



The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor

PROF MS MAKHANYA, PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

WELCOME

**VIRTUAL LAUNCH OF THE THABO MBEKI AFRICAN SCHOOL OF
PUBLIC AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS**

“African universities responding to the new world order post COVID-19”

22 SEPTEMBER 2020, 15:00 – 16:00

Thanks Programme Director: Dr Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, Member of the Advisory Council of the TMF and Chancellor of NMMU

- President Thabo Mbeki, Unisa Chancellor and Patron of the Thabo Mbeki Foundation
- Members of the Diplomatic Corps
- Mr Busani Ngcaweni, Deputy Chairperson (on behalf of Mr S Simelane, Chairperson of Unisa Council)
- Dr Brigalia Bam, Chairperson of the Thabo Mbeki Foundation
- Prof Veronica McKay, VP: Teaching, Learning, Community Engagement and Student Support

- Members of the Executive and Extended Management
- Mr Max Boqwana, CEO: Thabo Mbeki Foundation
- Members of the Board of the Thabo Mbeki Foundation
- Prof Sibusiso Vil-Nkomo, Director of The Thabo Mbeki African School of Public and International Affairs
- Ms Chigomezgo Gondwe who will be doing the recital
- Staff members of the Thabo Mbeki African School of Public and International Affairs
- Unisa staff and students
- Members of the media
- Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

Good afternoon to you all. I know that I speak on behalf of our Council, Senate, executive, staff and students when I offer our congratulations on this very auspicious and historic occasion – the launch of the Thabo Mbeki African School of Public and International Affairs.

It is my honour today to address what is without a doubt, a global - perhaps I could even say the global hot topic, when it comes to higher education, and that is the issue of “universities responding to the new world order post COVID-19”. Today I would be looking at how this applies to African universities. How are African Universities responding to the new world order post-COVID-19?

INTRODUCTION

Traditional understandings of a “new world order” are premised on quite dramatic - one might even say - unusual, changes in global politics and balances of power which have the potential to change the global status quo – for better or worse – to a new world order. This definition implicitly acknowledges and accepts a globalised world and our interdependency as nation states, and is fundamentally linked to the ideological notion of “world governance”, which supports the collective identification, understanding and addressing global problems which cannot be solved by any nation state on its own. What we should also note in regard to world governance is that this interdependence extends beyond the human, to include the entire biosphere. As such, sustainability and climate change are our collective responsibility as well.

A new world order post COVID-19, would obviously then, factor into an already dynamic mix the ramifications of a global pandemic whose trajectory holds little certainty for now, and whose impact is wreaking havoc on global economies and societies. There can be no doubt that COVID-19 has accelerated the global disruption already underway and is bringing to a head, many of the simmering global tensions that one has discerned these past few years. At the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, COVID-19 is forcing the kind of collective identification,

understanding and addressing (world governance) of this global issue, whose resolution is beyond the capability of any single nation.

HIGHER EDUCATION IN CONTEXT

Let me place in context the current higher education context. I will be brief.

The demand for higher education is predicted to expand from 97 million students in 2000 to over 262 million students by 2025 (UNESCO, 2009:10) this from a base of 68 million in 1991(UNESCO, 2006: 21). Most, if not all universities, especially those in developing nations, have therefore experienced rapid growth in student numbers and ongoing demands for access. As we move further into the 21st Century, and given projected population demographics, especially in Africa, these numbers are like to pale by comparison.

At the same time, 21st Century higher education is stumbling into an uncertain future that is calling into question the notion, role and purpose of education and with it, the role of the university. Key drivers of the current disruption include:

- Growing ideologically driven geopolitical tensions and conflicts between the US and other Western countries, as well as China and North Korea. (for example, Brexit and so-called “Trumpism” are

fuelling global anxieties and tensions and adding to concerns around the growing potential for future conflict on a global scale.)

- A borderless yet increasingly divided and fragmented world influenced increasingly by changing population demographics.
- Concerns around sustainability, social justice, equity and ongoing western hegemonies.
- Growing financial constraints in the form of diminishing subsidies, escalating, unsustainable student fees and massive student debt levels.
- Concerns around the continued internationalisation of higher education, especially the cross-border movement of students, academics and scholars, where there has already been a significant drop in enrolments and appointments. This will have serious financial implications for those universities, especially in countries such as the UK, Australia, the US, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand, who rely quite heavily on foreign student income, for their sustainability and their contributions to their national economies. Alternative means of income generation will have to be found.
- A plethora of “actors” or stakeholders (private and commercial providers) whose aims and objectives differ substantially from those which are currently assumed or provided for.

- The global pandemic dubbed COVID-19, which has added new challenges and exacerbated many of the existing ones.

Underpinning all of these, and lending impetus to the change that is underway is **accelerated technological innovation, increased digitisation, 4IR and more latterly 5IR.**

The World Economic Forum (2109) sums up the 4th Industrial Revolution as follows:

“The Fourth Industrial Revolution represents a fundamental change in the way we live, work and relate to one another. It is a new chapter in human development, enabled by extraordinary technology advances commensurate with those of the first, second and third industrial revolutions. These advances are merging the physical, digital and biological worlds in ways that create both huge promise and potential peril. The speed, breadth and depth of this revolution is forcing us to rethink how countries develop, how organisations create value and even what it means to be human. The Fourth Industrial Revolution is about more than just technology-driven change; it is an opportunity to help everyone, including leaders, policy-makers and people from all income groups and nations, to harness converging technologies to create an inclusive, human-centred future. The real opportunity is to look beyond technology and find ways to give the greatest number of

people the ability to positively impact their families, organisations and communities” (p.1).

For Higher Education institutions in developing societies, the aspects of both ‘peril’ and ‘promise’ hold true. On one hand, most are struggling to navigate an unparalleled nexus of complex and (potentially) destructive socio-economic and political forces, while on the other, the potential and promise of 4IR offer a platform from which to transition into a more equitable, relevant future. Furthermore, even as institutions of higher learning in developing societies grapple with their contextual realities vis a vis 4IR (and technological innovation per se) they are obliged to deal with the fundamental institutional change that will be required to derive benefit from its affordances, and the disruptive impact that this will have regarding institutional leadership and management, and the need for staff (academic, professional and administrative) and students of all ages to unlearn and relearn for a future that holds little certainty.

In a report titled *The Future of Jobs: Skills stability*, the World Economic Forum (2016) predicts [that] “On average, by 2020, more than a third of the desired core skill sets of most occupations will be comprised of skills that are not yet considered crucial to the job today, according to our respondents” (p.13). As growing numbers of articles

attest to massive job losses and redundancies, it is unsurprising that questions are being asked about the purpose and relevance of education? Who, and what, are we educating for?

Finally, with these drivers, has come the observable trend of a growing, contextually-driven “insularity” in global higher education, and with it, the disaggregation, or as some scholars have called it, the “unbundling and rebundling” of higher education into nation states, regional and even national enclaves, which cater specifically for own, contextualised, immediate needs. This has been accelerated and exacerbated by COVID -19.

THE GLOBAL IMPACT OF COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore the gross inequalities, which exist in both developed and developing societies when it comes to access to learning *per se*, and to appropriate devices for learning and the internet itself. As soon as the pandemic struck, and lockdown measures were imposed, most parents, teachers, children and students were forced to stay at home, sharing devices and internet access, where these were available, for both home schooling and higher education studies.

There was a scramble by the majority of institutions to move fully online into what many have dubbed “emergency remote teaching”.

Thus far it has been a sobering experience. There has been an uncomfortable realisation for most, that Open, Distance, and e-Learning is a distinct education model requiring its own types and levels of expertise, from pedagogical design and delivery for quality education, to ensuring that the appropriate IT infrastructure is in place to facilitate online teaching and institutional operations.

There is the realisation that one cannot simply *go online*. Few realised the complexity of this teaching mode and most have been completely unprepared for the associated costs.

In addition, it soon became evident that most teachers, parents and students dislike online learning; so much so, that many have simply elected to forgo the academic year in the hope of resuming face-to-face education in the coming year. This can be noted in the very poor enrolment stats for this new academic year in the global North.

While no one knows with any certainty where the pandemic will take us, we will need to apply what we already know – namely, that:

1. ***Parents are increasingly involved in the education of their children.*** With that has come very specific expectations of what they expect for their money - and they want “bang-for-bucks.” They want a say, and with that “say” come expectations which are often

woefully uninformed (understandably so) when it comes to the work that is done by educationists. We have, for example, seen many parents demand a reduction in fees or to pay no fees at all because there has been “no education provision”. This view is not cognisant of the huge amount of work that is done 24/7 by teaching staff to redesign courseware for online delivery and so on.

2. *Students themselves have different expectations and are increasingly taking education into their own hands.*

The new academic year begins in September in the northern hemisphere and it will be interesting to see the extent to which enrolments will actually change. Information is however already coming through of students being denied places in prestige universities (having previously been accepted provisionally) on the bases of final marks that have been adjusted downwards in line with the impact of COVID-19 on the schooling system, using algorithms which have proven to be poorly designed and which show clear evidence of class and race bias. This resulted in furious widespread protests by students and teachers in the UK and at time of writing these errors seem to have been addressed. This incident provides a fascinating insight into the power and yet fallibility of algorithms in the wrong hands, the dangers in relying too heavily on technology and power and sway of social mobilisation on the

part of teachers who know the capabilities of their students and of students who are unafraid to assert their legitimate expectations.

3. ***It is possible that South African and African universities will see a decline in enrolments*** for some of the same reasons – financial disruption and constraints occasioned by COVID-19. We will have to consider this likely impact in our strategizing and planning for the coming academic year.

4. It should also be noted that ***global trends are indicating a growing interest in non-degree programmes over degree programmes, especially amongst disadvantaged communities***. This is linked to the need for quick-time upskilling to increase employment opportunities. This is important for (South) African Universities, especially in regard to current concerns around certificate enrolments and poor success and throughput rates.

5. ***The role of teaching, learning and research is coming under great scrutiny***. While on one hand, the pandemic has revealed the strengths of teaching and learning and the importance of the teacher/student relationship, it has equally revealed some serious shortcomings, chief amongst them being the questionable quality and relevance of courseware, the pedagogical models used in instruction and the difficulties experienced in reworking such

content for online delivery. Some educators have similarly been exposed for demonstrating dogged adherence to methods and practices that are out of touch with 21st century needs and practices, as well as a failure to ensure that their content is at the cutting edge of pedagogical developments in their disciplines. It would be true to say that it is those academics who have grasped change, accepted and integrated technology in the didactics, who are adjusting most comfortably and successfully. The pandemic has in fact, provided a long overdue collective exposure and warning to ensure the relevance of the professions in light of 21st Century demands and needs in a digitised world. Both content and pedagogy need to be reviewed with an eye to the demands of the future.

6. Interestingly, ***the pandemic has provided research with a much need injection of interest and enthusiasm.*** We have noted globally, continentally and in South Africa, that the role of research has adapted to include research aligned to the impact of the pandemic. Laboratories are producing PPEs and hand sanitisers, and there is a significant amount of exciting collaborative research on vaccines and so on. One notes renewed interest in Occupational Health and Safety, as well as mental health and healthcare systems, social services and community engagement and support. Disciplines utilising statistical analyses, forecasting and modelling have also

been thrust into the limelight and it is likely that besides the research foci currently underway, these disciplines may see an increase in enrolments.

7. If there had been any doubt, it is now evident that ***technology will play an increasing role in higher education delivery.*** The comprehensive process of re-imagining the university is currently underway and I might add that it is a very dynamic process, that will require both courage and perseverance.
8. This re-envisioning is likely to bring with it many changes – all of which will have cost implications. Some of these include :
 - ***Changed working conditions for staff.***
 - ***The kind of students that we will be able to accommodate.***
 - ***Changed/reprioritised budgetary requirements on the part of both the state and universities.***
9. ***Competition from outside.*** While much has been said and written about competition from outside, this remains to be measured once the virus has been brought under control through vaccination, and some semblance of “normality” has returned. And while it might take a while to get back to this desired state, once this does happen, universities are only likely to adopt aspects of online learning insofar as they offer financial benefit.

10. ***An unclear and uncertain global future.*** Universities need creative thinkers who are able to capitalise on uncertainties of our future in the world, they need to find innovative means of accommodating their realities, while still providing a quality learning experience among their students.

11. We are clearly going ***to need to generate income, funds, outside of our traditional subsidy income base and we are going to have to prioritise and urgently.*** As higher Education Institutions we will have to :

- focus on who we are and our role and impact at home and on the Continent, ensuring that we are all on the same page in that regard;
- target and recruit post grad students from other countries whose enrolments will generate more income;
- increase the number of SLPs to increase income;
- decrease the number of certificate programmes and growing our degree programmes;
- look at our intellectual capacity and patents with an eye to income generation. We should be capitalising on that either through research papers or publications and not just giving our knowledge and expertise away; and,
- Maximise our capital investments.,

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we are in a hugely disruptive Higher education cycle that continues to be disrupted by COVID -19. No one is able to predict with any certainty the full picture of a post COVID-19 world. At best we can enlarge on what we already know, which is what I have shared with you, and speculate on what is yet to come. Africa is in the advantageous position of seeing some of its future COVID-19 impact playing out in the Northern Hemisphere. This provides a window of opportunity for risk assessment and mitigations insofar as is possible. As we continue to experience the challenges of COVID-19 and take stock of our new realities, need to appreciate that despite the terrible impact of COVID-19, we have been offered a rare moment in time to “reformat our hard-drives” when it comes to African universities, and their role and impact on the Continent.