

Unisa closes the 2025 academic year with performance excellence as the hallmark of a successful five-year (2021-2025) administration and a top priority for the future

The University of South Africa (UNISA) closed the 2025 academic with yet more accomplishments in the academic and administrative arenas; thus, continuing with a tradition of performance excellence that has become its hallmark since 2021.

Top amongst the highlights for 2025 was the announcement by the university that it has achieved a financially unqualified audit opinion for the 2024 financial year, based on its continued track record of clean financial reporting. The 2025 audit is already underway and will be reported in 2026.

This achievement marks yet another year in which the institution has maintained the highest standard of financial prudence, transparency and governance, following unqualified opinions for three consecutive financial years (2021, 2022, and 2023).

A financially unqualified audit opinion is a powerful affirmation of an institution's integrity in financial reporting. It confirms that UNISA's financial statements are free of material misstatements and are fairly presented in accordance with the applicable reporting framework. In essence, it assures stakeholders that the university's financial position is sound, credible, and well-managed.

This achievement is more than an audit outcome as it is a testament to the university's solid financial meticulousness, stewardship, governance maturity, and adherence to accountability standards. It also reflects the dedicated work of UNISA's financial and administrative leadership, guided by ethical principles and a clear vision for institutional excellence.

Beyond the clean audit, UNISA's financial performance has continued to strengthen. From R8 billion in reserves in 2018, the university has impressively grown its reserves to over R22 billion in 2025. This milestone highlights the effectiveness of UNISA's long-term investment strategy, robust risk management, and commitment to long-term sustainability. The financial reserve growth is a strategic buffer that ensures the university's future resilience and ability to expand and fulfil its academic mission.

While the university celebrates its consistent unqualified audit outcomes, the leadership is fully committed to achieving a clean audit opinion in the future, which requires not only accurate financial statements but also no material findings on performance reporting and compliance with legislation.

UNISA's success is, however, not limited to financial metrics. The university continues to perform strongly in its core mission of teaching, learning, research, and engaged scholarship.



Looking back: The journey from 2021 to 2025

Unisa like all others, has faced the aftershocks of COVID-19, which included disruption, exclusion, and digital inequalities. Yet, in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, Unisa showed a resilient character and an indomitable spirit which were acknowledged by the Council on Higher Education when it issued its Five-Year institutional audit report in June 2023. The Report commended UNISA for its exceptional resilience, delivery and academic success during the pandemic!

Some of the legacies inherited by Prof Puleng LenkaBula when her journey began in Jan 2021 entailed:

- an untenable institutional culture typified by a strategy to over-politicise the university and undermine the academic core;
- a deep mistrust between management and staff with a poor labour relations environment;
- a sub-optimal IT infrastructure;
- an increasingly isolated and mooted academic voice; the high turnover of senior academics; negative perceptions about leadership and governance
- as well as the declining international reputation and ranking of the university.
- And chief among these issues was institutional scrutiny through the MTT and the Independent Assessor's report.

But against all these, it is heartening to report that Unisa managed to achieve the following in the first term of Prof Puleng LenkaBula's tenure as Principal and Vice-Chancellor:

- Restored academic stability, strengthened Senate cohesion, and expanded research outputs.
- Ensured strong global & national rankings: In 2022, UNISA's engineering disciplines were ranked joint 1st in South Africa by Times Higher Education (THE) subject rankings.
- For the 2022 Research Outputs, Unisa achieved No.1 position in South Africa for producing PhD graduates.
- There has been a growing pool of NRF-rated researchers during the period, where there was an increase of 6,3% between 2022 and 2023 (from 240 to 255) and a further increase to 281 rated researchers in 2024, signifying a 10,2% increase. Currently (2025), there are 320 NRF rated researchers.
- Significant growth has been noted in academic staff holding PhDs from 39% in 2021 to over 67% in 2024.
- There is an improved ICT infrastructure which is stable and enabling innovation throughout the university.
- In 2024, UNISA acquired an experimental farm in Bronkhorstspuit to support agricultural education, smart greenhouse work, dairy and veterinary training, marking an important investment in applied sciences and community engagement.



Reflecting on the current:

- Once again in 2025, Unisa improved its global standing. According to the **Webometrics Global Web Ranking for Universities**, UNISA broke into the top 750 globally, rising from 797th (2024) to 732nd (2025), while maintaining a top-ten position nationally.
- With regards to the **UI GreenMetric**, Unisa improved overall from a ranking of 782nd to 720. Unisa is now in the top half globally, 23rd in Africa and 4th among ODeL universities globally. For Transport, Unisa is in the top quartile worldwide, for Setting and Infrastructure, Energy and Climate change, Waste and Education and Research, Unisa is in the top half worldwide, but for Water, in the third quartile.
- In the **2024 global Times Higher Education University Impact Rankings** (which assess universities on contribution to the UN Sustainable Development Goals), UNISA placed sixth among South African institutions and ranked globally in the 601–800 band. The university scored especially well on SDGs like Quality Education, Gender Equality, Peace & Strong Institutions, and Partnerships for the Goals.
- The very prestigious **Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU)** ranked two Unisa subjects, namely Chemical Engineering 151-200 out of 500 universities (one of only two SA universities, the other UJ in the 401-500 band) and Sociology 201-300 out of 300 universities ranked. For Chemical Engineering, only two South African universities were ranked and for Sociology, four (all in the same band, UCT, UJ, Unisa and Wits).
- Nationally, between 2022 and 2023, UNISA's publication output rose enough to move from 8th to 6th position for research output. Its publications output of 1 807 in 2023 is almost double the sector average of 915.
- The number of academics with a Doctorate increased by 6,6% between 2022 and 2023.
- Unisa moved up from 10th to 9th position with regard to the sector comparison of permanent academics with PhDs in 2023.
- The cherry on top is the news from the Department of Higher Education and Training on Unisa's outstanding performance in the 2024 research outputs.
 - Unisa recorded a 42,7% increase in **total awarded subsidy** units for research outputs, rising from 1 807.18 units in 2023 to 2 578.81 units in 2024. This is a GREAT Performance!
 - Subsidy units for **journal articles** grew by 46,4%, increasing from 1 505.05 units in 2023 to 2 203.11 units in 2024.
 - Subsidy units for **books and book chapters** increased by 11,1%, moving from 237.38 units in 2023 to 263.68 units in 2024.
 - Subsidy units for **published conference proceedings** rose by 73%, increasing from 64.76 units in 2023 to 112.02 units in 2024.
- The university hosted a National Dialogue where the nation's leaders gathered to confront the country's most pressing challenges.

UNISA remains a beacon of hope, opportunity, and academic excellence for students across South Africa, the African continent, and beyond. The university continues to fulfil its social justice mandate of broadening access to higher education, empowering historically disadvantaged communities, and shaping the intellectual futures of generations to come.



The series of unqualified audits from 2021 to 2024 under the leadership of the Principal and Vice-Chancellor Prof Puleng LenkaBula, are not merely financial accolades, but an affirmation that UNISA is on a firm and ethical footing, and that it is prepared to navigate the complexities of higher education with integrity, strategy, and purpose.

UNISA is proud of these achievements and remains resolute in its mission to lead, inspire, and transform through knowledge.

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