

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB NETWORKING FUNCTION

27 January 2011

Kgorong Building, University of South Africa¹

Colleagues in management, members of the press corps, invited guests, Unisa colleagues

I am pleased to welcome you to the University of South Africa, and particularly to this fantastic new entrance building, aptly named Kgorong, of which we are all so justifiably proud. I don't know if you have been taken on a tour of the building yet, but I'm sure you will agree that it provides a fitting entrance to the biggest university on the Continent.

Ladies and gentlemen, it would be fair to say that 2010 was a challenging year for both the press and the University of South Africa.

On the one hand, the press has been dealing with, and continues to deal with incipient regulatory measures which they feel will curtail their press freedoms. As professionals this must obviously be a matter for grave concern. Many swords have been crossed as various constituencies have shared their views on the matter. All have done so openly, making full use of those freedoms. Yet there can be no doubt that there are some people who rightly or wrongly, feel hurt, misrepresented and even damaged by the press. And while there are clearly two sides to every story there can be no doubt that the power when it comes to telling the story lies firmly on one side. One then has to rely on integrity, maturity and some balance in the reporting, and where that is in short supply, then concerns arise.

So that is why many people and institutions feel that it is really important to build sound relations with the media. Part of the rationale is to create an openness that will foster mutual confidence and ultimately, balanced reporting from an informed perspective - in our case, a sound knowledge of the higher education domain, the role and responsibilities of the various higher education institutions, and the people who work in them. Without that, reporting can at best be superficial and at worst purely speculative and even damaging.

¹ Welcome and brief address by Prof Mandla S Makhanya, on the occasion of the national press club networking function, held on 27 January 2011, Kgorong Building, University of South Africa

I genuinely believe that when it comes to the press, the University of South Africa is a very open and accessible institution. By and large, I am pleased to say, that accessibility has been treated in a professional manner and reporting - be it positive or negative - has been from an informed perspective. But it would be true to say that there has been the odd instance where that openness in our view, has been abused, to the detriment of the institution. And while we choose to remain an open and transparent institution, we will not facilitate baseless and biased reporting. No institution is perfect and where we err we expect to be held to account. But we also expect, and indeed we have the right to do so, that reporting will at least be factually correct.

I am therefore really pleased to see you all here. I hope that we can continue to build on the kinds of relationships that above all, will ultimately promote the higher education project in our country. You will agree, that is a national priority.

Many of us were surprised to see the thousands of students thronging outside our various universities when registrations opened this year. Even the Minister for Higher Education and Training, Minister Nzimande expressed his surprise at the clamour for access – despite a significant increase in the number of places for school leavers. Our people are hungry for an education and in the absence of jobs for the majority of school leavers, they will increasingly turn to education as a means of improving their qualifications and skills for entry into the job market. University is not, and should not be the only option, and it is gratifying to note the concerted push to revitalise the FET sector, which is destined to become a key role player in the provision of the skills training that South Africa needs so badly. Of course once FET students have reached a certain level of qualification there is no reason why they cannot access universities to further their studies, and in this regard Unisa is ready and willing to play its part.

Over and above the hundreds of thousands of students for whom Unisa is a first choice university, we increasingly find those who cannot get into contact institutions turning to Unisa. This places quite an onerous burden on us in terms of the sheer volume of registrations and so on, but we are resolved to working with government and other role players to ensure the best possible utilisation of our resources. And despite our ongoing difficulties in trying to reconcile our enrolment targets with the huge demand for access and all of the demands and difficulties that that brings, we are seeing a definite improvement year-on-year, in our throughput rates. Much of that I believe, can be ascribed to the dedication of our staff who somehow manage to

continually adjust the increased expectations brought by each new challenge. They do us proud.

Our reward for our efforts has been the public acknowledgement that Unisa is the most productive university in the country. Some 13.6% of all South African bachelors and honours degrees and 5.5% of all masters degrees and doctorates were awarded by our university in 2008. Together they made up 12.8% of all degrees conferred, the highest of all 23 higher education institutions in the country. While we acknowledge that we are by far the biggest University, we must also acknowledge that these figures emphasise the very significant influence and impact of Unisa on the socio-economic development of South Africa.

The University of South Africa looks forward to more of the same. We are committed to excellence, not only in the quality of our offerings but also in our student support, our service and our relationships with our stakeholders. We regard the press as one of those stakeholders – a very important one – and we look forward to a continued, mutually professional relationship. May 2011 be a year of good news for us all. I thank you.