



Office of the Principal and Vice Chancellor

**PROF MS MAKHANYA, PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA
WELCOME: NORTHERN CAPE PSET SECTOR FORUM WEBINAR
22 – 23 September 2020**

Thanks Programme Director, Dr Genevieve James

- Dr Zamani Saul: Premier: Northern Cape
- Members of the Diplomatic Corps
- Professor Tshilidzi Marwala: Vice Chancellor and Principal, University of Johannesburg
- Professor Andrew Crouch, Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Sol Plaatjie University
- Forum members from all of the regions.
- Representatives from the public and private sectors

- Invited guests
- Members of the media
- Ladies and gentlemen

A very warm welcome to you all.

This has been a very interesting year so far. We had scarcely begun celebrating 2020 as the year of “*twenty-plenty*” when the COVID-19 Pandemic struck leaving us all scrambling to keep our various endeavours up and running in an environment of very severe lockdown restrictions.

For many, it is an unfortunate reality that *twenty-plenty* has become *twenty-empty*. Many folk have lost their jobs, their homes and so much more. Still others have lost loved ones – the ultimate price. I think what has surprised us all is the speed at which our lives have been turned upside down, and how quickly things that were previously deemed so important, are now deemed to be quite trivial. Watching a beloved parent go from living a normal busy life, to burying them a mere 10 days later, will cause even the greatest cynic to step back, reprioritize and move forward accordingly. I think it would be true to say that when

COVID_19 arrived, life suddenly became more real, in every sense of the word.

And in many respects, this has been the case with higher education. While we have all been affected by the pandemic, the extent and impact of the disruption has differed from institution to institution. But what has been the one shared factor, is that it has forced us to confront, question and re-evaluate the notion of knowledge and education, and the role of the university in this time of global disruption.

I might tell you that this process had already begun some time before COVID-19, when the reality of rapid technological and digital advances became a reality in higher education delivery and when we began to wrestle with irrefutable facts: including that approximately 60% of new knowledge is generated outside of the university, and that by the time a student had finished their third year, knowledge acquired in their first year was quite likely already redundant. I'm sure many educators found this unbelievable at best, and hugely threatening at worst. There was general acknowledgement that we had to get on the technological train, but equally there was really tough resistance to actually doing so. Be that as it may, and Professor Marwala will support me on this one, a momentum and excitement had begun in higher education and in the

public and private sectors, around the uptake of the affordances of 4IR in education and society at large, as a necessity for the progress and development of our society, country and Continent. That is not to say of course, that those of us who embraced the notion of 4 and 5 IR were, and are not, aware of the challenges that confront us in moving into a digitized 21st Century environment. On the contrary, we are painfully aware of the challenges and the dangers of its adoption – including around issues of access and exclusion – but we are of the view that the benefits far outweigh the challenges and that necessity is the “mother of invention.”

For those who were trying to postpone the inevitable, COVID-19 is perhaps teaching us the harshest lesson on how an externally imposed disruption can quite literally bring the way in which we live, move and have our being, to a screeching halt. We had a taste of this in our universities during the #mustfall protests. Academic programmes in many universities suffered similar setbacks as university leadership scrambled to find alternative means of getting education to students and ensuring that they could still write exams and complete the academic year in safety. COVID-19 has done this – as they say – “On *steroids!*”.

Let me state unambiguously for those who may not yet realise it, the common denominator, the saving grace in both the *#mustfall* and the COVID-19 pandemic, has been technology. In both of these major disruptions our institutions of higher learning moved online as best they could, given their resources and capacities, and were to a satisfying extent, able to continue with their academic programmes - and it is technology that allowed us to do so. And the more sophisticated the technological infrastructure and transactional environment of the university, the more tech-savvy and trained the staff and students, the less disruptive this process has been.

Unisa is perhaps a fantastic example. We were admittedly ahead of the game in a number of respects. We are an ODeL institution whose infrastructure is set up for ODeL and whose staff and students are familiar with both the business model and the pedagogy. We have been in the business of ODL for decades, and as a university had already committed to, and were in the process of, moving to a fully online university. But we had a timeline that kept on getting pushed back for a number of reasons, so much so that trying to move online more quickly had become a very frustrating experience.

And then COVID-19 happened, and we saw what can only be termed as a *very rare window of opportunity* to grasp the nettle and move fully online in real time. I won't bore you with the details, but let me tell you - it can be done. It has been a terrifying yet exhilarating journey, whose end is not yet in sight. We adapted and wrote new courseware suited for online delivery, and had our students write their midyear exams fully online. Based on those outcomes, we have just released a statement to the effect that exams will all be fully online in future. Of course there were some teething problems with the first two or three exams - there was no time for trial runs or pilots - but let me assure you that as soon as we ironed these out, they ran so smoothly. We are most proud of the fact, for example, that our College of Law successfully administered online examinations to over twenty thousand students – virtually without a hitch. The feedback from our students has been overwhelmingly positive. We have proctoring in place, and this is also improving with each successive sitting, so cheating is less of an issue than what many would believe.

Ladies and gentlemen the reason why I am sharing this with you is because I have come to believe that we too often err on the side of caution when it comes to making radical changes which we know will

benefit our citizens and our country and continent. Of course, it is unsettling and even nerve-wracking, but the rewards are worth it.

The fact is that we can no longer hide behind the realities of a lack of digital coverage and access, or to staff resistance to change. We have proven that where there is a will there is away. As the saying goes, *the journey of a thousand miles begins with one step*. The 21st Century is our reality, warts and all, and we are either a part of it or we are not. It is those of us in leadership positions in the PSET sector and in the public and private sectors, who must have the foresight and the courage to do what we know, needs to be done. Of course, we can't go it alone given our limited resources and capacities, but that is what Forums such as this one is for. We will all have to collaborate and leverage of available resources to ensure that we are able to do what needs to be done to that we are able to produce the quality graduates our market so desperately needs.

Ladies and gentlemen, in 2019, the Northern Cape Post-School Education and Training (PSET) Sector Forum held a debut seminar on the topic: *Is the Post-school Education and Training sector producing graduates with the required knowledge, skills, competence and attitudes for the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) workplace/industry?* One of the main findings

of the first seminar was that the PSET sector should reassess its curricula in order to produce graduates with the requisite skills for the 4IR era.

Based on the recommendations of the 2019 seminar and the long-term objectives of the Northern Cape PSET Sector Forum, the latter then organized this webinar on the topic: *Province building in a time of 4IR and Covid-19: challenges and opportunities for the PSET sector and the workplace*. This webinar will also build on the findings of the debut seminar and further discuss province building in the time of an emergency such as Covid-19.

The aim of the webinar is to discuss the identified topic and produce recommendations that may have a direct impact on policies, strategies and practices in the Northern Cape's PSET sector, government and the private industry. The discussions and key recommendations will be published in a report that will be presented to the Northern Cape Office of the Premier for consideration and possible implementation. We are hoping that all these will contribute to the economic development of the Northern Cape Province.

We look forward to learning about the strides that the Northern Cape Province has made towards the attainment of the Provincial Goal Development Plan 2040.

The start of the Fourth Industrial Revolution has brought about disruptive technologies and trends such as robotics and Artificial Intelligence. Changes emanating from these disruptions demand a different way of relating, working and living.

As an Open Distance eLearning institution, UNISA's business architecture demands that the institution becomes actively involved in making 4IR a reality within the university and by producing graduates with the skills required to effectively participate in the 4IR era. I believe that we are well on our way. Within the ambit of this Forum and its activities allow me to say that Unisa is willing to share with any of the entities represented here, our experience, support and capacities when it comes to the changes that we have made to ensure that as a university we produce graduates who are ready and able to navigate successfully the demands of the 21st Century.

I thank you.