



The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor

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PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR: UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA
WELCOME: PRINCIPAL'S SUMMIT
TEAMS MEETING
14 AUGUST 2020

- Programme Directors, Proff Makoe and Letseka
- Prof Ndlovu and colleagues in executive, extended and management

A warm welcome to you all. It is so good to catch up with you again even though it is under very unusual circumstances. By now one would think that this way of doing things has become our “new normal”, yet it remains quite bizarre to think how much our lives have changed since March this year, and how quickly the majority of us have adapted.

I believe that it is this ability to adapt - sometimes in very fundamental ways - that has ensured not only our continued existence as a species, but perhaps equally important, our ability to learn, apply that learning, and flourish going forward. Those who have not been able to do so have fallen by the wayside and have become lost and forgotten in the mists of time.

This is a lesson we are learning at Unisa right now - in “real time” as the saying goes. But it’s not that this hasn’t happened to Unisa before. I have in fact regularly stated that Unisa’s longevity and success has been its ability to overcome and adapt to the changed circumstances in which our country has found itself. This University has prevailed for almost 150 years, and that is a stellar accomplishment irrespective of how one views it.

But colleagues, Unisa’s longevity, and its almost 71 years as a quality, dedicated distance education provider, cannot be ascribed solely to its ability to adapt. There are three additional strengths that have ensured that Unisa remains the premier ODeL institution on the Continent: These are: understanding our mandate and mission and the immense value and contribution that we make to society; a calibre of staff that appreciates

our mandate and is committed to doing whatever it takes to provide the best possible learning experience to our students; and a vision that is in tune with the educational needs and developmental aspirations of our people – nationally and on the Continent. I would like to comment briefly on each of these in the context in which Unisa currently finds itself.

Firstly, we must ask how we are faring when it comes to fully appreciating our mandate and mission. We are a legally promulgated, dedicated, mandated and funded ODeL university, with our own Statute. One senses though that there may be a misunderstanding of what this means for some people, while others may be thinking that most probably it does not matter what it means. Let me tell you that in our case, there is another area of who we are that we need to be sensitive about, and that is being a *comprehensive* university, and we need to ask ourselves whether we are indeed qualifying to be one. I have heard of another university that will remain nameless that has consciously begun to drop this part of its mission and one hopes that there is nothing wrong with that, but I get a sense that at some point it will catch up with them as we cannot take this differentiation for granted.

Colleagues, you are all aware of the recent announcement of the Ministerial Task Team to review Unisa on a number of issues that have been shared in the public domain. Among these are what the Minister refers to as “mission drift” as a result of a significant growth of a number of young students who are primarily catered for by NSFAS. As we all know this number is now approximately 170 000. I would not delve now into what is likely to be the core of the concern of the Minister, as I don’t want to speculate. I would rather leave this subject for a formal discussion with the MTT as and when the time permits.

What I *do* want us to address is one of the concerns raised by the Minister, that is, our very low success and throughput rates. This is an area that cannot be contested. We all know that this poses a huge threat to our survival and it has to be addressed if we hope to keep our university. I have spoken regularly about the consequences of this situation as it affects our subsidy in a negative way. Failure to address it is at our peril. I can ask our colleagues in Finance to do a quick math and tell you the negative impact in financial terms of our failure in this area. You therefore have a responsibility of ensuring that you put your shoulder to the wheel in doing your work, wherever you are placed in

the chain of command at the university, so that there can be an improvement in this area.

Another concern raised by the Minister is the fact that we obviously don't have a technology platform that is relevant to this day and age and capable of handling our numbers. This is where the Minister's notion of an institution that "is too big to fail" has emanated from. I take this to mean that our size must be matched by appropriate technologies so that we can operate efficiently and without any disruptions. We can all acknowledge that with the current legacy system we have no future, hence the investment that is underway to transition to ODeL. We know that what had been hoped to happen in the next three to five years, can no longer wait considering the challenges arising from Covid-19 that have confronted us particularly since March this year.

The COVID-19 pandemic has added another twist that must be taken into consideration, especially when it comes to our business model. Since lockdown we have been working non-stop to move into a fully online model and we are gaining ground. This means some adjustments to our operations and also to our own, and our students', mindsets. Is this

accommodated in our Strategy 2030 and APP, and if so, to what extent?
What needs to be done in this Summit to deal with that?

Second colleagues, I mentioned a calibre of staff that appreciates our mandate and is committed to doing whatever it takes to provide the best possible learning experience to our students. I have to say I have been so impressed at the level of commitment shown by the majority of our staff in this regard, more especially since the lockdown. This has not been an easy adjustment and we continue to work on the obstacles that come our way – almost on a daily basis. However, having noted that commitment colleagues, we need to align that with this new university that is being reborn out of the disruptions we have experienced since 2015, and what we will need to do in terms of the support we offer to both our colleagues and our students. I speak here for example, of different kinds of communication, of an in-depth contextualized knowledge and appreciation of our university and its location in the sector, the Continent and the world, and of the mindset change that needs to happen both in terms of sharing that new look institution and committing to the journey. I believe we can do that, but one suspects that more and not less, will be asked of you in the coming months and years as we find ourselves in the midst of one of the most critical global,

national and sectoral disruptions in living memory, and the worst since the economic recession of 2008. Our university will need clear heads and certainty of purpose.

Third and finally colleagues, I made mention of Unisa having a vision that is in tune with the educational needs and developmental aspirations of our people – nationally and on the Continent. Being in tune though, requires the institutional knowledge and contextualization that I have just mentioned, which is then applied in crafting ideologically or theoretically informed strategies. That knowledge - which incidentally, includes a thorough understanding of our regulatory, governance and compliance framework, will provide a sound framework when it comes to leadership models, business models, our pedagogical model and our strategy. If any one of those aspects is out of sync or in conflict with our typology, we will meet up with significant challenges along the way. Put simply, know and understand your context, your capacity, and your capabilities. Ideology is most often what drives us and gives us the passion for what we do, but that ideology must be in tune with our mandated responsibility.

Colleagues, our own resources are under immense pressure. Now, more than ever before our stewardship of this University and its resources must be of the highest order and integrity, governed by impeccable and pragmatic considerations that go beyond the here and now, to the future which our children and grandchildren will inherit.

In conclusion colleagues, I note that our programme will be covering all of these aspects I have addressed, in fact the purpose of this Summit is to bed-down the documents we have been working on for some months now. So, I ask that we engage thoughtfully and with an eye to the current disruption that we are all experiencing, and what it means for us as a university, staff, students and stakeholders going forward. This is serious work and we must make progress. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that this cohort of leadership ensures the sustainability and flourishing of our university, and not its decline.

I thank you.