



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INSTITUTIONAL AUDIT REPORT ON THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

(May 2023)

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ACRONYMS

ACHRAM	Academic Human Resources Allocation Model
APP	Annual Performance Plan
ASACoC	Academic and Student Affairs Committee of Council
B.Ed.	Bachelor of Education
BI	Business Intelligence
BRP	Best Reflective Practice
CHE	Council on Higher Education
DeL	Distance e-Learning
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DIQAE	Department of Institutional Quality Assurance and Enhancement
DPQA	Department of Planning and Quality Assurance
DQAP	Directorate: Quality Assurance and Promotion
HCert	Higher Certificate
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Committee
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
IF	Institutional Forum
IQMAF	Integrated Quality Management and Assurance Framework
IR	Industrial Revolution
IT	Information Technology
LMS	Learning Management System
MOOC	Massive Open Online Course
NDP	National Development Plan
NPR	Normal Pass Rate
NSC	National Senior Certificate
NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
NSRC	National Student Representative Council
ODeL	Open Distance e-Learning
OEP	Open Educational Practices
OER	Open Education Resources
PMS	Performance Management System
PoE	Portfolio of Evidence
QA	Quality Assurance
QA&E	Quality Assurance and Enhancement
QIP	Quality Improvement Plans
QMS	Quality Management System
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SBL	School for Business Leadership
SER	Self-Evaluation Report
SoTL	Scholarship of Teaching and Learning
SRU	Student Retention Unit
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
STLCEC	Senate Teaching, Learning and Community Engagement Committee
TLCE&SS	Teaching, Learning, Community Engagement and Student Support
UNISA	University of South Africa
UQC	University Quality Committee
UQEI	Quality Evaluation Instrument

VP
WIL

Vice Principal
Work-Integrated Learning

Executive Summary

The Council on Higher Education (CHE) was established through the Higher Education Act (No. 101 of 1997, as amended) primarily to assure quality in the South African higher education sector and to advise the Minister on aspects of higher education. The National Qualifications Framework Act (No. 67 of 2008, as amended) conferred additional responsibilities on the CHE as the Quality Council for higher education, with overall responsibility for the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF). The CHE executes its quality assurance responsibilities through its permanent committee, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC). The CHE, through the HEQC, exercises its quality assurance function using a variety of mechanisms, one of which is institutional audits that are mandated by the Higher Education Act.

The *Framework for Institutional Audits (2021)*¹ and its attendant *Manual for Institutional Audits (2021)*² are key instruments to regulate the implementation of institutional audits. These documents are also aligned in important respects to the new Quality Assurance Framework (QAF)³ that was approved by the HEQC and Council in September 2020 and which will be implemented in the medium term by the CHE. Institutional audits are strongly influenced by both the specific context within which each HEI works, and by the national transformational agenda within which higher education functions. The HEQC has identified a need to do full audits of all HEIs in South Africa. A full audit of an institution determines whether or not, and to what extent, an institution's IQA systems, policies and procedures ensure the effective provisioning of good quality higher education that enhances the likelihood of student success through quality learning and teaching, research opportunities and integrated community engagement. The emphasis is less on ensuring that required standards are met at a particular threshold than on the deliberate, continuous, systematic and measurable improvement of the student experience, as well as on building reflexive praxis to develop quality cultures in institutions.

The following principles guided the institutional audit of the University of South Africa (Unisa):

1. The primary responsibility for internal quality assurance rests with individual HEIs. Each institution is responsible for the establishment, implementation, maintenance, improvement and enhancement of its own quality management and assurance systems.
2. The uniqueness of each institution's size, shape, location, context and mission is recognised.
3. The value of institutional audits rests on the compilation of credible, contextually relevant and reliable information that is required for internal quality-related

¹ <https://www.che.ac.za/publications/frameworks/framework-institutional-audits-2021>

² <https://www.che.ac.za/publications/frameworks/manual-institutional-audits-2021>

³ <https://www.che.ac.za/publications/frameworks/quality-assurance-framework-qaf-higher-education-south-africa>

- planning and self-evaluation, peer review and public reporting (for example, by publishing executive summaries).
4. Student experience, student engagement and participation and the student voice are central to an evaluation of an institution's quality management system.
 5. The institutional audit is a peer-driven and evidence-based process to ensure that the HEQC and its audit panel reports are transparent, informed and consistent.
 6. Institutional audits are developmental and intent on supporting continuous quality improvement and enhancement.
 7. Institutional audits are required to balance their developmental character with the regulatory requirement that the CHE and the HEQC act on poor provisioning where institutions have no clear commitments, processes, practices or plans to improve.
 8. Institutional audits are a key component of the HEQC's broad-based quality assurance mandate.

Aligned to international practice, the HEQC uses a review methodology consisting of an institutional self-evaluation report (SER), and an external peer review which verifies, triangulates and validates the institution's self-evaluation. The external peer review consists of a document analysis of the SER and institutional portfolio of evidence, as well as a site visit at which interviews are conducted with constituencies, and physical infrastructure is visited. This audit report forms the outcome of the institutional audit of UNISA.

UNISA was established in 1873 as an examination centre, and later evolved into a fully distance-education "correspondence" organization in 1946, primarily to provide education opportunities to employed adults who were not able to attend face-to-face classes at traditional contact universities in South Africa. In this form, UNISA played an important role in widening access to higher education to South Africans who, for reasons of racial exclusion, unaffordability, unavailability of seat space in local contact institutions, or out of choice and personal circumstances, would otherwise not have been able to obtain higher level academic qualifications. UNISA later also became attractive to international students, particularly on the African continent but also more broadly, including the South African diaspora living and working abroad.

The past 20 years has seen a significant growth in student enrolments at UNISA which has been driven by two important factors. The first of these was the 2004 merger of the then-Technikon South Africa and parts of Vista University with UNISA. Secondly, the capacity at the 25 traditionally contact universities in South Africa has not been sufficient to absorb the increasing numbers of learners who complete the National Senior Certificate well enough to enter higher education studies. The result is that UNISA enrolled 343 800 students in 2019 (from 133 500 students in 2001), of which 30% are self-declared as being unemployed. The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS)-supported student numbers (160 000) suggest that a very large proportion of the 70% who did not self-declare their employment status have not been in formal employment or in post-school studies before. This profile of student

enrolment is important because it has had a significant impact on UNISA's support strategies for teaching and learning for its academic staff and its students.

In 2019, 95.3% of UNISA students were enrolled in qualifications between National Qualifications Framework levels 5 to 8 (Higher Certificate to Honours Degree levels) and 2.2% of students were in Masters- or Doctoral degree programmes. The remaining 2.5% of students were registered as occasional students studying for non-degree purposes. Students were registered across nine Colleges, of which the highest enrolment (31%) was in the College of Education and, together with the Colleges of Law (18%); Economic and Management Sciences (17%) and Humanities (14%), accounted for 80% of enrolments. Local students are drawn from all nine provinces in South Africa with Gauteng accounting for 78% of students enrolled. UNISA also manages 6 regional hubs and 28 regional centres around South Africa, with one centre in Ethiopia, where students can find administrative and academic support and facilities.

There were 8 442 full-time staff members at UNISA in 2019, of which 1 844 were permanent academic staff members. Full professors made up 16% of the academic staff while 37% were lecturers and junior lecturers. 69% of the total staff complement are recorded as non-professional staff which included staff in service divisions such as security and cleaning. There were also 9773 part-time staff members, 53% of the total staff complement, many of whom are in part-time lecturing positions. This gives UNISA the characteristic of having a relatively low ratio of full-time equivalent academic staff to head-count academic staff of around 50%.

In the area of research activity, UNISA supports eight research chairs and 10 research institutes. There are 231 NRF-rated academic staff and the university graduated 737 Masters and 304 Doctoral students in 2019. As with all of its areas of institutional operation, UNISA has made good progress with gender and race transformation of academics involved in research activities.

The institutional audit panel consisted of the following members:

- Prof Yunus Ballim (Panel Chairperson)
- Mr Hugh Amooore
- Prof Norman Duncan
- Prof Khaya Mfenyana
- Prof Som Naidu
- Mrs Kalawathie (Bella) Sattar
- Dr Mamoraka Caroline Selepe
- Prof Alan Tait
- Prof Antoinette Deirdre van der Merwe

The on-site visit by the panel members was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, the audit panel met in-person, undertaking simultaneous online interviews at the main campus of UNISA in Pretoria over a five-day period and involving around 400 interviewees. In some sessions, when the group being interviewed was particularly large or when multiple groups were to be interviewed on a similar area of enquiry, the audit panel chose to split its members to allow

parallel interview sessions to be conducted. In the second phase, a selected sample of five of UNISA's regional centres was visited over a two-day period. A structured set of interview sessions was held at each of the regional centres visited that involved senior management at the centre, the academic support staff, the students who regularly use the facility, and some alumni and stakeholders. It is also important to mention that none of the interview sessions during the audit were recorded nor was a designated scribe included in the interviews. In compiling this report, the audit panel relied on their internal discussions and their own notes made during the interviews.

In all these meetings with staff, students and external partners at UNISA, the panel appreciated the active engagement during discussions and the generally frank and open way in which matters were raised. Also, while there were some technical difficulties with the clarity of the sound for the online participants, the organisation and administrative arrangements for the visits were well-managed and members of the audit panel were thankful of the time and care shown by the UNISA team that took charge of the process.

The reflections and recommendations in this report are intended to point to areas of enhancement and development as UNISA strengthens the quality of its student development activities. The reader will find in the body of this report, a wide range of reflections and suggestions for quality improvement in the ways that UNISA develops its students to successful graduation. Where the matter was considered by the audit panel to be of sufficient importance or the impact to be of sufficient gravity, the suggestion has been elevated to the status of a recommendation that requires a more active and directed response from the institution. The recommendations are clustered around each of the 16 CHE Standards.

The SER formed an important part of the assessments and judgements that are presented in this report from the audit panel. The SER was also the main basis for preparation of the panel's preparation for the visit to UNISA and its regional offices, and for the questions and issues that were a focus of discussions during the audit visits. However, the panel noted that the SER would have benefitted from more care and attention during its preparation and review. The SER contained many editorial and typographical errors, incorrect internal references, diagrams and illustrations that bore little relevance or usefulness to the argument presented in the text and, in some cases, important statements that, upon further interrogation, were found to be factually incorrect or of interpretation that was not supported by internal staff during interviews.

The audit panel also noted with concern that, despite the evidence of preparatory consultations within the institution, the range and depth of consultation for input during the preparation of the SER appears to have been quite limited. During the interviews, a number of stakeholder groups, most notably the National Students Representative Council (NSRC) and Council, indicated that they did not contribute to the development or review of the SER and only received the final copy. This is a concern since Council is expected to critically engage with a document as important as the SER and to give final approval for its submission to the CHE. Of course, it is possible that the NSRC members interviewed did not participate or were not aware of the preparatory consultations since they would not have been in office at the time.

Given the importance of the SER to the work of the audit panel, it is possible that these concerns about the preparation of the SER have had a distorting influence on the analysis and judgements that are presented in this report. The panel have tried hard to be alert to this possibility and to avoid references to statements in the SER that were found to be questionable in factual accuracy.

UNISA is an important institution in the South African higher education sector and one that faces unique and complex challenges. The focus of this report is on the quality of teaching and learning activities at UNISA. While it is the panel's view that much in this core aspect of UNISA's operations is intact and working well, some areas do need attention for improvement. This report necessarily focuses on the areas in the teaching and learning function that are in need of attention, in the expectation that it will assist UNISA in strengthening its plans for continuous quality improvement into the future.

Two high-level observations stand out: firstly, UNISA achieved the near-impossible in managing to continue successful teaching and learning in 2020/2022 despite Covid-19, successfully catapulting itself almost overnight from a Distance Learning institution to a Distance e-Learning one; secondly, given the changed make-up of its student cohorts, UNISA must find ways to address and improve the progression and throughput rate of its students to graduation.

Our report commends UNISA for good practice and contains recommendations that will, we believe, help in consolidating and strengthening the teaching and learning process.

The following is a summary of the audit panel's commendations and recommendations for the UNISA.

Focus area 1: Governance, strategic planning, management and leadership support the core academic functions

The four standards in Focus Area 1 concentrate on the role that an institution's *governance, strategic planning* (as contained in its *vision, mission and strategic goals*), *management and academic leadership* play in its quality management in order to enhance the likelihood of student success and to improve the quality of learning, teaching and research engagement, as well as accommodating the results of constructive, integrated community engagement.

Standard 1

The institution has a clearly stated vision and mission, and strategic goals which have been approved by appropriate governance structures, subject to comprehensive stakeholder engagement.

The vision, mission and strategic goals in the strategic plan approved by Council are clearly

stated. Although UNISA had already committed itself to move from being a Distance Learning institution to an Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) institution, Covid-19 forced it to move faster on this path. The scale of the challenge has clearly been immense. The teething problems with the transition to ODeL have been apparent, not least with the move – at very short notice – from venue-based exams to online testing and exams. Many of these problems have yet to be fully overcome and the challenges have been exacerbated by the adoption, in the midst of the pandemic, of a new Learning Management System.

UNISA strongly expresses its identity as a student-centred, open, African University that emphasises its commitment to being Africa-focused and Africa-centred, with a “Pan-Africanist” agenda. However, discussions on this matter with academic and administrative staff and with students during interviews confirmed that the claimed identities were understood with different levels of depth and clarity within the university. It was also not clear how the understanding of these identity concepts find expression in the university’s operational aspects that would mark them as unique or distinguishing features of UNISA.

The audit panel was concerned – and this was acknowledged by members of the UNISA’s leadership – that the institutional vision, mission and strategic plans may not have been developed with sufficiently rigorous, engaged involvement of students. These concerns about the levels of student engagement in such processes at UNISA were also expressed by students in regard to the process of preparing the SER for the CHE audit visit.

UNISA has struggled to manage its enrolment size and shape within the agreed plans. Undergraduate diploma and certificate candidates make up 25% of current enrolment and UNISA considers this to be disproportionately high. Furthermore, the profile of enrolled students has significantly changed over the recent past and drop-out rates from three-year degree and diploma programmes are very high, which points to the need for UNISA to manage the relationship between its enrolment plans and the levels of learning support needed by its admitted students much more carefully.

Recommendation

1. UNISA must undertake an initiative to better define the understanding of its identity, particularly in light of the changing character of its students and their learning needs, and to advocate this understanding amongst its internal and external stakeholders in order to ensure that all sectors of the institution have a sense of a common purpose in their operation.

Standard 2

The stated vision, mission and strategic goals align with national priorities and context (e.g. transformation, creating a skilled labour force, developing scarce skills areas and a critical citizenry, and contributing to the fulfilment of national goals as informed by the NDP and related

national planning), as well as sectoral, regional, continental and global imperatives (e.g. Africa Vision 2063 or the Sustainable Development Goals).

UNISA's vision, mission and strategic goals are well aligned with national priorities and the panel found that this was generally the case. A range of institutional planning and academic departments showed evidence of good and thorough engagement with important strategic priority documents such as the Sustainable Development Goals, the South African NDP as well as Agenda 2063. An important feature of this alignment is the significant contribution that UNISA makes to South Africa's annual cohort of teacher education graduates. However, while the quantum is impressive, the panel was not required to assess the quality of the B.Ed programmes at UNISA.

Recommendation

No specific recommendations.

Standard 3

There is demonstrable strategic alignment between the institution's quality management system for core academic activities across all sites and modes of provision and its vision, mission and strategic goals, as well as its governance and management processes.

The quality management system is well articulated in the strategic plan as part of the strategic goals. The operational plans are realistic and subject to regular reviews. The panel was concerned about the parameters and measures used to determine strategic priorities and targets and to assess the effectiveness of its strategic plans.

General criticism of the UNISA funding allocation model was evident from interviewees' questions and opinions about the fundamental assumptions of the model. Those departments wishing to grow their enrolments felt disadvantaged by the logic of the funding formula. There were concerns about the fact that 80% of students are enrolled in four of the nine colleges since cost demands for quality management and student learning support are not linearly related to enrolment numbers at the department and module levels.

UNISA appears to have a strong performance management system for post levels 1-4 but acknowledges that the approach is not well-developed for post levels below 4. Workload is a concern for many academic staff members and their performance management, which is based on a workload model, is seen as unrealistic in its assumptions.

Staff and students at regional centres raised a range of concerns that negatively affect student performance such as limited student support, a sense of a muted student voice, NSFAS administrative problems, student registration problems, limited access to internet, connectivity challenges and cumbersome processes for responding to student concerns because of the 'over-centralisation' of authority at the main campus in Pretoria. Students at regional centres

also felt that their learning experience was not as rich and engaged as that of students who have access to the Gauteng campuses.

Recommendations

2. UNISA must address its acknowledged need to strengthen the relationship between the institutional strategic goals and the quality management and assurance system. This process must include improvement and development of the quality management arrangements for teaching and learning at regional centres as well as the structural arrangements for receiving and responding to student views on matters relating to the quality of teaching and learning - in equal measure for students who are attached to regional centres.
3. UNISA must address the identified gaps in performance management for employment posts below Level 4.

Standard 4

There is a clear understanding of and demonstrable adherence to the different roles and responsibilities of the governance structures, management and academic leadership.

UNISA has a properly constituted and functioning Council, Institutional Forum, Senate and a Student Representative Council. The relationships between Executive Management and academic leadership are well-structured and supported. The audit panel was concerned about Council's role in academic matters that should be within the authority of Senate, and about the ambivalent character of the Board of the School of Business Leadership. Both these matters require a review of the UNISA statute.

UNISA struggles with a seemingly annual failure of governance or management or both, leading to failures to start the [academic] year at the intended time and to resolve student issues related to registration in good time. This has a knock-on effect on the academic calendar and is seen as a result of management's failure to resolve industrial- or student disputes in good time.

The scale of UNISA's operations suggests that the current, deep levels of academic and operational governance *are* needed but there appears to be scope for further delegation. There is also much room for higher levels of delegation of authority from Council to the Vice-Chancellor and the Executive Team, particularly to improve the agility of operational processes in the institution.

Recommendations

4. UNISA must review the role of ASACoC to ensure that Council does not exercise decision-making authority over academic matters and that such authority remains with – and is properly exercised by – Senate.
5. The Council of UNISA must review the range and levels of delegation of authority to the

Vice-Chancellor and executive management with a view to minimising administrative blockages and improving the agility of operational processes.

Focus area 2: The design and implementation of the institutional quality management system supports the core academic functions

The four standards in Focus Area 2 concentrate on how the *design and implementation of an integrated quality management system* in the institution enhances the likelihood of student success and improves the quality of learning, teaching and research engagement, as well as accommodating the results of constructive, integrated community engagement within the context of the institution's mission.

Standard 5

A quality assurance system is in place, comprising at a minimum, of:

- (i) governance arrangements*
- (ii) policies*
- (iii) processes, procedures and plans*
- (iv) instructional products*
- (v) measurement of impact*
- (vi) data management and utilisation*

as these give effect to the delivery of the HEI's core functions.

Barring a few notable exceptions, a thorough suite of policies, processes and procedures support the implementation of the Quality Management System across the core functions of teaching and learning, research and community engagement. However, there was much evidence that policies are not subjected to regular review, with the result that policies often do not adequately respond to changing contexts or circumstances. Academic interviewees expressed particular concern that teaching, learning and assessment policies do not take full cognisance of the specific and changing needs of programmes in the different colleges.

UNISA relies on a five-year cycle of programme review, while student module evaluations (SMEs) are conducted annually on selected modules and improvement plans developed accordingly. The schedule of programmes to be reviewed annually is approved by the Senate Teaching, Learning and Community Engagement Committee. However, How the outcomes of these reviews are used to develop strategies for improved quality of the taught programmes is not clear, nor is the impact of any such initiatives.

The panel found that, in practice, the structures and reporting lines of authority and accountability for quality management are much more complex, less coherent and less

integrated than indicated in the Self Evaluation Report. Operational reporting lines on quality matters to Senate appear duplicated and it is not clear where the actual responsibility lies. Furthermore, Council's role in approving academic matters also makes Senate's responsibility for quality oversight uncertain.

UNISA has implemented an approved Performance Management System that is considered as an integral part of its quality assurance system. However, the institution does not have a systematic approach to lecturer evaluations and there is a sense amongst academic staff that, for the purposes of promotion, the Performance Management System considers research activities as being more important than the depth and quality of teaching activities.

Student representatives expressed a view that academic support structures for students are largely dysfunctional and that the relationship between the university leadership and student representatives is weak. Both staff and students acknowledge that the most important negative characteristic of this relationship is the poor level of communication between students and the institution. Concerns about communication were wide-ranging and included matters such as the troubled channels for electronic or online communication, the poor levels of response to student queries, no or poor representation of students in planning and implementation processes for quality management and the limited channels for a more general and disinterested student voice to be heard on academic quality matters.

The significant growth in enrolments in Higher Certificate programmes has resulted in a large number of students who see this as a 'bridging programme' that will allow them to articulate into diploma or degree programmes at UNISA. While UNISA's strategic intent for the Higher Certificate is not explicit, it does not appear to be intended as a bridging programme. However, student representatives have taken to understanding the qualification as a bridging programme and indicated that successful students in these programmes expect automatic vertical articulation to other cognate programmes. There clearly is a lack of proper communication with students on this matter, which is essential to ensure that their expectations of possible programme articulation are realistic.

Recommendations

6. UNISA must ensure that there is a documented procedure for the development, approval and review of all policies, and that a comprehensive consultation process is included to ensure proper alignment of the related policies with the quality management framework. Mechanisms must be in place to ensure that policies are reviewed accordingly. Consideration should also be given to the adoption of an overarching Institutional Assessment Policy and associated guidelines that comprehensively deal with online assessment and acknowledges variations in approaches at the department- and college levels.
7. UNISA must develop policy and associated procedures for the approval, recording and monitoring of changes to academic programmes.
8. UNISA must review the arrangements for Senate membership of the senior professoriate to

ensure that the voices of senior academics are appropriately heard on academic matters at Senate.

9. UNISA must develop and implement a formal approach to lecturer assessment that is guided by best practice in the ODeL sector and that is primarily used to support and develop good teaching practices amongst academic staff members.
10. UNISA must improve the integration of student governance structures – at all academic and institutional levels – in its quality management processes. Such integration must include structural arrangements for reporting to students on quality responses to formal feedback received from students. This process must include implementation and effective communication of a complaints procedure that is easily accessible to students. In this context, the appointment to the position of Ombud at the university should be finalised as a matter of urgency.
11. The university must ensure that applicants and enrolled students in the HCert programmes are properly informed about possible articulation arrangements to diploma- and degree programmes. Where articulation is possible, the university must ensure that there is a clearly described and transparent selection process.
12. UNISA must develop a more rigorous process for managing the implementation of its agreed enrolment plan, in a manner that allows for proper consideration and agreement about flexibility and deviations.

Standard 6

Human, infrastructural, knowledge management and financial resources support the delivery of the institution's core academic functions across all sites of provision, in alignment with the concomitant quality management system, in accordance with the institution's mission.

The number of senior and experienced staff to implement and develop the quality management system seems to be adequate at all management levels, even if it sometimes appears to be duplicated. The increase in student numbers over recent years has caused academic teaching workloads to increase with a consequent distraction of their attention away from the quality management aspects of their work, and academic staff expressed concern about a growing compliance approach to quality management.

Quality management is financially well-resourced at UNISA and the necessary capacity is in place. However, the measures of the effectiveness of this resource allocation are not always clear.

UNISA has put much by way of human and financial resources into development and support of its ICT systems, but there is urgent need to improve its functionality, particularly at the staff- and student-user interfaces. This problem seems to manifest most strongly in the functionality of student communication systems (including call-centre operations) and the learning management system. The transition to a new learning management system has not gone well, in part due to inadequate planning for the implementation and transition to the new system. UNISA has a

generally adequate provision of computers, specialist equipment and laboratories for the needs of students and academic programmes. Computer facilities at the regional centres are well equipped and this is very helpful for students who are able to access the regional centres and who do not have computers or proper data access at home.

UNISA has a policy on Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), but the panel could not identify a clear WIL management strategy. There were also reports of a shortage of staff to support students for WIL placement, monitoring and assessment, and the university has stated its plans to employ more staff in programmes which have WIL modules.

UNISA libraries at all campuses and centres are well-resourced and appreciated by staff and students. Also, UNISA has entered into collaboration agreements with municipalities and higher education institutions active near their regional centres for shared library facilities offered to students.

There was general agreement amongst staff and students that UNISA needs to improve the reach and accessibility of network connectivity to students in order to support the e-learning intentions of the institution.

Adequate provision of academic staff development is in place for the foundational aspects of professionalisation of teaching. The division for providing academic staff development programmes is adequately staffed and it regularly offers a suite of teaching development programmes. However, no evidence was presented to the panel to indicate that the possible links between student learning performance and the results from module evaluations are monitored and analysed to guide the teaching development needs of academic staff.

UNISA does not appear to have a reliable instrument to regularly survey or measure the satisfaction and wellness of its staff. The audit panel heard mention of a range of concerns that do not seem to have been identified by the survey instrument being used. These concerns relate to the increasing pressure on academic staff due to the growth in student numbers, the demands on research productivity, the current transition to full e-learning and the poor functionality of the electronic and administrative systems that are meant to support academic staff in their teaching and assessment tasks. Academic staff mentioned serious personal wellness concerns and the sense is that this is a contributing factor to resignations in some departments.

Commendation

- a. UNISA is commended for the quality of its library resources and for the quality of library services that students receive. UNISA is further commended for developing collaborative agreements with other higher education institutions in providing shared library services to students at its regional centres.

Recommendations

13. UNISA must redouble its efforts to improve the functionality of its ICT systems for teaching and learning support to academic staff and students. The ICT system in place has serious negative effects on the learning experience of students as well as on UNISA's aspirations for being an e-learning institution.
14. UNISA must invest in training for both staff and students on the invigilation system in order to avoid injustices and other risks associated with the use of the software. In addition, alternative methods to validate integrity of the online assessments for large numbers of students should be investigated. On a related matter, the university must find ways to significantly improve the access that students have to devices and internet connectivity, particularly to achieve its objective to become a fully ODeL institution.
15. UNISA must ensure that the management of WIL is improved, appropriately resourced and is aligned with the needs of the relevant programmes.
16. The senior leadership for Teaching and Learning at UNISA must monitor the teaching development needs of academic staff, to ensure that all those who teach are competent at developing and delivering modules as well as assessing student learning on e-learning platforms. Academic staff should regularly be exposed to the fundamental debates and current thinking on these and related aspects of their work.
17. UNISA must implement an appropriate and regular assessment instrument for monitoring the wellness and satisfaction of its staff. This must be complemented by the necessary systems and strategies for responding to individual and collective concerns about staff wellness.

Standard 7

Credible and reliable data (for example, on throughput and completion rates) are systematically captured, employed and analysed as an integral part of the institutional quality management system so as to inform consistent and sustainable decision-making.

UNISA has a variety of sources of data which it uses to prepare for HEMIS reporting, improve teaching and learning and monitor student success amongst others. However, the panel found that, while the data is available and properly stored, it is not well used to monitor and improve teaching, learning and student success. While it was stated that student data was held in a 'data warehouse', it was not clear that this data is integrated in a manner that allows for selective analysis to provide evidence bases that may inform policy and strategy on improving student learning. The recently established Student Retention Unit is developing new and innovative approaches to maximise the benefits of UNISA's rich data resource for directing strategies to improve teaching and learning. This is at an early stage and not yet fully integrated into the university's quality management system.

The most important parameter used by UNISA to measure student learning performance is the module Normal Pass Rate. However, during interviews it was not clear that staff understand the

use-value of this parameter and the limitations of its use given the basis that UNISA uses for its calculation. UNISA needs to expand the range of indicators that it uses to monitor student performance and to ensure that there is deeper understanding of the forms of interpretation of such indicators amongst staff in the quality management and assurance divisions.

Recommendations

18. UNISA must improve its capacity for analysing its student data as the evidence base for responding to student learning needs. An important part of this development is the need to better integrate all the academic and administrative units that process student data with those who should use the analyses for teaching and learning support. The analysed student data should be accessible to all staff members with responsibility to track, monitor, support students and report on general student performance in the academic and administrative departments.
19. UNISA must develop and provide regular reports on the academic performance of students and modules using parameters that are well understood and can be interpreted in ways that properly guide strategies for learning development of students.

Standard 8

Systems and processes monitor the institution's capacity for quality management, based on the evidence gathered.

UNISA has a business intelligence dashboard which provides information such as the analysis of student performance conducted after examination periods to determine trends and identify modules that are underperforming in terms of Normal Pass Rates. However, access to the dashboard is not uniform and managers at regional centres particularly complained about a lack of access to such information.

The panel was positively impressed by UNISA's ability to sustain its teaching and assessment programmes during the Covid-19 restriction conditions of 2020 and 2021. It was clear that the university had harnessed its resources together with the goodwill of staff and students to ensure that students continued to engage with their learning and assessment tasks and to progress through their study programmes with as little disruption as possible.

Members of the management team at UNISA were of the view that their pre-Covid-19 experience with blended teaching and learning had given them a head start in managing teaching and learning during the pandemic restriction conditions and that it has also spurred a leap to ODeL modes of delivery. It will therefore be important for UNISA to carefully document and reflect on its experiences with online forms of pedagogy and assessment as a rich resource for strategic planning with ODeL.

Recommendations

20. UNISA must address the risks that have been identified in the progress report on the 2020 online examinations.
21. The University must implement an online tool for monitoring and reporting on plagiarism and unacceptable support in online assessments. This should include a review of the online proctoring system to improve its functionality.

Focus area 3: The coherence and integration of the institutional quality management system supports the core academic functions

The four standards in Focus Area 3 concentrate on the coherence and integration of the various components comprising the institutional quality management system and on how these work in concert to support the likelihood of student success and improve the quality of learning, teaching and research engagement, as well as accommodating the results of constructive integrated community engagement in accordance with the institution's mission.

Standard 9

An evidence-based coherent, reasonable, functional and meaningfully structured relationship exists between all components of the institutional quality management system.

UNISA has an extensive system in place, referred to as the integrated quality management and assurance framework. This system is based on an approved schedule of reviews of modules, programmes, departments, and portfolios. Furthermore, the monitoring and evaluations of the quality management system for teaching and learning, research and community engagement are done by means of the UNISA Quality Evaluation Instrument and peer reviews which occur through programme reviews and departmental reviews. Despite the extensive framework for quality management and assurance, UNISA's leadership acknowledges the challenges around the implementation of these quality evaluation instruments, including a lack of buy-in from internal stakeholders, the alignment of the instrument to academic processes rather than to support and administrative processes, difficulty with interpreting the results and the perceived lack of alignment between programme reviews and module reviews.

In consideration of staff performance evaluations, it became clear during the interviews with academic staff that lecturer evaluations and teaching loads are often used as the only indicators to measure the quality of the core academic functions. There are no formal criteria for good teaching practice in place against which a lecturer's performance can be judged.

Although UNISA states that its monitoring systems for quality assurance have been effective, the institution acknowledges that the monitoring systems create contestations and that the

perceived competing roles need to be streamlined to optimise their effectiveness in quality assurance. This could also lead to lack of clarity about the ultimate responsibility and accountability for the overall quality assurance system because reporting lines are to two different committee structures of Senate.

The wide-ranging nature of the Integrated Quality Management and Assurance Framework at UNISA appears to cause duplication, additional bureaucratic burden for staff, potential tensions and difficulty in actively monitoring which improvements have been implemented. This extensive administrative system could also lead to increased workloads for academic and support staff without necessarily improving the quality of the core functions.

Recommendations

22. UNISA must accelerate its efforts to address the quality management and assurance of student support services (e.g. IT, administrative) to provide an effective one-stop support point for students.
23. Within the devolved model of quality assurance in the colleges and departments, clear role descriptions and responsibilities must be formalised for each of the roles (e.g. Tuition Managers, Research Heads, Academic Quality Heads and Quality Champions) in the institutional quality assurance system.
24. UNISA must review its Quality assurance committee structures (Senate and Council committees and reporting lines), support structures (Department of Quality Assurance and Enhancement, the Directorate Institutional Quality Assurance and Enhancement and the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Unit) and VP reporting lines to ensure greater streamlining, reduced duplication and clearer lines of responsibility and accountability for the overarching quality assurance and management system.

Standard 10

Evidence-based regular and dedicated governance and management oversight of the quality assurance system exists.

It was not clear to the audit panel whether Council or Senate are ultimately responsible for quality assurance in respect of the academic project. The panel was also concerned that full professors are not automatically members of Senate but are rather represented through a relatively small number of elected members.

UNISA does not appear to have a formal process or set criteria for identifying good practice in teaching and learning and community engagement. Only the process of reward is explained in the SER. None of the staff members interviewed could point to criteria used in the performance evaluations or the recognition and reward for these activities.

The regional centres have done well in implementing the Best Reflective Practice initiative as well as establishing the Regional Community of Practice to share good practice and reflect on

improvements required. Unfortunately, it does seem as if insufficient strategic direction is provided by the central UNISA office for such initiatives.

UNISA acknowledges the “structural inefficiencies” that result from duplication of reporting on quality management and assurance matters. On the one hand, the structures that manage quality are decentralised at college-, department- and regional levels but are also centralised around institutional portfolios that report to Senate sub-committees that in turn report to Senate.

Recommendations

25. UNISA must investigate and resolve the apparent role ambiguity and ultimate accountability of Senate and Council in the governance and management oversight of the quality enhancement systems.
26. UNISA must ensure that institution-specific criteria for good teaching and community engagement are reviewed, properly communicated to staff and used as the basis for reflecting on the academic performance of staff and for reward and recognition of good performance.

Standard 11

Planning and processes exist for the reasonable and functional allocation of resources to all components of the institutional quality management system.

There are substantial budget allocations to quality assurance at UNISA and it is clear that this function receives proper attention in the budgeting process. It was difficult for the panel to determine how annual allocations for the institution’s quality assurance commitments are calculated and how it is distributed across entities. This was mainly because of a lack of detail in respect of any systematic efforts at monitoring and evaluating the quality management interventions implemented.

The budget allocation instrument used drew criticism from Deans and other staff members. Nevertheless, while some of the parameters of the model may require consideration and adjustment, the model appears logical and, on the face of it, can indeed ensure suitable allocations in pursuit of the institution’s student success, research and community engagement ambitions.

UNISA acknowledges that its approach to academic workload allocation needs review and improvement. Workload issues impact on quality management because the dimension of quality oversight is compromised by heavy academic workloads. Inefficiencies in the system have overloaded academic staff with administration duties and the generally-expressed experience is that the administrative departments do not sufficiently support academic staff. It is also not clear how rising student-to-staff ratios have been considered in the allocation of teaching loads to academic staff.

Recommendations

27. UNISA must finalise its revised workload framework as soon as possible so as to address both the actual anomalies and the sense of unfairness in the current workload allocation model.
28. UNISA must review its Human Resources strategy and related support departments to improve the effectiveness of their responses to the needs of its academic entities, in ways that enhance its quality assurance capabilities.

Standard 12

The quality assurance system achieves its purpose efficiently and effectively.

The systems used to resource the quality management processes at UNISA appear to be logical and appropriately aimed at improving the quality of teaching and learning. However, Senior Management acknowledges the need for more focused assessment of the impact of the resources allocated in adding value to general quality enhancement at the institution.

UNISA relies on a range of stakeholders for views and contributions to the institution's quality management processes and such stakeholder engagement appears extensive. However, an important weakness in this regard is the inadequacy of the communication channels available to students to register feedback in respect of their general learning experiences, beyond their contributions to regular module evaluations. The institution has recently launched an intervention aimed at addressing this challenge.

Recommendations

29. As suggested in the SER, UNISA must undertake a comprehensive impact assessment to ascertain whether the resources allocated for quality management are effectively employed.
30. UNISA must ensure the implementation of a process aimed at the systematic monitoring and evaluation of all quality management interventions implemented.
31. UNISA must evaluate whether the turn-around strategy aimed at improving the channels available to students to provide the institution with feedback on the quality of its academic offerings and support services is having the desired effect.

Focus area 4: Curriculum development, learning and teaching support the likelihood of student success

The four standards in Focus Area 4 concentrate on how effectively the institutional quality management system enhances the likelihood of student success, improves learning and teaching and supports the scholarship of learning and teaching. These standards drill down in

greater detail in Focus Area 2.

Standard 13

An effective institutional system for programme design, approval, delivery, management and review is in place.

UNISA's ambition to be a comprehensive Open, Distance e-Learning institution is positive and marks it as a pioneer in the use of open and distance learning methods for programme design, development and delivery. UNISA has also signalled that it is no longer an alternative destination only for adult or mature-age learners without any prior formal higher education and training, but an institution of choice for both adults and first-time entry tertiary education students. UNISA's plans and contributions in this regard are not only ground-breaking but clearly different from that of other South African public tertiary education institutions. There are significant challenges ahead for UNISA on this development path and the institution as a whole will have to reflect carefully on the meaning of the core concepts and their implications for curriculum, pedagogy and operational aspects of student learning development.

Commendations

- b. UNISA is commended for the manner in which arrangements were put in place to sustain its teaching and assessment activities despite the Covid-19 restrictions. The commitment of students and staff at UNISA to ensuring the functionality of the process is also to be commended.

Recommendations

32. UNISA must develop a clear and consistent message about its core operational model for programme-design and -delivery along crucial dimensions of open, distance and e-Learning on matters such as open access, open learning, open scholarship and open educational practices.
33. UNISA must also clearly articulate and communicate its core business model for programme-design, -development, -approval and -management from the Executive and Senior Management through to regional Centre Directors. This must include communication of a clear roadmap for the adoption of ICT in teaching and learning, especially in its online learning management system.

Standard 14

There is evidence-based engagement at various institutional levels, among staff, and among staff and students, with:

- a. *curriculum transformation, curriculum reform and renewal;*
- b. *learning and teaching innovation; and*

- c. *the role of technology (1) in the curriculum, (2) in the world of work, and (3) in society in general.*

The panel found that there is significant variability in understanding among academic staff about what comprises the curriculum, how best it can be developed, taught and learned across the various disciplines. UNISA has chosen to use a Team Approach to the design and development of the curriculum which is a positive development. It seems however, this approach is evolving and there are a number of principle and operational issues that need to be better articulated and resolved to improve and guide the effectiveness of the Team Approach.

As a comprehensive Open, Distance and eLearning institution, UNISA's signalling the role of eLearning in its operational model is a positive development. However, the implementation of this agenda across the colleges currently remains aspirational. Also, UNISA needs to develop a coherent and integrated institution-wide policy which is benchmarked against internationally recognised standards and criteria, and one which clearly articulates the attributes of technology-enhanced learning and teaching.

UNISA's positive adoption of the idea of Engaged Scholarship—Transforming the Academy appears to include the scholarship of teaching and learning. The panel's view is that this will require a comprehensive and carefully articulated plan for roll-out in each college so that scholarly contributions to engagement, teaching and learning are valued equally alongside other academic pursuits and embedded in appointments and promotions processes.

Recommendations

34. UNISA must review its policies and processes around curriculum design and development to ensure that these adequately reflect the university's claims and aspirations as a comprehensive ODeL institution. This should include the development of clear and consistent messaging around issues such as "epistemic justice" and "decolonisation" of the curriculum.
35. The use of a team approach to curriculum design and development must be more clearly articulated in its adoption processes and its acculturation across the institution.
36. UNISA must undertake a review and renewal of policies around learning and teaching to include clarity on the roles and responsibilities for the adoption and integration of ICT and technology-enhanced teaching and learning. This should be benchmarked and continuously evaluated against internationally recognised standards and criteria. The renewal process must include a plan for the integration of ICT in teaching and learning, especially for on-boarding and developing academic staff and students.
37. The staffing and the promotion value of scholarly contributions to teaching and learning, alongside 'traditional' research and other academic pursuits, needs to be established and made clear. This will include how these contributions are assessed and recognised in the appointment and the promotion of both academic and support staff across the university's colleges.

Standard 15

The students' exposure to learning and teaching at the institution, across all sites and modes of provision, is experienced as positive and enabling of their success.

It is clear that the registration process at UNISA is not well aligned with institutional capacity planning. Registrations are accepted at a very late stage even well after semesters start, which it is feared leads to poor chances of success for significant numbers of students. This is part of a range of challenges that contributes to the poor student success and qualification rates, as generally acknowledged by the institution itself. However, some innovative practices are emerging such as the use of a massive open online courses (MOOCs) before students commence their studies at undergraduate level, which are directed at student preparedness for study and combines the use of new technologies for learning in a targeted way that bears positively on student success.

Some modules – identified as 'at risk' modules at undergraduate level – are allocated a tutor to provide student support. This category is applied to a small number of modules deemed to be at risk because of low pass rates. However, the requirement for this 'at-risk' categorisation is set quite low and only about 2% of UNISA modules actually fall into this category. Tutor support is widely regarded as essential in modern distance and online learning to provide a bridge between learning materials and individual and group support of a personal kind.

Undergraduate students were consistent in their complaints of *not* having had a good learning and interaction experience at UNISA. Students were particularly distressed by the complexity and unresponsiveness of the Student Support systems, and expressed particularly strong comments about not receiving timely replies to emails over extended periods – or not at all. Many did not understand how to access the services they needed. UNISA acknowledges its complexity as a factor inhibiting the quality of the student experience.

UNISA seeks feedback from students at the end of taught modules. The practice is widespread but not complete for all modules taught. Nevertheless, the panel was not able to establish that analysis of this data has led to quality enhancement of modules and programmes, or that students receive institutional feedback to their comments. Equally, while UNISA collects a wide range of data about students, this data is not organised or analysed for trends in student performance using parameters such as gender, geography, occupation, disability, area of study, etc. to guide the implementation of student learning support strategies.

The student voice on matters relating to their learning experiences does not appear to be consistently heard at all levels and across all parts of the university. In interviews with members of the UNISA National Student Representative Council, they clearly had serious and well-reasoned contributions to make to the improvement of services to students. On the other hand, at levels in the university with more direct student interactions and in Regional Centres, it seemed that students were more active in discussion with academic and support staff and that their opinions were more seriously considered.

Commendation

- c. UNISA is commended for the innovative use of MOOCs and online learning platforms for the academic orientation of first-year students to help prepare them for teaching and learning in an ODeL environment.

Recommendations

38. A major review of the organisational structures, management reach and lines of accountability for Student Support must be undertaken as a matter of urgency with a view to improving integration, coherence and consistency of quality from the student perspective. This review should particularly include improvement of the services for students with disability.
39. The tutor system currently in place for 'At Risk' modules must be extended to *all* undergraduate courses in UNISA. This could be done incrementally, starting with modules with the lowest student success rates but should become normal practice in the medium to long-term.
40. UNISA must undertake a review of its promotion and reward criteria to remove the perception that excellence in teaching and student learning support is of lower priority than activities such as research and community engagement.

Standard 16

Institutions engage with and reflect on the employability of their graduates in a changing world.

It is clear that UNISA has a serious commitment to the employability of its graduates, and has used a range of approaches to deliver on this commitment. These include employability studies and Graduate Destination surveys. The colleges are expected to submit improvement plans as a result of employability surveys and it is clear there are systems to allow a competent review of practice as a result of the survey evidence. Nevertheless, UNISA acknowledges that a more systematic approach is necessary for Graduate Destination Surveys and that these surveys should seek to include employer views. In the spirit of quality enhancement, UNISA should develop its survey design process for both Graduate Destinations and Employability Studies by benchmarking its standards against those conducted in other universities to ensure that best current practice is in place.

UNISA notes the existence of significant Work Integrated Learning components in a range of colleges, with study-employment placements for students supported by relevant quality assurance measures. What is described as experiential learning in the workplace will, if well managed, greatly enhance employability.

UNISA provided little information on support arrangements for unemployed students, such as a curriculum offering specifically to support the unemployed. It is reported that 10% of UNISA's alumni are unemployed, as are most of its enrolled students. This is therefore a major student

life context and deserves some focus from the university. It is important that UNISA reflects on what employability and gradueness mean for all its programmes, not only those which have a clear vocational outcome, especially in light of UNISA's observation that only 23% of graduates from the College of Human Sciences were employed in their field of study.

Recommendations

41. UNISA must ensure that its graduate survey instruments are benchmarked against those of other, similar higher education institutions, locally and internationally.
42. UNISA must consider how it can better prepare students for employment, both before and after they graduate, through initiatives that strengthen their employability and expose them to employment opportunities. In this regard, it is important to develop a coherent, institutionally developed approach that incorporates the work of regional centres and allows for region-specific variations.