

2018 UNISA ACADEMIC OPENING

Chairman of Council, Mr Sakhi Simelane

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen – I want to thank the Programme Director for doing such a fine job with the Protocol List: however, please indulge me and allow me in my capacity as Chairman of the Unisa Council, to particularly acknowledge the following persons:

- Unisa Council Members present this morning;
- the Principal and Vice-Chancellor, Professor Mandla Makhanya, Mrs Makhanya and the entire Executive and Extended Management team of Unisa;

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen: Good morning.

Let me take this opportunity to remind you that tonight was supposed to be the night all South Africans were to be glued to their TV screens to watch the State of the Nation address. The events leading up to this day have created uncertainty in our political system and we hope the winds of change will bring goodwill to the people of South Africa. I raise this issue because on this occasion last year I spoke about “having spent an extremely

embarrassing evening watching the State of the Nation address on TV”. There appears to be changes in the making. These are likely to have an impact in the public domain and the higher education sector is also likely to be affected by any changes in political leadership. This would be the second time with the likelihood of a third Minister in less than 24 months.

Nonetheless, we gather here annually for the Academic Opening in our continued attempt to celebrate and recognise the achievements of the university and its staff members. Part of this day is to recommit ourselves to being a university - and in Unisa’s case, to being “a university shaping futures in the service of humanity”. **Unisa is 145 years old this year and we need to once again commit ourselves to creating a culture of passion for what Unisa represents and in the process, create a university that is a high performance, service focused and people-centered institution. In such a space, Unisa will become a caring community and as an employer will give expression to and demonstrate the values of social justice and fairness, and excellence with integrity.**

Last year we were blessed because our Academic Opening was unique in that it was combined with the inauguration of Unisa’s Chancellor within the context of inclusivity. We were happy then and are still happy today

to have given our staff the opportunity to be part of the installation of the Chancellor.

Programme Director, ladies and gentlemen, as I welcome you to the 2018 Academic Opening of Unisa, I want to emphasise my gratitude to every one of you who took the time to participate in this important event in our annual calendar.

Firstly, let me take this opportunity to thank our students for choosing Unisa as their vehicle to achieving academic excellence; secondly, all staff members for their continued support and their drive for excellence and participation in local, national and international activities; thirdly, executive leadership for their role in managing the university; fourthly, my colleagues on the Council for their professional steerage in their governance of the university; lastly, the Ministry and Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) for the continued support (financially in particular) and guidance in our endeavour to be the pillar of hope for many South Africans. It has been a collective effort of pride and overall goodwill that has brought us to where we find ourselves today.

I started earlier by reflecting on this day last year and I think it is prudent to reflect on some of the challenges I posed then:

a) The first was the “#Fees Must Fall” debate and the Heher Commission appointed by the President of the Republic. We know now that the Heher Commission submitted its report in August 2017 and on 16th December 2017, after a long wait, the President finally responded by making available “Free Education” to the “poor and working class”. Of course there is jubilation and, to some extent, discontent as some were looking forward to blanket “Free Education”. Nevertheless, the effort made has taken away a substantial financial burden from many South African families who would have not been able to attend a university had it not been for the new policy change. As universities and Unisa, in particular, we are very grateful that a substantial number of our students will benefit from this initiative. The policy will also relieve Unisa of the potential financial loss from those students who would have had to drop out due to financial exclusion. Notwithstanding the Heher Commission and the president’s response, in 2017 Unisa also made available more than R90 million for student bursaries at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. For undergraduates, Unisa has made available a total of R 48,7 million which was utilised for tuition as well as books

for 6 325 students. The postgraduate component will be completed when the January 2018 results are finalised.

- b) Coupled with Unisa's commitment to increased access and affordable higher education, our Council approved a no-fee increase for 2018 which will continue to make our programmes affordable to all South Africans. Such a move requires us to be prudent and efficient in the delivery of our services, without compromising quality.
- c) We also touched on "online-driven education" where disputes on bandwidth and connectivity remain unresolved, not only here in South Africa, but on the continent as a whole. South Africa in particular remains the most expensive when it comes to bandwidth. We at Unisa are planning to pilot mobile devices for our students. At the same time, we are engaging with bandwidth providers to ensure that our students are able to utilise bandwidth for free or alternatively at reasonable prices in tandem with "free education". We hope that this will assist Unisa in dealing with the increased access and massification of education as inspired by the Sustainability Development Goals and online technology as the catalyst for bridging geographic boundaries. I did mention that our imagination can only inspire our researchers to spend "much time on these questions and produce the necessary results and findings to be implemented to make Unisa's open distance e-learning model more effective."

While there is an urgent sense of pride in the resolution of these challenges, we remain committed to finding solutions to a myriad of challenges our sector is faced with ranging from funding to issues of quality, and access with success. More importantly, Unisa must continue to engage in ODeL research leading to the development of an appropriate business model for the university. Being an African comprehensive and globally competitive university requires Unisa to offer quality undergraduate and postgraduate programmes supported by research in niche areas informed by national and international developments, and transformational needs. To achieve this an ODeL business model must create learning opportunities and ensure that these are delivered via cutting-edge open distance learning technologies. Of course, our Council will be required to engage in this discussion when the time comes taking into account that Unisa, being a distance learning institution, is fast becoming a hybrid. There are a growing number of students who are under 20 years of age looking for affordable programmes and who cannot afford a residential/contact university. In addition, we have seen an increase in the number of students who are currently unemployed (17%) but in search of better education opportunities, they have found a home in Unisa. This may be an opportunity for both Government and Unisa to consider this group as a way of further increasing access in the higher education sector via a hybrid mode.

These initiatives must also take into account our role as Unisa in promoting inclusive higher education. Traditionally, inclusive education was focused on ways to integrate students with “special educational needs” but the shift has moved towards diversity among students. The international trends point to all students who were traditionally marginalised from higher education such as “students from different nationalities, age groups, cultures, and socio-economic situations”. South Africa is no different and we have to arrest the continuation of exclusions due to disability, nationality, age and economically. This requires us to continually work towards developing new ways of providing support to our students. In addition, the proportion of students who are above 30 years of age and considered older still constituted a large part of our students in 2015.

We all remember that in 2017, the Minister and the Department of Higher Education and Training, placed a significant focus on transformation. I am happy to report that Unisa has started developing this plan, not only for the Minister, but as an indication of our commitment to transformation of the higher education sector. I was encouraged by the enthusiasm from all Unisans from all demographics with regard to transformation. Everyone seem committed to transformation from all sides and the leadership of this

University ranging from Executive Management, middle management, all stakeholders and employees at large, have embraced the transformation and supported it wholeheartedly. What is remaining is for everyone to be impatient about the implementation of the transformation road map.

Next week we will be participating in the workshop to discuss the draft National Plan for Post-Secondary Education and Training. This plan will replace the National Plan for Higher Education approved in 2001. If you remember, the Minister published the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training in 2013. The plan, as such, is a roadmap for the “development and reinvigoration of post-school education and training over the next 12 years, from 2018 - 2030.” The plan aligns and integrates the post-school system to work as a “coordinated system, bringing together institutions and traditions with very different histories and investments, and finding ways of making them work together towards common goals.” Our participation in this milestone is as significant as the role to be played by Unisa in the post-school system.

We are not going to achieve some of the things I have mentioned above if we do not review our leadership roles and the manner in which we work as teams. Working together remains our hope for success hence I implore

our staff and our executive management to continue to explore ways of working together.

Notwithstanding our executive management, I want to encourage our Councillors to continue to take their responsibilities seriously and encourage unity in the execution of their responsibility. It is important to remind ourselves that as Councillors we are tasked with the responsibility to govern the institution. By so doing, we provide oversight over the “financial affairs, affairs relating to quality instruction and proper evaluation of students, its general reputation and standing within South Africa and also in the rest of the world and, in general, for the maintenance of good order in the affairs of the institution.” Council can only achieve this by providing general policies for management to implement and conduct the day-to-day running of the institution. However, the management must always be accountable to the Council for the decisions and conduct regarding the day-to-day management of such an institution.

I said this last year and I think it’s important to say its again: My “appeal to the Unisa community is that you focus your minds and be what a university is meant to be ... unleash your potential so that communities nationally, continentally and globally will have to sit up and take note. Maintaining

brand recognition and sustainability should be Unisa's drive for the foreseeable future.”

To all Unisans, I congratulate all those that are being recognised for a variety of the contributions they have made to the university and the South African community at large. I encourage you to continue making this university a shining example and a beacon of hope for many South Africans.

I would like to end this speech by quoting some of these life lessons from different authors. It is important to draw from these lessons as we forge ahead with the academic project. Let us not be distracted but must remain courageous:

Certificates that hang on your wall do not make you a decent human being but just show how much education you have - lets strive to have the best of both. It is sometimes hard to determine where to draw the line from being nice and not hurting people's feelings and at the same time standing up for what you believe in, it is not easy but it is something that we have to learn.

The other thing is that people are very adamant about their particular positions; No matter how thin you slice it there are always two sides to it ie there is one side that you may not see and then there is your side.

It is a lot easier to react than to think and decide what to do, so always think first before you react. And I particularly urge you to always think first before you react with emotions. No matter how much you care for people there will always be some people who may not be interested in that, but in your case continue to care.

As I close, allow, me as usual, to quote from the Holy Bible of Mathew 5: 13 where Jesus uses the concept of salt and light to illustrate the valuable role we need to play in our culture, community and in all areas of our influence. Therefore let's strive to be real salt or the light in this university.

To all Unisans today, I want to wish you everything of the best for the 2018 academic year.

I THANK YOU

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