



*The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor*

## **PROF MANDLA MAKHANYA, PRINCIPAL AND VICE-CHANCELLOR**

**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA**

**WELCOME: YRU@BMR YOUTH RESEARCH UNIT CONFERENCE**

**SENATE HALL**

**12 April 2016**

- Madame Chair, Professor Divya Singh, Vice Principal: Advisory and Assurance Services
- Professor Deon Tustin, Head: Bureau for Market Research
- Dr A Busson YRU@BMR
- Our Keynote speaker this morning, South Africa's Public Protector, Advocate Thuli Madonsela
- Our Keynote speaker for tomorrow, Mr Brad Huddleston of Brad Huddleston Ministries, United States of America

- Members of Unisa's executive and extended management
- Unisa staff and students
- Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

A very warm welcome to this timely and pertinent conference.

No one would argue that our society is faced with serious challenges. Our world is going through one of those very rare historical transitions; a moment in time where both the young *and* the old are faced with changes and adaptations for which neither is equipped. Advancing technologies and the advent of the internet have changed the world in very fundamental ways and our children are growing up with challenges that are so different and dynamic that we, who are supposed to be guiding them, teaching them, nurturing them, are left feeling unprepared, inadequate, and if we are to be honest, a little afraid. How does one cope in a world where children at primary and secondary school have access to knowledge, both good and bad, which has taken humankind centuries to accrue?

Just as an example, I can share with you that I was at a shopping mall over the weekend, doing some shopping and I suddenly heard raised voices: one, a man accused of trying to steal a wallet, in voluble defensive mode; and the other the person who was convinced of the attempt to steal his wallet and who was wanting to get physical. What stunned me was

not so much the incident, which we could argue is an everyday occurrence in our malls. It was the speed - just seconds - at which a crowd of children – adolescents - gathered and encircled the two and the security guards – and nearly every *single one of them* had a cell phone in their hands, and were filming the incident ‘for Facebook,’ I heard one of them say. The adults stood on the outer fringes of the crowd just looking, but the children were actively involved. It was none of their business but it was all of their business, if you can understand what I am getting at. The result was that the accuser felt so threatened by this attention that he turned away and walked off and the alleged thief sauntered off. Justice, one way or another had been denied. Children – adolescents - had exercised a very fundamental level of power – knowingly or unknowingly - over adults. This would never have happened even 15 years ago. It was a scary instance of role reversal, and if the truth be told, of bullying (albeit unintentional), as well.

This conference came to mind when I was processing that scene, because it brought home to me the prevalence and power of social media and the many ways that it is manifesting and impacting on all of our lives, positively and negatively, through changed attitudes and behaviours.

There can be no doubt that our youth are in trouble to a degree that we have never experienced before and it is therefore

apposite that youths' immersion in social media, substance abuse, bullying and biases, and forms of addiction are amongst the key projects that have been undertaken by YRU@BMR in since its inception. These are now the topics for discussion at this conference, following on multi-stakeholder research that has been done to determine their prevalence and nature, as well as the options that are available to us for their resolution.

The Youth Research Unit has been located in Unisa's College of Economic and Management Sciences since its inception in 2011. Their scientific research and community engagement initiatives, conducted with Unisa's Bureau for Market Research, continue to make a fundamental impact and contribution to our society – nationally and continentally, and even globally. (As a strategic business unit of the College of Economic and Management Sciences, the BMR's primary mandate at Unisa is to conduct research confined to commissioned syndicate and institutional research and to participate in community engagement initiatives and generate accredited research outputs and supervise masters and doctoral students.)

As I said earlier, today you will be discussing some of the findings of the research that has been conducted by YRU@BMR. I would like to make brief mention of just five of these projects.

1. The YRU was instrumental in sharing research finding that highlighted psychosocial challenges faced by learners in schools, drawn from the School research and Community Engagement Project conducted in 2011/2012. The YRU shared finding on substance abuse and violence amongst learners in secondary schools in Gauteng. The contribution culminated in a call for South Africa to consider social work practice to deal with the psychosocial issues, and was used along with other presentations conducted by the University of the Witwatersrand and other practitioners in the field, to recommend a new direction for the United Nations to achieve its goal of using education to develop the world.
2. A project on the risk and mitigation of online exposure and behaviour of South African adolescents which focused on the use of technology, specifically the internet
3. A project on the impact and effects of exposure to pornography with the potential of dysfunctional transference towards the sexual exploitation of children, which explored possible links between viewing pornography and the possible sexual exploitation of children,
4. A project on nomophobic behaviour among young adults, which focused on the fear of being without cell phone connectivity (I'd like to think that we adults are equally prone to that phobia!)

5. Another first for the YRU was conducting a training session on bullying at the 14<sup>th</sup> Annual National Child Abuse Conference hosted by the South Africa Professional Society on the Abuse of Children in June 2013. The training session was based on research findings generated through the YRU School Research and Community Engagement Project, which was completed in 2012. The research results generated from this project, related to bullying and substance abuse resulted in widespread interest in various sectors of South African Society.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, Unisa is proud to be hosting this conference. The research that will underpin your discussions and possible action plans, as well as a sustained and more holistic focus on our youth are entirely consonant with our commitment to be immersed in the communities that we serve. At Unisa we believe that our students are the future of this country and as such, we are a student centred university. Today's adolescents - our learners - will be the Post School Education and Training students of tomorrow. We believe that the value of the research findings that you will be discussing today and tomorrow, will find their echoes in the generations to come.

We would like to thank the YRU@BMR for their quality research. We would like to thank you, our participants for your

dedication to our youth and to our country. We welcome you to Unisa and we wish you a fruitful and rewarding conference.

I thank you.