



The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor

PROF MS MAKHANYA, PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR

ACADEMIC ASSEMBLY, MUCKLENEUK CAMPUS

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“The time for talk is over, we have to live our vision.”

- Programme Director, Professor T Mogale, Executive Dean: College of Economic and Management Sciences
- Mr PZR Zwane: Vice Principal Finance and Business Enterprises
- Executive Deans, Deputy Executive Deans, Directors of Schools, Chairs of Departments
- Members of Unisa’s academe

Thank you Professor Mogale and a good morning to you all colleagues

At our Academic Opening and our first Senate in March, I spoke of the impact of the past 18 months of disruption on the university; the

current context in which we find ourselves; and the urgent need for us to focus on that which we have been appointed to do. I said:

We have to find a positive way forward for our tens of thousands of students, staff and alumni, as well as our donors and sponsors, not to mention the wider South African and continental community which is eager to see us be 'the African university shaping futures in the service of humanity'. The time for talk is over. We have to live our vision.

You see colleagues, our global peers, our national peers, our students and our country have expectations of us which, it would seem, we are failing to meet fully, on a number of fronts.

While we all felt a sense of pleasure and pride at the statistics which were provided at the academic opening and inauguration of the new Chancellor this year and which I will share with you shortly, I believe that those statistics hide so much more than they reveal. You see, I am of the view that our scholarship is not realising its full potential. In fact, I am confident that if it were, and given this institution's infrastructure and capacities, Unisa would be so far ahead of its peers in all respects; that we would in fact, be peerless.

I say that, because it has become increasingly clear to me that our status and reputation are unlikely to remain where they are if we do not improve on our performance. Last year I alluded to this when I

spoke of the complex challenges that Unisa faces operationally, as well as the difficulty of managing so many expectations. This is something with which we continue to grapple on a daily basis. I also spoke of my realisation that we are sometimes so overwhelmed by our fraught environment that we tend to lose sight of the impressiveness of this university; of what we have accomplished; and of the impact that we are making in the country and the world - and now I would like to add - of our massive, and I genuinely mean massive - potential to make an even bigger impact in our country, our continent and the world of higher education.

I would like to reiterate some of the realities that I shared with you last year, and I would like to add to them, sharing with you development that have occurred since then, and the role that you are called to play in rising to the challenges. Let us start off from the premise though, that we have what it takes to realise our potential.

Unisa is unique. That remains true. As I travel the world, including in my capacity as the President of the ICDE, I have come to realise that we are one of the very few dedicated distance education institutions in the world, that I know of, that is a formal part of the government's higher education structure, that is funded by government, that enrolls more than one-third of a country's students, and that offers formal, quality assured and accredited qualifications.

However, enlarging on my remarks last year, on the diversity of the ODeL environment, I can tell you that there is a growing acknowledgement of the vagueness that now characterises the global ODeL environment, with a great deal of conflation and misunderstanding around models of ODeL, which include but are not limited to: flexible learning, blended learning, hybrid learning, online learning, e-learning, open education, digital supported or technology enhanced learning, distance teaching, open and distance learning, distance education or a combination of these. Every provider, it seems, has their own understanding of what each of these means, and how they should be operationalised.

Unisa is going to find it increasingly difficult to maintain or assert its dominance and reputation and brand, in an environment that increasingly regards “open” or “online” education as sub-standard and inferior. This is a matter of some concern to me as it should be to you, because the more traditional, quality assured and accredited providers such as Unisa who were able to rely on a clear understanding amongst the public of who they are and what they offer, are no longer able to do so. In the current global context, we are increasingly viewed, especially amongst newcomers, as just another voice amongst the hordes, claiming to provide access, quality and affordable education – and we run the risk of being

associated with these newcomers who do not have a track record and are not recognised in our field.

Are we as academics discussing this amongst ourselves - or are we trusting and believing that our brand and our reputation carry so much weight that our quality and calibre as an institution will remain unchallenged? I would be derelict in my duties if I did not alert you to the fact that this can no longer be taken for granted. We are being challenged to prove the quality, excellence and service that we claim. While we are, and should be, proud of the fact that Unisa is a national asset, we need to be reminded that assets can lose their value if they are not maintained and developed.

As a university and as its scholars, we are the custodians of knowledge traditions, but we are also pioneers of new ideas. Successful universities are dynamic, always transforming, always innovating and always exploring new ways of knowing and being. We have begun walking that path with renewed vigour in 2017. On the part of management we will do everything in our power to retain our 70-year-old status as the premier distance-education university in South Africa, which has alumni of in excess of seven hundred thousand in South Africa, across our continent and around the world. This year we will for example, be hosting an international conference focusing on the decolonisation of knowledge and on social and academic transformation. In 2016 Unisa changed its language policy

to create a meaningful space for and development of indigenous languages. We have also set up an institutional mechanism to review and transform our curricula across colleges. A forum has been established to ensure maximal participation in this process. This is designed to move university transformation beyond the usual rhetoric and symbolism to concrete, implementable programmes.

Also, in 2016, Unisa awarded a total of 47 777 degrees, diplomas and certificates. This number included 243 doctorates and 1 011 master's degrees. Among these were many of the leaders in South Africa and on the continent. We have succeeded to make the desirable progress in our Colleges, although some Colleges outperformed others.

While acknowledging our contribution to higher education and some of the successes that we have achieved, I must simultaneously acknowledge my serious concern at the continued lacks around service delivery and equally disconcertingly, the quality of some of our offerings, which, if we are not careful, may be susceptible to de-accreditation.

Unfortunately much of our time has, of necessity, been diverted to managing the very ad hoc dynamics of the transformation in national higher education, so as to ensure our sustainability and the continuation of the academic project at Unisa. In that process we have not focussed to the extent to which we might have, on the core

business of the university and of the academe, that is, scholarship. And not just scholarship, colleagues, but *quality, relevant* scholarship within the context of our new Strategic Plan 2016 - 2030, especially Focus Area 1: scholarship that will restore the excellence that has been associated with Unisa for so many decades, but which is currently in jeopardy.

This year colleagues, must provide clear evidence of a turnaround in that status. It is my own, and the desire of management, Senate and Council, that Unisa's academe re-invigorates and reinvents itself to a status of collective pride: in your disciplines and professions; in this unique university; and in the quality of the qualifications that we offer and the students that we produce. The solution, I believe, lies with you the academe, claiming your space as the core business providers of the university, and harnessing all of your innovation and ingenuity in finding practical, workable solutions to regaining Unisa's prestigious reputation for relevance, quality and excellence (in regard to both our course content and our graduates). I believe in the work of academics. Each of you is a teacher. Let us reclaim this space. Your students deserve your kindness, support and compassion, and where necessary firm guidance. Only you will be able to break the cycle of learned helplessness which paralyses so many of our students currently. And that will be done through your inspiration, guidance and mentorship.

At the moment, I acknowledge that, we are not able to give the academe the same amount of time and attention as that which has been diverted to our students and our operations. This is as a result of the circumstances that we find ourselves in. Regardless of this situation, my call to you today is that you take up the baton, reclaim the academy and resurrect our reputation particularly for service.

As the academe, your prime strategic focus area is Focus area 1: *Towards becoming a leading ODeL, comprehensive university in teaching and learning, research, innovation and community engagement based on scholarship.* That needs to happen in the context of an African university. I believe that in the current context we have a very real opportunity to assert Unisa's dominance in the national and global ODL arenas. We can do so by focussing on service, quality and excellence and by communicating our progress and innovations to the world. As academics you should be both challenged and excited at the thought of (re) conceptualising and revitalising your disciplines to that end. A lot of hard work lies ahead, but if we work supportively of one another, we will find that a wonderful sense of collaboration and pride will emerge in the knowledge that we are the creators and crafters of a truly African Unisa, that will be used by others, (and not the other way round) as a benchmark of quality ODeL.

Colleagues let us harness our intellect and our innovation, mindful of the challenges that we are facing, in energising the academic space at Unisa. *The time for talk is over, we have to live our vision.*

I thank you.