**University of KwaZulu Natal**

**Institutional Forum**

**SUBMISSION ON RETIREMENT AGE REVIEW**

The lifting of the retirement age from 60 to 65 for all employees of the University is supported for the following reasons:

1. **Operational**

Fierce competition for high quality academic staff exists in the South African education landscape and this is accompanied by a shrinking pool of academics to draw from in numerous disciplines. The uptake of new entrants into the academy has not progressed at a suitable pace and the abandoning of courses and programmes is a very real possibility in view of a lack of qualified academics. For example, after 3 advertisements for a Mathematics of Finance academic (Lecturer to Professor) not a single serious application came in - the only applicant was a dismissed former employee.

Similarly, over the last few years, the Discipline of Public Governance lost four highly qualified senior academics known for research and supervision success. Three had reached or neared retirement age and the other was head-hunted by another university. Three of four posts were frozen. Despite numerous advertisements the senior lecturer post remains unfilled. The loss of these four academics means that great expense must be incurred to hire part-time lecturers and 16 full research masters’ and 15 doctoral applicants remain on a waiting list due to lack of supervision capacity in the discipline. Additional expense is being incurred for external supervision of coursework masters students standing without in-house supervisors. It is unlikely that this would be the case if the retirement age was 65.

In the recent past, the Actuarial Science programme was discontinued as skilled staff was in short supply. Technical, professional and administrative staff possess crucial experience, expertise and specialist qualifications that are in high demand outside the university. They play a vital role in the system and may wish to be retained beyond the age of 60 to practice their skills. Those opting to retire early may still do so without penalty. The move to 65 will afford the institution to carry out its operational responsibilities - discharging normal courses and providing supervisors for post-graduate students.

1. **Market Perception, Competitiveness and Risk**

The early retirement age at UKZN is completely out of sync with other institutions in the country and across the globe. Other South African universities are receiving the benefit of intellectual prowess, teaching and learning capabilities and research productivity from academics who retire from UKZN at age 60 or earlier. In some countries, such as the United States and Canada, for example, there is no forced retirement of academics. If we are concerned about university rankings and internationalization of higher education, how is it that we would want to uphold a retirement age that is non-aligned with higher education discourse? Problematically, as we prematurely retire staff, we are likewise failing to attract new qualified staff.

Moreover, existing staff reaching their mid-fifties and who are marketable do not wish to suffer the risk of unsuccessful super-annuation attempts based on the nefarious PU system that glorifies quantity of research over quality. Such staff simply exit the system and take on positions elsewhere in the country. For example, Prof Jacek Banasiak (NRF B1 rated mathematician and recently decorated by the Prime Minister of Poland for his mathematical works) has just opted for early retirement at age 55 to take on a post at UP. This represents a huge loss to the children of the province.

1. **Capabilities of Replacement Staff**

Staff retiring prematurely are being replaced in the main by junior or inexperienced staff members. This is resulting in the University not being in a position to provide academics of suitable gravitas to supervise Masters and Doctoral research. The end result is a loss of students in addition to the loss of staff. It should be noted that the SRC leadership indicated in the Senate meeting of 19 August 2015 that there was a shortage of available supervisors for post-graduate students.

The current retirement age thwarts the ability of the University to comport with South Africa’s National Development Plan in terms of increasing the number of PhD holders in the country. We cannot do our part at UKZN because we do not have the supervision capacity to produce doctoral graduates due in part to required retirement at age 60.

**4. Retirement Benefits Quantum**

When staff stop contributing to the pension fund, the effective payout values will be substantially lower when compared to institutions where majority of staff continue contributing until age 65. This represents a *de-facto* loss of 5 years of compounding. There is also a drain on the accumulated funds when members withdraw early - not allowing for sufficient maturation of funds. This decreases the quantum of funds to be invested and in turn results in lower pension payouts. From an employee point of view, this loss of earnings for 5 years can be catastrophic in view of the advancing mortality age internationally. (It should be noted that the European Union has in the last 2 years removed a specified retirement age so in theory an academic in the UK can go on till death. Academics of course, should have the modesty to know their physical limitations and also the good sense to realize the importance of injecting new blood into the system upon their exit at an appropriate age.)

**5. Strategy**

It is well known that academics reach the height of the prowess in the later years - late 40s and 50s. It is particularly tragic that just when the academic has reached optimal productivity, then he/ she is forcibly retired. The current super-annuation system is seriously flawed being based on the PU system. On this basis the University has lost some of its most accomplished staff in recent years. In disciplines that are not favoured by the PU system, staff nearing retirement are opting to leave the employ of the University and take on jobs elsewhere. If the performance system were fair, this may not be happening as exceptional staff could trust the system to keep them employed for the full duration of their academically productive life. This element of uncertainty can be eliminated by raising the retirement age to 65 so that there is no longer any suspense. Basically the investment of the University in their human potential - such as by providing them excellent research facilities, pleasing research rewards, access to funding, and the like all comes to naught if they are retired early. The University must extract more value for money from this investment into its own academics and other employees.

**6. Transformation Agenda and Mentorship and Coaching**

The University subscribes to equity and transformation policies and this is widely accepted by staff. Removing experienced academics and replacing with entry-level academics does not serve this process effectively. Young academics need to be mentored into academia. At worst, even if academic staff are only able to contribute in the form of teaching of advanced topics, they can offer themselves to mentor the incoming generation of academics. Keeping retired academics on the payroll as *ad hoc* employees, which is the current practice, does not give them sufficient motivation to play this role of immense generosity.

Toward transformation and equity, the University has instituted certain worthy recruitment and hiring practices and employed an array of developmental lecturers (DL). To its credit the University has ensured that these new employees are from all walks of life – which generally means that they are not yet experienced in the academic environment. Once we hire them, how will we retain them if seasoned academics who could be mentors and coaches are instead, prematurely retired at age 60? In the absence of sufficient mentoring and coaching in a welcoming way, are we likely to once again run the risk of failing to receive a return on our investment in our African DLs? They may gain just enough experience from UKZN only to be employed by other academic institutions that provide adequate mentoring and coaching.

**7. Restoration of Superannuated Academics to Permanent Staff**

UKZN academics who have been superannuated but have not yet reached the age of 65 should be restored as permanent staff. Under the current retirement age mandate superannuated staff are barred from applying for promotion. This inhibits the career trajectory of staff who wish to be promoted. Some of these academic staff have joined academe as a second or third career. Their practical experience in the public and/or private sector enhances their capabilities for teaching, research and community engagement. Therefore, these superannuated academics should be afforded the opportunity to meet performance criteria consistent with UKZN academic promotion. In addition, the University should look into rehiring staff that were not super-annuated but that showed an interest in continuing as academics at UKZN. These could have been persons not favoured by the performance system, but who are otherwise exceptional academics.

Sudan Hansraj (PhD)

Chair: Institutional Forum