

MEDIA STATEMENT

Unisa sets the record straight on its qualifications and research capacity

Approved for public release

Date: 19 October 2021

The University of South Africa (Unisa) has noted with serious concern reports in the print and social media domain that purport the sale of qualifications and question the quality of scholarship and research of the university. The entailed aspersions sought to bring into question the integrity of Unisa's qualifications and its research capacity. These reports, emanating mainly from a news article published in the Sunday Times of 17 October 2021, are intentionally misleading, malicious, and inaccurate, and hence require correcting.

The integrity of Unisa qualifications

Unisa is a Comprehensive Open Distance University which pivots e-learning to anchor the Academic agenda of the university. Our qualifications are audited by the Council for Higher Education (CHE), South Africa and other professional qualification authorities here and abroad. All Unisa's qualifications are registered with the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). Unisa is currently undergoing a qualifications audit (2021) as part of its ongoing effort to ensure compliance with the requirements of the CHE and other bodies, as well as ensure high quality standards on its academic offerings. Our qualifications undergo strict quality assessments and reviews by international knowledge and professional bodies such as the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), the Health Professional Council of South Africa (HPCSA), Engineering Council of South Africa (ECSA); among others.

Unisa is the leading and biggest university in South Africa, whose qualifications at certificate, undergraduate and post-graduate levels are held by millions of South Africans and graduates from outside the country's borders. Unisa has several well-established processes designed to safeguard the integrity of its qualifications.

The process of qualifications begins right at the point when prospective students apply to study at Unisa because they must meet strict qualifying criteria to be admitted to their course of choice. In the same way those students must meet all relevant entry requirements and, on completion of their course, they earn a qualification because they have met strict criteria.

Unisa's Teaching and Learning, Research and Innovation; and Engaged Scholarship portfolios and the colleges are staffed by highly qualified and ethical professionals who would never issue qualifications to those who have not earned such qualifications. These academics work in a more complex learning environment than any University in South Africa, the Continent at large and globally, with over 380 000 students and using multi-modal approaches.

All Unisa teaching materials are available for peer review and academic adjudication and academic critique, unlike other Universities. The diversities of our students, many of whom are not embraced by small, traditional universities and who require specialized tuition support, complete their studies with Unisa.

Given its status as an CODEL university, Unisa has implemented robust "Invigilation or/ proctoring systems" digitally designed to authenticate and safeguard the integrity of examinations in contact and online environments.

Research capacity and output



Unisa also has one of the biggest research communities and its research hubs include the Research, Postgraduate Studies, School of Graduate Studies, Unisa School of Business Leadership (SBL) and the Thabo Mbeki School, as well as the Innovation and Commercialisation units. Its research activities contribute to the knowledge and information society, advance development and nurture a critical citizenry.

Unisa's College of Graduate Studies provides virtual research platforms for postgraduate students in all colleges, thus promoting both interdisciplinary and research excellence. Unisa prides itself in the highest academic standards, a balanced academic programme and academic rigour, as well as ethical conduct. Unisa's research outputs, relative to the numbers of students per Academic, is commendable and does not compare to any other university. Hence comparisons with universities which differ with it on size, mission, research, complexities, and numbers is fallacious if not maliciously aimed at trivialising its local and global impact. Opportunistic scholars / individuals who seek to validate themselves by publicly prejudicing Unisa and undermining the efforts of its staff and students in the pursuit of knowledge excellence unduly harm the enhancement strategies that Unisa has put in place.

Equally, the continuous improvement of our research output remains a top priority for the university; and is encapsulated in the vision of the new Principal and Vice Chancellor, Professor LenkaBula on focusing on research anchor projects such as the 10 catalytic research and engaged scholarship niche areas. These are Marine Studies, Aviation and Aeronautical Studies, Automotive Studies, Energy Studies, Space Study and Square Kilometer Array, Fourth Industrial Revolution and Digitalisation, Natural Sciences, Health Studies (Medicine) Feminist/Womanist/Bosadi Theorisations and Student Support and Co-Curricular Activities.

The university assures its students, a very large global alumni and the publics that, as it has done in the past 148 years, it will continue to produce illustrious graduates who will go on to become thought leaders, and successful local and global leaders of the public, private and civil society sectors.

Collection of certificates

Outside the context of Covid-19, graduation certificates are often given to students at graduation ceremonies and in their hand. This has meant that the certificates land in the right hands. However, during Covid-19, the university arranged Courier services locally and internationally to deliver certificates to students. Given the scale of the operation, of at least 60 000 + certificates requiring delivery to varied contexts, there have been challenges. To mitigate these risks, the University has changed its model and arranged for the collection of certificates at Unisa regional offices/ centres across the provinces. The students are notified via SMS, the Unisa website and/ or formal media communication. These processes are located at the Portfolio: Registrar, which implements the distribution. Over 60 000 certificates were due for delivery to students. These entailed uncollected certificates from 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020. A total of 46 071 certificates were due for collection for 2021. To date, 31 000 of the 46 000 certificates have been issued to students. The 2021 supplementary certificates will be distributed later in the year. Unisa commits to expedite the delivery of certificates locally and internationally for all students who have completed their studies and have fulfilled all the requirements for their qualifications.

At the beginning of her tenure early in 2021, Professor LenkaBula recognised the issuing of outstanding certificates as a critical area requiring expediting and finalisation. It is through her express intervention that this project is accelerated.

Ends/

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