

PROF MANDLA MAKHANYA, PRINCIPAL AND VICE-CHANCELLOR
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA
WELCOME REMARKS, SETTING THE SCENE AND CONTEXT
BUSINESS ROUND-TABLE ENGAGEMENT WITH THE UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTH AFRICA

*“Business and Higher Education Collaboration in the Context of
Covid-19 and Beyond”*

Teams meeting

13 November 2020

Thank you for that kind introduction, Programme Director, Dr Daisy Selematsela, Executive Director: Library Services, Unisa

- Mr D Mminele, Chief Executive Officer: Barclays Africa
- Mr S Silinda, CEO OF First National Bank, Public Sector Banking
- Mr Thabiso Letsoela, CEO: Unisa Business Enterprise
- Dr M Socikwa: Vice-Principal, Operations and Facilities
- Ms R Mathura, Acting Vice-Principal: Finance and Business Enterprises
- Prof Thenjiwe Meyiwa, Vice-Principal: Research, Postgraduate Studies, Innovation and Commercialisation
- Ms Poppy Tshabalala, Vice-Principal: Information and Communication Technology

- Members of Unisa's Executive and Extended Management present
- Esteemed business and industry members who have joined us this morning
- Esteemed representatives of the various state entities present
- Our neighbours - the City of Tshwane
- Colleagues from sister institutions
- Unisa staff
- Leaders of the NSRC and all student formations
- Leaders of organised labour
- Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

A very warm Unisa welcome to you all. I feel encouraged and comforted that during such a time of disruption, our business community and our peers are still sufficiently engaged and committed to finding solutions to our collective challenges, that you have taken the time to join us this morning: to listen to us and share your thoughts, ideas and support on how best to ensure that this magnificent university, Unisa, is able to continue providing quality education to so many South Africans and, in fact, Africans across the continent. For us in the higher education sector, such collaborative engagements have become a key component of our efforts to

maximise our collective resources and capacities to the benefit of our institutions.

In most nations across the world, education is deemed to be a right, a duty, and often a common or public good; fundamental to socioeconomic development and national flourishing. In South Africa, this is the case. Since the advent of democracy in 1994, we have always understood that, and this is reflected in the fact that the growth and development of our nation incorporates education, and higher education in particular, as a key pillar of national development.

But the envisaged development has never quite measured up to our expectations and we have not realised the growth, progress and prosperity that we had hoped for. In fact, at the end of 2019, our economy was in dire straits and we were all focusing on kickstarting our economy. And then we were struck by the Covid-19 pandemic, which, quite frankly, has blindsided us and wreaked unimagined havoc on us all. Few, if any, have escaped its impact and ramifications.

There can be no denying that the pandemic has been a global game changer that has weakened an already fragile global economy. And

we in higher education are feeling it. Our universities have been severely affected by the pandemic. As it lingers on, nearly all schools and universities have adopted some or other form of online learning (or emergency remote learning, as many have called it). In that process, the stark reality of the very real gap between the “have” and “have-nots” has been brutally exposed around the world and has contributed to social agitation, dissatisfaction and much questioning and soul-searching around the role and content of education and of our institutions of higher learning.

Although we are still not sure what teaching and learning will look like in the future, as its transformation is unfolding in real time, one nevertheless notes a growing appreciation for a more holistic approach to higher education delivery to ensure its ongoing relevance and agility in the prevailing context. We are simultaneously seeing the centrality of the curriculum, and this accompanied by a very sharp spike in interest in learning design, which essentially refers to the framework that supports student learning experiences. Many face-to-face institutions that are now compelled to adopt forms of online learning in order to service students and ensure longer-term sustainability, are upskilling their staff in learning design. One thus discerns how the pandemic has

impelled a concerted focus on the redesign of pedagogy in line with the growing reliance on technology.

Even more evident is a global trend indicating that technology is now uppermost in everyone's minds when it comes to higher education delivery. If there had been any doubt, it is now evident that technology will, and is already, play(ing) an increasing role in higher education delivery and that the entire global higher education community is looking at ways and means of ensuring their relevance and sustainability while simultaneously trying to develop curricula that will produce the quality graduates that they pride themselves on.

Unisa cannot allow itself to be left behind. It is therefore understandable that the institution will incur significant financial ICT-related expenditure for the foreseeable future, over and above the massive investments that have already been made as a result of the immediate operational response to the pandemic. This must be attended to as perhaps *the* institutional priority. That said, there can be no doubt that Unisa has a significant advantage in terms of both infrastructure and capacity, and future expenditure is aimed at entrenching this advantage and building it to increasingly

sophisticated levels for improved efficiencies and effectiveness, rather than building from the ground up.

Our ongoing review of the entire institution and the concomitant revision of our strategy attest to the fact that we have identified and are dealing with these realities. We are therefore well on our way to arriving at the optimal model for a quality learning experience. Curriculum; vision; infrastructure, facilities, resources, hardware and support; professional development; student learning support; partnerships; and research and evaluation are receiving ongoing attention. I am proud of the amount of work that has gone into the significant progress that we have made in the wake of the pandemic to ensure that Unisa remains relevant and sustainable.

However, a key part of this necessary transformation will have to accommodate the reality of changed/reprioritised budgetary requirements on the part of both the state and universities. We have already noted that infrastructure subsidies will be withheld in many instances, while those monies are channelled into Covid-related expenses (for example). This means that Unisa will have to anticipate and adjust in real time to the changes that are likely to be made to our subsidy income and offset these by focusing on generating the

income to make up the shortfalls and still provide for the desired additional projects.

We will need to generate income and access resources outside of our traditional subsidy income base and prioritise urgently. To meet these needs, many universities, including Unisa, have set up business or enterprise entities/units that are aimed at leveraging resources, setting up businesses, focusing research on innovations that can be patented, exploring win-win collaboration that will contribute to growth and development and looking at short learning programmes for additional income generation – to name but a few. We are having to think differently and operate differently, and we are already seeing some exciting results.

Unisa has adopted a multipronged collaborative approach that aims to harness and share capacities that are required to achieve our institutional strategy – which is to be *the African University shaping futures in the service of humanity* – and to drive radical socioeconomic transformation, inclusive growth, and development. We recognise that there is a desperate need to kick-start institutional initiatives that will generate income and develop capacity and competencies, to meet the demands that we are faced with while

contributing to national growth and development – more so in this time of Covid-19.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, we cannot do this alone. Universities are primarily in the business of knowledge creation and knowledge generation. The key outcomes of our core business are our graduates, as well as the knowledge and intellectual property generated through our core research programmes. If suitable knowledge transfer mechanisms are established, research outcomes can also contribute to enhanced social and economic benefits. In fact, the pandemic has shown us just how crucial the role of research is, and what can be achieved through collaboration – between scholars and between universities and business. The most obvious examples of this are of course the sharing of data on the pandemic and the massive intercontinental and international collaborations regarding the development of a number of vaccines.

There is also a dire need for enterprise development to create more jobs. This, in turn, calls for creativity and innovation, but creativity faces a deadlock where ideas cannot meet capital, or when, where they do meet capital, the ideas lack mentorship to be transformed into fully fledged businesses. We aim further to encourage creativity, capitalise on the created ideas, and mentor the newly capitalised

ideas into business units that can compete and add value to investors, and customers. But we cannot do it alone. So, a key part of our strategy is to leverage the process and forces of business enterprise by creating the bridge between innovation and commercialisation.

Ladies and Gentlemen, what we aim to do this morning, is to broaden our stakeholder and collaboration span to include a far greater array of potential collaborators and contributors who appreciate that we are all journeying along the same road, with the same end goal, and who would also like to explore possible opportunities for kinds of collaborations that will be mutually beneficial. We are hoping to engage with you as peers and partners in our mutual development.

On Wednesday evening this week in his address to the nation, President Ramaphosa emphasised the need for us to “restore, recover and rebuild”. He concluded by saying: “Our actions will decide the fortunes of our nation.” Wise words from our Covid-weary President. In that spirit, Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to invite you to join us on our journey. This morning we will be sharing with you *our* experience in responding to the pandemic in our

various portfolios. We look forward to the engagement that will follow.

I know that I speak for my management and staff, when I say that we look forward with much anticipation to the ideas that will flow from our discussions and the potential that will be revealed for mutually beneficial collaborations.

I thank you.