

2017 ACADEMIC OPENING AND INAUGURATION OF THE CHANCELLOR

Chairman of Council, Mr Sakhi Simelane

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen –I want to thank the Programme Director for doing such a fine job with the Protocol List: however, please indulge me and allow me - in my capacity as Chairman of the Unisa Council, to particularly acknowledge the following persons:

- The Minister of Higher Education Dr Blade Nzimande
- Cabinet Ministers, Minister of Science and Technology, Minister Pandor, Minister of Human Settlement and Chancellor of Mangosuthu University of Technology Minister L Sisulu, and also, Minister of Small Business Development Minister L Zulu
- President Thabo Mvuyelwa Mbeki, Unisa’s Chancellor-elect and his wife, Mrs Zanele Mbeki
- Unisa’s former Chancellor Judge Bernard Ngoepe, and his wife, Dr Daphne Ngoepe
- Unisa Council Members present this morning

- the Principal and Vice Chancellor, Professor Mandla Makhanya, Mrs Makhanya and the entire executive and extended Management team of Unisa
- All Chancellors and Vice Chancellors of other Universities

Distinguish guests, ladies and gentlemen good morning

I can't believe that a year has passed since I stood at this podium in 2016 to address you. I can only say, having spent an extremely embarrassing evening watching the State of the Nation address on TV some two weeks ago, that I am very relieved not have such a tough audience.

Annually the Academic Opening is a morning of celebration as we recognise achievements and recommit ourselves to being a university - and in Unisa's case, to being "a university shaping futures in the service of humanity". That requires a great deal more than just being any ordinary structure serving up higher education degrees!

This year the Academic Opening is a little later than usual for two reasons:

Firstly, many of you will be aware of the slight disruption that Unisa experienced at the end of January which I am pleased to report ended with a mutually responsible outcome.

The second reason is that the 2017 Academic Opening is made more special by the fact that it is an enhanced event, combined with the inauguration of Unisa's new Chancellor. As we planned the function, central to the decision was the consideration of inclusivity. The Chancellor is central to the University; yet many Unisa staff never get the opportunity to participate in any function with the Chancellor. In an attempt to change this, we decided that it would be singularly appropriate that the installation of **this** Chancellor, with his tradition of servant leadership and mantra of 'people-first', takes place in the presence of as many Unisa staff members as wished to attend and witness this moment in Unisa's story.

This morning, we will therefore commence with the 2017 Academic Opening, and it will be followed by the inauguration of the 2nd Chancellor in the history of the new merged Unisa. And for that reason the BIG CHAIR on the stage stands empty for now ...

Programme Director, Ladies and Gentlemen, as I welcome you all to the 2017 Academic Opening of Unisa, I want to emphasise my gratitude to every one of you who took the time to participate in this important event in the annual calendar. I have already introduced the core value of inclusivity, and this morning I greet you all in the spirit of unity and oneness, conscious of the turbulence and protest of the past months. However, I believe that we have set our compass in the right direction - focussing on Unisa and for that I want to firstly thank the students for the responsible approach to the academic year and allowing the exams to proceed during 2016 and 2017; secondly, all staff members for their continued support and their drive for excellence; thirdly, leadership for their role in managing the university; fourthly, My colleagues on the Council for their professional steerage of the university. It has been a collective effort of pride and overall goodwill that has brought us to where we find ourselves today.

I want to also thank the Minister of Higher education and his department for the leadership and guidance through these difficult times, Last and by no means the least I wish to thank the Minister of Finance, Mr Pravin Gordhan for acknowledging the desperate need for additional funding for higher education and making it a reality in

his 2017 Budget. While this it is not the promise of free higher education, it is a progressive realisation of the right to higher education, which is precisely where the Constitution guides us.

Like most South Africans, I am keenly alert to all that is happening in the realm and space of education – both basic and higher, and particularly what is happening in the University sector. And it is not just South African universities that are experiencing the turmoil of change, I have found that this is a global phenomenon. Allow me to touch on a few of the important issues for us as Unisa:

1. The #FeesMustFall debates are repeated all over the world in different manifestations as the cost of higher education makes it prohibitive to the general masses. Unisa is in the fortunate position of having some reserves and sound investments, both of which are supported by maintaining a relatively large student base. For these reasons, Unisa has been able to retain its position of having the lowest fee structure in the South African higher education sector and still providing a quality academic product. In 2017 Unisa has made available more than R90m for student bursaries at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels - we see this as part of our continuing

vision to shape futures and grow South Africa. My reading and analyses tell me that, globally, student debt is in the trillions and the University should continue to find innovative ways to lessen the burden. Coupled with this funding challenge, my assessment of the higher education system describes a picture where students register at university but the revolving door is spinning ever faster and they eventually drop out before earning their Certification. It is indeed sad considering the socio economic challenges out there.

2. The push for fully online-driven education on a Continent where bandwidth and connectivity are still in dispute must give us reason for concern and, I believe behoves honest and critical engagement. We must be wary of adopting strategies and platforms from the west that are not appropriate for the African contextual realities. Distance education is critical to increased access and massification of education as inspired by the Sustainability Development Goals and online technology is the catalyst for bridging geographic boundaries. But HOW IT IS OPTIMALLY IMPLEMENTED IN A MANNER THAT (I) DOES NOT DISCRIMINATE AGAINST AND (II) DOES NOT EXCLUDE THOSE WHOM IT PROPOSES TO SERVE is the challenge and we must find the answers. I can only imagine that the researchers must be spending much time on these questions and I look forward



to seeing the results and their findings implemented to make Unisa's open distance e-learning model more effective.

3. My experience and engagement in the world of work tell the unfortunate story of a large proportion of university graduates being under- and even unprepared for even entry level positions in the job market. The Alignment of graduate skills with 'in-demand jobs' and meeting the needs of employers who want new recruits to 'hit the ground running' – is the reality of the job market and future of higher education.

Against this bleak background, I know that something must be done – and it needs to be done quickly. Now I am not suggesting that nothing is being done and that change isn't happening but I sometimes wonder whether in our academic deliberations and speculative reflections, we are not missing the simpler points of truth and reality. I know that Unisa's new Chancellor-elect knows what I mean as he had much the same message some years ago when he was President. He stressed:

Many of our own people here in this country do not ask about computers, telephones and television sets. They ask – when will we get a road to our village.

As far as education is concerned, the simple truth is that, of course we need to increase access ... but our *success and throughput rates* must grow in tandem with the growing numbers of students entering university. Now I am not advocating a 'pass one, pass all' scenario but I believe that students must be appropriately guided and properly supported to complete what they started in minimum time. I know that Unisa has many professors and I would like to see them not just in the research journals but also applying their wisdom to the teaching of first year students. That's where we need to begin!

Another peg when we talk about success is "quality". This has been a critical discussion at the World Economic Forum in Davos 2017 – and the debate post-WEF has been started by the Vice Chancellor of Harvard University with the question: *What is the intersection of technology and quality, especially in distance education?*

My immediate reaction is that, as this debate rages amongst the academic gurus, should we be sitting back and waiting for the answers? waiting for others to determine our trajectory?; or should we be working on spelling out our own framework? The problem with Africa is that sometimes we take Ubuntu too far ... instead of

aggressively opening doors, we wait for someone else to walk through first and then we play catch up. Unisa need to develop its own framework for quality in the environment of distance education that will be globally acceptable. There will be a wonderful chance to test the ideas when the ICDE conducts its regional workshops towards a global quality framework for distance education.

I am aware that the Minister and the Department of Higher Education and Training is placing a significant focus on 'university transformation' – and 2017 is the year when he wants to see change. All universities have been called upon to develop their transformation plans but again, I am going to stress that the plan is secondary – primary to success is the *content* of the plan. You have heard the expression:

- “The devil lies in the detail” – it is true! May be add that innovation is also in the detail!!!

As one ponders the issues and accounts of organisational transformation, one realises that there is no straight path from beginning to end! Transformation has many hidden secrets and various indicators and the success will depend on the ability to

interpret and respond to the **true needs** of the many stakeholders. Therefore, synergy, integration and holistic understanding will all be key elements of the success of Unisa's transformation agenda. The Unisa Council last year in September 2016 asked the Executive to convene a Transformation indaba at Unisa. I am happy that such a workshop indaba will be held in March. I look forward to some of the honest and truthful discussions and practically implementable plans.

We have started well and I congratulate the University on its Language Policy. When I spoke to you last year, there was still considerable disagreement between the university and the student structures. It is therefore pleasing to be able to congratulate the University on finalising its Language Policy and achieving material consensus on the content.

I can state without fear of contradiction that Unisa is undoubtedly a university apart when it comes to strategic and operational planning. Its strategic planning regime led by the Office of the Vice Chancellor is one of its noteworthy successes over the years. However, I want to caution that whilst there can be no effective execution without strategy; equally, there can be no efficient strategy without

execution. When we start measuring success based on added value, accountability and outcomes, we know that our strategy is working.

With this in mind, I want to raise what I regard as a fundamental question: What is the role and purpose of a University? In November 2016 I sat at the ICDE Presidents' Summit and listened to speaker after speaker talk about 'university as a space of care and hope', 'learning as a social experience' and one of our own Unisa colleagues recount the example of the University professor who unequivocally stated, 'My role is to give my students discipline-specific knowledge - it is not my job to teach them to be good people!'. So, I repeat my question: *'What is the real purpose of the University?'* Iconic thought-leader Dr Martin Luther King Jr reminds us:

The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence and character – that is the goal of true education.

What is Unisa saying on this subject? We need to clearly define our character because only then will we be able to develop a shared understanding of (a) what we are; (b) where we want to go; and (c) how we propose getting there. As long as our understanding of what

is a university remains fragmented it will continue to realise discordant outcomes.

Another take-away for public higher education institutions – and I don't think Unisa is in any way exempt – is that I firmly believe that in time, TVET Colleges will gain their rightful space in the post-school system and we should also not forget about the Community Colleges that the Minister introduced in the White Paper on Post-School Education and Training. These initiatives coupled with imminent recognition of private universities will demand that the traditional public universities – and Unisa is not excepted – will need to start fighting for their survival. Students are simply going to have more options and become increasingly savvy as they shop for a degree.

When this happens, quality, service and product excellence, innovation, and creativity on the one hand and, on the other hand, respect for each other and the institution as a whole, and an acknowledgement of the role that we all have to play in making Unisa great will be critical.

Unisa is the African University shaping futures in the service of humanity. Unisans need to stand up and become excited about the university, its history, its legacy and the number of graduates it



produces. However, that said, Unisa cannot rest on its laurels - and how it responds to the challenges of the 21st century, will be the mark of its future. The journey into the 21st century calls for innovation, thought-leadership, academic proficiency and I know that all of these positive attributes sit within the confines of this great university.

I am not alone with this belief of the importance of working together - research confirms that fragmented leadership, in-fighting, and toxic baseless competitiveness will never map a successful journey of excellence

As I close, my appeal to the Unisa community is that you focus your minds and be what a university is meant to be ... unleash your potential so that communities nationally, continentally and globally will have to sit up and take note. Maintaining brand recognition and sustainability should be Unisa's drivers for the foreseeable future.

To all Unisans today, I want to wish you everything of the best for the 2017 academic year and I hope that you will accept some (if not all) of my challenges. When you are ready, I will be ready too, to come and listen to you share your thoughts and recommendations



for improvement and best practices on the issues raised this morning.

I THANK YOU

