

Task team to conduct independent review of Unisa

Higher Education, Science and Innovation Minister, Dr Blade Nzimande, has appointed a ministerial task team to conduct an independent review of the University of South Africa (Unisa).



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Nzimande said given the size of Unisa, not only in South Africa but on the entire African continent – having 407,759 students in 2020 and growing, the institution is clearly too big to fail, as too many people depend on its success.

Nzimande said since the merger of Unisa with Technikon Southern Africa in 2004 (incorporated with the distance education component of Vista University), it appears that there has not been sufficient attention on addressing the underlying drivers of institutional coherence and sustainability.

He said Unisa is gradually experiencing “mission-drift” by becoming more 'full-time', yet there has never been a plan supported by national government in favour of such a move.

“The issue of mission drift has massive implications for the financial sustainability and future of Unisa. It also has materially-significant implications for government for both subsidy and student financial aid support, as we have seen at the start of the 2020 academic year, when segments of the student community made demands for near full-time equivalent National

Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) support from government,” Nzimande said.

Similarly, the Minister said, mission drift will impose major pressures on infrastructure, teaching staff and a host of other concerns.

The Minister also raised the importance of making a rigorous assessment of how the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) and its associative disruptions and shifts will affect many aspects of the academic mission, academic programmes, markets and operating model of all of the country’s universities, especially a Unisa of the mid-21st century.

The Minister also raised other concerns, including:

- There has been no comprehensive reflection on the implications of new technologies on the operations of the university;
- There have been concerns raised regarding the quality of offerings/programmes;
- The persistent problem of Unisa's unacceptably high student failure rates, as well as de-accreditation of some of its academic programmes; and
- The instability in the senior management is also a matter of great concern.

Nzimande has held two consultative meetings with the Unisa Council chairperson, deputy chairperson and the Vice Chancellor, as well as a full Unisa Council to discuss the details of the review.

Nzimande said there is consensus between the Unisa Council and the Higher Education and Training Ministry about very serious concerns regarding the future of Unisa.

“I am requesting members of the university community, including and specifically, Council and management, including the Vice Chancellor, to provide the fullest support for, and cooperation with the MTT,” the Minister said.

Appointed members of the task team include, Dr Vincent Maphai (chairperson), Professor John Volmink, Professor Louis Molamu, Nonkululeko Gobodo and Professor Brenda Gourley.

The task team will commence with its work immediately.

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