

PROF MANDLA S MAKHANYA: PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA
CLOSING OF THE ACADEMIC YEAR 2020
ZK MATTHEWS HALL, MUCKLENEUK CAMPUS
04 DECEMBER 2020

Thank you, Programme Director, Professor Khomotso Masemola,
Executive Dean: College of Human Sciences

- Mr Sakhi Simelane, Chairperson of the Unisa Council
- Other members of the Unisa Council, including Mr Mashukudu J Maboja, who will be serving as a Chairperson of the Unisa Council from tomorrow (05 December 2020)
- Professor Veronica McKay, Acting Vice-Principal: Teaching, Learning, Community Engagement and Student Support
- Professor Thenjiwe Meyiwa, Vice-Principal: Research, Postgraduate Studies, Innovation and Commercialisation
- Dr Marcia Socikwa, Vice Principal: Operations and Facilities
- Members of the Unisa executive and extended management
- Honoured recipients of awards this morning
- Unisa staff

- Unisa students
- Members of our NSRC and labour formations
- Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

A very good morning to you all, and welcome to the formal closing of our academic year at Unisa.

This year's ceremony takes place in a time of COVID-19, and at a time of transition in the leadership of Unisa and of our Council, and so you will understand when I say that we are pleased that relaxed lockdown restrictions have allowed some of us to attend this gathering at such an important juncture in the life of our university. That said, allow me also to offer a very warm welcome to those who are joining us in the regions and via Teams in your homes. It is always good to meet as the Unisa family, albeit in different and perhaps unexpected ways this year.

INTRODUCTION

This year has been a very different one, hasn't it? The pandemic has changed our world, our lives and our world of work in very fundamental ways. Some of our staff have not been back to their offices since March this year and have grown accustomed to working from home. Many have been called upon to go above and beyond the call of duty to work

long hours to ensure that our university remains operational and our students did not lose the academic year. Still others who have returned to work, have done so to very different working conditions and changed office spaces. We have all had to adapt, adapt, and adapt again as Covid-19 blazes its erratic and unpredictable path into a very uncertain 2021.

What has been predictable though, and what I always knew that I could rely on, was the loyalty and dedication of the vast majority of Unisa staff, who have risen to the occasion and done what has been asked of them, under what have been very difficult and sometimes daunting circumstances. It is this “can do” attitude that has ensured that we have been able to conduct online examinations and that we have made a very brave, yet necessary leap in our journey to a fully online ODeL university. So as I commence this address, know that I do so from a place of gratitude and thanks to you all for upholding the 147 year tradition of staff resilience that has seen this university prevail over so many difficult challenges.

Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, transformation has remained at the top of our agenda during 2020. I think it would be true to say however, that the changes necessitated by the pandemic have added yet another dimension to our change and transformation trajectory and so

this is an institutional imperative that will continue into the future. Change is never easy, more so under such disruptive conditions, but I would like to believe that we have demonstrated that the momentum for change and transformation which I spoke of at our academic closing last year, has delivered results, and I think that you all deserve to be commended for that.

OUR CONTEXT

As the higher education sector nears the end of 2020 global trends have largely been shaped by the pandemic and are likely to carry over into 2021. Key amongst these, which we can already note in Africa and South Africa include: the indefensible gap between the “haves” and “have-nots” in rich and poor countries alike; there is much interest currently on the redesign of pedagogy in line with the growing reliance on technology; renewed interest in research especially in the sciences; a concerted focus on the role and importance of technology in higher education, and the ongoing challenge of a precarious global future. There is in fact, a growing acknowledgement that we will have to adopt a more holistic approach to higher education delivery to ensure its ongoing relevance and agility in the prevailing context.

And if you doubted that technology is taking over our lives and our work, I am reminded of an article I read recently to the effect that “Since the launching nav Home in 2016, about 10 000 families have been placed in homes through the seamless functionality” of this app. Mobile banking is a service provided by a financial institution that lets its customers conduct financial transactions remotely using a mobile device such as a Smartphone or Tablet. The purpose of an app is to allow you to serve yourself and do your banking using your smartphone or tablet.”

Following on this success other banks are also adopting this kind of app. What is interesting is that it is being used widely and effectively by many previously disadvantaged South Africans – perhaps in contradiction of the sentiment that we are not ready for technology. Our future colleagues, is indeed in our hands.

Having noted these trends, Unisa has already implemented a number of initiatives including: defining ODeL through provisioning of a Blue Print with a clear roadmap towards 2030; Council approval of the establishment of an ODeL Programme Office, comprising Executive Directors as Workstream Leads identified from all portfolios of the organisation; and defining foundation and building blocks at the School of Business Leadership and the College of Science Engineering and

Technology. We have already been treated to good news of the success that has already been registered at the SBL. I know that similarly once a report on CSET is released we would hear about that everything is progressing as planned.

Ladies and gentlemen, we cannot allow ourselves to be left behind. It is therefore understandable that the institution will incur significant financial ICT-related expenditure for the foreseeable future as a result of our transition. 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.

I am pleased and proud of the amount of work that has gone into the very significant progress that we have made in the wake of the pandemic to ensure that Unisa remains relevant and sustainable. And much of that credit must go to you, our staff.

The accelerated changes necessitated by the pandemic will undoubtedly have some ramifications which we will have to attend to. One of these has to do with the budgetary constraints that will face universities and

this would mean that 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. I must reiterate that the Unisa Enterprise and the Unisa Foundation are going to have to play a far greater role. They will have to commit to fund-generation targets – and they will have to achieve them.

Colleagues, allow me to reiterate that I believe that Unisa, through its own process of ongoing rearticulation, and through the design of new courses, is in the process of positioning itself at the cutting edge of relevant courseware and its delivery in South Africa and on the Continent. We are already at the forefront of the decoloniality movement and it remains for us to ensure that we continue to match that spirit of transformation and innovation with our tradition and reputation for quality and excellence – and that, in a time of really fundamental disruption, that has brought with it many challenges. I am however confident that we are dealing with these in a very pragmatic way in pursuit of the best possible outcomes for both staff and students. What we need right now, is to ensure that our innovative pedagogy is matched by excellent student experience and I think we still have a long way to go in that regard. But we are making every effort to overcome these challenges.

In my last Senate meeting I thanked and congratulated our senators for their industriousness and commitment to ensuring that the academe remains a dynamic and innovative space despite the challenges that they have had to face this year. I would like to reiterate that vote of thanks in this assembly. The loyalty and commitment of by far the majority of our academic staff has been commendable. Such diligence and devotion colleagues, is critical when one appreciates the very important fact that Unisa has been, and continues to be, a beacon of hope to thousands upon thousands of students. We remain a drawcard for many students – not only in South Africa but also on the Continent and the rest of the world. We also remain by far the largest of South Africa’s 26 public higher education institutions. I am sure you will have heard of the recent graduation with a PhD from Unisa, of celebrated South African actor Mme Regina Nesengani, who is famous for playing Chief Azwindini’s mother, vho-Masindi Mukwevho on the SABC 2 soapie Muvhango. Nesengani’s doctoral thesis which she wrote in Tshivenda, is on gender-based violence. I don’t know of any other University that offers such unique opportunities to so many people, and in their mother tongues. Unisa is indeed a university of the people and a university of the times. We remain a unique tour de force!

When it comes to our HEMIS data, the pandemic has set us back by two months and the final audited HEMIS submission was therefore only completed this quarter. However, it will also be supplemented by preliminary information from the 2020 student data which was submitted towards the end of October, as well as provisional information on the May/June exam results which became available this quarter.

What I can tell you colleagues, is that the preliminary 2020 unduplicated headcount enrolments of 389 187 exceeds the 2020 target of 376 000, which is outside the permissible band allowed by DHET. This is of concern as DHET has introduced penalties for deviations from the agreed targets. For 2019, Unisa is within the acceptable band, but for 2020 the *preliminary* first-time entering enrolments is almost 78 000, which significantly exceeds the target of 57 703. We have already met with DHET about this matter, but we are clearly going to have to manage our enrolments more carefully moving forward.

Given our student enrolments colleagues (which are still more than one-third of all public HE enrolments), you will appreciate the importance of Unisa to South Africa's HE sector, to distance education in general and to the socio-economic development of South Africa and the Continent. There is no doubt that when it comes to our student demographics and

given South Africa's and our own, imperative for redress and social justice, Unisa has made a massive contribution.

African students continued the upward trend, and in 2019 represented 79,7% of all unduplicated headcount enrolments. The preliminary figures for 2020 point to a continuation of these trends. The preliminary proportion of African students for 2020 is 82,4% compared to the final audited figure of 79,7% for 2019. White student numbers declined further from 10,5% in 2019 to 8,6% in 2020. Similarly, coloured and Indian students also continued to decrease to 4,8% and 3,9% respectively from 5,0% and 4,5% in 2019. In absolute numbers, African students increased from 273 062 in 2019 to a preliminary 320 734 in 2020, still subject to change. Preliminary 2020 enrolments of coloured students increased marginally to 18 556 from 17 074. White students declined to 33 327 in 2020 from 35 909 in 2019 (still subject to change) while Indian students declined marginally from 15 335 in 2019 to a preliminary 15 123 in 2020.

The contribution of female students to the unduplicated headcount enrolments continued with the steady upward trend from 63,3% in 2014 to 67,8% in 2019 and a preliminary 69,3% in 2020. Similarly, the contribution of male students to unduplicated headcount enrolments

continued a declining trend from 36,7% in 2014 to 32,2% in 2019 and preliminary 30,7% in 2020. In absolute numbers, female students increased from 232 250 in 2019 to a preliminary 269 745 in 2020 and male students decreased from 110 517 in 2019 to a preliminary 119 442 in 2020. It is therefore evident the female students are increasing faster than male students.

When it comes to enrolments in the various disciplines, the agreed targets for 2019 for Science, Engineering and Technology (SET) and for Business and Management were not reached -in fact we noted a slight downward trend - especially for Business and Management. It is therefore encouraging that the preliminary 2020 enrolments, still subject to change, indicate that SET increased to 11,3% (44 121 enrolments) and Business and Economics to 28,2% (109 908 enrolments).

For 2019, Education continued an upward trend and with 31,4%, exceeded the proportional contribution of 21,5%. The Broad field of study *Other humanities* were fairly stable. With an actual contribution of 31,8% in 2019 this Broad field of study exceeded the target of 27,4%. Preliminary 2020 numbers indicate that Education is now on 26,6% (103 453,5) which is moving towards the target. Other humanities with

a third of enrolments (131 704,5 or 33,8%) is moving away from the target.

What we are noticing colleagues, is a higher proportion of undergraduate enrolments and decreasing postgraduate enrolments. The large number of Higher Certificate enrolments is specifically of concern because many of these are also in lower funding groups, which affects the Teaching Input Units. This is an indication of increased enrolments on courses which are in lower funding groups, e.g. Education and Law. As reported last quarter, DHET is also planning to review the revised funding framework in 2021 for implementation. The current proposals will impact Unisa negatively as many enrolments currently in funding group 2 will be reclassified into funding group 1 and the proposals intend to differentiate between Unisa and other distance education courses. *This represents a major strategic risk for Unisa which is aggravated by the changes in course enrolments by course level and funding group mentioned above.* We are of course attending to this.

The Degree-credit success rate (DCSR), is continuing the increasing trend from a low of 64,9% in 2016 to 68,4% in 2019.

When it comes to examinations, a total of 973 222 exams were written by students in May/June 2020, which is significantly higher than in the

previous years. Furthermore, the exam absence rate was lower on 1,4%, compared to 2,6% in 2019. This is important given the Covid-situation and lockdown at the time. It should also be considered that this was the first fully online examination that took place. It is therefore also important to observe that the normal pass rate (NPR) was almost ten percentage points higher than in 2019. The number of graduates also continued to increase.

Colleagues, I am really pleased with the work that has been done in the academe this past year. We have made excellent progress despite the major disruptions we have had to endure. I am proud to say that our transformation has not been uni-dimensional. At Unisa we have an academe that has demonstrated its commitment to their own development and progress and to the growth of their disciplines and research, including through collaborations. The number of our rated researchers is growing year-on-year, our academics are receiving accolades and being appointed to important boards and committees in acknowledgement of their professionalism and expertise, and we have a number of academic staff who are at the forefront in their fields. A number of inaugural professorial addresses could not be delivered this year as a result of the pandemic. We have now taken a decision of going virtual with the bulk of our inaugural lectures from 2021 onwards. Our

community engagement initiatives have garnered a lot of positive attention and are bringing honour to Unisa's name and reputation, while enriching and bettering the lives of those whom we are serving. Still other colleagues have been commended for cutting edge science and research projects.

We have achieved so much in the field of collaborations, where we have entered into an array of useful and productive partnerships that are innovative in their conception and yet entirely pragmatic in their intention, execution and outcomes. It is perhaps not fair to single out any discipline or field, but we are receiving a lot of attention for the work we are doing in Sustainability, Agricultural Sciences and in Science, Engineering and Technology. Much of that work is linked to community engagement, to Multi-inter-and transdisciplinarity and to collaborations across institutions and borders. Our academics are really coming to the table and showing just what this institution is capable of when our staff exercise genuine professionalism and commitment to their disciplines. I have every confidence that this upward trend will continue into 2021 and beyond. It is exciting and energizing and I would like to reassure the academe that we will remain focused on our core business – in fact more so than ever before. I have every expectation that we will grow from

strength to strength as pathfinders for authentically African education, and as exemplars of excellence, amongst our peers.

Many of those who have achieved will be honoured shortly, and to you all I must say – well done! We are very proud of you. But in the same breath, to those of you whose names will not be called but who rank amongst those achievers I have just mentioned, we are equally proud of you! We do not have the time to go into each and every one this morning but, these have been reported on in Intcom, Focus and other institutional publications. We will continue to produce quarterly report aimed at showcasing our academic progress, achievements, innovations and accomplishments.

That said colleagues, we acknowledge that we have some ongoing challenges around service delivery. But in the same breath I can tell you that the implementation of the ICT blueprint has been accelerated in line with the demands of COVID -19 and I would like to extend a special word of appreciation to our ICT colleagues for the huge effort that they have made, and continue to make this year, to move staff and students into new and different online working modes under extremely challenging circumstances. They have had no respite from the relentless pressure and I can only assume that this pace will continue into the new

year. I am very pleased with the progress that has been made in ICT and I look forward to this dynamic portfolio playing an increasingly important and stable role in facilitating our journey to fully online ODeL as we at Unisa define it.

Service delivery issues aside, Unisa, I believe, is doing well in the most crucial areas of its mandate of Teaching and Learning, Research and Innovation and Community Engagement. As we bid 2020 farewell and look to 2021, we will be moving into a new 5 year strategic phase, I believe that we are well prepared and I rely on you all to continue the momentum that we generated this year, as we support our new Principal and Vice Chancellor, Professor Puleng Lenka-Bula in settling into her new role.

LOOKING AHEAD

As you know colleagues, this is my last academic closing as the Principal and Vice Chancellor of Unisa. It has been my honour to have shepherded this university through possibly the most tumultuous decade in higher education in South Africa. It has not been an easy task – in fact at times it seemed to be almost impossible, especially during the three tumultuous years *that we had to endure*.

To say I would not have been able to steer the university through this time without the support and guidance of Council would be an understatement. And so, I would like to use this moment to acknowledge our Council for their committed support of our university over the past decade. Theirs is an immeasurable contribution that is deeply appreciated. In the same breath I must thank the outgoing Chair of Council, Mr Sakhi Simelane for his selfless dedication to Unisa and the results of his contribution speak for themselves

Our new Chairperson of Council, Mr James Maboja, who was formerly the Chair of FIECoC, will take over the reins at midnight tonight. We welcome Mr Maboja and wish him well for his tenure. Mr Maboja you may be assured of our support.

I would also like to acknowledge my executive team, who have had years of working in ad hoc crisis mode and who have always been available day and night to do what had to be done. This year has not been different in so far as their dedicated service to the university is concerned. I have honestly been impressed with their work ethic this year and I want them to continue doing good work. They are owed a great debt of thanks and appreciation.

I have already thanked our staff for their contributions and I reiterate that now and ask that they continue their support of our students and this university as we move into a new era and new leadership. It has been my honour and privilege to have enjoyed the loyalty and support of these colleagues throughout my career at Unisa - as their Vice Chancellor, their Pro Vice Chancellor, their Executive Dean, their Dean and their fellow academic. It has been a long and rewarding journey of more than three decades and I thank you all most sincerely.

I would also like to thank our stakeholders for their various contributions to Unisa. I have no doubt that our stakeholders will continue their support of this institution as they have done these past 10 years.

Last but not least colleagues, I must express my appreciation to our students who have journeyed with us these past 10 years through the tumult, disruption tough times but who never gave up. I am especially proud of the manner in which our students have embraced online examinations in real time. The statistics speak for themselves. This has not been easy, and it speaks to those qualities for which Unisa students have been renowned: Resilience, proactivity and courage. Long may it continue!

I think we owe ourselves a round of applause! Thank you

CONCLUSION

In conclusion colleagues, despite a number of unpredicted and complex challenges, Unisa has managed to ensure that it continues with its operations, and dare I say, it has done so quite successfully. Most importantly our academic performance has been sustained and satisfactory under extremely challenging circumstances and our financial management and stewardship has ensured that Unisa remains a going concern. This has been extremely challenging and thanks must go to our colleagues in Finance for running a very tight ship.

Colleagues, this has been a long, tough year and I know that I speak on behalf of Council and executive management when I thank each and every one of you for your contributions to our university. Let us continue this trend into 2021! It remains for me to wish you and your loved ones well for a blessed and relaxing festive season.

I thank you.