



Black Forum South Africa

UNISA Black Forum: Nurturing Discourse, Empowering The Marginalised and Maximising on Intellectual Depth in the Higher Education Sector in South Africa

**A presentation before the Parliamentary Committee on Higher Education, Science and Innovation
Cape Town, 30 August 2023**

A brief background of Black Forum

Black Forum is a lobby group whose major focus is to advocate for Black Solidarity in South Africa. Born in the height of apartheid in the late 80s, the founders of the organisation, which included esteemed professors and academics, envisioned a just and equal world where individual merit rather than skin colour determined the quality of life one enjoyed in both the workplace and in society. As such, the marginalisation of black academics was at the centre of the many struggles that Black Forum waged a war against from its very inception. It is the institutionalised racism, exclusion, anti-Black rhetoric, discriminatory policies and exclusionary systems that the founders and subsequent members and office bearers sought to purge from what had become a deeply entrenched organisational culture within UNISA in particular, and the wider higher education space in general.

Black Forum exists today as an important stakeholder in the University of South Africa, and participates in bettering the lives of its members in like manner as other recognised interest groups within the University. Black Forum exists within the ambit of section 235 of the Constitution of the land, which protects and promotes the right to self-determination – in other words, the right of any cultural group or community sharing a common cultural and language heritage to determine their future. It cannot be gainsaid that part of the heritage of Africans in South Africa is the history of exclusion, denigration, black on black violence and lack of access to dignity-affirming opportunities in the workplace. Black Forum pursues the interests of anyone who identifies as black - and can prove it. We seek to contribute towards a sound and globally competitive black South Africa, establish a society that is even-handed in all respects; ensure economic justice, promote the general welfare of our people and secure the blessings of freedom for our Black people and posterity.

Our views on the Assessor's (Mosia) Report.

Quite a lot has been said about recent developments at the University of South Africa. Black Forum comes from the stance that good governance is indeed a central pillar for any organisation, much more a public institution. However, what cannot be disputed is that governance is a highly contested space, with vastly competing interests seeking to influence various outcomes in that process. Despite this contestation, a healthy, well-balanced good governance system built on the pillars of transparency, responsiveness, inclusion and good financial stewardship forms the basis of an effective system of checks and balances.



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There have been pronouncements on good governance at UNISA in recent months. Of note is the Mosia Report, which became public discourse. Black Forum laments the methodology employed in producing a report of such magnitude. It was plain and simple wrong. It is our firm and considered belief that this report would not pass legal scrutiny for various reasons. The author of the report drew from gossip mongers to frame the final output. There were some assertions or allegations that were entertained without the alleged offender being made aware of, or given a chance to respond to those allegations. Needless to say, this practice flew in the face of the now hallowed principle of - *audi alteram partem*, meaning “to hear the other side of the story”.

We also decry the lack of credibility of the investigations carried out as part of this report. The output is soiled because the Mosia Team was meeting with other stakeholders outside the official processes to discuss matters raised within the official process of investigation. In law this is not only frowned upon, but it also taints the impartiality and independence of the adjudicating officer and soils the outcome.

Despite the above, it would be remiss of us to imagine a reality where there are no issues of concern within the University as in other universities. Indeed these challenges are not unique to UNISA but are endemic in the general higher education sector in South Africa.

The trust deficit:

The depletion of trust among managers is at an all-time high at UNISA. This concerning factor is also historical and has survived and entrenched itself within the organisational culture for so many years. It is common cause that in an environment that is devoid of trust, individuals do not perform at their peak. They hold back, they second guess themselves, and the university is deprived of the excellent ideas such individuals harbour. Such individuals only give their bare minimum. Most often than not, such individuals resort to quiet quitting - in other words, such employees would only be there in body only, to do the bare minimum that they know is required of them, and not risk introducing innovative, cutting edge ideas for fear of not being supported. If not addressed squarely right now, it will continue to do more harm than good.

Impunity as a consequence of the lack of enforcement mechanisms:

Poor or lack of policy enforcement to affirm compliance remains problematic. The quality of policies an organisation has can only achieve meaningful results if accompanied by enforcement. In the absence of a political will to hold individuals to account, contempt, impunity, lack of trust, disillusionment, worker dissatisfaction breeds. Once such an environment takes hold, the university goes into a spiral dive and cannot recover. Managers cannot manage in such an environment, and they cannot hold employees to account once a culture of impunity becomes entrenched. It is the one important stakeholder, the student that suffers in such an impunity-prone environment.

Lack of systemic transformation:



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Transformation should not just be rhetoric, without concomitant real-life support systems and visible dedication to uproot decades old barriers that prevent certain sectors of our black community from finding expression in academia. This is even more pronounced for UNISA, given its leanings towards decolonisation and Africanisation. An organisation cannot avoid transformation and remain the same. This calls for UNISA to have a reflexive, introspective conversation with itself, and not only pose, but also actively seek to answer very uncomfortable questions. WE know that much like governance, or good governance, the concept of transformation is also highly contested. There are those who view transformation as the lowering of standards, as a free ticket for black people to become what they couldn't become before. This unfortunate worldview has stunted transformation in many sectors, and it is not backed by any truth. UNISA needs to strengthen transformation efforts to advance black academics. There is a need to remove remnants of practices, prejudices, organisational culture that assumed quality and excellence within one race whilst assuming mediocrity in the black race. The systematic exclusion of blacks from leadership positions, from promotions etc can only be tackled by addressing these social ills collectively, in other words, using systematic transformation – because it is the inherited system of governance, buoyed by an exclusionary organisational culture, that has allowed such exclusion to thrive. Even though UNISA has had some great successes in the transformation sector, a lot still has to be done. We have seen young women, young men of colour, persons with disabilities successfully lead various portfolios when previously the only disqualifying criteria would have been the colour of their skin.

When Black Forum lobbied for transformative promotional criteria, it was influenced by the need to create space to ensure talent management for our fellow black academics; to ensure that quality, talent and excellence is allowed to thrive without the entrenched barriers preventing such growth. Indeed we have managed to create black professors who are rated researchers, whose scholarship is cited globally, professors who produce quality PhD graduates semester after semester. We have managed to ensure that the culture of tokenism does not thrive – in other words, the culture of professors without a PhD, as it happened in the previous dispensation, where white professors were appointed without PhDs, and some without a Masters degree – did not happen under our watch. If anything, we strengthened and bolstered the standards and quality of the professorate.

On the issue of administration

As we said above, the sphere of governance is highly contested. The visions we all have about what good governance ought to look like are not immune from the influence of external forces. However, at the core of all these visions and aspirations must be the academic project, for us as a University to deliver to the public quality, decolonised and transformed education that can take South Africa to the global stage. To do that there is a need to ensure that a culture of executive training and further management support is in place. Taking cognisance of the issues canvassed above, and being intentional about creating a supportive,



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mentorship-friendly environment and executive support environment, we are confident that the issues currently gripping the University can be resolved.

We therefore propose that the University be assisted to establish a 'Reconciliation Committee or Forum' which would heal the hurts and repair trust, respect, collegial and professional deficits among employees, management and stakeholders of the University - which have been fermenting over the period of years and continue to transform themselves into an unpleasant culture within the University. Until critical stakeholders within the University, in the form of employees, organisations and management start to trust one another, stop treating one another with an attitude of contempt and or suspicion, Unisa would always be perceived as a university with big problems – although our problems are not that much dire as compared to other universities but mostly premised on internal personality clashes.

The great positive part is that amid such personality battles, we still individually and collectively champion the academic project as the core business of the university. This is evidenced by the improved academic ranking of world universities where Unisa is ranked number 08 in the country in what is deemed to be best 1000 universities in the world – including eight located in South Africa.

Therefore, the most appropriate process to assist Unisa is not administration but a committee which could heal the apparent hurt among all stakeholders of the university which has been recurring over years. A Reconciliation Committee would be more suitable diagnosis to the challenges we are living with at Unisa.

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