

Unisa Senate's position on the industrial action

Context and background

Since March 2022, the University has been engulfed by industrial action that has become violent at times and accompanied by criminality and a lack of respect for academic activities, including disruption of critical university functions. While the University respects the rights of colleagues to engage in industrial action and to protest, Senate has thought it prudent to express views that promote the spirit of elevating the importance of brand reputation, academic integrity and institutional culture, even in trying times, which are the collective responsibility of all Unisans.

It is in this spirit that Senate conveys this message, in the spirit of peaceful co-existence, mutual respect and protecting the University, all its staff and all that is sacred to this august institution with a national, continental and global footprint. In the same spirit, the Senate meeting of 25 May 2022 took a resolution to make this statement to the university community as a measure to communicate its position relating to the industrial action at Unisa. This is in line with Senate's core function of regulating and superintending the teaching and learning discipline as well as promoting research. This academic enterprise has become difficult to execute, to the detriment of our students and all stakeholders concerned under the circumstances of the industrial action.

Academic integrity

Senate further emphasise that ACADEMIC INTEGRITY is at the heart of our endeavours as Senators, both from the point of view of quality and service delivery of our CODEL+ business model. Despite the protracted labour unrest, Senate members in their various capacities continue to ensure the requisite stability for the student-centric rollout of the Academic Project as a key node of academic business continuity without prejudice to labour and other affected stakeholders. It is incumbent on us as Senators, to increase the value of our intellectual capital through high-level support of students involved in learning and research. In its impact - as Senate holds things together- our cohesive intellectual capital ineluctably translates itself into social and political capital that are the building blocks of a restorative dialogue with disaffected members of the University community, including labour.

Brand reputation

There is no doubt that the Unisa brand has suffered from the prolonged industrial action. Senate acknowledges that Unisa is a mega African distance education institution with an international standing. This statement gives assurance to its commitment to continue to remain a single constant in the provisioning of quality distance education in the world. Currently, the University provides access to more than 350 000 students through its colleges. As a student-centred institution, Senate makes its unequivocal commitment that the university will continue to provide for individuals to traverse from learning to work and from work to learning throughout their lives.

For this reason, Unisa continues to reclaim its place as a premier contributor to knowledge production and as one of a few universities in South Africa that continues to climb university rankings through its research outputs and the number of patents registered. Senate acknowledges the importance of protecting this legacy and the Unisa brand. Similarly, Senate believes that the industrial action by the unions has had a major impact on our operations and access to the University, including its services. Senate thus believes that the academic project should be protected at all costs.

Institutional culture

Senate acknowledges the rights of employees to embark on industrial action as these rights are enshrined in our constitution. However, we believe these rights should be exercised without the violation of the rights of others. The continuing intimidation of non-striking staff members who are attempting to access the university is worrying as it affects the delivery of services to Unisa stakeholders. We are also deeply concerned about the failure of security systems to protect the university community and infrastructure, including the instruments of trade during this industrial action.

As Senate and a University that is committed to good neighbourliness, we are embarrassed by the vandalism and blocking of access to streets and property that the community of Muckleneuk has suffered during this industrial action. We are of the view that the University is a marketplace of ideas and opinions, where the need to listen to those with different views is an imperative.

For some time, we have observed this important and ideal institutional culture degenerating into insults, bullying, harassment and the undermining of the leadership and management, especially women leaders. We, therefore, propose that the management of Unisa should organise a re-orientation programme in which we reaffirm our roles and responsibilities to protect the intellectual integrity of the University of South Africa for now and for future generations. This programme, we believe, should also focus on cultural/political intelligence, to foster mutual respect among Unisans.

Our pledge

Our commitment as Senate is to continue to support the management of the University and labour formations in their endeavour to expeditiously find a co-created peaceful resolution to the current situation. Our very own democratic South Africa was born of such peaceful ways. To this end, Senate pledges to constantly encourage the concerned stakeholders to safeguard University property and all its workers, irrespective of participation/non-participation in the strike. We encourage staff to desist from engaging in activities that can have negative impacts on our students, our operations and the institution's reputation.

As Senators, we fully support the academic project of the University and salute the efforts of all Unisans who continue to ensure the success of this project. Equally, we support the labour formation in their pursuit to elevate their grievances. We will continue to do so, for as long as such a pursuit is within the confines of the law.

Senate wishes all Unisans a prosperous May/June examination period. We also look forward to the speedy resolution of the impasse with the labour union.