

**REMARKS BY PROF PULENG LENKABULA, PRINCIPAL AND VICE-
CHANCELLOR OF UNISA AT THE UNISA MEDIA BRIEFING**

CSIR Diamond Auditorium, Pretoria, Tuesday, 23 August 2022

Thank you very much Programme Director, Mrs. K Mahlare,

Esteemed members of the Media,

Vice-Principals and other Members of Extended Management,

Colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning!

I welcome you all to this important Media Briefing by the Management of University of South Africa (Unisa) whose purpose is to update the South African public and members of the media on the state of the university in respect to three critical areas, namely, the academic project, governance and student services.

I wish to recognise that the fact that the University of South Africa is turning 150 years in 2023. This is an important milestone for not only for Unisa but for higher education and distance learning in Africa and the world. As part of marking this milestone, Unisa will be engaged year-long activities that are centred around learning, teaching and research to mark this historic occasion.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

I am pleased that finally, the Management of Unisa and members of the media have found time to meet and discuss the state of Unisa – one of the important national and regional assets of Africa. Given the important role of Unisa in the imagination, development and prosperity of Africa, this conversation is long overdue. I must state upfront that, as Unisa, this is an engagement that we have been planning to have for quite some time; but could not do so due to other pressing matters beyond our control.

In the past few months, we have seen a few events and reports that have cast a national spotlight on Unisa. Among other things, the public has come to learn about the Report of

the Ministerial Task Team (the MTT Report) tasked with conducting an independent review of Unisa, the disruption of the first week of the 2022 Autumn Graduation Ceremonies and subsequent postponements forced by the prevailing circumstances at the time, unfounded perceptions about the integrity of the university's qualifications, as well as student services concerns.

As Principal and Vice-Chancellor, I am the Administrative Head (Accounting Officer) and Chairperson of Senate which is the custodian of the academic programme of the university – our primary mandate and core business. And collectively as Management, we have the moral and legal obligation to clarify certain matters which have the potential to cause irreparable harm to the university – matters which have gone largely unchallenged in the public domain.

The Higher Education Act, Act 101 of 1997 (as amended) and the Unisa Statute, obliges the Principal and Vice-Chancellor to provide leadership on management and operational matters of the university for which he or she has a responsibility on a day-to-day basis. The duty to inform the public about the state of the university and important developments forms part of this obligation.

I can also say without any doubt that Unisa respects the media as one of the important institutions that strengthen our democracy and systems of governance. It is for this reason that we felt this media briefing must take place.

We also appreciate that the relationship between public power and the media will always be characterised by creative tensions, albeit within the law, the Constitution and robust human rights and ethics culture.

ON THE ACADEMIC PROJECT – THE CORE MANDATE OF UNISA

Our core mandate is the academic project. In this regard, Unisa remains a leading Comprehensive Distance eLearning (CODeL) institution in Africa and the world. In the past eighteen months, Unisa has made significant improvements on several indicators and rankings, both nationally and internationally. We continue to retain our accreditation for many of the important academic programmes that are central the domestic and regional economy.

Academic excellence is non-negotiable at Unisa. It is through high calibre academics, teaching, research and engaged scholarship that we consistently retain our programme accreditation through the Council on Higher Education's (CHE) other domestic and international accreditation and quality assurance bodies.

In past eighteen months alone, Unisa has improved its national and international rankings.

Our national and global rankings keep improving, and we are proud of the achievements and our deepest gratitude goes to our talented and excellent researchers and academics. The *US News & World Report* has published its [2022 Best Global Universities Rankings](#), which includes a list of the top 13 tertiary learning institutions in South Africa – 10 of which, including Unisa, are ranked among the top 900 in the world. For the second consecutive year, the rankings placed Unisa at 9th in the country and 851st globally, up from 921st in the previous year. This ranking included 54 African universities and three ODeL universities. Unisa achieved 22nd position out of the 54 African universities (ninth of the South African universities) and 2nd among the ODeL universities.

We have also improved our overall ranking in the *Times Higher Education World University Rankings* to joint position 948, despite an increase in the number of ranked institutions from 1 527 institutions for the 2021 ranking to 1 662 for the 2022 ranking.

Among African universities ranked, Unisa achieved 30th position out of the 71 ranked African universities. However, Unisa achieved 7th position for teaching, 8th position for research, joint 31st position for industry income, but only 46th position for citations and 50th position for international outlook. Only five open distance education institutions were ranked, of which Unisa was 3rd of the five.

Similarly, in the *Times Higher Education Emerging Economies Rankings* for 2022, Unisa improved its position to joint 237th out of 698 institutions in the second quartile overall. Furthermore, Unisa also improved its position in all five dimensions teaching, research, citations, industry income and international outlook.

Unisa has been placed in the 401 to 600 category in the authoritative *Times Higher Education Impact Rankings*, the only global performance tables that assess universities

against the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This is a marked advancement from the 601+ category in which the university was placed in its previous participation in the rankings in 2020.

More recently, the Annual Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities, which are based on per capita metric, put Unisa amongst the top South African universities – as the 8th top university in South Africa. Whilst we are encouraged by this steady progress, we intend to work even harder to attain an even better ranking going forward.

On the research front, this year Unisa presented a record 120 awards to 112 dedicated researchers and innovators across numerous disciplines at the 2022 Unisa Research and Innovation Awards. These awards are based on their impactful research on the continent and globally.

This magnificent tally of awards reflects a strong increase in National Research Foundation (NRF) ratings. In 2022, 66 Unisa researchers successfully applied to be rated, re-rated or transferred with a rating, compared to 28 in 2021. This goes to show how productive Unisa researchers have managed to be in the most difficult of circumstances.

To further affirm our stature as a centre for academic excellence, the university also won an award at the 2022 ZAIRI International Awards for Excellence in Higher Education Ceremony held in Dubai in March this year. Unisa emerged as the winner in the category: Excellence for Research Impact.

In the field of Computer Science, Engineering and Technology (CSET), Unisa is ranked number eight (8) among the best universities for prospective students to pursue such academic programmes. This ranking is based on a comparative analysis of the rankings of several of South Africa's biggest universities performed by MyBroadband using six reputed educational institution ranking systems.

A few examples of our innovative flagship research are worthy of mentioning. We have recently been invited to partner with the African BioGenome Project (AfricaBP). The African BioGenome Project is a coordinated pan-African effort to build capacity (and infrastructure) to generate, analyse and deploy genomics data for the improvement and

sustainable use of biodiversity and agriculture across Africa. This is important for the achievement of some of the goals of Agenda 2063 – the long-term vision of Africa.

Our researchers in Agriculture and, Science and Technology managed to advance a new solution to tackle multi-drug resistant tuberculosis. The focus of the research was the chemical design and synthesis of new TB drugs and biological investigation into several medicinal plants as a cradle of novel TB drug leads.

What does this all mean?

It means the academic project remains safe and shows significant signs of improvement. It means in various national rankings and certain fields of academic endeavour, Unisa has entered the Top 10 ranks. These achievements are due to conscious and consistent efforts by Management and the entire Unisa value chain to improve our performance on the core mandate.

Ladies and gentlemen,

When we assumed leadership in January 2021, we introduced 10 New Catalytic Niche Areas of research and engaged scholarship which are increasingly becoming spaces of much needed innovation in the university, the country and the continent at large.

The 10 Catalytic Niche Areas are:

- Marine studies
- Aviation and Aeronautical studies
- Automotive studies
- Energy research
- Space studies and the Square Kilometer Area (SKA)
- Fourth Industrial Revolution and Digitalisation
- Natural Sciences (Biotechnological Studies)
- Health Studies/Medicine

- Feminist, Womanist, Bosadi Theorisations
- Student Support and Co-Curricular Activities

The entire academic community has bought into this vision and many great things have already happened and continue to happen inside the university and the knowledge communities we seek to impact. After this Media Briefing, we are going into an academic workshop where we will spend some time solidifying our thinking and approaches on these niche areas. This is yet another way of placing the academic project at the centre of our existence.

ON THE MTT REPORT AND THE APPOINTMENT OF AN INDEPENDENT ASSESSOR

As you know, in March 2022, the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, Dr Blade Nzimande released the report of the Ministerial Task Team (the MTT Report) tasked with conducting an independent review of Unisa.

At the invitation of the Minister, the Council of Unisa submitted its response to the MTT Report and also held some engagements with the Minister in this regard. Following these engagements, the Minister has since announced his decision to appoint an Independent Assessor to investigate and establish the veracity of several reports that are before him, including the MTT Report.

In terms of the Higher Education Act, independent assessments are an important mechanism to help improve the governance and performance of institutions of higher learning. The principles and ethics informing this mechanism are based on the understanding that universities enjoy academic freedom and institutional autonomy, however, they are subject to the principle of public accountability. In popular parlance, this is referred to as a system of checks and balances.

Once more, we reiterate our full support and cooperation with the process as established by the Minister and the university looks forward to working with the Independent Assessor.

We appeal to all stakeholders to afford the Independent Assessor the time and space to do his/her work without any undue pressure and interference. The independent

assessment is a serious process which will put to rest all the concerns and allegations which have been in the public domain, and it empowers the Minister to act on the basis of verified facts and proper recommendations.

At this stage, the Unisa Management wishes to assure the public that it holds itself to very high standards when it comes to governance, compliance and accountability which forms part of our individual and collective fiduciary duties. We always strive to ensure that the decisions we take in the execution of our respective tasks are informed by the policies and statutes of the university, as well as all other relevant laws of the Republic. And in the instance where there lapses in leadership, management, or governance, we do not hesitate to act!

In so far as the MTT findings are concerned, especially in the domain of Management, we are not waiting for the independent assessment. The work has already begun on several areas where corrections and improvements are needed. The university will submit its progress report the Independent Assessor in this regard.

Today I wish to remind and assure the public and our students, the most important stakeholder of the university, that under our leadership and areas of accountability, their qualifications and future career prospects remain safe and as bright as ever:

- Unisa's academic programmes and qualifications meet the highest verifiable quality assured standard by the relevant authorities (Council on Higher Education, SAQA, etc). This includes the Unisa programmes accredited by the South African Institute of Accounting Sciences (SAICA), a fact recently affirmed so loudly by SAICA itself when others were trying to wrongfully cast aspersions on the integrity of our accounting programmes.
- That the university remains true to its mission and model as a Comprehensive Open Distance eLearning (CODeL) institution in South Africa. Even under Covid-19 conditions and changing demographics, we remain resilient, relevant, and competitive locally and globally and we continue to be pioneers and leaders of CODeL in South Africa, Africa, and the world. Unisa remains by far an authority on Open Distance Learning and the envy of many peer institutions across the globe.

- That the university still has a healthy balance sheet and will continue to operate sustainably into the future. In addition, in the past year, we have expanded our international relations programme to build new and enduring partnerships that will bolster our knowledge enterprise, as well as our financial sustainability.

ON STUDENT SERVICES AND RELATED CHALLENGES

Much as the university has made remarkable strides in delivering education to more than 378 000 students under difficult and unprecedented conditions of Covid-19, the institution remains acutely aware of some of the frustrations and challenges that our students face on a regular basis.

Soon after taking office last year, I was presented with what we call, the AS IS Report. The report details the state of the university as I found it. Among others, it details some of the weaknesses in the quality of our student services. As Management, we committed not only to fix the inefficiencies; but to also review and improve the system from the moment of application to the day of graduation – the whole Unisa student journey. Such an improvement programme will take a bit of time and money, but with the right leadership, technology, and financial resources, we shall overcome the challenges. As the executive head of the university, I have already begun regular engagements with the National Student Representative Council and the Regional SRCs to ensure that no student is left behind.

We know the system has challenges, but contrary to some media reports, the system has not collapsed, and it is certainly not in chaos. Our attitude in this regard is very clear: one complaint is one too many!

IN CONCLUSION...

Unisa is too big to fail. It cannot and will not fail. It has challenges but they are not insurmountable. It is an important national and continental asset that will always be protected by all of us as members of the public and leaders committed to its vision and core mandate.

As Principal and Vice-Chancellor, my focus is on the strategic vision and plan of the university. More importantly, the academic project is my greatest commitment and within the context of my accountabilities, I will do everything within my talents, legal prescripts and available resources to protect and advance the academy. Such a commitment includes ensuring that we hold each other accountable for the national asset that our people entrusted us with.

We will build meaningful and enduring partnerships internally and externally based on sound ethics, mutual respect, observance of the rule of law, common principles and a shared vision.

We remain committed to shaping African futures in service of humanity!

I thank you.

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NOTE FOR MEMBERS OF THE MEDIA

In addition to the media releases and advisories that the University normally shares with you, you are call upon you are encouraged to visit: <https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/News-&-Media> or on the student portal, also known as myUnisa (<https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/myunisa/default/News/Articles>). You would find articles that show various strides that Unisa is making in a range of areas.

Importantly, please see attached the fact sheet on some of the data that inform the remarks.