

UNISA STATEMENT ON XENOPHOBIC VIOLENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

We, the Senate of the University of South Africa (UNISA), the highest academic decision-making body at the University as prescribed by the South African Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 (as amended) and Statute of the University of South Africa, have deliberated on the issue of xenophobic violence in South Africa. We condemn xenophobic violence and the targeting of African migrants and foreign nationals in South Africa - and everywhere in the world.

At UNISA, our institutional identity and intellectual responsibility have never been confined to a single national border. We belong to an African intellectual community whose strength comes from the movement of ideas, people, knowledge and experience across national boundaries, especially the African continent.

We anchor our world outlook on the African values espoused in both the African Union (AU) human rights architecture and the founding values of the South African Constitution. We are guided by the values of Ubuntu/Botho and the ideals contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other United Nations treaties. These values are entrenched in the DHET (2019) internationalisation policy which is intentional in establishing the place of international faculty and students in the South African higher education sector.

Every human being is entitled to dignity, safety and belonging. For an African university, this is inseparable from recognising Africa as a place from which knowledge and ideas emerge, shaped by the continent's own experiences, intellectual traditions and ambitions, and by Africans as authors of their own futures.

Through our internationalisation drive, science diplomacy and mandate across the continent, our researchers work alongside colleagues in other African universities and communities. We undertake collaborative research that recognises Africa not as a site from which knowledge is extracted, but as a producer, author and custodian of knowledge. These relationships show a basic truth - Africa's intellectual future cannot be built within the confines of national borders. This is why xenophobia and Afrophobia are faultlines which we must individually and collectively eradicate. They are not merely social ills. They are an assault on the conditions that allow Africa's knowledge ecosystem to thrive – and on the African Union's aspirations for a continent where trade and the free movement of persons is supported.

An African knowledge system cannot be built while African scholars, students, researchers and workers from South Africa and elsewhere on the continent are treated as outsiders. We will not challenge exclusionary Western epistemological hierarchies, while reproducing divisions that fragment African intellectual communities. These contradictions are lived daily, in our universities and in the communities around them. They demand critical reflection and decisive action. Our contribution is to produce scientific research that can demystify some of the rationales put forward in justifying xenophobia and Afrophobia.

Pan-Africanism emerged from the recognition that the political, intellectual and economic liberation of African peoples cannot be understood solely through the boundaries created by colonialism. The borders that divide African states were largely inherited from a colonial order that frequently disregarded existing social, cultural and historical connections. It challenged the political and intellectual effects of that division by imagining Africa as one connected political, economic, and cultural project.



Xenophobia and Afrophobia undermine that project. They replace African solidarity with unhealthy African competition, fragmentation and polarisation. They engender suspicion and contempt for the African who was born elsewhere, thereby shattering the idea of a shared continental future. They treat the person from another African country not as a neighbour, but as a rival, or in some cases an enemy whose purpose is to disadvantage the locals. This is particularly critical at a time when Africa needs greater, rather than less, intellectual mobility, academic collaboration, student exchange, research cooperation and continental solidarity. A continent whose countries close its borders to its own people effectively neuters its own future.

At a time when the continent needs decolonial knowledge and greater cooperation in addressing civil conflict, climate change, inequality, unemployment, technological transformation, public health, food security, illicit financial flows, and economic development, the response cannot be to treat fellow Africans as enemies. It must be to treat them as partners, and brothers and sisters too.

We must resist the politics of scapegoating and lawlessness

To advance these ideals and values does not mean that legitimate questions about migration, employment, border governance, crime, public services, national security or state capacity should go undebated. But these are questions of policy and political economy, not justifications for vigilantism and hostility towards people because of their nationality and blackness. We must be particularly vigilant when socioeconomic frustrations are redirected toward migrants from other African countries. Poverty, unemployment, inequality, inadequate public services and economic exclusion are deep, connected problems in South Africa. Reducing them to the presence of foreign Africans offers neither an adequate diagnosis nor a meaningful solution. It turns people who should be partners in addressing Africa's challenges into convenient targets for frustration. What is clear is that scapegoating solves nothing; instead it creates new problems—moral damage at home and estrangement from African nations whose citizens are mistreated.

None of this is an argument against the enforcement of immigration law. UNISA does not support undocumented migration, and questions of border governance, documentation and residency status are properly the business of the State and its dedicated arms of government. What we reject is the idea that a person's documentation status allows anyone to deny them dignity or due process. South Africa is not a lawless country, and everyone within its borders, whether citizen, permanent resident, asylum seeker, or undocumented migrant, must be treated according to international law and national law as enshrined in the Constitution, including its guarantee of dignity in section 10 of the Bill of Rights. Even considering the migration crisis, the rule of law must prevail.

This principle has direct implications for our own sector. Under section 8 of the Employment Services Act of 2014, a South African employer, including a university, must satisfy itself that no suitable South African citizen is available before appointing a foreign national. We accept this obligation. It reflects a legitimate policy priority set by the Department of Higher Education and Training: supporting South African academics and maintaining quality while also meeting national employment goals. Where a suitably qualified South African is available for a post, we should appoint that person. Once a foreign national is appointed, the process of knowledge and skills transfer must be put in place to empower local development.

At the same time, higher education has a strategic interest in the mobility of scholars across the continent, and South African law already recognises this. The Critical Skills Work Visa, issued under section 19(4) of the Immigration Act of 2002, lists dozens of academic and research occupations for which no local labour market test is required. This is the correct instrument for attracting scholarship to South Africa from elsewhere on the continent, and it should be used as intended. The USAf (2026) position paper on internationalisation, employment equity and the appointment of international staff supports this point and takes it further by recommending building partnerships with the state (immigration processes) to expedite such appointments.



Our Institutional Commitment

UNISA will continue to strengthen partnerships across the continent, deepen collaborative African scholarship and create spaces in which African scientists, scholars and students produce the knowledge needed to understand our societies, advance scientific discovery and shape Africa's intellectual and developmental futures. This commitment sits within an existing national framework. The Policy Framework for the Internationalisation of Higher Education in South Africa, promulgated in November 2020, already commits the sector to the kind of continental engagement described here. The aims of the framework will not be met by policy language alone. We must also remove the practical, financial, and legal barriers that slow the movement of African scholars and students between countries. Internationalisation scholarship terms this "brain circulation," but its institutional imperative is clear: scholars and students must move to sustain knowledge exchange. This work is as consequential as the framework itself. That challenge applies to our own institutional practice as much as it does to national policy.

We are committed to building knowledges that circulate across borders; an African university system that collaborates rather than competes destructively; students and researchers who move freely across the continent; African intellectual traditions speaking to one another from Pretoria across the continent, and African knowledge carrying authority in its own right rather than acquiring legitimacy through Western institutions.

We must recognise that South Africa's intellectual futures are connected to the intellectual futures of the rest of the continent, and that Afrophobia needs to be confronted not as someone else's problem, but as a contradiction within the African project itself.

Through the spaces we create for African scholars to work, move and produce knowledge across borders, UNISA will advance the African intellectual futures we seek to shape and affirm South Africa's place within a shared continental future, free from xenophobia and Afrophobia. A future South Africa must not force us to live in fear alongside our fellow Africans. It must be a country that embraces African scholars and knowledge. That is the Pan-Africanism this university stands for.

We are impelled by our first democratic leader and a great alumnus of UNISA, His Excellency President Nelson R. Mandela, who, in addressing the people of the Alexandra community, promoted unity and rejected tribalism, stating the following:

"During the years I lived here, the people of Alexandra ignored tribal and ethnic distinctions. Instead of being Xhosas, or Sothos, or Zulus, or Shangaans, we were Alexandrans. We were one people, and we undermined the distinctions that the apartheid government tried so hard to impose. It saddens and angers me to see the rising hatred of foreigners."

