



*Office of the Principal and Vice Chancellor*

## **Professor MS Makhanya's meeting with the Unisa Black Forum**

**22 August 2016**

-  The President of Unisa Black Forum, Prof Mogashoa
-  The leadership of Unisa Black Forum
-  The Membership of Unisa Black Forum
-  Distinguished audience
-  Colleagues and members of the Unisa family

Good morning.

Let me first appreciate the fact that you have taken interest in this engagement by prioritizing this meeting in your competing schedules.

As part of my open door policy I consistently engage with Unisa's key

stakeholders such as the Unisa Black Forum as I sincerely believe that these interactions are of mutual benefit as we share ideas and facts about current developments and in shaping our shared future. As you know, I have had these regular engagements and I will continue to do so given their aforementioned value and my firm belief in consultations and engagements, especially in a knowledge institution.

As we meet this today, I am sure we are all aware of the challenges facing South African universities as well as specific institutional challenges at this time. This national and institutional context suggests that our engagement cannot assume the posture of business as usual. Up front, I should declare that I am one of those who believe that challenges also present us with opportunities if collective leadership constructively and honestly engages in a search for sustainable solutions in an imaginative or innovative manner informed by hard facts on the ground. I am convinced that failure to confront trials and tribulations often lead to a slippery slope towards crisis or stagnation. I

am reminded of a great African intellectual and struggle veteran, Frantz Fanon, who proclaimed in his seminal work, *The Wretched of the Earth*, that “Every generation must, out of relative obscurity, define its mission, fulfill it or betray it”. I have been asking what could be the mission of this cohort of university leaders and leaders of key stakeholders such as the UBF.

I will try to give a brief overview of the current realities facing our university and South African higher education. The recent wave of political protests, calling for #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall and #OutsourcingMustFall, have shaken the very foundations of our institutions. The reaction or response to these issues have varied from institution to institution as informed by their internal dynamics and contexts. Whatever the responses have been, there is no denying that the issue of university transformation has now been brought into the center of our agenda after what seems to have been the losing of some steam, just as I reflected in the column article that I wrote for the

Sunday Independent a few weeks ago. The issue of insourcing and current freezing of students fee increase have also added another dimension of social justice, affordability on one side and financial viability and sustainability on the other side, with the greatest challenge being a delicate exercise of balancing these legitimate aspects in the interest of the university. Another issue that has come to a sharp focus is the manner and conduct of all involved stakeholders and role-players in engaging with each other in addressing challenges emanating from the aforementioned issues. In engaging with our own Council, other VCs from other universities, key stakeholders from universities, as well as the South African government, the following facts and observations have emerged.

1. Whilst the notion of a fee-free education may be a noble long-term goal, it is unlikely that the presidential commission will emerge with a recommendation that this is immediately feasible particularly given the extremely weak fiscal situation. Government

has not been able to meet even the universities' shortfall for this current year due to the no fee increase, thus leaving each university to fend for itself - even imposing austerity measures to deal with diminishing resources and possible budget deficits. Treasury has already made its submission that it does not have additional resources to meet these emerging demands or that they may have to take resources from other critical programmes which may trigger other politically risky reactions from affected communities.

2. Insourcing partially or fully applied would need creative ways of reconfiguration of our HR and personnel landscapes and it comes with resource and operational implications whose full impact is hard to accurately predict as we enter uncharted waters which may intuitively be easy to comprehend but difficult to translate into practical implementation.
3. The current political environment in the universities have tested existing laws, consultation forums, collective bargaining and laws

governing industrial actions and strikes to the limit. In the first instance there is an emerging diffusion or collapse of traditional identities between labour unions and students. Issues that use to be a sole preserve of labour unions are increasingly championed by the students' political formations outside the existing bargaining forums such as UBF. The student formations are increasingly conducting themselves parallel to, or even supplanting, existing SRCs. Students' political formations want to have direct engagements on issues they champion whereas the SRC is frowning at instances of being by-passed. There are formal structures juxtaposed with current political realities with the university management caught in the middle in an intriguing proverbial dilemma of being damned if you do and damned if you don't. What are the implications of all these on the existing conventional institutional arrangement? There is another reality on the conduct of some of these engagements wherein unprotected strikes and violent protests often impact negatively

on the rights of non-participating university community members, vandalism against university and private property and general tone and language over the social media, emails and general communication. This volatile environment is beginning to affect the functioning of our Council, Convocation and other statutory bodies. There is another reality of internal strife within stakeholders and structures which impacts negatively on the legitimacy and effectiveness of the representatives of various structures.

4. The pressing need to implement and realize our Strategy Vision 2030 which has placed transformation and Africanization at the centre of our institutional change hence the “leading change” programme. As the Unisa Black Forum, an institution that I participated in for many years, the issue of transformation is naturally and organically linked to your very existence, hence the expectation that you would play a vital catalytic role in influencing and shaping discourse on this matter. I have identified the

vigorous implementation of the transformation programme as a defining feature of the next four years or the first five year implementation plan for Strategy Vision 2030.

5. The institution has been experiencing serious challenges in establishing a solid and well-integrated IT platform to support our quest to become an ODeL university and in being effective in supporting our admissions/registrations, teaching and learning, research and basic management of our operations. We are working on re-engineering the system as well as the migration and integration of some of our systems.

Given the above outlined salient features of our current realities as a university, I call upon the Unisa Black Forum to play a crucial catalytic and constructively imaginative role in seeking reasonable solutions to the challenges of our time. It is this collective wisdom that transcends any sectional or partisan interest that will elevate the core interest of Unisa and reinforce our endeavors to bring the academic enterprise

back to the centre from the periphery. I implore you to assist in invigorating our institutional discourse on transformation, stakeholder engagement, social justice and institutional sustainability. Let us work together not against each other, let us turn to each other not against each other as we seek solutions to these complex problems. Failure to do so will be a painful indictment to our generation of leaders and we will have failed in our historic mission to advance the transformation and development of Unisa. The road ahead will not be easy or predetermined, but our collective resolve can easily make lemonade out of what was expected to be a sour lemon squeeze. We can identify opportunities out of these challenges. Failure to address these issues and resolve them effectively, balancing all the contending variables, is vital to our success.

Again let me express my deep sense of gratitude to you and your leadership as I always find engagement with Unisa Black Forum refreshing, constructive and insightful.

I thank you.