



Office of the Principal and Vice Chancellor

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

SPEECH AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE ACADEMIC YEAR 2023

'Reclaiming Africa's Intellectual Futures'

PROFESSOR PULENG LENKABULA

PRINCIPAL AND VICE-CHANCELLOR - UNISA

FRIDAY, 10 FEBRUARY 2023

ZK MATHEWS GREAT HALL, MUCKLENEUK CAPUS

Programme Directors, Mrs M Nakene-Mginqi, Vice Principal: Information & Communication Technology and Prof T Mgutshini, Acting Executive Dean: College of Graduate Studies

Mr MJ Maboja, Chairperson of the University Council and other Members of Unisa Council in attendance today

Prof P LenkaBula, Principal and Vice Chancellor of the University of South Africa and other members of extended Management present here today

Your Excellences, Ambassadors and High Commissioners representing various Countries in South Africa

Members of the Unisa Foundation Board of Trustees

Cllr. PG de Bruin, MMC for Community and Social Development Services and other members of the Mayoral Committee of the City of Tshwane, present here with us today

The Awardees of the University of South Africa and University of Oldenburg Certificate His Royal Highness Dr Koketso Rakhudu, leader of the Royal Bafokeng Nations community of Tsitsing, and Chief Executive Director of Education Training and Development Centre of Koketso Rakhulu Foundation

Representative of all different interfaith members present here today and participating on our programme

Representatives from labour organisations and Unisa forums

Members of the NSRC and various students' structures present and connected virtually

Alumni Convenors in different countries present here in the venue and virtually

Members from the media Fraternal present

Members of the University Community present and those connecting virtually

Friends of the University of South Africa present here and connecting virtually

Esteemed Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is my singular honour to address you in this year's Official Opening Ceremony for the academic year 2023.

The tradition of the Official Opening Ceremony holds a significant place in the life of the university. It is a moment when we reaffirm, once again, our commitment to our

core mandate of teaching, learning, research, engaged scholarship, student academic support, as well as resourcing the future.

Whereas we recognise that the mandate is institutional, we also appreciate that it cannot be limited to the education sector alone. It is a mandate that, out of necessity, must shape our nascent democracy, as well as Afrika's development ambitions as articulated in our long-term vision and plan – Agenda 2063.

This year marks 150 years since our university was established. It is an herstoric milestone to behold. Throughout the century and half of producing knowledge and shaping history, the University of South Africa (Unisa) has established itself as a centre of academic excellence for Afrika and the world as a whole.

More than anything, Unisa must be celebrated as the pioneer of the distance education model – an enduring gift to human civilisation world over. For this reason, the milestone of 150 years does not belong to Unisans or South Afrikans alone but, to Afrika and the world. Our celebrations and reflections, therefore, must live up to the identity of Unisa as a pan-Afrikan university in service of humanity. After all, we have more than a million alumni spread across the world showcasing the name and prestige of our university – the University of South Afrika.

Today, based on numerous rankings, Unisa is regarded as one of the leading universities in the world in diverse academic fields such as education, science, engineering, and others. Throughout the decades, the university has traversed a road of transformation that was characterised by ebbs and flows, triumphs and defeats, and yet remained true to its existential calling: **questioning and advancing society**.

As leaders, academics, staff, and students of this truly pan-Afrikan public institution, we must appreciate the solid foundation upon which we stand; and show respect to the weight of history as we Forge Ahead to another 150 years. That is the dialectic and contradiction that we must contend with as we build new foundations and reach new frontiers. The late Mze Chinua Achebe calls it the '*weight of colonial history and the pressures of transformation*' in his world-famous classic, 'No Longer at Ease.'

Throughout the year, we will have numerous activities to mark and celebrate the 150 years of our existence. Whereas it will be festive in terms of attitude, the celebrations are meant to be a critical platform of exchange of ideas about where we come from,

where we are, where we ought to be and more importantly, our place in society. I hope we are all ready and energised to reflect intently and honestly with our various epistemic communities inside and outside the university. And as we do so, I hope we recall that the university exists within society and society too, exists within the university.

For this special academic year, we wish to continue with the theme of *'Reclaiming Africa's Intellectual Futures'*. We do so in the context where there is great volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity in the world.

In a fascinating paper titled *'African universities and Globalisation'*, Paul Zeleza aptly explains the context within which Afrikan universities operate in the 21st century and he says the following:

'The challenges that face African universities and intellectual communities are many and daunting. They are simultaneously internal and external, institutional and intellectual, paradigmatic and pedagogical, political and practical. Globalisation, as a process and a project of neo-liberalism, reinforces and recasts these challenges.'

The long-term trends shaping South Africa today are more or less the same anywhere in the world and certainly reflect Zeleza's exposition. The world is facing a poly-crisis of energy, rising cost of living, low economic growth, the nexus of unguided immigration and urbanisation, food insecurity, weakening State capacity and poor infrastructure. All of these crises give rise to numerous challenges in terms of our quest to improve the human condition.

However, it is not all doom and gloom. Opportunities abound too. And because of the resilient spirit of human beings, as well as the innovative capabilities that reside within universities, we are certainly going to ride the storms and emerge on the other side triumphant and more determined to not only survive but, succeed.

Reclaiming Afrika's Intellectual Futures means that we need to grapple with the issues of the day and create the futures we deserve. In his book *'Decolonising Africa Studies – Knowledge Production, Agency and Voice'* Professor Toyin Falola reminds us about our commitment to both the academy and the societies in which we live and serve. He argues among other things that:

‘Both [Samir] Amin and [Frantz] Fanon recognize the complexity faced in the task of decoloniality just as another critic, Archie Mafeje from South Africa, acknowledges the value of the social sciences; but his focus is also concerned with the maintenance of state infrastructure. Mafeje places emphasis on the variety and role of intellectuals in a society: his taxonomy includes the intellectual who is able to rebel against the status quo; the Shanghaied organic intellectual, who values monetary success rather than independent thought; and the transcendent intellectual, who is opposed to the current state. Mafeje’s perspective on this intellectual freedom sets him apart from many other academics, researchers, and theorists; his arguments place a heavy emphasis on the necessity of political action, which is long overdue for a revolution if future generations are to prosper.’

The idea of the role of intellectuals in society, (in a Gramscian sense, ‘organic intellectuals’), is placed before us by Falola as *‘political action which is long overdue for a revolution if generations are to prosper.’* In this regard, *political consciousness and action* must be understood in the broadest sense to mean that the political order must be transformed, be inclusive, futuristic, and humane. In part, that is what *Reclaiming Afrika’s Intellectual Futures* means for us as knowledge community in the 21st century.

Building on the successes of 2022

Despite some notable challenges, Unisa closed the 2022 academic year on a high note – a signal that we are on track in terms of rolling out our strategy and improving our operations.

We have had the fortunes of improving our international rankings.

We increased the number of NRF-rated scholars.

We have seen our engaged scholarship programmes recognised for their impact locally and globally.

We have improved our success rates in some fields.

We have completed the rollout of our Online Application and Registration System and the rollout of our new Digital Teaching Learning System is near completion.

We have improved our financial reserves and remain a sustainable institution. And at the same time, the institution received a Clean Audit opinion for 2022.

We continue to hoist flagship research programmes in the form of the African BioGenome Project and the 10 Catalytic Niche Areas.

Forging Ahead

As we forge ahead in the new year, I hope that we will embrace a positive attitude amidst the global, local, and sectoral challenges I spoke about earlier on. We know that the challenges in our national economy will impact the sector in various ways. For example, the cost of provision and access to education will rise and as a result, sources of income for universities may be fewer, and the national fiscus may be reduced as revenue declines and resources are allocated to other priorities.

For this reason, as a member of the national innovation system, we need to find the solutions for Unisa and the country at large. Universities need human, financial, digital, physical resources, and infrastructure to deliver quality education and retain the highest quality of talents. I hope we do not waste the opportunities that may be presented by the crises.

As we tackle the challenges we face and take advantage of the opportunities we have, I would like to invite the university leadership and all our epistemic communities to focus on the following key priorities for the year ahead:

The Academic Project

Teaching, learning, research and engaged scholarship (including internationalisation) remains the *raison d'être* of Unisa. Completing the take-off of the *Ten Catalytic Niche Areas*, implementing the Improvement Plan in the aftermath of the CHE Institutional Audit, stabilizing the Deanery and the Academy by filling all vacancies, capacitating the College of Graduate Studies, and increasing the enrolment of M&D students must continue to be the centerpiece of our work.

Academic and Student Support

Academic and student support remains critical for success, throughput rates, and competitiveness. We must continue to improve the overall frontline experiences of

students and academics, including improvements on the Learning Management System (LMS) and related support environments, cyber security, professionalisation of student support services, and other enablers. The adoption of the new ICT Strategy by Council last year, enables Unisa to roll-out IT infrastructure and services faster and efficiently. In the post-Covid-19 digital era we live in, technology is a strategic lever to deliver academic support and student services.

Strengthening Core Operations

The core operations of the university will be optimised and strengthened through sound management of People, Finances, Technology, and the Environment. These levers are crucial for the achievement of the Vision, Strategy and Plans of the university.

We need to sustain the improvements we are making on academic administration through sound management systems and innovation. The financial health and sustainability of the university through prudent management and allocation of resources, diversification of sources of income and the steady increase of our savings remain important.

Strengthening Human Resources and Labour Relations, filling of critical vacancies, keeping labour peace, building a high-performance organisation, and progressive institutional cultures will unleash the potential of the university.

Governance

Planning, Monitoring, Reporting, Compliance and Consequences Management are important for an ethical and excellent university. For proper governance to thrive, an enabling environment must exist, and the top leadership of the university must enforce and promote a culture of excellence, compliance, and accountability.

Given the multiple crises we must contend with, the university will need to do *institutional scenarios* for purposes of sharpening our strategy, planning and allocation of resources. And at the same time, must continue to review key policies for the optimisation of operations in the institution.

As we go through year, we will encounter numerous challenges and opportunities individually and collectively. As we do so, we must remember the words of Bob Marley in Redemption Song:

'Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery
None but ourselves can free our minds
Have no fear for atomic energy
'Cause none of them can stop the time'

In conclusion, and as I said earlier, the 150 Years Celebrations are important for the core business of the university and its reputation. We need to celebrate gracefully in a manner that enables the academic project and institutional sustainability.

I wish to take this opportunity to thank all our Council, colleagues, staff and students for their input, guidance, and leadership as we open the 2023 academic year.

Let us look forward to another year of **Reclaiming Afrika's Intellectual Futures** in a year of historic significance to Unisa, Afrika and the world.

Once more, it is my honour to officially open the 2023 academic year with your kind support and encouragement.

I thank you.