Changes in store for University of Joburg

New vice-chancellor gets everyone to buy in to his vision despite concerns

BY NOMUSA CEMBI

In the next five years, the University of Johannesburg will recruit 150 academics, use all four of Gauteng’s official languages and establish a premier business school in Soweto.

This was stated by Dr Ilron Rensburg in his inauguration speech as vice-chancellor of the university.

"Over the next five years the university will bring in isiZulu and Sepedi as communication languages. We will begin with the newsletter, which will go out in English, Afrikaans, isiZulu and Sepedi.

"In 2008 we will expand these languages into support course notes, assessments and lecture notes. Eventually we want to get to the point of having these as languages of instruction," Rensburg said.

The business school in Soweto would be opened in 2008, he said.

"The critical focal point of the business school will be the bringing together of new knowledge in partnership with universities outside of South Africa and, of course, business. Part of the programme will be to recruit academics from the continent and all over the world."

Of the 150 academic posts the university would create in the next four to five years, 60% would be occupied by black academics, he added.

At the moment, black academics make up between 25 and 28% of the university’s academic population.

“"The number of students is very high, more especially in the economics and financial sciences classes. Lecturers say they can’t be scholars because they have to stand in front of a class every day. We need to relieve them and create space for them to be scholars."

The university would also invest in research and innovation, establishing 15 centres of innovation and excellence.

Rensburg said although 70% of the students were black, few took postgraduate courses.

“We are going to attract more black students into postgraduate studies,” he said.

Rensburg, who has been vice-chancellor since April, was inaugurated on Friday - at the same time as business leader and entrepreneur Wendy Luhabe was officially inaugurated as chancellor of the university.

He said the university was only 30 months old, the result of a merger of Rand Afrikaans University and Technikon Witwatersrand in 2005, and the incorporation of the predominantly black Vista University.

The university had 47,000 students and 4,500 staff spread over five campuses in the city, Soweto and Ekurhuleni.

“"We were dealing with a complex merger of a university and a technikon. We were merging different management and academic teams,"" said Rensburg.

Out of the four candidates for the post, the senate gave Rensburg the lowest mark. However, the council, who are the final decision-makers, gave him a unanimous vote.

The academics’ main concern was Rensburg’s lack of academic credentials.


"Senates are a complex combination of academic leaders. I come from outside the academic sector. My career path is not the path that senates associate with," he explained.

He said he had, however, managed to win their confidence. In his first address to the senate, when he outlined his vision, he received a standing ovation.

Rensburg, who is on a contract, is calling his five-year tenure the “investment tears”.

“"We are seeking to build a university founded on distinguished scholarship, not teaching," he added.

He had spent most of the first three months in his position explaining his vision to academics, staff and students, and listening to their concerns.

Now he felt that everybody was keen to see the vision become a reality.

Before taking the vice-chancellorship, Rensburg held the post of chief executive, strategic corporate services, at the
SABC. Before that, he was deputy director-general in the Department of Education.

Some of his main responsibilities were to introduce new post-apartheid policies for higher, further and general education, as well as early childhood learning.

The 46-year-old obtained a B Pharm degree from Rhodes University and practised as a pharmacist in his hometown of Port Elizabeth and later in Soweto.

Born in Port Elizabeth, he became a student activist and was involved in the anti-apartheid struggle from as early as 1976. He was detained for several months.