

# **THE OFFICIAL OPENING CEREMONY OF THE 2020 ACADEMIC YEAR**

**ZK MATTHEWS HALL, MUCKLENEUK CAMPUS**

**14 FEBRUARY 2020**

**PROF MANDLA S MAKHANYA**

**PRINCIPAL AND VICE-CHANCELLOR**

***The African University shaping futures in the service of humanity***

Thank you, Prof Mulaudzi, our Programme Director

- Chairman of Council, Mr Sakhi Simelane
- Members of Council
- Mrs Makhanya
- Members of the diplomatic corps
- Mr Maxim Jean Louis, President of Contact North, Canada
- Colleagues in Executive and Extended Management
- Colleagues who are joining us in the regions
- President of the NSRC, your executive members and all student leaders
- Leaders of NEHAWU and APSA
- Leaders of the Women's Forum and the Black Forum
- Our esteemed staff members and especially our award winners

today

- Unisa students
- Friends of the University from all walks of life
- Members of the media fraternity

Allow me to commence this address with a warm welcome to you all.

A special welcome to those who have come on board as new staff members since last year's academic opening. The data which has been provided to me indicates that we gained 357 new colleagues in 2019. We were also joined by eight more senior colleagues in that period, over and above those whom I welcomed in January last year. They are:

1. Ms Ziphora Anastacia Mamabolo	Executive Director: Risk and Compliance
2. Adv Modidima Palmerston Mannya	Executive Director: Legal Services
3. Prof Matoane Steward Mothata	Deputy Registrar: Student Administration and System Integration
4. Prof Zodwa Thembelihle Motsa Madikane	Executive Director: Leadership and Transformation
5. Prof Lungile Ntsalaze	Executive Dean: Accounting Sciences
6. Prof Kgomotso Masemola	Executive Dean: Human Sciences
7. Mr Bryton Siyanda Masiye	Director: Planning

8. Dr Motlatso Gladys Mlambo	Director: Institutional Research
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I would also like to extend a special warm welcome to staff who have joined us this past year, and to wish them well as they grow their careers at this great university. To all new staff, I will say that a key part of settling in at any university is getting to know the people and the culture. And so, I would really encourage you to make sure you know Unisa's *Charter on Transformation* (which is available on the intranet) and, in particular, our *11Cs plus 1*, which articulate the kind of culture which we seek to embed and practise at Unisa.

This morning we will also be acknowledging several colleagues whose contributions to Unisa, through their professional conduct, their commitment and their loyalty, set precisely the kind of example we should all be striving for. They are living and practising the Unisa ethos and their efforts have been noted and acknowledged - by colleagues and students alike.

To the recipients of the awards this morning, I say: Congratulations, well done, and well deserved! You set the example of excellence and the bar for all of us at Unisa. I know that there are others who may not have been nominated. To those staff, too, let me say very sincerely that we

appreciate your diligence and integrity. No one loses with such colleagues in our midst. We have noted your efforts and we are also proud of you.

Colleagues, it has been really interesting this past year to see our staff being judged positively or negatively on social media, which is an incredibly influential force – especially among the student community. People are actually being mentioned by name. I would like to remind us all that individually and collectively we are the face of Unisa, especially in our engagement with students and members of the public - who are very quick to voice their delight or disgust at our conduct and apply pressure accordingly. So, when you perform well, so does Unisa. When you are embarrassed publicly through your conduct, so is Unisa. I would urge us all to ensure that in whatever we do, we safeguard our own and our university's reputation by ensuring that we act in a way that reflects the university's values and ethos.

Colleagues, we meet here this morning in a context of ongoing upheaval in our sector. We have just experienced some of that ourselves. Two of our sister institutions (UKZN and UWC) have been shut down temporarily in the wake of violent protests over a host of concerns that are simply too complex to be solved by any single institution - no matter how justified the demands may be. The biggest losers in all of this are our students –

the very people we are committed to serve. It is a *Catch 22* situation and judging by the volume of emails that I have received and the comments on social media, our students are fed up, anxious and frustrated.

The fact of the matter is that irrespective of our socio-economic and political challenges nationally (and even continentally), no matter our own journey towards an authentically African University, we cannot afford to become so insular that we begin to isolate ourselves from the rest of the world, or worse, believe that we don't need to be a part of the global higher education environment to be relevant. As the largest ODeL university on the continent and one of the largest in the world, we are in many respects a trendsetter when it comes to the innovative delivery of ODeL and we are looked up to as an example by many developing nations across the world. Of that I am certain. The fact is that globally, we are all dealing with the same problems and challenges. It is only our contexts that differ and that compel us to prioritise and interpret our challenges differently.

So like most other institutions in the world, we have a dual imperative: achieving national and global relevance and quality with regard to our academic offerings, and flowing from that, producing a calibre of 21st century graduates that will be able to navigate the world of work and

business with confidence because they have the requisite skills and because they have taken on board a mindset of lifelong learning that will ensure that they are comfortable with upskilling and reskilling as the need arises. I can assure you that the ability to change and adapt with agility and confidence is going to be a core competency for successful graduates in this new world that is revealing itself to us.

The only way in which we as a university will ensure that, and our ongoing relevance as we grow our status and reputation, is by focusing concertedly on the academe. It is therefore my intention and my directive – which has the concurrence of my management and our Council - that this year is one in which we will devote our energies to growing and developing the academe. This directive, colleagues, applies to the whole university. We will all devote our energies to that end. We will, of course, at the same time continue with the implementation of our support systems and our administrative processes to ensure a sound and efficient platform for the delivery of quality teaching and learning, research and innovation and community engagement to our students. That goes without saying.

But let us be clear: the purpose of the university – this university – in fact every university in the world, is education – educating its students. And the key measure of that purpose is the success and flourishing of our

students, which in turn, can only be guaranteed by quality, relevant offerings and quality, inspirational teaching and learning. In other words, the academic project of the university.

Let me tell you what a university is not. A university is not a platform for the political aspirations of some staff and students to the detriment of the academic project. A university is not an avenue for looting and corruption to the endangerment of our sustainability and existence for future generations. A university is not a site for personal agendas that sow division along racial and ethnic/tribal lines and that, in so doing, break every right that is guaranteed in our Constitution. Let me be clear. A university is first and foremost a place of learning and upliftment - for our students. And for our staff, our university must be a home that fosters and facilitates scholarship of the highest order.

Colleagues, with each passing day there is a growing realisation that we have to reconceptualise our social contract as universities to prepare and equip our citizens for the world that is emerging from the Fourth Industrial Revolution. That is the responsibility of the academe.

So, as universities we are going to have to reassert and prove our value *in*, and *to*, society, and to the parents and students who have placed their trust in us - especially when we claim to be *shaping futures in the service*

*of humanity.* And this means refocusing on our core mandate: teaching and learning, community engagement and research and innovation. I am serious when I say that the *whole university* needs to ensure that our academics are given the space to do what they have been trained and appointed to do – usher well-educated and equipped students into the world of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and any future such revolutions – students who are both critical and socially responsible citizens.

To our colleagues in the academe: There is a reciprocal duty on, and expectation of you, to perform as responsible and professional academics. I am aware that we already have many such colleagues in our colleges. Some of them will be honoured today. But I am equally aware, colleagues, that there are many academics at Unisa who are using the university as the generator of their pay cheque and not too much else. They come and go as they like. They treat our students with contempt or don't even interact at all. They are never available, even to their colleagues. My VPs have an urgent task on their hands – to tackle those who (as we are told) are running their businesses from their offices, those who are farming out their marking, those who have put in place really innovative money-making schemes that, for example, bring our research and graduate projects into disrepute, and those who are engaged in unprofessional relationships with students, which in truth, are a scourge at so many of our universities. I mention but a few that we have been made aware of, and

these must stop. All of these ills speak to staff members who have lost a sense and meaning of their roles, their moral compass, and have rendered their mandated responsibilities a joke. This conduct, colleagues, echoes the parlous state of so much in our country and it demonstrates a lamentable lack of personal and professional ethics.

So, we expect these academics to introspect – on their professionalism, their commitment and their loyalty to the academic project, the institution and, most importantly, their genuine contribution to the quality education of our students. We expect our academics to commit themselves wholeheartedly to what they have been appointed to do. And we expect our academics to hold *themselves* and *one another* accountable to the highest ethical and professional standards. Quite frankly, nothing else will be acceptable.

We are totally committed to halting unsavoury practices in their tracks and to giving the academe a much-needed “shot in the arm” – a booster that will galvanise Unisa into action and break the current apathy that unfortunately overshadows the fantastic work that is being done by so many other colleagues. Unisa attracts many students who are disadvantaged and who need truly dedicated men and women who *choose to teach* at such a university, rather than those who are looking for a job.

For me, teaching is a *calling*, and I want to differentiate between people who choose to teach because of a calling and those who merely want a job! Let me repeat what I said last year. I am sorry, but I don't want people who are at Unisa for a job because they are obviously at the wrong place! It is, in fact, a huge irony that our students, who are mostly already disadvantaged, should suffer the additional disadvantage of being neglected, rather than nurtured, by the very institution in whom they have vested their hope and aspirations. Unisa students need teachers and admin staff who genuinely care. Therefore, I say that working at Unisa can never be just a *job*.

So, I expect all of our academics to come on board. Those who elect not to will surely rue their decision down the line. To our admin and professional staff, I expect you all to support the academic project and our academics to the fullest extent possible. You, too, will be held to account for this. *None* of our efforts in regard to ensuring academic relevance and excellence, developing appropriate pedagogical models and practices, ensuring our active participation in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, being community and stakeholder engaged and conducting relevant and cutting-edge research *will be of any use* if our academic project is not supported by quality, efficient and effective administration and, crucially, staff support, initiative and loyalty.

Of course, the most important stakeholder in all of this is our students. Colleagues, as we teach and support our students, let us ensure that we *mentor* them, especially those who demonstrate “learnt helplessness” which we see too often for comfort, into a constructive empowerment that enables a proactive, disciplined responsibility for their own studies and conduct. By its very nature ODeL requires skills that some find difficult to master, but that are imperative to successful studies. Each of us has a role to play in mentoring our students – with kindness and patience – to behaviours that will afford them greater chance of success.

I cannot end my address without expressing our excitement as a university at the fact that at the end of 2019 our Council approved the establishment of the Thabo Mbeki School. So, briefly for your information, the new Thabo Mbeki School is *the* leading school offering ***African-centred knowledge*** and ***scholarship*** in governance, diplomacy and state affairs with a view to achieving the African Renaissance and unity. It is the first of its kind on the African continent – in the same league as the Kennedy School at Harvard University. It is an authentic and proudly African school tailored on the ***legacy*** of former President Thabo Mbeki and other African thought leaders on the continent. Its mission is to enhance and develop conscientious, ethical leaders in Africa and beyond, as well as to produce

agents of change that will reposition and develop Africa and the entire world. This school offers a unique Africa-focused education based on ***African ideologies, epistemologies and methodologies.***

What sets this school apart from the others is that it is a platform for African thought throughout the world - a ***unique flagship programme*** for any student seeking to study and understand Africa. The school is going to contribute to the social, economic, political and cultural renewal of the continent (African Renaissance). It is going to add value to policy at local, regional and continental level, e.g. adopted African Union treaties, protocols and declarations, and national development plans.

The Thabo Mbeki School is grounded in the ***values*** professed and lived by former President Thabo Mbeki and other African thought leaders, and in particular their vision of: 1) African Renaissance; 2) African thought leadership; 3) the advancement of women as equal partners in African development; 4) the enabling of youth and people with disabilities to participate in all affairs of the state in Africa; 5) the pursuit of African diplomacy as a mechanism for peace building, stability, conflict resolution and African unity; and finally, 6) good governance as a prerequisite for African renewal.

Ladies and gentlemen, as we move into this new decade, let us commit as a university to an academe that has an appreciation for abundant opportunities that we have to tap into, an advance that is admired and respected by our peers, parents, students and the sector. I believe that if we all work together, we can do it.

I thank you.