



**HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY COMMITTEE**

**Audit Report  
on the  
University of South Africa  
Executive Summary  
January 2010**

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Audit Report Number 24

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## Acronyms

AP	Audit Portfolio
CAES	College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences
CEMS	College of Economic and Management Sciences
CHE	Council on Higher Education
CHS	College of Human Sciences
CL	College of Law
COL	Commonwealth of Learning
CSET	College of Science, Engineering and Technology
DoE	Department of Education
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Committee
HEQF	Higher Education Qualifications Framework
HR	Human Resources
ICLD	Institute for Curriculum and Learning Development
ICT	Information & Communication Technology
MCQs	Multiple Choice Questions
NRF	National Research Foundation
ODL	Open Distance Learning
PQM	Programme and Qualification Mix
PVC	Pro-Vice Chancellor
QA	Quality Assurance
QAC	Quality Assurance Committees
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SAA	Student Assessment Administration
SENREC	Senate Research Committee
SEP	Self Evaluation Portfolio
SET	Science Engineering and Technology
SP	Strategic Plan
SRC	Student Representative Council
TSA	Technikon South Africa
TSDL	Tutorial Support, Group Discussions and Work-Integrated Learning
TSS	Tutorial Support Service
UNISA	University of South Africa
VUDEC	Vista University Distance Education Campus
WIL	Work Integrated Learning

## **Overview of the Audit**

### **Introduction**

The Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) has the statutory responsibility to conduct institutional audits as indicated in the Higher Education Act of 1997. This responsibility of the HEQC is also recognised in the National Qualifications Framework Act.

The audit of the University of South Africa (hereinto after referred to as Unisa) was conducted by the HEQC in terms of its mandate. This document reports on the audit process and findings based on the Audit Portfolio (AP) and documentary appendices provided by Unisa, supplementary documentation requested from the institution, and interviews and observations made during the audit visit that took place between 11 and 15 August 2008. The Panel also consulted the Institutional Profile of Unisa prepared by the Monitoring and Advice Directorate of the CHE.

This report<sup>1</sup> comprises an overview of the audit visit, the findings of the Panel in relation to the audit criteria set by the HEQC, and a list of commendations and recommendations that are based on the findings.

### **The Audit Process**

In August 2007 the Executive Director of the HEQC secured the consent of the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Pityana, and the executive management team at Unisa that the university would participate in an institutional audit between 11 and 15 August 2008.

Unisa asked the Commonwealth of Learning to conduct a trial audit from 18 to 22 June 2007 as preparation for the HEQC Audit. The institution conducted its institutional self-evaluation in the agreed time and produced an AP for review by the HEQC audit panel. The university appointed its Directorate of Quality Management and Promotion to facilitate the preparations for the audit.

The Directorate of Quality Management and Promotion also ensured that internal and external stakeholders were kept informed of the audit process through numerous road shows, workshops, meetings and a compact disc. After the criterion convenors had submitted their narratives, a report writer was appointed to amalgamate the narratives into a self-evaluation report which was then reviewed by five critical readers. Senate and Council also contributed by reviewing and

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<sup>1</sup> The report includes four appendices: Appendix A lists the objectives of HEQC audits; Appendix B provides the names of the members of the Audit Panel; Appendix C lists the documents submitted by the University of South Africa, and Appendix D contains the audit visit schedule.

approving the final draft of the report. The AP (which included a self-evaluation report, appendices and supporting documentation, and an electronic version) was submitted to the HEQC as scheduled in May 2008.

The HEQC constituted an audit panel consisting of senior academics and academic administrators from the higher education community, all of whom had participated in auditor preparation workshops run by the HEQC. An AP meeting was convened in Pretoria on 18 and 19 June 2008 at which the Audit Panel considered the AP and developed a schedule of questions in preparation for the audit visit. During this meeting, the Panel identified additional documents to be requested from Unisa prior to the audit visit.

The Executive Director of the HEQC, in the absence of a Director of Institutional Audits, assumed the role of audit officer, and together with the audit administrator, undertook a preparatory visit to Unisa on 27 June 2008. During that visit, the format and programme for the audit visit and other details of the audit were discussed and generally agreed to with the Directorate of Quality Assurance and Promotion.

Open sessions were also available for any staff members, students or members of the community to meet the audit panel and make submissions. Some staff members made use of the opportunity to address the Panel.

In all, the Audit Panel interviewed a total of 358 people in 47 interview sessions during the audit visit, including

- Council members
- The Vice-Chancellor and members of his executive management team
- Members of Senate and other senate committees
- Executive deans of colleges and heads of schools
- Academic and academic support staff
- Professional and administrative staff
- Undergraduate and postgraduate students
- Representatives of staff unions
- Representatives of the SRC
- Civic and community representatives
- Alumni.

A sub-committee of the Audit Panel visited four of Unisa's five Regional Centres, namely North Eastern (Polokwane), Midlands (Rustenburg), KwaZulu-Natal (Durban) and Cape Coastal (Parow, Cape Town).

This Report reflects the audit process and findings based on the Audit Portfolio provided by Unisa, supplementary documentation provided by the institution, interviews, and observations

made during the audit visit. Every effort has been made to understand the quality arrangements at the institution at the time of the audit visit and to base the Panel's conclusions on the documentation submitted, the interviews held and the observations made.

It is expected that Unisa will use these findings to strengthen its internal quality management systems and thereby facilitate the improvement of the quality of its core academic activities. Decisions about the manner in which this is done, and the priority accorded to the various recommendations, is the prerogative of Unisa. The HEQC expects Unisa to submit an improvement plan based on the audit report within five months after the publication of the audit report.

The HEQC would like to thank the Unisa for the highly co-operative manner in which it has participated in the audit process. The HEQC also wishes to express appreciation for the openness and confidence demonstrated by the Vice Chancellor and management in facilitating the work of the Audit Panel. Efficient preparation by Unisa resulted in a trouble-free audit that enabled the auditors to focus their attention on the main purposes of the audit. The hospitality and assistance of the Unisa's staff is greatly appreciated. In particular we would like to thank Professor Narend Baijnath and Ms Liana Griesel and their team for the preparation of the documentation, as well as for their co-operation and helpfulness throughout the process.

## **Executive Summary**

### **Brief Overview of the University of South Africa**

1. The University of South Africa (Unisa) is the dedicated distance education provider in South Africa. With a headcount of 226 269 enrolments in 2007, Unisa caters for one-third of the total student enrolment in the South African public higher education system. The University is the result of the 2004 merger of the 'old' University of South Africa, Technikon South Africa (TSA), and Vista University Distance Education Campus (VUDEC) as part of a government-led restructuring of the higher education system which began in 2001 with the publication of the National Plan for Higher Education.
2. Unisa is a comprehensive open and distance learning university which offers vocational, professional and academic qualifications across all fields of study at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The University has its main campus in Pretoria and is structured in five hubs: Coastal hub, Gauteng hub, Kwazulu-Natal hub, Midlands hub, and the North Eastern hub.
3. Unisa is organized into five colleges which house different schools. The majority of enrolments are at undergraduate level (83.60%) with 9.25% at postgraduate level. Doctoral students represented 0.30% of Unisa's enrolments in 2007 (AP: 13). In 2006 the institution had a total staff complement (permanent and temporary staff) of 10 223, with the total permanent executive management and academic staff being 1457.

### **Institutional Mission**

4. The first and most immediate consequence of the merger of the three institutions that now constituted Unisa was the need for the University to rethink and redesign its business processes and systems, examine its academic offerings and critically reconceptualise its teaching and learning, research and community engagement. The organisational, financial and human resource demands confronting Unisa from 2004 have been daunting. The Panel is of the view that the institution has risen to all these challenges with energy and focus.

#### **Commendation 1**

**The HEQC commends the University of South Africa on the manner in which it used the merger processes to rethink the mission and vision of the institution and their implications for the conceptualisation and implementation of the three core functions.**

5. Unisa is rightly proud of some of its academic achievements, such as its 95 National Research Foundation (NRF) rated scientists in 2008, the award of a Department of Science and Technology (DST) chair in Development Education, award winning learning materials in several disciplines, the quality of research on Open Distance Learning (ODL)

conducted at the Institute for Curriculum and Learning Development (ICLD), and the university's role in creating public spaces for the analysis and debate of national and international issues through initiatives, such as the Founders Lectures.

6. After examining the documentation and interviewing senior management, staff and students, the Panel is of the view that the 'Africanness' of Unisa's vision needs to be unpacked and understood together with its implications for both knowledge production and the definition of quality in the core functions as well as for Unisa's search for a recognised position as an international African university. The Panel agrees with the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) Report that appropriate mechanisms and adequate staffing need to be put in place to ensure that all international students receive appropriate support at acceptable levels of quality. The Panel heard complaints about Unisa's courseware lacking relevance in other African contexts as most examples and cases were South African. It also heard staff complaints about the negative effects that the growing number of enrolments, particularly of students from other African countries, is having on the quality of tuition in oversubscribed courses, which lack sufficient staff to support students adequately. This is detrimental to the already serious throughput problem faced by the institution. The Panel would like to urge the institution to assess carefully the implication that the rapid growth and expansion in the enrolment of students from other African countries is having on the quality of provision offered by Unisa both to these students and to their local counterparts.

#### **Recommendation 1**

**The HEQC recommends that the University of South Africa monitors and assesses the implication that rapid growth and expansion in the enrolments of students from other African countries have on the quality of provision offered to these students and to their local counterparts.**

7. Despite Unisa having been an ODL provider for a long time, until recently no critical engagement with the constituent elements of this notion had taken place. The institution is now examining the philosophical and pedagogical implications of ODL as well as its vast technological and organisational implications. Fundamental among these is the definition of what constitutes 'quality provision' in the ODL context and what Unisa's responsibilities are in this regard. The interactions of the Panel with senior management, staff and students suggest that there is an uneven level of engagement with the ODL concept, particularly regarding its pedagogic underpinnings.
8. The Panel understands that it is in the nature of ODL that not all students enrolled intend to obtain a qualification. However, the enrolment figures suggest that approximately half of students are first-time entrants who intend to complete a qualification. Unisa's student throughput does not compare well with other open distance learning institutions. This is a source of great concern for the Panel and an area for improvement of which the

institution is aware. The Panel is concerned that the powerful social justice drive which defines Unisa's access mandate might not be realised if students cannot progress through their studies and the institution cannot produce a significant number of graduates to alleviate the country's skills shortage and contribute to social development. In order to understand the nature of the interventions that need to be put in place to improve its throughput, the institution should consider analysing what happens to those students who, having enrolled to complete their qualifications, drop out.

### **Recommendation 2**

**The HEQC recommends that the University of South Africa as a matter of urgency develops strategies to address its current lack of capacity to respond adequately to the demand for access to the higher education system which is in fact jeopardising the institution's ability to fulfil its social justice mandate. This should include establishing the university's carrying capacity, and identifying areas where it cannot produce good graduates within an acceptable time frame.**

9. The Panel is pleased to note that Unisa is using the implementation of the new Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF) as an opportunity to re-curriculate its programmes and that comprehensiveness is a major criterion in this process. However, specifically in relation to vocational and professional programmes which require Work Integrated Learning (WIL), the Panel heard from the vast majority of students, staff and employers that students' work experience is often insufficient or non-existent and that the systems available at the institution to deal with the placement, monitoring and assessment of students in experiential learning are at unacceptably low levels of efficiency. Interviews suggest that WIL is being removed from courses and that, where these forms of experience are required as part of the assessment of students, they are being replaced with other forms of assessment. This situation contradicts the institutional leadership's own commitment to Unisa's identity as a comprehensive university and is a matter which urgently needs decisive leadership. The Panel is aware of the current externally imposed realities on the ODL provisioning of WIL programmes and Unisa's view that WIL is an important conduit for executing its social justice mandate and for instilling service learning values in graduates.

### **Recommendation 3**

**The HEQC recommends that the University of South Africa identifies all programmes which require work integrated learning, assesses the extent to which this requirement is being fulfilled at appropriate levels of quality, and designs the necessary interventions to deal with those courses in which work integrated learning is unsatisfactorily implemented, or has been removed as a course requirement. This should take into account the ODL provision of WIL programmes and the legislative context in South Africa.**

10. In terms of the range of academic offerings, the Panel noted that the large majority of Unisa's enrolments are in university type qualifications (69.33%) and that vocational type qualifications constitute 23.52% of the total enrolments (AP: 33). In this regard, the Panel would like to encourage the institution to monitor its enrolments in order to avoid academic drift. ODL can offer a powerful approach to technical and vocational education, based on the utilization of the appropriate combination of courseware and delivery systems. The Panel urges the institution to examine critically the design of courses leading to vocational type qualifications in order to ensure that students enrolled in these programmes acquire the knowledge, skills and competencies required in the labour market.

### **Unisa's Institutional Culture and Transformation**

11. In relation to institutional culture, the Panel noted the sense of loyalty that many staff and students have towards Unisa. It also noted that the tensions of the merger resulted in a deterioration of the relationship between management and academics. While to a large extent, relations between management and academics have been restored, the Panel found significant expressions of dissatisfaction among academic staff that the institution might need to investigate. First and foremost is the issue of workload. Most academic staff members have too many students to support and staff: student ratios in certain courses are far higher than the college average. The Panel urges the institution to look into the impact that growing student numbers have on academic staff in the different colleges. The Panel is of the impression that the very ambitious nature of Unisa's strategic objectives, particularly in the area of research, might be putting an extraordinary load on staff. Decisive action needs to be taken in order to avoid high staff turnover and disengagement of staff from their responsibilities in the core functions. Similarly, academics need to understand that delivering on the transformative and access mandate of Unisa is a challenge for the institution as a whole.

#### **Recommendation 4**

**The HEQC recommends that the University of South Africa engages in a comprehensive and inclusive analysis of the workload of academics in different colleges and courses in order to understand its impact on staff morale and quality of education, and devise appropriate strategies to deal with both challenges.**

12. The Panel visits to four regional centres and interviews held at these centres and the main campus highlighted the seriousness of the challenges facing the University due to the changing composition of its student enrolment. The Panel found, in general, that students are young, studying full-time and come to the centres and main campus looking for more face-to-face support, and seeking physical and social spaces where they can study, develop, and belong to a community of higher education students, both for identity as well as educational purposes. The Panel is aware of the enormous investment being made

by the institution in infrastructural development in the regions and the centres. However, the scale of the demand is such that it cannot be met adequately.

13. The Panel analysed Unisa's Service Charter and congratulates the institution on the drive to improve the quality of its service to the public. However, the Panel found during interviews with students that there is late reception of study materials and marks, the provision of incorrect dates for registration, and a general sense of not being taken care of, all of which is conformed in the analysis of student surveys. The Panel was concerned about students' fatalistic sense of their educational experience at Unisa. Failure seems to be accepted as a norm; they try again and again until they finally pass a course. This, the Panel observed, has led to an emphasis on mimicry and poring over old examination as an approach to learning. The Panel is of the view that much remains to be done in relation to improving the service provided in the different functional areas of the institution.
14. Unisa has a sophisticated material production and distribution system staffed by committed professionals. This notwithstanding, disruption to the flow of study guides, tutor letters, assignment materials as well as the absence of an early warning system about such delays, require urgent attention to improve the quality of learning especially taking into consideration the implications for the proposed semester system.

#### **Recommendation 5**

**The HEQC recommends that the University of South Africa addresses student dissatisfaction with service delivery at the different stages of the student process and finds appropriate solutions for both bad service and system failure in such a manner that it realizes the promises made in the institution's service charter.**

15. In relation to the demographic profile of Unisa's academic workforce, like most institutions in the country, Unisa finds difficulty in attracting and retaining black academics. Despite this, the institution has made considerable progress in the appointment of black academics and senior managers. The Panel heard with concern that black academics are made to feel uncomfortable in schools staffed predominantly by white academics. The Panel also heard of cases in which the best candidate has not been chosen in order to improve the equity profile of different units. The Panel was not able to corroborate this, or to ascertain how widespread this might be. Nevertheless, the Panel wants to signal the importance of both sets of concerns. Unisa's social justice mandate can be jeopardised by covert and overt racist behaviour among staff as well as by not finding an appropriate balance between quality and redress in the appointment of staff.
16. The focus on performance of the higher education funding framework has resulted in Unisa reviewing its open access policy and its decision to replace it with a managed open admissions process which entails students undergoing a diagnostic test before registration. This approach is combined with a university preparation programme focused

on providing students failing the diagnostic test with a range of skills that would allow them to gain admission later (AP: 31). This approach to access is too new for the Panel to comment on, but it would like to stress the importance of developing appropriate monitoring systems to measure the impact that managed open access has on success rates and throughput as well as on the quality of graduates produced by the institution.

### **Institutional Planning, Resource Allocation and Quality Assurance**

17. The Panel met with some representatives of Council and was told by the executive management of their appreciation for Council's contribution to the institution without getting involved in management issues. While the Panel appreciates this, it is concerned that Council members do not seem to be sufficiently aware of the impact that increased student enrolments have on the quality of students' experiences at Unisa, and on the ability of the institution to deliver both in terms of its access mandate and in terms of its commitment to respond to labour market needs. The Panel is of the view that, without overstepping its role in the governance of the University, Council members need to be informed in more detail of matters affecting the quality of the institution's offerings.
  
18. The Panel is unclear about the roles of Senate and Senex as drivers of academic change in the ODL context at Unisa. The Panel noted with concern the unwieldy system of Senate committees, ten in total, and the failure of Senate as a whole to engage sufficiently with the critical issues which affect the institution. The Panel is concerned that the multiplicity of Senate committees might be adding to the silo effect, which could be an obstacle to achieving an integrated view of ODL. The Panel strongly agrees with the recommendation in the COL Report of the need to review the structure of the committees of Senate.

#### **Recommendation 6**

**The HEQC recommends that the University of South Africa reviews the structure, terms of reference and composition of the committees of Senate with a view to integrating different components of the teaching and learning process in an open distance learning environment into a coherent set of policies and practices.**

19. The Panel noted the complexity of the institution's management structure and understands this structure is to a large extent a consequence of the complexity of Unisa as an organisation. The Panel is of the view that for this structure to function, the interface between the core functions and the Strategy, Planning and Partnerships portfolio has to be both close and of high quality. The Panel heard the clearest articulation of Unisa as an ODL university from the Strategy, Planning and Partnerships portfolio and the Institute for Curriculum and Learning Development (ICLD) team. The Panel concurs with members of the management team that it is important to find the appropriate means to develop a shared and suitably sophisticated conceptualisation of ODL and Unisa's academic tasks in this regard.

20. The Executive Deans are the interface between management and academia. For their management role to be effective they need to be sufficiently supported and empowered in university-level management and processes. For their academic role to be effective, the Deans need to be recognized leaders in their disciplines, who can mobilize their academic colleagues and be mobilized by them in relation to matters affecting the development and transformation of the disciplines. In the case of Unisa in particular, the Deans need to be at the forefront of the pedagogic enterprise in the ODL context. Interviews with the Deans and academic staff across the colleges suggest that there is considerable unevenness in the way in which each Dean discharges their role, the support they feel they are receiving from the institution's management and the confidence that they themselves elicit among their peers.

**Recommendation 7**

**The HEQC recommends that the University of South Africa analyses the situation of Executive Deans at different colleges and creates an enabling environment for Executive Deans to provide academic leadership, management and strategic direction both to their faculties, colleges and to the institution.**

21. The review of the documentation submitted by the institution and, particularly, the interaction with different layers of academic and management staff suggest that, with regard to the operationalisation and management of projects and processes, Unisa is lacking integrated structures where there is a clear sense of the impact that interdependent projects and processes have on each other. While this might be a function of the organisational complexity of Unisa, it needs to be addressed in order to provide coherence to multiple projects. The Panel strongly supports the institution's observations that it is necessary to achieve better horizontal or cross-portfolio alignment and integration (AP: 52). In particular, the Panel would like to suggest that the institution finds ways of sharing more broadly some of the conceptual work done under the Strategy, Planning and Partnerships Portfolio across the University.

22. In relation to Unisa's capacity for institutional research the Panel compliments the institution on the creation and implementation of the throughput project, which has the potential to make a substantive contribution to Unisa's self-understanding.

**Commendation 2**

**The HEQC commends the University of South Africa on the work done in the Strategy, Planning and Partnerships Portfolio and the manner in which the institution has been able to connect strategy, planning and resource allocation in order to support the achievement of the university's mission.**

23. The Panel was pleased to see that, in organisational terms, quality assurance is a matter that the institution has incorporated at all the appropriate levels. The Panel was uncertain

as to the depth at which quality assurance committees are able to focus on the quality of teaching and learning and the overall student experience. Students' complaints and the concerns of academics about the impact that workload has on the quality of delivery at the institution, suggest that there are problematic areas regarding the quality of provision which are not being addressed either at all or not fast enough. Of particular concern for the Panel, given the evidence gathered during the visits to the regional centres, is the role that the regional quality assurance committees have in assuring and improving the educational experience of students in the regions.

### **Recommendation 8**

**The HEQC recommends that the University of South Africa carefully monitors the impact that the different structures dealing with quality assurance at different levels and areas of the institution have in improving the quality of provision at the institution, and therefore, the overall educational experience of the university's students.**

24. The Integrated Quality Assurance Framework developed by Unisa is too new for the Panel to comment on its effectiveness. The framework has been designed to support of the institution's capacity to address a number of national imperatives. This provides an important point of entry to develop a notion of 'quality' that takes into account the different aspects of Unisa's mission. The Panel hopes that the institution will use this opportunity to avoid the implementation of a compliance driven quality assurance system operating independently of substantive notions of quality. The Panel urges the Directorate of Quality Assurance and Promotion to implement its new framework in the understanding that quality does not only take place in the context of the core functions but depends, to a large extent, on the vibrancy of scholarship in the different disciplines.
25. In the area of resource allocation, the Panel was impressed by the ability of the staff in the units under the Finance Portfolio to link an understanding of the institution's strategic plan with its budgeting model. The Panel found the strategic allocation model and the activity-based costing and management important tools to support Unisa's achievement of its strategic goals. The Panel was also impressed by Unisa's pricing model and its relation to enrolment planning. In terms of the institution's idea of reducing the fees in those areas to which it wants to attract students, the Panel urges the institution to monitor carefully the impact that this decision has on student performance. While there is not always a direct correlation between poor students and poor mathematics and science results, the institution could consider aligning the pricing model together with its managed open access model, in order to ensure that Unisa not only provides access to key national areas of need but also ensures that students graduate with the appropriate knowledge and skills within an acceptable timeframe.

### **Commendation 3**

**The HEQC commends the University of South Africa on its Finance Portfolio's ability to understand the budgeting model as a fundamental tool to support the realisation of the institution's strategy and on the work conducted in developing financial tools that respond to this understanding.**

26. The Panel met with the executive members of the Student Representative Council (SRC) in Pretoria and with members of the regional SRCs during the visits to the regional centres. The overall picture is one of students adequately represented in all structures, but since only 30% of the enrolled students participate in the SRC elections, the level of representation of the SRC is doubtful. Given the need to achieve representation for the regions as well as the central campus the size of the SRC is rather large (84 members), and, according to the interviewed representatives, is becoming unwieldy.

### **Teaching and Learning**

27. Unisa has gone a considerable way in its efforts to contextualize best international practice in ODL. The Panel is impressed by the institution's analysis of what is required, when and the extent to which this necessitates a cultural change in the institution over and above a change in business processes. However, the Panel found that, despite a few remarkable exceptions, there is minimal conceptual engagement with the pedagogy underpinning the idea of student-centeredness in an ODL context at Unisa. The Panel found no resonance among most senior managers regarding the relationship between Unisa's graduates, curriculum development and the role of power courses. As a result there is a dissonance about the understanding of ODL. The Panel concurs with the institution of the need to develop an ODL policy framework.
28. The task of reducing the approximately 5000 programmes offered by the combined merger partners to the current 3500 postponed a serious engagement with curriculum issues in discussions about the appropriate Programme and Qualification Mix (PQM) for the new Unisa. The processes of rethinking programmes in the context of the implementation of the HEQF can be an opportunity for the institution to deal with these issues. The Panel would like to stress the importance of clear senior management leadership in this endeavour.
29. The Panel analysed the Framework for the Implementation of a Team Approach to Curriculum and Learning Development and it recognises, at the conceptual level, how the student profile and the different learning contexts are taken into account. The success of the approach depends on the institution's ability to integrate processes and the people tasked with implementing them at each step. Interviews with ICLD established that the integration of disciplinary/subject content and expertise in learning facilitation is absolutely necessary for the approach to be successful. The phase of 'learning

development' clearly presupposes that academics and tutors assigned to the different modules will be familiar with the variety of media required and will be available to support students according to their needs in the facilitation process. The demands of facilitating the learning of large numbers of students who, due to a variety of reasons, are not autonomous learners, are enormous.

30. The Panel congratulates the institution on the development of *MyUnisa* as web technology with a variety of applications. The Panel heard enthusiastic students and lecturers talking about the possibilities that this offers for teaching and learner support purposes.

**Commendation 4**

**The HEQC commends the University of South Africa on the development of web technology to support open distance learning in its different facets.**

31. However, the Panel is aware of the comparatively low take-up of *MyUnisa* by academic staff for teaching purposes and, particularly, for on-line assessment. This lack of connectivity limits the use of *MyUnisa* for a significant number of students. While the Panel congratulates the institution on the successful implementation of *MyUnisa* for registration and communication purposes, it would also like to encourage the institution to find an appropriate strategy to increase the full use of this platform by more academics and students as soon as possible.

**Recommendation 9**

**The HEQC recommends that the University of South Africa considers the most appropriate mechanisms to make all academic staff involved in teaching integrate the pedagogical possibilities of *MyUnisa* into their teaching. In this sense, improving staff ability to develop sound open distance learning courseware needs to be improved and encouraged. One way of achieving this would be to include courseware development as criteria for promotion of staff. The HEQC strongly recommends that the institution find ways to ensure that all students have sustainable and regular access to the web in order to benefit from *MyUnisa*.**

32. The Panel was interested in the conceptualisation of 'power courses' and the impact they could have in improving Unisa's effectiveness in teaching large numbers of students as well as the overall student experience. But during interviews with a wide range of staff, the Panel also noted poor articulation of the purpose and principles underpinning 'power courses' despite the clear understanding of the issue demonstrated by some groups such as ICLD staff. The principles informing the design of 'power courses' include the development of a range of ODL-specific skills, features of taking the curriculum as the point of departure.

### **Commendation 5**

**The HEQC commends the University of South Africa on the development of its ‘power courses’ which reflect a deep understanding of teaching in an open distance learning environment.**

33. ‘Power courses’ as well as other teaching and learning innovations at Unisa require a considerable amount of planning and preparation. Critical in this regard is finding, appointing, training, equipping and managing thousands of tutors to provide and mediate the new learning ethos of the institution. This is a major human resource challenge which, unless managed carefully, could cause considerable reputational damage to the institution. Given Unisa’s current capacity in terms of curriculum advisors, academics, tutors and learning facilitators, the Panel is not persuaded that the institution will be able to deliver on its targets.
34. Related to this is Unisa’s seeming lack of an appropriate mechanism that realistically calculates the quantum and nature of support that students will need per module and whether this is available and sustainable. The Panel heard generally negative comments from students about the quality of tutors and heard from staff that insufficient thought has been given to the need for enough coordinators to work with tutors in modules with very large enrolments.

### **Recommendation 10**

**The HEQC recommends that the University of South Africa develops an appropriate mechanism to establish the quantity and nature of the support required in the different modules, and ensures that sufficient number of appropriately trained staff is available to support student learning.**

35. The Panel had the opportunity to see some of the consequences, particularly, but not exclusively in regional centres, of the lack of sufficient access to lecturers and well-trained tutors, and the impact this has on the attitudes that students develop towards learning. Students complained of being on their own, not only because they did not understand distance education but because their experience of dealing with the institution makes them feel so. Complaints about expensive text-books which are hardly used, absent lecturers and poor tutorials characterised many interactions with Unisa undergraduate students. The Panel is concerned particularly with the fact that, for students who are not autonomous learners, lack of support encourages repetition and mimicry instead of interactive learning. This defeats the very purpose and principles that Unisa espouses in its mission in relation to the development of critical citizens.

### **Recommendation 11**

**The HEQC recommends that the University of South Africa establishes the necessary mechanisms to analyse the extent to which students’ learning experiences at the University yield the kind of graduates the institution wishes to produce, and**

**based on these findings, devises appropriate interventions in order to ensure that students do attain the expected learning outcomes.**

36. The functioning of the Tuition Committee and its relationship to the colleges is important for the realization of Unisa's ambition of becoming a comprehensive ODL university. The Panel is of the impression that there are clearly identified areas for action. One of these is the need for colleges to move away from the idea that Unisa's courses are intended for self-directed adult learners and to provide more scaffolding into the learning materials. The Panel is of the view that there is a lack of clarity and concrete plans about how the massive resources required to put this into place are going to be mobilized given the capacity constraints under which colleges and key units, such as ICLD, are working. The Panel was not able to shed light on the monitoring capabilities in relation to, for example, the extent of the implementation of 'power courses', or simply in terms of the effectiveness of existing teaching. Neither was it satisfied with the explanation received as to the relationship between the Tuition Committee and the Throughput Committee.

**Recommendation 12**

**The HEQC recommends that the University of South Africa critically assess the functions and responsibilities of the Senate Tuition Committee in terms of its effectiveness and efficiency in leading the implementation of the university's key teaching and learning policies.**

37. While the Panel understands the principles that guide the academic human resource allocation model, it is clear that the allocation is not enough and that the teaching load of lecturers dealing with 750 or 4000 students is such that there is no chance of ensuring that good teaching takes place. The Panel heard complaints about workload from academics as well as from the Executive Deans, who have to deal with the fallout from materials development not being timeously produced, and assignments and scripts not marked within expected timeframes. The Panel heard of the impending semesterisation of courses and it echoes academics' concerns about the impact that this will have not only on staff workload, but fundamentally on the quality of learning as no formative assessment seems to be possible taking into account current turnaround time for the reception of materials and marks.

**Recommendation 13**

**The HEQC recommends that the University of South Africa analyses the potential impact of the impending semesterisation on the quality of learning across different modules, given current difficulties in the area of assessment considering the university's profile of student enrolments, in order to ensure that this system will not undermine the quality of learning.**

38. The Audit Portfolio makes it clear that academics experience frustration in a variety of ways at the different colleges. This was confirmed by the Panel in interviews with a cross

section of academics. Academics seem to be experiencing ODL as primarily systems and technology, managed in a top-down fashion, while they feel that there is not sufficient space to deal with issues pertaining to the disciplines. It is also apparent that given the size of the institution and the complexity of most processes, academics often have no idea of what happens outside their own work sphere. This does not help to understand the issues facing them from an institutional and administrative perspective. This is a situation that requires corrective action on the part of heads of departments and Deans. The Panel not only found problems and even resistance among Unisa's staff, but also had the opportunity to meet enthusiastic, committed and knowledgeable individuals in the area of teaching and learning. The Panel saw examples of fine work and is persuaded that there are many pockets of excellence at Unisa. The Panel is, however, concerned about the extent to which the conceptual and practical issues are affecting the quality of tuition offered at Unisa.

### **Academic Support Services**

39. ODL is 'a systems-drive mode of delivery'. The systems have to cater for the development, production and dispatch of courseware and are key to the fulfilment of Unisa's vision as an ODL institution and the distributed facilitation of learning. The quality of the support services depends both on the quality of work of the specific unit and on the ability to integrate the different processes. Overall the Panel is impressed by the complexity of the processes involved, the technical capabilities of individual units and the efforts made by the institution in order to become a fully-fledged comprehensive ODL university. Much of what the Panel saw and heard is forward looking. The Panel is, however, concerned about the current obstacles which impede Unisa's progress towards its vision.
  
40. The Panel was particularly impressed by the work done by the Institute for Curriculum and Learning Development (ICLD) in its three areas of work. The Panel found the richest analysis of the implications of ODL for curriculum design and development came from ICLD's staff. There is no doubt that many excellent curricula are being developed and that this is done through the collaboration between ICLD staff and academics in the colleges, and also by individual academics. However, workload and lack of sufficient staff also mean that many study guides do not receive specialised input. It is a concern that the ICLD worked substantially in only 10% of the study guides submitted as new or revised guides in 2007(AP: 121). This partly has to do with the fact that lecturers are not compelled to work with ICLD. Given the current capacity of ICLD, the Panel is of the impression that, should the institute's input become obligatory, it would become technically impossible to respond to the demand. The Panel is not persuaded that ICLD can manage the demand that will be generated by the development of power courses, let alone its other commitments.

41. The Panel would like to impress on the institution that lack of team work on study guides increases the risk of perpetuating rote learning among students instead of developing integrated foundational, practical and reflective competencies, which are supposedly the mark of the Unisa graduate. Moreover, poorly conceptualised study guides combined with lack of sufficient student support can aggravate Unisa's low student throughput. Taking this into account, the Panel is of the view that the current location of ICLD outside the Academic and Research portfolio is in contradiction to the vision of Unisa as a fifth generation ODL Institution and might be one of the reasons why lecturers can see the utilisation of the institute's services as optional.

**Recommendation 14**

**The HEQC recommends that, as a matter of urgency, the University of South Africa finds ways of strengthening the capacity of the Institute for Curriculum and Learning Development with the aim of substantially increasing the proportion of study guides that are developed based on sound curriculum principles. In order to facilitate this it might be useful to relocate the unit under the Academic and Research portfolio.**

42. The Panel noted with appreciation the contribution of ICLD to staff development and research in ODL at Unisa.

**Commendation 6**

**The HEQC commends the University of South Africa on the work done by the Institute for Curriculum and Learning Development in the areas of curriculum development, professional learning and research in open distance learning.**

43. The Panel was impressed by the highly skilled staff who work at using media in an educationally sound way to support Unisa's lecturers and students. The quality of audio-visual material and the work of the Centre for Software Engineering are acknowledged by the Panel as is the work of the done in the area of audio-visual production and printing. It was also impressed by the scale and complexity of the production, distribution and storage of printed material. The Panel agrees that staff responsible for this service is operating at full capacity and is concerned that any increase in demand will make it almost impossible for this unit to cope. The Panel understands that delays in the arrival of materials for printing due to late submission on the part of the colleges will inevitably create bottle necks in production which will negatively impact on students. The Panel is aware of the efforts made by the institution to address these problems.

44. **Library.** The changing profile of Unisa's students is impacting on the utilisation of the library. Students in search for a place to study flood the library on the Pretoria central campus. This has several implications for library staff, students' satisfaction with the service they receive, and utilisation by academic staff of the library for research or teaching purposes. However, undergraduate students' experiences of the Library are

generally negative due to the nature of their demands. The Panel is aware of the construction of new premises at the Pretoria central and Sunnyside campuses with the intention to respond in a more adequate manner to students' needs.

45. The library services in the regional centres were unanimously criticised by students and staff. Students complained that prescribed books were not available in libraries and that resources available on subject matter were often outdated. This seems to be compounded, in the students' view, by the inefficiency of the inter-library loan system. The Panel had the opportunity to see the precarious state of some of the regional centres, particularly in the less urbanised areas. The situation is particularly difficult for postgraduate students.

**Recommendation 15**

**The HEQC recommends that the University of South Africa conducts a detailed assessment of the quality of the library services provided to students in the regional centres and finds mechanisms to improve students' access to appropriate library facilities.**

46. The Panel was impressed by the commitment and efficiency of the Unisa Library staff as well as on its collections and in this regard the library should be congratulated. The Panel is also satisfied that the institution has made adequate budgetary provision for the library and understands the challenges staff, students and academics are facing in this regard.
47. **Registration System.** The Panel appreciates the frank analyses provided in the Audit Portfolio about the areas of weakness identified in the functioning of the Unisa Contact Centre, in the provision of registration information to students and in the process of registration and administration. The institution has identified those areas that are offering sub-standard services, the causes of many of these problems and is implementing solutions to some of these problems.
48. In the view of most students interviewed registration seems to be a difficult and frustrating process in which a lack of integration of different institutional systems undermines the student's experience of their interaction with the institution. While the Panel appreciates some of the decisions taken by the institution in order to improve the quality and accuracy of information provided to students, it is a source of serious concern that mistakes in the processing of student registrations have far-reaching consequences for students' progress in their chosen qualifications. Whatever the problems found in Pretoria in the processes of registration, these are far worse in the regional centres despite the good-will and commitment of the staff.
49. **Distributed Learning System.** With staff student ratios of 1:750 and 1:4000, and an ever more demanding student population, a great deal of the successful facilitation of learning at Unisa depends on tutors. Direct responsibility for the allocation of tutors falls under the

Tutorial Support Service Division (TSS) of Tutorial Support, Group Discussions and Work-Integrated Learning (TSDL). All tutors are employed part-time and their main responsibility is to facilitate face-to-face tutorials in the regional centres. Liaison between tutors and academic department is conducted by tutor-coordinators (62 in 2007). This can hardly be sufficient in courses with enrolments in the tens of thousands. Moreover, the statistics provided on the profile of students attending tutorials indicate that most students are younger than 29 years old, African and female. This in itself poses specific pedagogical challenges for effective learning facilitation. The Panel heard generally negative comments about the quality of tutors from students and heard from staff that not sufficient thought has been given to the need for enough coordinators to work with tutors in very large modules. The Panel also heard from both students and tutors of the negative impact that late delivery of learning materials has in the facilitation process. The Panel found that the presence of 'residential' students in the regional centres causes tutors to become lecturers helping students understand the material, teaching rather than facilitating the learning of autonomous students. The Panel is seriously concerned about the quality of the educational experience of remote students who depend on regional centres for guidance and access to technology.

50. Despite the institution's requirements regarding the minimum qualifications of tutors, the Panel found examples of tutors whose level of qualifications barely exceeded the level at which they were offering instruction. Given these circumstances, and a sense of dissonance between the institution's self-assessment, the Panel is concerned about the viability of rolling out 'power courses' by 2015 with a requirement for 11 000 subject experts as tutors, who are envisaged as markers in order to free academics for teaching, learning and research (AP: 156). The Panel would like to urge the institution to assess the realism of recruiting the required number of tutors, train them and deploy them in a manner that supports quality of provision across all academic offerings.

#### **Recommendation 16**

**The HEQC recommends that the University of South Africa conducts as a matter of urgency a careful investigation into the efficiency and sustainability of its tutorial system in terms of supporting students to achieve expected learning outcomes. Important aspects of this investigation should include the nature and quality of the interaction between lecturers, coordinators and tutors; the effectiveness of the training received by tutors; and the extent to which overall facilities in the regional centres are conducive to providing adequate support to underprepared young students studying full-time through distance learning. This assessment should be used to inform decisions about whether and when to stop enrolling students in those areas in which the institution cannot provide appropriate support.**

## **Recommendation 17**

**The HEQC recommends that the University of South Africa uses facilities such as MyUnisa in order to improve tutor training and support.**

51. **Certification.** Unisa has an established and reliable system for certification that exhibits high levels of security to protect the integrity of its qualifications. The Panel is aware that controls are in place, and that any existing risks are managed by implementing these controls. Training of staff involved in the verification process takes place annually to ensure the correctness of their checks and to train them in the use of any system changes/enhancements that might have been made during the year. The institution's certificates contain adequate security features. During interviews with staff, the Panel heard of good practice in the management of graduation lists and programmes, including aspects such as the collection, printing and safe-keeping of certificates both before and after graduation.
52. The Panel noted the absence of the Coat of Arms as a security feature on certificates issued after the completion of short learning programmes. The Audit Portfolio points out that the initial *Policy for the issuing of certificates for formal qualifications and short learning programmes* has been amended by university management and Senex. According to this amendment, a certificate awarded for concluding a short learning programme may no longer bear the official Coat of Arms, as the previous practice had led to practical and security problems (AP: 273). This matter presents a distinct security challenge for the certification process. The Panel concurs with the COL audit recommendation (p.34) that certificates issued for short courses need to be made more secure and less easy to photocopy. The Panel is aware that the matter is receiving attention at policy level by the University.
53. **Short Courses.** Unisa has a number of centres, institutes, units, and colleges through which it offers a range of skills-based short learning programmes designed to meet students' vocational or social needs for lifelong learning (AP: 238). There is a policy that governs the development, approval and content of credit- and non-credit-bearing short learning programmes. Unisa's management of the quality of short learning programmes is elaborate. The Panel is aware of the different approval routes for credit and non-credit-bearing short learning programmes and that short learning programmes are subjected to the same rigour as formal modules (AP: 271). It also noted with appreciation that leaders of the various programmes take responsibility for ensuring the quality of tutorial matter and have a database of short learning programmes and marketing materials (AP: 272).
54. However, interviews with a range of stakeholders suggest that no proper market research informs the implementation of short learning programmes. Furthermore, the current structural arrangements and mandates seem to be overly complicated. Too many

structures are involved and there is a lack of distinction between governance, management roles and mandates, making it unlikely that delivering better-focussed, quality short learning programmes with more coherent community engagement could be achieved. The Panel is concerned about the governance structures that deal with the quality of short courses and is of the view that a more simplified and enabling structure is desirable.

55. **Programme Development and Review.** Unisa's main focus in relation to programmes since the merger has been the consolidation of academic offerings and the approval of its new Programme Qualification Mix (PQM) by the Department of Education. This to some extent distracted from the deeper quality-related issues involved in the process of programme development and review. This notwithstanding, the institution has made important progress in the development of an appropriate framework for programme development and has set up structures and processes for programme review.
56. An analysis of the self-evaluations of the different colleges suggests that there is no consistency in the manner in which programmes are evaluated. The Panel observed that some colleges are frustrated by the workload of their Quality Assurance Committees (QAC) including their interactions with the Quality Assurance Committee at institutional level. Given the concerns already raised in relation to the quality of materials and learning facilitation, the Panel would like to see greater integration between the work of the QAC and that of the Senate Tuition Committee.
57. **Staff Development.** The Panel noted the importance placed on staff development in improving quality at the institution. Departments are allowed to budget between 2-3% of their annual salary budget to plan and fund continuing professional development in each department. Staff members are encouraged to attend workshops and conferences, and sufficient funding is available to support applications. In 2006 a university-wide strategy was developed to enable the appointment of postgraduate research assistants and postgraduate student assistants. The Panel would like to congratulate Unisa for its serious efforts at improving staff skills and knowledge in and about ODL through the staff development and induction programmes. Its workshops, seminars and research support structures are cited as important initiatives for the development of young academics in support of changing the profile of the academic workforce at the institution.

#### **Commendation 7**

**The HEQC commends the University of South Africa on the conceptualisation and implementation of a programme focused on the comprehensive development of young academics.**

58. **Assessment.** Assessment is a particularly complex activity at Unisa. Growing enrolments have meant a proportionate increase in the volume of assignments. To add to the

academic and logistical difficulties of managing volume and time across the colleges, the central campus and the regional centres, Unisa also was required by the DoE to indicate the number of active students for subsidy purposes. This implied the introduction early in the academic calendar of an obligatory assessment. In 2006, this resulted in the paralysis of the assignment section of Student Assessment Administration (SAA) due to the sheer volume (AP: 288).

59. The University has some courses following an annual system and others following a semester system, with variations across colleges and among departments. Some colleges argued, and this has been confirmed by academic staff, that semester courses are not conducive to formative assessment. The Panel learned from documentation and interviews with different layers of staff, that the institution is moving towards a unified semesterised academic year. The Panel heard that the Senate vote on semesterisation, although sufficient to make the recommendation, was not overwhelmingly in support of the new system. The Panel has not seen persuasive evidence regarding the pedagogic soundness of the proposed semester system when Unisa's student profile and the number of students involved, particularly when the largest colleges are taken into account. Delays in any stage of the process of assessment of which there seem to be many, result in students not having received feedback before the examination, which in turn contributes to poor pass rates, and also to student dissatisfaction.
60. The Panel is aware of the effort made by the institution, in particular by academics and the ICLD, to improve the quality of assessment, specifically by improving the construction of MCQs in order for these to measure the required learning outcomes. In this regard it congratulates the institution. The Panel also notes with appreciation the clarity with which policies and procedures regulating the setting of examination questions, moderation, and consistency have been stated. However, from an academic point of view the practice of much of this is at best uneven. From an administrative point of view, the institution acknowledged the enormous difficulties faced by SAA and the University in general in simply running the assessment system effectively.
61. Most of the indicated solutions to the current bottleneck are systemic and technology based and, since many of Unisa's students do not have access to computers for submitting assignments, depends on the scanning of hand-written scripts. While the incorporation of technology, increasing capabilities in the SAA, and the training of academics to make use of existing and future technology can help in improving turnaround time, it is still difficult to see how the institution will deal with the semester system before the technology and the ability to utilise it, is established. The Panel heard from both students and staff that Unisa struggles to find sufficient numbers of good markers who can help achieve consistency in the assessment process. The Panel would

like to encourage colleges to continue their reviews of current assessment strategies to address the identified inconsistencies.

62. The Panel accepts that contact university graduation and throughput rates are inappropriate as a measure of Unisa's performance. However, the institution is aware that even for ODL institutions, its outputs are poor, and moreover, due to the legacy of apartheid, that these are differentiated across racial lines. The transformative role of distance education requires the identification of a number of interventions, some of which the institution has already put in place. The Panel would like to urge Unisa to implement monitoring mechanisms to ensure the effectiveness of its assessment practices from both administrative and academic perspectives.

### **Recommendation 18**

**The HEQC recommends that the University of South Africa implements thorough monitoring mechanisms to ensure the effectiveness of its assessment practices from both administrative and academic perspectives as some of the current practices jeopardise the quality of the student experience and the achievement of the learning outcomes expected from its graduates.**

63. Concerning Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), there is an internationally and nationally benchmarked RPL policy with clear procedures. The Panel heard during the interviews with staff that not all the RPL unit's posts are filled, forcing the unit to use contract workers. Staff argue that training contract workers to the level required to join the team on assessment of RPL takes a long time and that these members do not stay for long. Due to the labour intensive nature of RPL assessments, customized ways of assessment enforced through administrative structures, there seems to be a need for qualified staff and committed individuals to do the assessment required for RPL. The location of the RPL as a student support service rather than as an administrative function seems to be an issue of concern for staff. The institution might want to look into this issue, as well as the need to allocate resources to track the progress of students who gain access to the institution through RPL.

## **Research**

64. The 2015 Strategic Plan indicates Unisa's aspiration to becoming one of the top five South African research universities by 2015. With this objective in mind the institution has developed a number of policies and structures designed to support the institution in progressing towards this goal. An analysis of Unisa's research policy suggests that, despite the university's commitment to its identity as a comprehensive institution, this aspect of the mission has not been factored into the university's definition of research. Under 'principles of research' the policy makes no reference which indicates that Unisa is contemplating the possibility of research into technologies. In general, the Panel found that the Research Policy of the institution is in need of a conceptual review, in order to

achieve a better fit with the overall institutional mission and other frameworks regulating research activity at the institution.

65. In 2007, 60% of enrolments were at the undergraduate level, with 7.15% at postgraduate level (AP: 83). The majority of these enrolments are at honours level with only 681 doctoral students. Research-intensive institutions in the country have between 30% and 40% of their enrolments at postgraduate level. Unisa is far from this target and it is unlikely that it will be able to improve postgraduate enrolments in order to become a research intensive university by 2015. The Panel's interactions with senior academics who are supervising postgraduates at master's and doctoral level suggest that they are already oversubscribed. Taking this into account, the Panel is not persuaded that any important feature that could identify Unisa as a research university could be realised with the institution's current staff capacity and the demands being made on these staff at present.
66. The Panel met with a wide range of researchers across the institution as well as with the relevant governance structures. Based on these interactions and the analysis of the documentation submitted by the institution, the Panel agrees with the COL Audit Report that most researchers do not see the Senate Research Committee (SENREC) as a proactive committee providing leadership in the development and implementation of research policy at the institution. The Panel noted the lack of integrated reports on the research function, as well as some marked variations in the implementation of institutional policies at college level.

#### **Recommendation 19**

**The HEQC recommends that the University of South Africa considers undertaking an assessment of the effectiveness of the Senate Research Committee in discharging its role in the coordination, monitoring and evaluation of research at the institution. The outcomes of this assessment should provide the information to design appropriate strategies to support the performance of this committee and its effectiveness in driving the university's Research Policy.**

67. Overall the Panel found that the management and administration of research is fairly efficiently done. The institution has good support programmes for young researchers and it is making important efforts to improve the university's participation in programmes, such as the NRF's Thuthuka. The Panel is satisfied with the support measures the University has put in place to realize its mission in the area of research. This was confirmed during interviews which informed the Panel about the institution encouraging publication in accredited journals, incentives for researchers, two new prizes, and research leave. The Panel also heard that growing the next generation of researchers is one aim of the Research Directorate's workshops for emerging researchers, a commendable attempt to address this mission and vision.

68. A number of important observations are made by the Panel about research at Unisa. First, as already mentioned the lack of a comprehensive character in the research published by Unisa and in the institution's general research outlook is apparent. The Panel is not aware of any data on patents of intellectual property. Defining the research focus appropriate for a comprehensive university and the range of research outputs expected from it is a necessary task for the institution. Secondly, there is seemingly a lack of alignment between areas of strength in terms of publication and the choice of research niche areas. The Panel is not clear as to the criteria used in the selection of research niche areas. Thirdly, there is the issue of the tendency of Unisa's researchers to publish predominantly in Unisa's journals. While understanding that all these journals are DoE accredited, the institution might want to encourage researchers to publish in other accredited journals as well. Finally, and partly as a consequence of both disciplinary fields and journals of publication, there is a lack of international exposure of Unisa's research. The institution might consider how this impacts on its aspiration to be a research intensive university.

69. The Panel supports and encourages the development of the research function at Unisa. Knowledge production in the various disciplines benefits the scholarship of teaching and no academic community is sustainable without the practice of research. However, the Panel is concerned that Unisa's aspiration to become one of the top five research universities in the country is coming at a time when the energies and resources of the University should be invested in giving effect to the ODL character of the institution. The provision of appropriately designed courses and learning materials and the deployment of sufficient student support to achieve the institution's throughput targets and quality objectives is itself daunting. The Panel is not persuaded that the financial and human resource investment of becoming a research university can be handled simultaneously with these other challenges. The Panel suggests that Unisa should downscale its aspirations to become a research university in order to prioritise the improvement and consolidation of its ability to provide good and excellent tuition across all its colleges and qualifications offerings in an efficient and effective manner.

#### **Recommendation 20**

**The HEQC recommends that the University of South Africa reassesses its aspiration to become one of the five research universities in South Africa until it has substantially improved the effectiveness of its teaching and learning core function particularly in relation to student support, success and throughput.**

## **Postgraduate Education**

70. The Panel had an opportunity to meet with supervisors and postgraduate students as well as with the Higher Degrees Committees. The Panel is of the impression that postgraduate education is one of the areas that generate the greatest discontent among both academics and students. This is particularly so in relation to the processes of admission and registration of students. The Panel heard that supervisors are often allocated students without their having a say in the student's ability or their willingness or interest in supervising them. The Panel heard from students that they experienced 'tremendous frustration' with the registration process, being allocated a supervisor, and having no access to supervisors to discuss proposals or to receive guidance in terms of a topic for a dissertation. Academics on the other hand, had a variety of experiences of the process of admission of students. While in some departments supervisors to postgraduate students are appointed once the proposal is approved and registered, in others supervisors simply receive students already registered. Most academics complain about their workload in this area. The Panel learned of departments with 1300 master's students, and individual academics responsible for 120 honours students, not to mention masters and doctoral students. The Panel heard from supervisors that some of the students that they do not have the language and research competencies to undertake postgraduate studies. The Panel would like to urge the institution to assess the impact that its system of admissions for postgraduate students has on the overall quality of the student experience and on the quality of the degree conferred.

### **Recommendation 21**

**The HEQC recommends that the University of South Africa put appropriate screening mechanisms in place to manage admissions to postgraduate degrees taking into account the need to align supervisory capacity and student readiness.**

71. The Panel is of the view that the workload of supervisors, particularly given the low level of research readiness of their students, is too high to maintain acceptable quality standards. This is confirmed by the findings of the COL report that noted postgraduate students' complaints about poor supervisory contact, lack of facilities and apparent neglect and long drawn out silences on the part of supervisors. Students and supervisors agreed that the quality of supervision is a source of concern. Besides lack of time due to the excessive workload, the Panel also found that there is lack of training regarding ODL supervision.

### **Recommendation 22**

**The HEQC recommends that the University of South Africa develops an appropriate system for the mentoring and training of supervisors as well as a system to monitor the quality of the supervision that actually takes place in the different departments.**

72. The Panel heard that students are not aware of any processes and procedures that are in place to complain about poor quality supervision. The Panel would like to urge the institution to examine the different policies and procedures that regulate postgraduate education in order to ensure that the quality of the interactions between supervisors and students as well as the quality of the research produced meets minimum standards of quality. Furthermore, the Panel heard about the problem of plagiarism in postgraduate work. The Panel was unable to establish whether all colleges have appropriate systems to detect and deal with plagiarism at postgraduate level.
73. In terms of the availability of an effective appropriate infrastructure to support postgraduate research, particularly in the natural sciences, the Panel heard about the lack of appropriate laboratories and equipment in this area. The Panel would like to encourage the institution to ensure that appropriate arrangements are in place for postgraduate students in need of laboratory equipment while the institution is developing its own infrastructure. Similarly, the Panel would like to suggest that the institution monitors carefully its postgraduate student intake in areas that require infrastructure and equipment not readily available.

### **Community Engagement**

74. The Panel agrees with the sentiments expressed in the Audit Portfolio that community engagement has been neglected as a formal system in the university (AP: 93). The Panel concurs with the COL report that there is a significant and varied amount of community engagement activity in the university and that it is uneven within the colleges. The Panel appreciates the institution's current efforts to conceptualise, audit and consolidate its initiatives in community engagement, but these developments are too recent to comment on their effectiveness. The Panel acknowledges the institution's efforts to develop a comprehensive community engagement policy and the creation of a Directorate for Community Engagement and Outreach in the Academic Planning Office. The institution is aware that all these activities will have to be looked at from the perspective of an appropriate framework that, by necessity, will have to take into account how students may be productively engaged within community engagement in an ODL environment.

### **Conclusion**

75. Unisa is a national asset which needs to be preserved and developed. With its 280000 student enrolments, the institution holds the responsibility of providing quality education to a third of the total number of students enrolled in higher education in South Africa. The fact that an increasing number of these students come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and have undergone poor schooling makes Unisa's responsibility to turn these students into good professionals and competent graduates all the more difficult, necessary and costly.

76. Open and Distance Learning is a political and moral choice which needs to be sustained through the development of educational processes geared to graduating students who have the necessary knowledge, skills and competencies to continue to learn. The fact that Unisa sees its mission not just to produce graduates but also to develop critical citizens capable of engaging with and committing to their societies, makes delivering on the demand for quality education in an ODL context even more complex.
77. The fundamental area in which Unisa has to concentrate its efforts and capabilities is the substantive improvement of the effectiveness of its teaching and learning core function. The improvement of student support in terms of access to sufficient numbers of appropriately qualified and trained tutors, sustained and regular access to pedagogic tools such as *MyUnisa*, and the development of well-conceptualised and pedagogically informed study guides, are vital areas that the institution knows require concentrated attention. One of the greatest challenges of Unisa is to improve throughput and student support so as to guarantee that a reasonable number of those students who access Unisa also succeed in their endeavours.
78. In an ODL context and taking into account the circumstances under which Unisa is operating, realising these objectives will require a massive deployment of student support, the re-engineering of processes, as well as rethinking teaching and learning within the disciplines, together with investing in human resources and technology on an extraordinary scale.
79. Unisa is a dauntingly complex organisation in terms of size and processes. Successfully implementing radical change in such an organisation requires firm and clear leadership to bring together all layers of staff and students; an ability to recognise areas of weakness and failure; and an unwavering commitment to the value of such a project. Yet all of this will not be sufficient unless it is supplemented by the ability to prioritise and pace change, and accept that not all processes of development have to, or can, take place simultaneously.