratios into consideration. However, insufficient detail is provided in respect of what these ratios are, what is considered reasonable and how these ratios are adjusted in relation to research and community engagement expectations of academic staff. Given the institution's transition to an e-learning approach, reasoned and well-consulted approach to the appropriate ratios will be critical if UNISA is to measure and monitor the adequacy of its workload allocation approach. Nevertheless, the positive tenor of the draft report, *Towards the development of the Institutional Work Allocation Model*, indicates that the university is on the right track in this regard.

Recommendations

27. UNISA must finalise its revised workload framework as soon as possible so as to address both the actual anomalies and the sense of unfairness in the current workload allocation model.
28. UNISA must review its Human Resources Strategy and related support departments to improve the effectiveness of their responses to the needs of its academic entities, in ways that enhance its quality assurance capabilities.

Conclusion for Standard 11

The panel found UNISA to be functional in the area covered by this Standard.

Standard 12

The quality assurance system achieves its purpose efficiently and effectively.

Use of annual resources allocations to the quality management system
According to the SER, all academic, support and professional entities at the university have to ensure that their quality management processes are adequately resourced. This was in fact echoed by several staff members interviewed by the audit panel. Furthermore, as described in the SER, the systems employed to resource the quality management processes appear to be logical and appropriately aimed at improving the quality of teaching and learning. However, the SER lists the following two caveats in respect of the institution's use of resources for quality management:

- "More focused impact assessment to ascertain whether the resources are adding value to practice" should be considered.
- "A possible area of enhancement would be more regular quality performance conversations to ensure regular monitoring and reporting on performance."

Both these caveats point to a reassuring level of reflexivity on the part of the institution. Nonetheless, the second caveat raises a concern. Already it appears as though the institution's quality management processes are overly cumbersome and bureaucratised. The institution should therefore guard against the possibility of the implementation of quality performance conversations leading to the further bureaucratisation of its quality management processes.

A further concern relates to the fact that, while the institution appears to be doing its best to consistently employ the resources that it ring-fences for their intended purpose, this has not always resulted in the desired outcomes. For example, in 2021, as indicated in the SER and as became apparent during the course of the interviews, the Human Resources Department appeared to struggle with processing payments for the human resources required for the institution's quality management functions.

Performance management to ensure that resources allocated to quality management are appropriately utilised
At various points in the SER, the institution confirms that its performance management processes include an assessment of the use of the resources allocated to quality management so as to ensure optimal impact. However, the institution acknowledges that "an institutional impact study should be conducted to evaluate the value-add of the quality initiatives … to ensure that the system moves … to maturity".

Stakeholder engagements and reporting to ensure that resources allocated to quality management add value to the institution
The SER indicates that a range of stakeholders are involved in the institution's quality management processes and that stakeholder engagement is extensive. Nonetheless, while a number of stakeholders interviewed by the audit panel appeared to have a good grasp of the institution's quality management processes and of their own roles in these processes, some stakeholders did not have a good understanding of the contents of the institution's SER.

Furthermore, the institution's acknowledgment in the SER that the need for students to "continuously engage on (sic) UNISA's social media platforms on [its] areas of strength and limitations" indicates that its engagement with these stakeholders in respect of matters pertaining to quality is less than optimal. Indeed, at various points in the SER, the institution indicates an awareness of the inadequacy of the communication channels available to students to register feedback in respect of the quality of services. As a result, the institution has recently launched an intervention aimed at addressing this challenge. It should be noted that students have an opportunity to provide feedback in respect of the quality of teaching by means of student module evaluations. No problems are recorded in this regard. However, following scrutiny of the SER based on the interviews conducted, it is not clear how student module evaluations are used to enhance or revise modules and programmes.

Recommendations

29. As suggested in the SER, UNISA must undertake a comprehensive impact assessment to ascertain whether the resources allocated for quality management are effectively employed.
30. UNISA must ensure the implementation of a process aimed at the systematic monitoring and evaluation of all quality management interventions implemented.
31. UNISA must evaluate whether the turn-around strategy aimed at improving the channels available to students to provide the institution with feedback on the quality of its academic offerings and support services is having the desired effect.

Conclusion for Standard 12
The panel found UNISA to be functional in the area covered by this Standard.

Focus area 4: Curriculum development, learning and teaching support the likelihood of student success

The four standards in Focus Area 4 concentrate on how effectively the institutional quality management system enhances the likelihood of student success, improves learning and teaching and supports the scholarship of learning and teaching. These standards drill down in greater detail in Focus Area 2.

Standard 13

An effective institutional system for programme design, approval, delivery, management and review is in place.

Open, Distance and eLearning (ODeL)
UNISA understands and presents itself as a comprehensive ODeL institution. As a pioneer in the use of distance learning methods for programme design, development and delivery, its adoption of eLearning underscores the university's intention to make increasing use of digital technologies

to offer learning opportunities to those who, for various reasons, are unable to commit to conventional campus-based educational practices. In recent times though, in its adoption of ODeL methods, UNISA has demonstrated that it is no longer an alternative destination only for adult or mature-age learners without any prior formal higher education and training, but an institution of choice for both adults and first-time entry tertiary education students. The opportunities for learning that UNISA provides afford students the capacity to make choices about their lives and livelihoods which would not have been possible for them without it. UNISA's contribution in this regard is not only ground-breaking but clearly different from that of other South African tertiary education institutions.

Open, distance and eLearning comprise a range of teaching and learning methods that are identifiable by open access to educational opportunities, the use of open learning and teaching strategies and the adoption of open scholarship and open educational practices. However, despite its claims as a comprehensive ODeL institution, UNISA's operational model for learning and teaching is unclear and confusing. In the SER, the university claims that "UNISA states its commitments to improve the quality and access to higher education through the *distance mode* of delivery" and further notes that "It does this by using a blended model of teaching, learning and development" with the adoption of "remote modes of teaching". The claims to ODeL are bold but not clear, and the concepts were not fully articulated in the SER and in the interviews. The figure on page 135 of the SER is also not helpful in understanding UNISA's philosophical approach to teaching and learning, particularly because the aspects apply equally to contact universities and are not particularly located in an ODeL framework.

It is necessary that UNISA develops a clear and consistent message about its operational model for programme design and delivery, especially taking account of the following features of a possible model:

- *Open access* refers to inclusive and equal access to educational opportunities without barriers such as prior educational qualifications and the ability to pay. It is unclear how, and to what extent this attribute is embedded in UNISA's admissions criteria and the recruitment of students across the institution. This may require reconsideration (with the appropriate Ministerial authorities) of the current legal requirements for admission of students based on Ministerial regulation, in addition to the opportunities presented by RPL for student admission.
- *Open learning* refers to the possibilities of learning anytime, anywhere and at any pace. While this is generally possible within the ODeL framework, learning and teaching at UNISA still takes place within specified time frames, programmes and cohorts. The extent to which the idea of open learning can be personalised, needs careful consideration and articulation across various disciplines. This will need to include consideration of options such as the use of alternative pathways with micro-credentials, along with conventional curriculum programme arrangements. This requires further consideration of the meaning of *flexible learning*, which is a fundamental feature of open, distance and e-learning.
- *Open scholarship* refers to the adoption of a culture of sharing and the release of educational resources under an open license scheme (i.e., OER), which permits no-cost access, use, adaptation and redistribution of these resources by others. The

extent to which this concept is adopted at UNISA is unclear. It needs definition, articulation and integration as part of an ODeL model.

While the adoption of eLearning in the university's programmes opens up new opportunities for teaching and learning, it does demand sustained and adequate resourcing, without which it can become an impediment. A clear roadmap for the adoption of information and communications technology in teaching and learning, the related online LMS and its continued support through the resource allocation model will be crucial.

The adoption of eLearning has direct implications for assessment of students' achievement of their learning outcomes and the provision of feedback to them. This requires the development of clear policies and guidelines, as well as processes and procedures around academic integrity and the judicious use of online proctoring tools. Currently, these are neither clear nor uniform across programmes, colleges and the institution and the panel heard both high praise and serious complaint about the functionality of the current proctoring system.

In relation to all of these attributes—but especially the university's core operational model for learning and teaching and the important role of information and communications technology, UNISA needs to develop a systemic as well as a systematic approach to the on-boarding of staff and students. Failure to do so will result in mixed messaging, patchy roll-out and considerable anguish and frustration. This is particularly problematic for learners with educational disadvantage and those living with disabilities.

UNISA's expertise and resources in ODeL (such as the UNESCO Chair in ODL and the Institute of ODL etc.), as well as Directorates of Curriculum Design and Development, Instructional Support and Services, Lifelong Learning, and Information and Communications Technology need to be better integrated into the process of re-imagining and re-engineering curriculum and pedagogical approaches on the path to becoming a comprehensive ODeL institution. These resources are currently too poorly coordinated for them to properly realise their potential and achieve institution-wide impact.

A clear message on the university's core business model for programme-design,-development, -approval and -management from the Executive and Senior Management through to regional Centre Directors is critical, and needs to be communicated, socialised and adequately supported. Having Regional Centre Directors (who are in academic support roles) reporting to the Registrar, for instance, rather than to the Vice Principal (Academic or Teaching and Learning), or an equivalent person in the academic portfolio seems inappropriate.

Commendation

b. UNISA is commended for the manner in which arrangements were put in place to sustain its teaching and assessment activities despite the Covid-19 restrictions. The commitment of students and staff at UNISA to ensuring the functionality of the process is also to be commended.

Recommendations

32. UNISA must develop a clear, and a consistent message about its core operational model for programme-design and -delivery along crucial dimensions of open, distance and e-Learning on matters such as open access, open learning, open scholarship and open educational practices.
33. UNISA must clearly articulate and communicate its core business model for programme-design, -development, -approval and -management from the Executive and Senior Management through to regional Centre Directors. This must include communication of a clear roadmap for the adoption of ICT in teaching and learning, especially in its online learning management system.

Conclusion for Standard 13
The panel found UNISA to be functional in the area covered by this Standard.

Standard 14

There is evidence-based engagement at various institutional levels, among staff, and among staff and students, with:

> *a. curriculum transformation, curriculum reform and renewal;*
> *b. learning and teaching innovation; and*
> *c. the role of technology (1) in the curriculum, (2) in the world of work, and (3) in society in general.*

Curriculum design and development
Curriculum is often misrepresented and misunderstood as comprising the content of the subject matter, when in fact it is about a lot more than that. A more enlightened and comprehensive view of curriculum comprises the complex interplay of subject matter, knowledge and identity, teaching and learning, and the communicational phenomenon. Seen in this manner, curriculum is about the whole of the student learning experience and in the case of UNISA, this is particularly complex. Its design and development need to go beyond the selection of the content of the subject matter — which is a critical component of the learning experience — but insufficient on its own.

The panel found that there is significant variability in understanding among academic staff about what comprises the curriculum, how best it can be developed, taught and learned across the various disciplines. A clear, consistent and properly nuanced view of curriculum needs to be developed and socialised among all stakeholders, including teachers, learners and academic support staff across the university.

Reference to the adoption of a Team Approach to the design and development of the curriculum

at UNISA is a positive development. The composition of the team its and modus operandi were however unclear. For example, it was difficult to understand aspects such as:

- the kinds of skill-sets that are required of the members of a course team;
- the guidelines for the work of the course team and how these are enforced;
- the consistency with which such guidelines are applied across colleges and departments;
- the resources that are available to course teams across the institution and in the different colleges, and the consistency in availability of such resources across the various colleges;
- measures of the influence of the course team process in curriculum design, development and transformation, including the development of the expected graduate attributes.

It seems that UNISA should develop a clearer structure, framework and reporting lines for course teams to be accountable to an academic lead in Senior Management such as the Vice Principal responsible for teaching and learning.

There is mention of the term "Epistemic Justice" in the SER but it is not clear what is meant by this concept or how is it operationalised across different colleges and discipline areas. It is also not clear how this concept relates to curriculum components like cultural and linguistic considerations, workplace-based learning and work-integrated learning. It is important that UNISA reflects on this concept because, while it may direct an institutional approach to admissions policy, the high drop-out rate of undergraduate students at UNISA raises questions about the reach of the intended justice initiative.

It was also not clear to the panel how monitoring and evaluation of the curriculum is carried out and supported across the colleges and departments. Ideally this should include a process for external validation and benchmarking, as well as input from professional bodies and associations on the suitability of the curriculum for employability.

Learning and teaching

In its approach to pedagogy, UNISA claims to subscribe to a constructivist approach to teaching and learning and it is important that the university has recognised the need for a philosophical approach to this important aspect of its work. This is commendable. However, this approach requires further explication. It is easy to claim to be adopting a broad theoretical construct such as this, but quite another to clearly articulate its implementation across various discipline areas. There is also no rationale provided for adopting a constructivist approach and how the institutional approach responds to proponents as well as opponents of the approach. There is also no evidence that the implications of constructivism were considered for the assessment of learning achievement, nor of the possibility of alternative or complementary theoretical constructs that could be adopted.

Furthermore, it is important to consider how constructivism applies across disciplines such as the humanities and the natural sciences, and the willingness of academics in different disciplines to adopt such an approach. The approach requires the development and implementation of rigorous

guidelines to direct and support the work of academics in the institution. Without this level of articulation, such broad theoretical constructs are not very helpful, and likely to be misrepresented at the coalface.

While constructivism can provide a useful basis for an approach to teaching and learning, UNISA needs to develop a clearer structure and framework that will guide the implementation of learning and teaching design and curriculum renewal in each college, based on a constructivist approach.

The role of technology in teaching and learning
As a comprehensive Open, Distance and eLearning institution, UNISA is signalling the role of e-Learning in its operational model as a positive development for the institution. The implementation of this agenda however, across the colleges currently remains aspirational at best.

The SER suggests that the incorporation of ICT in the student experience requires the work of many contributing departments. In such a case, it is not clear to the panel who takes overall accountability for things like the hosting and maintenance of the educational technologies ecosystem, including the Learning Management System and their adoption and integration in teaching and learning, given the size and complexity of the institution. There does not seem to be a coherent and integrated institution-wide policy which is benchmarked against internationally recognised standards and criteria and which clearly articulates the attributes of technology-enhanced learning and teaching. For example, it is not clear what use is being made of OER (Open Education Resources) and OEP (Open Educational Practices) by academic staff or the kinds of professional development support that is provided to academic staff for the adoption and integration of new and evolving technological approaches in teaching and learning.

A comprehensive and carefully articulated plan for the integration of ICT in teaching and learning in each college reporting to an academic lead in Senior Management such as Vice Principal responsible for teaching and learning is critical.

The scholarship of teaching and learning
UNISA is clearly a national leader in the use of open and distance education for social change and the empowerment of educationally disadvantaged and underprivileged students. Its adoption of eLearning as part of this modus operandi is equally appropriate and noteworthy. However, its roll-out of open and distance learning in the colleges is not clearly articulated.

There seems to be disagreement on the identity of the institution—reflecting a tussle between its form and function as an ODeL institution and one that is uniquely different from all other tertiary educational institutions in the country, on the one hand, and its aspirations to emulate other comprehensive tertiary educational institutions in the country on the other. In interviews with staff, the panel sensed a wish for UNISA to be seen as no different from other South African universities when it actually *is* quite different. Of course, both aspects of an institutional identity are possible given the global adoption by universities of on-line or blended approaches to teaching and learning, recently spurred on by the Covid-19 restrictions.

UNISA's adoption of the idea of Engaged Scholarship—Transforming the Academy is equally

positive. Presumably this includes the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). This requires a comprehensive and carefully articulated plan for its roll-out in each college in which contributions to Engaged Scholarship, including SoTL, is valued equally along with other academic pursuits and embedded in appointments and promotions processes.

This kind of positioning will require appropriate policies to be in place, as well as their socialisation via the offices of an academic lead in Senior Management such as the Vice Principal responsible for teaching and learning, as well as academic leadership within the colleges.

Recommendations

34. UNISA must review its policies and processes around curriculum design and development to ensure that these adequately reflect the university's claims and aspirations as a comprehensive ODeL institution. This should include the development of clear and consistent messaging around issues such as "epistemic justice" and "decolonisation" of the curriculum.
35. The use of a team approach to curriculum design and development must be more clearly articulated in its adoption processes and its acculturation across the institution.
36. UNISA must undertake a review and renewal of policies around learning and teaching to include clarity on the roles and responsibilities for the adoption and integration of ICT and technology-enhanced teaching and learning. This should be benchmarked and continuously evaluated against internationally recognised standards and criteria. The renewal process must include a plan for integration of ICT in teaching and learning, especially for on-boarding and the development of academic staff and students.
37. The staffing and promotion value of scholarly contributions to teaching and learning, alongside 'traditional' research and other academic pursuits, needs to be established and made clear. This will include how these contributions are assessed and recognised in the appointment and the promotion of both academic and support staff across the university's colleges.

Conclusion for Standard 14

The panel found that UNISA needs substantial improvement in the area covered by this Standard.

Standard 15

The students' exposure to learning and teaching at the institution, across all sites and modes of provision, is experienced as positive and enabling of their success.

Student exposure to learning and teaching at the institution
Meetings with students, graduates, alumni and academic staff provided a very varied set of accounts concerning the quality of the student experience. At the early stage of study, it is clear that the registration process is poorly aligned with institutional capacity planning. Registrations

are accepted at a very late stage even after the semester start, which it is feared leads to poor chances of success in reality for significant numbers of students. The panel was concerned that, while there is opportunity in principle for a wide range of applicants from across the country, the recruitment and registration processes are not managed with the *educational* outcomes in mind and it is possible that the promise offered by UNISA in terms of the recruitment and registration is not made a reality by the admission and student support system. This is part of the range of challenges that contributes to the poor student success and qualification rates, as generally acknowledged in the SER.

Innovative areas of practice are worthy of commendation, including the use of a massive open online course (MOOC) before starting study at undergraduate level. This innovative practice is directed at student preparedness for study as well as combining the use of new technologies for learning in a targeted way that bears positively on student success. But this is not a widespread practice and emphasises the inconsistency in quality and commitment to supporting a positive student experience.

Some modules at undergraduate level are allocated a tutor to provide student support, under a category of 'at risk' modules. This category is applied to a small number of modules deemed to be at risk because of low pass rates. However, the requirement for this at-risk categorisation is set quite low and only about 2% of UNISA modules fell into this category. Tutor support is widely regarded as essential in modern distance and online learning, providing a bridge between learning materials, and offering individual- and group support of a personal kind. Consideration should be given to embedding this practice as core to student support and not restricted to a minority of courses that are deemed to be particularly 'at risk'. Large scale institutions such as UNISA have to consider the scale and cost-effectiveness of mass systems but must be combined with a personalisation strategy that allows the student to feel recognised and supported as an individual. It is true that this increases operating costs for the institution, but the approach is essential if higher levels of student success are to be realised. The costs of such a strategic approach to learning support must be measured against its benefits and the reduced total 'cost' of unsuccessful or drop-out students.

In addition to this marginal tutor role for 'at risk' modules, UNISA provides learning services from e-tutors, support directly from a module lecturer, support of an individual or group in Regional Centres in writing skills and counselling, and support from the Student Retention Unit. The panel heard from students who have had a good experience of study, especially at Master's and Doctoral levels. But these categories of students make up only 2.18% of the student body, according to the SER. However, the panel also heard the concerns of a number of Higher Certificate and undergraduate students, the great majority of students in UNISA, who had not had a good experience, and who were distressed by the complexity and unresponsiveness of the Student Support systems. The panel heard particularly strong comments from students who had not received timely replies to emails over extended periods, or had not received answers at all, and from those who did not understand how to access the services they needed. UNISA acknowledges the complexity of the institution as a factor inhibiting quality issues and staff spoke of the 'silo effect' of so many organisational units which fail to communicate or to cooperate. UNISA needs to undertake an institutional-level examination of the range of services for students with a view to rationalising the overall field of activity, its span of management and the nature of

the blend of face-to-face and online channels. This would include an examination of the different reporting lines for regional centres and colleges, when so much of the work of the regional centres is educational rather than administrative. The aim would be to make the Student Walk programme simple to manage for the student, from recruitment through to qualification, with clear and simple signage to the support services that she or he needs, which are delivered with consistent high quality, recognised standards of performance and avenues for complaint.

An important goal in a vision of a reformed Student Support system is the consistency of high-quality services. The panel heard evidence to the effect that there are high quality services for students, but not consistently so. For example, services from the Disabled Student Unit were highly regarded by some, but highly criticised by others. It has also said that not all UNISA buildings have suitable access for students with disability. It is clear however that a university with a commitment to home-based study is likely to attract a high number of students with disability as it may well be their only avenue for academic ambitions. It is essential to ensure that the promise made to students with disability of support and success is made a reality for all. In the spirit of 'universal design,' this attention to services for students with disability is likely to lead to an improvement in quality of services for all.

Underpinning the delivery of services to students in a contemporary, large-scale, blended and online university is the management of data to analyse performance of students across a range of characteristics, to intervene to support individual students deemed to need help, and to revise services in the light of that analysis. It is clear that UNISA collects feedback from students at the end of the module and while it is noted that this is not completely universal, adding weight to the critique of lack of consistency, it does seem to be widespread.

Nevertheless, the panel was not able to establish that the analysis of this data has led to quality enhancement during module- and programme-review. Equally, while UNISA collects a wide range of data about students, this data is not organised in such a way that it can be interrogated so that analysis of student performance by gender, geography, occupation, disability, etc. can be made. The field of learning analytics is highly important, and it is recommended that there be investment in its development in order to support greater consistency of services and targeted intervention in support of students. At the same time, it should be noted that there are significant ethical issues in the use of learning analytics, as regards privacy and in particular with regard to judging future student performance. Nonetheless, learning analytics is essential in a large-scale online university and the audit panel recommends its development in terms of systems and its application in terms of practice for student support.

It is clear that UNISA records both student success and student drop-out or non-completion, the latter of which are unfortunately in the majority. UNISA acknowledges that these are challenging outcomes, with very varied rates of student success at module level for 2020, ranging by college, from 58.12% to 88.6%. It is to be commended that the Student Retention Unit has been established specially to improve student outcomes, and that the trend has improved across all programmes by more than 13% in the years 2016-2020. This is an example of focused and innovative intervention that delivers positive results. The low levels of communication between the Student Retention Unit and the Regional Centres is noted, even though they have some duplicated activities with very similar aims. Nonetheless student drop out and student non-

completion rates remain unacceptably high.

The panel has questions as to whether the definition of module- and qualification-completion are adequate, and further are unclear as to why the ambition for qualification completion is not conceived as being able to reach above 16% (as stated in Figure 49, SER, p. 169). It is essential in a university that has UNISA's laudable social justice ambition that definitions of student success and qualification are made in the most transparent and accurate way. While the panel commends the intention to improve student success rates, which in the very recent period, has had some success, UNISA must continually revisit what can be achieved – what is the scale of change and improvement that can be aimed for – along with the criteria with which standards are defined. In combination with reform of the recruitment and registration processes, this would be a powerful programme of improvement in student throughput and success.

The panel is not confident that the student voice is consistently heard at all levels and across all parts of the university. It notes that in the SER, the student representative structure (NSRC) is referred to only once and only to the effect that it organises protests. In listening to NSRC representatives, it was clear that they had serious and responsible contributions to make to the improvement of services to students. On the other hand, at levels in the university with more direct student interactions and in the regional centres, it seems that students are more actively in discussion with academic- and support-staff, and that their opinions were more seriously considered.

Some staff commented that teaching and student support were not adequately recognised in the reward of performance and promotion. Further, personal financial reward for the publication of journal articles over and above salary, may have the serious negative consequence of suggesting that teaching and student support is of a lesser priority and divert academic staff behaviour away from student learning support towards higher publication outputs. This would be a highly damaging development in a university whose mission is primarily delivered through its teaching. In many teaching-focused universities, it is possible to gain promotion up to professorship through excellence primarily in teaching, with research in a secondary place. UNISA must undertake a review of its reward and promotion criteria for teaching and student support, not at the expense of UNISA's research ambitions, but to ensure that teaching and student support remain areas of work for which excellence at the highest level can be appropriately rewarded, and which remain at the pinnacle of staff commitment.

It should not go unrecorded that Library Services received praise from a wide range of students, both in terms of online resources and individual student support.

In summary for this crucial standard, the reform of student support is core to the effective delivery of institutional mission. The panel commends the institutional response during the Covid-19 restrictions as well as innovations such as the Student Retention Unit and the improvement in student success rates. But there have been too many years of weakness in student support in a university devoted to inclusion and access for this reform to be anything other than urgent.

The audit panel agrees with the SER that the performance in this Standard is no more than functional. The move to making performance against this Standard mature is as overdue as it is

essential.

Commendation

c. UNISA is commended for the innovative use of MOOCs and online learning platforms for the academic orientation of first-year students to assist them in preparing for teaching and learning in an ODeL environment.

Recommendations

41. A major review of the organisational structures, management reach and lines of accountability for Student Support must be undertaken as a matter of urgency with a view to improving integration, coherence and consistency of quality from the student perspective. This review should particularly include improvement of the services for students with disability.
42. The tutor system currently in place for 'At Risk' modules must be extended to *all* undergraduate courses in UNISA. This could be done incrementally, starting with modules with the lowest student success rates but should become normal practice in the medium to long-term.
43. UNISA must undertake a review of its promotion and reward criteria to remove the perception that excellence in teaching and student learning support is of lower priority than activities such as research and community engagement.

Conclusion for Standard 15
The panel found UNISA to be functional in the area covered by this Standard.

Standard 16

Institutions engage with and reflect on the employability of their graduates in a changing world.

Engagement and reflection on the employability of graduates in a changing world
The great majority of UNISA students will in all probability be motivated by their wish to ensure a livelihood and build a rewarding career. As a university where large student numbers include a small but significant proportion of part-time adult learners, this is a very important dimension of the student experience.

UNISA clearly has a serious commitment to employability and has used a range of approaches to deliver on this. These include employability studies and Graduate Destination surveys. The colleges are expected to submit improvement plans as a result of employability surveys and it is clear there are systems to allow a competent review of practice as a result of the survey evidence.

At the same time the SER notes that a more systematic approach to Graduate Destination Surveys is necessary and, with regard to Regional Employability Studies that the College of Economic and Management Sciences undertook, these surveys could have benefited from

gaining employer views. In the spirit of quality enhancement, UNISA should develop its survey design process for both Graduate destinations and Employability Studies by benchmarking its standards against those conducted at other universities to ensure that best current practice is in place.

A number of other instances in the SER demonstrate an embedded concern with the employability of UNISA's students. These include the Work Readiness Workshops in the East London Regional Centre, which are cited as best practice in the SER, as well as the Western Cape Regional Hub presentation of online events for the development of 'soft' skills to support work readiness. There was however also the observation that this programme of work in the regional centres is developed without connection to the curriculum, and that such programmes may be strengthened if such connections were reinforced.

The SER also notes the existence of significant Work Integrated Learning components in a range of colleges in the university, with study-employment placements for students supported by relevant quality assurance measures. What is described as experiential learning in the workplace will, if well managed, greatly enhance employability.

It was also suggested that collaboration across regional centres in developing a coherent provision of support for employability and work readiness is limited. With the move to online delivery making regional definitions of student engagement less relevant, it would be appropriate to investigate to what extent the regional centres could deliver a *national* programme of support based on more structured collaboration.

Absent from the discussion with staff at UNISA was support for unemployed students, or a curriculum offering designed specifically to support the unemployed. It is reported that 10% of alumni are unemployed, as are just under one third of all enrolled students. This is therefore a major student life context and deserves recognition. It was also reported that in 2021, 35.3% of the adult working-age population in South Africa were unemployed. Support for students and graduates entering the workplace must therefore be developed in full recognition of the characteristic of a high-unemployment economy. It is at the same time noted that only 22% of UNISA graduates felt their programmes had supported entrepreneurship, which would support job creation for themselves and others. In applicants' absence of experience or skills for available jobs, UNISA should consider how it can give greater focus to developing programmes that support unemployed adults.

It is essential that UNISA reflects on what employability and graduateness is for all programmes, not only those which have a clear vocational outcome, especially in light of the observation in the SER that only 22.9% of graduates from the College of Human Sciences were employed in their field of study. This makes it essential that the range of transferable skills that graduates have undoubtedly developed through study are explicitly identified and further developed for them, so that they can with confidence seek work in a wide range of employment sectors.

Recommendations

41. UNISA must ensure that its graduate survey instruments are benchmarked against that of other, similar higher education institutions, locally and internationally.

42. UNISA must consider how it can better prepare students for employment, both before and after they graduate, through initiatives that strengthen their employability and expose them to employment opportunities. In this regard, it is important to develop a coherent, institutionally developed approach that incorporates the work of regional centres and allows for region-specific variations.

Conclusion for Standard 16
The panel found UNISA to be functional in the area covered by this Standard.

4. Conclusion

The audit panel found that UNISA has not lost sight of its long tradition of providing opportunities for higher education studies to people, young and old, who do not have the resources (time, money, accessibility, etc) for full-time contact study. Without the access opportunities that UNISA provides, such people with the will to learn further, would be structurally excluded from higher education study opportunities. This is not a small task.

In sustaining this aspect of its purpose, UNISA has in the recent past had to deal with a student body and an environmental context that is changing, both in terms of the challenges and the opportunities that are on offer. The institution has gone from a student body of mainly employed adults, interacting with a correspondence university through the postal and telephone systems, to one that now has a much larger body of students, a significant proportion of whom are young, post-NSC, unemployed learners, in need of deeper learning support in a much more sophisticated and evolving world of pedagogical approaches that draw on readily available computational analysis as well as information and communications technologies. The Covid-19 restrictions implemented in early 2020 added a further layer of complexity to UNISA's teaching, learning and student engagement activities.

Amongst the expressions of concern and complaint to the audit panel, much of it considered in this report, was an acknowledgement that there are many areas of the teaching and learning function at UNISA that are intact and operating well. Such areas are to be recognised and defended as plans are developed for the continuous cycles of improvement in the quality learning experience that current and future students find at UNISA.

The challenge to UNISA is to extend this operational functionality to a much larger proportion of its staff and student body, to release what seems to be a contained potential to have a much larger positive impact on individual student lives and on social development in the region and on the African continent. The institution is undoubtedly in a phase of necessary transition in adapting to new technologies, better understanding and responding to the learning needs of its student body, and improving the overall quality of service that it provides to staff and students alike. UNISA's large student population and its distance education mode give a unique character to many of these challenges, and in many ways, the solutions will only be found through rigorous

internal discussion, reflection and planning that draws on the wisdom of all UNISA's constituencies. The guiding light in these discussions and plans must be the need to improve the quality of student learning that leads to higher numbers of successful graduates, who leave with a positive university education experience.

The panel hopes that the suggestions and recommendations contained in this report will assist UNISA in directing its efforts as it meets its challenges. The range of thought, comment and criticism draws from the audit panel's acknowledgement of UNISA is an important part of the higher education system in South Africa.

Annexures

Practical arrangements for the audit

Thanks to the reduced risk of Covid-19 infection and its severity at the time, all the South African panel members, being fully vaccinated against Covid-19, were able to attend the interview sessions in person at the main campus of UNISA in Muckleneuk, Pretoria, between 4 - 8 April 2022. The two international members of the panel, Prof Som Naidu (in Australia) and Prof Alan Tait (in England) joined the interviews and discussions through online connections. Also, while most of the interviewees attended the sessions in person, some chose to participate using the online platform. This too worked reasonably well and all participants were suitably able to present their views. All interviews and discussions for this part of the audit took place in suitable rooms on the first floor of the Kgorong Building of the campus.

UNISA manages and supports a number of regional centres across South Africa and a centre in Ethiopia. These centres are intended to give students in the region closer physical access and support for their administrative and learning needs, including facilities such as physical library holdings, internet connectivity and desk-top computers. The audit panel thought it important to visit a sample of these centres and it was decided to visit six centres – two in Gauteng, two in KwaZulu-Natal, one in the Eastern Cape and one in the Western Cape. It was also decided that up to two panel members would visit each centre in person and that the two international panel members would join the visits remotely as time and connectivity permitted. The visits to the regional centres occurred over the period 11 - 12 April 2022.

Schedule of interviews - Audit panel visit to UNISA Muckleneuk, Pretoria campus

The schedule of interviews over the five-day visit to UNISA is indicated below. Interviewees were present at all of the sessions and, while the allocated times for each session were generally constrained, the panel managed to keep to the scheduled time each day.

The panel received no requests from staff or students at UNISA to address the panel on the last afternoon of the visit (Session 5/5). UNISA chose instead to use this session as an opportunity for mid-level administrative staff to address the panel on matters raised during the interviews that may not have been fully covered in the Self Evaluation Report. Also, for the allocated recall session (Session 5/6), the Audit panel chose to recall only the Registrar of UNISA to respond to a small number of outstanding questions.

Where further information or analysis was requested by the panel during the visit, such information was readily provided by the UNISA staff. In cases where some time was needed to gather the necessary information or to perform the required analyses, this was submitted to the panel during the two-week period immediately after the visit.

DAY 1: (Monday 04 April)		
SESSION 1/1 08:00 – 09:00	Vice Chancellor	
SESSION 1/2 09:10 – 10:30	ManCom team	The VC not expected to be present
SESSION 1/3 10:40 – 11:40	Staff Unions	
SESSION 1/4 11:50 – 12:50	Members of Council	
SESSION 1/5 13:50 – 15:00	Vice-Principal: Teaching, Learning, Community Engagement and Student Support	
SESSION 1/6 15:00 – 16:00	Deans	
SESSION 1/7 16:10 – 17:10	Directors of Schools 2 parallel sessions – one from each College in each session	1/7/1 Panel Group A 1/7/2 Panel Group B
17:10 – 18:00	Panel reflection session	
DAY TWO (Tuesday, 05 April)		
SESSION 2/1 08:00 – 09:00	Academic Heads of Departments. 2 parallel sessions – one from each College in each session	1/8/1 Panel Group A 1/8/2 Panel Group B
SESSION 2/2 09:10 – 10:15	Human Resources Executive Director and members of AEAHRPC (Academic Enrolment and Academic Human Resource Planning Committee)	
SESSION 2/3 10:30 – 11:30	Chairs of College staffing and promotions committees	
SESSION 2/4 11:40 – 12:40	Institutional Forum members – chair and ~8 members	
SESSION 2/5 13:30 – 14:30	DPQA Department of Planning and Quality Assurance DQAP Directorate: Quality Assurance and Promotion	
SESSION 2/6 14:40 – 15:40	Staff involved in recruitment; admissions and financial aid/bursaries and Registrar	

SESSION 2/7	USPRC	
16:10 - 17:30	DVC-Finance	
17:30 – 18:00	Panel reflection session	
DAY THREE (Wednesday, 06 April)		
SESSION 3/1 08:00 – 09:00	Quality Champions	
SESSION 3/2 09:10 – 10:15	UQC – University Quality Committee	
SESSION 3/3 10:30 – 11:40	DCDT Directorate: Curriculum Development and Transformation Vice-Principal: Teaching, Learning, Community Engagement and Student Support	
SESSION 3/4 11:45 – 12:45	ICT Vice-Principal: Teaching, Learning, Community Engagement and Student Support	
SESSION 3/5 13:30 – 14:30	STLCEC Senate Teaching, Learning and Community Engagement Committee	
SESSION 3/6 14:40 – 15:40	SRU Dean of Students	
SESSION 3/7 16:10 - 17:30	SSAQAF Student Support Student Affairs Quality Assurance Forum Dean of Students	
17:30 – 18:00	Panel reflection session	
DAY FOUR (Thursday, 07 April)		
SESSION 4/1 08:00 – 09:00	Academic members of Senate	
SESSION 4/2 09:10 – 10:15	Professors and Associate Professors 2 parallel sessions – one from each College in each session	4/2/1 Panel Group A 4/2/2 Panel Group B
SESSION 4/3 10:30 – 11:35	Senior Lecturers, Lecturers, Junior Lecturers, Tutors 2 parallel sessions – one from each College in each session	4/3/1 Panel Group A 4/3/2 Panel Group B
SESSION 4/4 11:45 – 13:00	Senior, established and research-focused academics 2 parallel sessions – one from each College in each session	4/4/1 Panel Group A 4/4/2 Panel Group B
		4/5/1 Panel Group A

SESSION 4/5 13:30 – 14:30	Junior or emerging research-focused academics: 3 parallel sessions – one from each College in each session; 2 general sessions and 1 for UNISA academic staff who are registered for Masters or Doctoral	4/5/2 Panel Group B 4/5/3 Panel Group C
SESSION 4/6 14:40 – 16:00	National Students Representative Council	Allow more than 10 if needed
SESSION 4/7 16:10 - 17:10	UG, Honours, research Masters and coursework Masters students 3 parallel sessions – one from each College in each session: (A) 1st and 2nd years; (B) >2nd year UG, Hons; (C) research-only and research + course-work Masters students	4/7/1 Panel Group A 4/7/2 Panel Group B 4/7/3 Panel Group C
17:30 – 18:00	Panel reflection session	
DAY Five (Friday, 08 April)		
SESSION 5/1 08:00 – 09:00	Recent graduates 2 parallel sessions – one from each College in each session	5/1/1 Panel Group A 5/1/2 Panel Group B
SESSION 5/2 09:10 – 10:15	2 parallel sessions: External partners involved in community engagement projects UNESCO Chair in ODL; Institute for ODL	5/2/1 Panel Group A 5/2/2 Panel Group B
SESSION 5/3 10:30 – 11:40	Alumni Office Executive members of Convocation	
SESSION 5/4 11:45 – 12:45	Follow-up meeting with VP: Teaching, Learning, Community Engagement and Student Support	
SESSION 5/5 13:30 – 14:30	Open Session – for special requests to present to the Panel	
SESSION 5/6 14:40 – 15:40	Session for possible recall of sector or group representatives	
SESSION 5/7 16:10 - 17:30	Final meeting with VC and ManCom	

Notes: UNISA was asked to:

1. ensure that, except by agreement, there are not more than 10 persons to be interviewed in any one session
2. as far as possible, ensure that proper attention is given to race, gender and age distribution of staff and students selected for interview
3. except in the case of portfolio holders and as necessary for the programme, ensure that individual interviewees do not appear in more than one session
4. supply the names and designations of people involved in each interview in electronic format to the CHE audit administrator by 25/03/2022.
5. inform all interviewees of the purpose of the audit visit and the protocol of the interviews. This includes making known the names of the members of the audit panel.
6. notify all members of the institution that there will be an open session where any member of the university community can address the audit panel on any quality related matter. Participation will be by prior arrangement with the CHE audit administrator, contactable at nene.s@che.ac.za
7. please provide modest refreshments for the panel members who attend in person, including water, tea, coffee, sandwiches, fruit, etc.
8. liaise with the Chair of the Audit panel and the CHE Audit administrator, should the Vice-Chancellor or the Vice-Principal wish to arrange a short consultative meeting during the audit visit.

Regional centres visits

Audit panel visits to UNISA's regional centres took place during 11 and 12 April 2022. The table below indicates the centres visited and the Panel members who participated in each visit. A visit to the UNISA centre in Durban was also planned but this had to be cancelled because of the flooding in the city on the intended day of the visit. Also, for the visits to the Florida and Pietermaritzburg campuses, unforeseen circumstances on the day of the visit prevented the second audit panel member from joining.

Regional Centre	Panel Member(s)
Sunnyside, Pretoria	Prof Norman Duncan Dr Caroline Selepe Prof Alan Tait (remotely) Prof Som Naidu (remotely)
Florida	Dr Caroline Selepe
Cape Town	Prof Antoinette van der Merwe Mr Hugh Amoore Prof Alan Tait (remotely) Prof Som Naidu (remotely)
East London	Prof Khaya Mfenyana Prof Yunus Ballim
Pietermaritzburg	Prof Yunus Ballim

The table below indicates the interview schedule that was followed during visits to the regional centres

SESSION	ACTIVITY	ATTENDEES
SESSION 1 45 minutes	Regional Site/Hub Management and Services	• Management • Administration support staff • IT support staff
SESSION 2 45 minutes	Academic/academic support staff	• Academics (where relevant) • Tutors • Markers • Academic support staff
SESSION 3 45 minutes	Student engagement	• Student Representatives
SESSION 4 30 minutes	Panel on site walk-about	• Site/hub management