

Building up SA's historically disadvantaged universities into strongholds of empowerment

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More than two million people in Limpopo live below the breadline. So it is no wonder that there was great joy in the province on Friday, 18 October 2019, as students, academics, members of the chartered accountancy profession, government officials and VIP guests gathered in the University of Venda's (UNIVEN) auditorium to celebrate the accreditation of the University's BCom (Accounting Sciences) undergraduate degree by the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants (SAICA).



While the significance the province cannot be understated – the accreditation is expected to help create more jobs in the area – the celebration marked a momentous moment for the country. With UNIVEN's accreditation it now means that all six of South Africa's historically disadvantaged institution (HDI) have been accredited by SAICA to produce chartered accountants (CAs(SA)).

The only way to change the plight of the country's poorest citizens is to improve the standard of education available so as to minimise the impact of the triple challenges of poverty, unemployment and inequality. It is for this reason that SAICA embarked on a project to accredit the country's HDIs to address educational inequalities by building additional capacity at all of South Africa's HDIs. This is crucial as South Africa's HDIs, whose mission it is to serve the disadvantaged, still remain critically under-funded and under-resourced.

Speaking at the celebratory event, Ms Chantyl Mulder, SAICA's Executive Director: Nation Building, expressed her pride and excitement as well as the chartered accountancy profession's satisfaction at the institution's achievement, and congratulated the team who made UNIVEN's accreditation possible through collaboration, partnership and hard work.

"SAICA's expectation is that, on average, it takes between five and seven years of hard work, funding, partnership and commitment from top leadership all the way down to students for a historically disadvantaged institution (HDI) like UNIVEN to acquire and develop the necessary resources to deliver a quality undergraduate degree meeting the SAICA

accreditation review process. In achieving this, UNIVEN and its accreditation partners have done an outstanding job of collaboration towards the betterment of our youth."

In particular, Mulder praised the collaboration with the University of Johannesburg (UJ): "This accreditation would not have been possible without the partnership entered into between UJ and UNIVEN to provide the appropriate capacity-building support and development of staff. Staff from both universities must be congratulated on this achievement, as it is a direct result of their willingness to collaborate and learn from one another that accreditation has been achieved."

It is also worth noting that projects like these do not come cheap, Mulder added. She thanked the National Skills Foundation (NSF) and the Banking Sector Education and Training Authority for their financial support in making the journey to accreditation possible.

Mulder says: "When this project began in 2014 it supported 50 students. To date, the project has funded 455 students as a direct result of this initiative. With an overall view pass rate (across all four years) of 75%, the project has contributed significantly towards skills development in the province."



Her sentiments were echoed by UNIVEN Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Dr Bernard Nthambeleni, who said: "We are all painfully aware of the scarcity of qualified chartered accountants (CAs(SA)) in South Africa, in particular Black African CAs(SA). The ultimate aim of the BCOM Accounting Sciences qualification is the contribution of UNIVEN to the transformation imperatives in production of desperately needed Chartered Accountants in South Africa, particularly in Limpopo Province and the SADC region as a whole. We also take heart that, through this programme at the University of Venda, the access to professional accounting services in rural communities, can no longer be a distant dream, but now a reality. Our commitment to the success and sustainability of this project remains resolute. The University's commitment has been demonstrated in providing critical human and physical resources for the Department of Accountancy. Over the past five years, the staffing complement for the Department has more than tripled and we are extremely proud that there are 13 CA(SA)s who make up a critical component of our lecturing staff."

The impact of HDI accreditation

According to the terms of Univen's accreditation status, any student graduating with a UNIVEN BCom (Accounting Science) undergraduate degree from 2019 onwards should be eligible to study for their postgraduate degree (known as CTA, or equivalent) without needing to complete a bridging course or programme at another university that offers such

SAICA-accredited programmes, provided that they meet the entry requirements of that university.

But the benefits of the institution's accreditation extend far beyond the university and its students.

"The primary and most important benefit of SAICA accreditation is to ensure that there is sustainable capacity in the rural communities of South Africa to provide the same quality of education that is available in the rest of the country. We are delighted to note that this initiative will ensure that aspiring chartered accountants [CAs(SA)] can stay in the Limpopo province to pursue their qualification instead of migrating to one of the country's three major economic provinces to look for opportunities. In so doing, we are consistently building a case for skills development in communities that need empowerment.

"By making education of this quality available at multiple locations throughout the country, often outside major centres, the necessity for students to travel to distant towns or cities is alleviated. This means more students have the benefit of staying close to their families while studying. Thus the inevitable stress which accompanies the jump from high school to university is mitigated.

"It is with the benefit of nearby family support that students will have the best possible chance of academic success. By raising the calibre of education available in their home towns, students are also less likely to relocate. Instead, they use their knowledge and experience to contribute to the economy of the local area."

SAICA has now accredited all six of the country's HDIs

With UNIVEN's accreditation, all six of South Africa's HDIs have now achieved accreditation for their undergraduate BCom CA-stream degrees. This, in turn, contributes towards the National Development Plan transformation initiatives by increasing the number of black CAs(SA) not only in the province but also in South Africa.

The accreditation route

"The SAICA accreditation process is a rigorous and extensive one," explains Ms Mandi Olivier, Senior Executive for Professional Development at SAICA. Because of the infrastructure and staffing difficulties that HDIs face, it can also be a long process:

"In order for a programme to achieve accreditation from SAICA, we undertake a rigorous academic review process to assess whether the university's specific programme(s) leading to the CA(SA) designation qualification have the necessary resources (financial and other) in place to deliver a quality programme."

She continues: "The purpose of the accreditation process is to establish that the criteria for an accredited academic programme are being met, and that they also meet the Council of Higher Education's (CHE) definition of being a 'purposeful and structured set of learning experiences that lead to a qualification.' Accreditation by SAICA is over and above other regulatory requirements from the Department of Higher Education and Training that first have to be met by these providers."

According to Olivier: "SAICA seeks to establish whether or not the programme meets the appropriate national and international educational standards of the chartered accountancy [CA(SA)] designation, and ensures the delivery of competent CAs(SA) with relevant skills to the market place. Having undertaken the formal accreditation process, we are satisfied that UNIVEN's undergraduate degree has the necessary resources to meet the required standards."

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