

**PROF MS MAKHANYA, PRINCIPAL AND VICE-CHANCELLOR  
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA**

**ADDRESS: GALA DINNER: RESEARCH AWARDS CEREMONY**

***“Working with communities towards attainment of the  
Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)”***

**THE BALLROOM, GALLAGHER CONVENTION CENTRE, MIDRAND  
6 MARCH 2020**

Thanks to our Programme Director, Dr Genevieve James, Deputy  
Director: Community Engagement at Unisa

- Chancellor of Unisa, President Thabo Mbeki
- Chairperson of the Unisa council, Mr Sakhi Simelane
- Members of Unisa’s council, here present
- Members of the diplomatic corps
- My colleagues, members of the executive and extended management
- Prof Thenjiwe Meyiwa, Vice-Principal: Research, Postgraduate Studies, Innovation and Commercialisation
- Dr S.D. Selematsela, Executive Director: Library and Information Services
- Members of the business community and civil society
- Unisa’s student and labour formations

- Our honoured guests this evening: recipients of our research awards
- Our entertainers this evening, the Gaabo Motho Tenors
- Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

A very good evening to you all. On behalf of our Chancellor, who is the host of tonight's research awards, as well as the council and management of Unisa, it is my pleasure and honour to bid you all a very warm welcome to our annual Unisa Research and Innovation Awards Ceremony. This is a bittersweet moment for me, because this is my last awards dinner in my capacity as Principal and Vice-Chancellor of Unisa. You may or may not know that I will be retiring at the end of the year, having served two terms as the Principal and Vice-Chancellor, and so it is in a somewhat reflective mood that I address you this evening.

I can assure you, though, that I remain completely confident that this university is unique and that it is regarded as such – nationally, on the continent, and internationally. It has always been a bit surprising to me that we, who work at Unisa, do not seem to fully grasp the value of the strategic gem that is Unisa, and I often wonder whether we truly appreciate this magnificent asset for what it is, or the massive potential that it has for change. Yes, I use the word "massive" intentionally, and the contribution that we

continue to make to the world of quality higher education in what is most certainly one of the most challenging times for tertiary education.

The fact is, brand Unisa remains highly regarded, and despite our sometimes critical press locally, we have a much-envied reputation amongst our peers for quality education and, increasingly, for the caliber of the research we are providing – this, despite the fact that we are not a research-intensive university. And if ever you were in any doubt about our growing presence and impact in higher education research, look around you – look at your colleagues: I counted close on 100 awards this evening. Slowly but surely we are building on what, I believe, will become an enviable reputation for research – research that is relevant and applicable to our context as a comprehensive African ODeL university.

While preparing for my first-quarter report to council, I read through a very comprehensive ranking report which has been prepared by DIRPO. The aim of the project was to determine Unisa's status in the various global rankings, and then amongst our ODeL peers.

Now you will know that, as an ODeL institution, many of the

traditional ranking criteria cannot be applied in our case, and so quite rightly there are questions about their relevance for Unisa. In fact, there is much research available that questions the entire notion of ranking higher education institutions, precisely because of this lack of universality. Be that as it may, the rankings are used by many universities both as a benchmarking and an advertising tool – as we well know from our own experience right here in South Africa.

For the first time, though, we now have a ranking that applies to ODeL institutions which meet the criteria for this category. And these are indeed useful to us, especially when it comes to benchmarking. So, for example, in the 2020 World University Ranking only four distance education universities were included, namely Anadolu University (AU), the Open University UK (OUUK), the Open University of Catalonia (OUC) and the University of South Africa (Unisa). These are our global peers when it comes to ranking criteria.

WUR Rank	Institution	Country	Overall Score	Teaching Score	Research Score	Citations Score	Industry income	Internat. outlook Score	FTE students	Students per staff	Internat. Students	Female to Male ratio
501-600	The Open University	United Kingdom	35,3-38,7	18,2	16,1	66,5	34,8	57,6	61 915	32,3	8%	62 : 38
501-600			33,5-37,0	18,5	16,4	68,5	34,4	54,4	64 638	34,0	8%	61 : 39
501-600	Open University of Catalonia	Spain	35,3-38,7	16,5	14,2	74,2	35,8	40,2	22 902	84,5	2%	56 : 44
601-800			26,0-33,4	12,8	12,5	71,3	34,9	39,8	20 133	54,6	3%	55 : 45
1001+	Anadolu University	Turkey	10,7-22,1	13,0	24,0	16,5	100,0	17,3	830 104	493,5	1%	37 : 63
801-1000			19,0-25,9	11,6	23,9	17,5	100,0	16,4	1 413 003	865,8	1%	44 : 56
1001+	University of South Africa	South Africa	10,7-22,1	22,1	19,1	15,0	35,2	43,7	193 874	155,2	7%	67 : 33
1001+			9,8-18,9	20,2	15,8	9,9	34,9	35,0	163 520	106,7	8%	67 : 33

Colleagues, despite the other three universities being located in the northern hemisphere, which would benefit them in terms of reputational scores, Unisa performed reasonably, in comparison. **Overall**, the OUUK and OUC jointly had the highest score of 35,3–38,7 (33,5–37,0 in 2019) followed by AU and Unisa on 10,7–22,1 (9,8–18,9 in 2019).

But this is the interesting part, for our purposes this evening: for **research**, AU achieved the highest score of 24,0 (23,9 in 2019), followed by Unisa with 19,1 (15,8 in 2019), the OUUK with 16,1 (16,4 in 2019) and OUC with 14,5 (12,5 in 2019). Unisa therefore performed well, considering the impact of research reputation.

With **citations** it is evident that the northern hemisphere universities are better known in Europe. OUC achieved the highest score of 74,2 (71,3 in 2019), followed by OUUK with 66,5 (68,5 in

2019). AU, located in Turkey, also achieved a higher score than Unisa, with 16,5 (17,5 in 2019), while Unisa was last in this category, with a score of 15,0 (9,9 in 2019).

Colleagues, if our research is ranked second, but our citations are last, then we must question its quality, relevance and impact, and ask why so little of it is being cited. What do we need to do, to improve this aspect of our research? In which journals are we publishing? Who is reading our research?

Given what I know about our research performance this year, colleagues, I am confident that we can enhance this score – in fact, I would love to see Unisa at the top of the ODeL ranking in the next five years. We are already the foremost ODeL researchers on the continent, so let us extend that to the globe. I truly believe we can achieve that. We have been put into the same category as the other three universities because we share numerous similarities – they are comparing “apples with apples”, so they say, so let us embrace that challenge.

I know for certain that there is a research area which would contribute to an escalation of our research status and impact. I speak here, of course, of *sustainability* in all its guises, and as it is articulated in the SDGs. I am therefore really pleased that *Working*

*with communities towards attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)* is the theme for our R&I week in 2020. Sustainability is, in fact, a global trend – not only in higher education but *everywhere*, as the realities of our changing world and environment are teaching us many hard lessons.

We in Africa and, more pertinently, Unisa as an ODeL institution located in Africa, can make a seminal contribution to the SDGs via its research, innovation and community engagement, let alone in teaching and learning! We have adopted MIT, we are actively pursuing collaborations, we are located in many of the communities that we serve, and, colleagues, we have infrastructure that is the envy of everyone – on our continent and across the world. We need to capitalise on these advantages as we grow our research capability and impact.

Tonight, we have gathered to honour our brightest and best for their professionalism; their consistent dedication to research, innovation and collaboration; and the demonstrable success that they have achieved. Well done to you all, for your dedication and commitment to your disciplines, and for striving consistently for excellence. Yours is the attitude that will make us the number 1 ODeL institution in the world, and one of Africa's top-performing universities. Colleagues, it is not easy conducting research while

**Commented [CE1]:** I see there are two students here from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), I assume Prof is referring to them

teaching. It requires you to go the extra mile – often at the expense of those at home – and so we also thank your families and significant others for their support and sacrifice, and for the role they have played in contributing to your success.

To our awardees this evening, thank you for your dedication, professionalism and sacrifice. We are honoured to acknowledge your efforts and achievements tonight. We salute you, congratulate you, and share in your pleasure and pride.

I thank you.