



*The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor*

**PROF MS MAKHANYA, PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR**

**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA**

***HRCoC ADDRESS: "FROM DE TO ODeL – TRANSFORMING FOR  
RELEVANCE AND SUSTAINABILITY"***

**18 February 2019**

Thanks facilitator, Mr Kalenga

- Chairperson of HRCoC, Mrs Mokoka
- Deputy Chairperson of HRCoC, Mr Tlhabanelo
- Members of the Executive Committee of Council
- Members of the HRCoC
- Unisa stakeholders

Good morning to you all. I've been asked to share with you our journey to ODeL, how this is impacting or is likely to impact on the HR function within Unisa, and how we should prepare HR for this.

Well, that is a very tall order Madame Chair! But you have raised a crucial topic that speaks to the very fabric of Unisa and our reason for being. In fact, if I were to use an analogy, I would say that the HR function in any institution is the engine that drives the ship – and the bigger the ship, the more powerful, efficient and well-oiled that engine needs to be. And, Unisa is a big ship! The biggest on the Continent by the way.

So let me begin by giving you a *very* brief synopsis of our environment and our journey since the advent of our democracy in 1994. What happened in distance education prior to that is not really relevant for our purposes. As you can well imagine, education and higher education in particular, was a key pillar of the national transformation that needed to happen post- Apartheid, to redress deeply entrenched, historical, socio-economic and political inequalities and iniquities that had divided our Higher Education landscape along racial, ethnic, language and geographical lines. Please remember that the transformation of HE had to happen in the context of a transforming nation, and that our transformation has always been directed and impacted by the state of our nation's transformation. That continues to be the case today.

So, briefly, the Higher Education Act of 1997 set out the vision to:

1. ESTABLISH a single co-ordinated higher education system which promotes ***co-operative governance*** and provides for programme-based higher education;
2. RESTRUCTURE AND TRANSFORM programmes and institutions to respond better to the human resource, economic and development needs of the Republic;
3. REDRESS past discrimination and ensure representivity and equal access;
4. PROVIDE optimal opportunities for learning and the creation of knowledge;
5. PROMOTE the values which underlie an open and democratic society based on human dignity, equality and freedom;
6. RESPECT freedom of religion, belief and opinion;
7. RESPECT and encourage democracy, academic freedom, freedom of speech and expression, creativity, scholarship and research;
8. PURSUE excellence, promote the full realisation of the potential of every student and employee, tolerance of ideas and appreciation of diversity;
9. RESPOND to the needs of the Republic and of the communities served by the institutions;
10. CONTRIBUTE to the advancement of all forms of knowledge and scholarship, in keeping with international standards of academic quality; and

11. ...enjoy freedom and autonomy in their relationship with the State within the context of public accountability and the national need for advanced skills and scientific knowledge;

Education's fundamental role, articulated in section 13 of the Act, (RSA 1997: s 13), is therefore:

- To meet the learning needs and aspirations of individuals through the development of their intellectual abilities and aptitudes throughout their lives
- To address the development needs of society and provide the labour market in a knowledge-driven and knowledge-dependent society, with the ever-changing high-level competencies and expertise necessary for the growth and prosperity of a modern economy
- To contribute to the socialisation of enlightened, responsible and constructively critical citizens
- To contribute to the creation, sharing and evaluation of knowledge

Now, the reason why I have read these to you verbatim from the Act, is to remind us all of the Higher Education vision for our country and to highlight the critical role of HR in achieving the goals informing the vision. We therefore need to be activists whose work is underpinned by visionary thinking and conceptualisation that is in line with the noble ideals and precepts in the Act and our Constitution.

The National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) (2001) emanated from the Act and “gave flesh” to the vision of the reconfigured HE landscape set out in the Act. In the plan, Unisa was established as the *single dedicated distance education institution in South Africa*. In terms of this establishment we were not allowed to offer anything face-to-face, although residential universities had some leeway (not much) in being able to offer correspondence course and to articulate into university level programmes (but not vice versa.) (However, the HE PSET Act 2014 opened up DE to all HEIs in South Africa.) It should also be noted that because Unisa was a dedicated distance education university, we were funded at 50% of the funding allocation, at undergraduate level for our students, although post graduate students were all funded at the same level. It should also be noted that any students enrolled in excess of the enrolment targets agreed with DHET were for the university’s expense. That remains true today as well.

We should remember as well, that there was no policy for Distance Education – the *POLICY FOR THE PROVISION OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF AN INTEGRATED POST-SCHOOL SYSTEM*, was only promulgated on 7 July 2014 shortly after the promulgation of the HE Act for PSET (2014) in the same year. Now we are in the final phase of *the Open Learning Policy Framework for Post School Education and Training*, which I might tell you, has different views on openness and access, for

example, than those which Unisa holds. And so it is going to be interesting to see how we are able to work with this policy going forward when it comes to crafting our strategy.

Twenty five years of democracy have seen much broader access to higher education in South Africa and to distance education in particular, and this has brought with it a wide variety of problems ranging from ever increasing student numbers, under-resourcing, systems and structure congestion and inefficiencies, capacity dilemmas, concerns regarding the appropriateness of course offerings in relation to market needs and continued poor throughput rates. The implementation of the merger that established the new Unisa was guided by a comprehensive strategic plan entitled *2015 Strategic Plan: An agenda for transformation* (Unisa 2005), which was reviewed in 2009, in line with the institution's growth and development. The resultant *Unisa 2015: Revisited* (Unisa 2010) was subsequently replaced by our Unisa 2016 - 2030 Strategy. The institutional strategy was supplemented by an Institutional Operational Plan (IOP) (now the Annual Performance Plan (APP)), which currently spans a rolling planning framework and sets out the objectives that the institution must accomplish each year in pursuit of its strategy. It should be noted that our timelines and planning rhythms have traditionally been aligned with those of DHET to ensure reporting and budgeting synergies and efficiencies. It should also be noted that DHET

imperatives in the NPHE were initially *efficiency* and *effectiveness*. These moved into *responsibility and accountability* with the uptake of the King Governance principles and more recently the Governance guidelines for HEIs, and the promulgation of new Institutional Reporting Regulations in 2014.

Now, regarding our evolution from DE to ODeL, I can say that this has happened over a relatively short period. Initially Unisa was known as a *distance education* institution because of the technological separation of teacher and learner which freed the student from the necessity of travelling to a “fixed place, at a fixed time, to meet a person in order to be trained.” In fact most people called, and still call Unisa, a *correspondence university* because Distance Education at that time entailed delivering course materials, library materials, assignments, etc., by mail, and examinations were held at remote locations – even for our students abroad. The gradual uptake of technology and digital affordances resulted in Unisa’s transition to ODL by 2008. The Commonwealth of Learning (CoL) defined ODL as:

*A way of providing learning opportunities that is characterized by the separation of teacher and learner in time or place, or both time and place; learning that is certified in some way by an institution or agency; the use of a variety of media including print and electronic; two-way communications that allow learners and tutors to interact;*

*the possibility of occasional face-to-face meetings; and a specialized division of labour in the production and delivery of courses.*

You can see the progression in that definition. More recently, in the past three years in fact, and in line with the ascendancy of *digitalisation*, we have entered the domain of ODeL, which includes the e – or electronic aspect - of the digital learning environment. This includes fully online courses where students would need a device and access to the internet to conduct their studies.

So I think we can safely say that Unisa now incorporates all of these transitions in our business model, which we package as *blended learning*, which I might assure you, seems to be the most globally acceptable model as well, when it comes to formal ODeL.

Now, central to, and underpinning our business model is the imperative of transformation, which was highlighted in some detail, by the Chairperson of Council at the academic opening address. Mention was also made of the resilience that is required in our university to weather the storms that continue to buffet us as we do the necessary work of transformation.

To me, this implies that as an institution, and as individuals, we need to be *intelligently responsive and proactive* in the manner in which we lead, manage and operate this institution. We need to adopt and



nurture a mindset flexible enough to accommodate and embrace change even where it makes us uncomfortable. Sometimes we need to trust that our leadership does in fact understand the forces with which we are grappling in higher education, a little better than we do. I spoke to that at our academic opening. In a world that is in a constant state of flux and in a country similarly affected, our relevance and our impact as the biggest educator in the nation and on the continent will be determined by our ability to adapt and transform in good time – and that will only happen where we have properly trained and equipped human resources who not only buy into the vision but who demonstrate the loyalty that is required to “make it happen” even when they don’t.

Bearing in mind that HR managers and practitioners are essentially change agents, four acknowledged competencies found in most HR competency models are communication, analysis capabilities, relationship-building skills and leadership qualities,<sup>1</sup> explained as follows:

### **1. Communication**

“An HR manager must be able to communicate with everyone in the workplace, from line staff to executive leadership”, with the same sincerity, enthusiasm and passion. HR staff needs to be so well

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<sup>1</sup> **What are the four competencies of an HR Manager?**

<https://yourbusiness.azcentral.com/four-competencies-hr-manager-3925.html>

informed and such an integral part of the HR 'team' that they are similarly enthused and committed.

## **2. Analytical and Critical Thinking**

“Analytical and critical thinking skills are a must for HR leaders. An HR manager has to exercise sound judgment and engage in high-impact decision-making in a number of areas. The ability to analyze situations and view the implications of certain decisions from a critical perspective is particularly useful for HR leaders.....HR managers also are involved in representing the company (Institution) in matters involving employment litigation, which requires that they be able to justify the company's actions related to employment decisions such as hiring and firing.”

## **3. Relationship-Building**

“Creating a cohesive HR department that works collaboratively to achieve the goals of the department as well as help the organization reach its goals related to workforce development is a competency that That being said, HR managers must have”. Relationship-building and interpersonal relationship skills are fundamental to an HR manager's success. “.....That being said, an HR manager must have the ability to establish credibility and trust as well as balance the obligation to be an advocate for both the organization and its employees.”

## **4. Leadership**

“Leadership skills are an essential competency for HR managers.....particularly in the process of justifying the functional

elements of a strategic plan (or a restructuring, for example,) to the company's management team (and staff). In addition, HR managers have to direct the activities of the HR department, and in doing so, they need the type of leadership skills that influence HR generalists' and HR specialists' commitment to the HR department goals.”

While all these competencies speak directly to HR Leaders and Managers, at Unisa we believe that all staff are leaders and so it goes without saying that these competencies apply to everyone in HR.

So I would like us to pay particular attention in the immediate future, to the first of those competencies, that is *communication*, which is also one of our 11 C's. When it comes to communication, and especially inter-personal communication, we are failing quite miserably in far too many instances. The same applies to communication via email. Let us not make staff members to be on tenterhooks because they never know if their request will be processed on time.

Staff members must be served with respect and diligence.

Let me repeat what I said last year. HR is core to our transformation. It is arguably *the* key strategic partner to *everyone* in the institution. Unlike the majority of the other portfolios, HR resides at the nexus and interface of *people* and processes. Covering the vital areas of Employee Relations and Wellness, HR Development, Organisation

Development and Human Resources Information System (HRIS), Remuneration and Administration and Staffing and Client Services, HR is simultaneously tasked with being the architects of infrastructural development and design, as well as the development and nurturing of those who must fill its structures and ensure its efficacy. It is this duality of *people* and *processes* that makes HR unique but which also poses the greatest threat to operational efficiency and effectiveness and ultimately, to transformation and progress. An over-emphasis or focus on any one half of this equation will result in institutional disequilibrium, malfunction and a lack of progress and transformation and ultimately a threat to our very sustainability.

My concern at present is that we are neglecting our *people* in the manner in which we communicate and conduct ourselves. However, all is not lost as of course there are pockets of excellence, and excellent performers, but overall, there is much work to be done, and that work colleagues, relates more to the so called *soft skills* of *communication*, relationship –building and leadership, than it does to administrative efficiency. The former, in fact, will ensure the latter.

We have so many excellent policies in place, including the updated IPMS policy which has now been workshopped quite extensively across the institution, so we have no excuse when it comes to leading and managing.

Let us not forget our humanity. Know this: You will now be held to account and measured on the manner in which you lead, manage and interact with your staff and colleagues. Where you feel you are lacking or where shortcomings are identified, then as part of your personal development plans you must receive training to empower you to overcome, upskill and move onward and upwards. No one is perfect. The problem arises when we think we are. There are those who don't identify or acknowledge growth areas, and who seem to think they are above or beyond growth and development. This is far from the truth.

Let me repeat my conclusion from last year's address: "Let HR become a beacon of excellence, whose tentacles filter into the entire institution, to bring about a change in the people and our institutional culture. Let HR managers and staff be the ambassadors for and pathfinders for the transformed workforce that we need to accelerate our transformation agenda at Unisa. I believe that only once this happens, will we see the kind of operational efficiencies that will drive transformation to its rightful conclusion, that will give expression to our Strategy 2030 and that will make every single Unisa staff member and every single student feel that they belong and that they are valued. "

I thank you