



The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor

PROF MANDLA MAKHANYA

PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR'S ADDRESS: MEETING NEW STUDENTS

13 MARCH 2017

- Programme Director:
- Members of executive and extended management
- Professor Michael Temane – Acting Registrar
- Acting Dean of Students:.....
- Members of Unisa's NSRC and all our Regional SRCs
- Most importantly, new Unisa students

Good day and a very warm official welcome to the University of South Africa, Class of 2017! A warm welcome too, to those returning students who have successfully completed a year's study and are now moving on to the next level. To you I say well done - long may your success continue!

Allow me to begin with a very famous quote, which many of you may have heard, but whose wisdom endures yesterday, today and tomorrow.

"Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that a son of a mineworker can become the head of the mine, that a child of farm workers can become the president of a great nation. It is what we make out of what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person from another. Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."—
[Nelson Mandela](#)

If we were to ask you what Unisa means to you and why you elected to study at this university, what would your response be? If I were to ask you how much you knew about Unisa before you registered, what would you tell me? I am often amazed by how little our students, and even our graduates, know about Unisa and so I hope that this session will help you to appreciate what an amazing university you belong to. So besides welcoming you as new Unisa students today, I would like to tell you a bit about this wonderful institution. By doing that I hope that you will share in my pride in Unisa; that you will be proud, proactive and diligent Unisa students; that you will understand a bit more clearly what role Unisa is playing in the socio-economic development of this country and Continent; and that you will do all in your power to protect this national asset.

I would also like to tell you about the kinds of support that you can expect from Unisa, and what will be expected of you as a Unisa student and perhaps even offer you some words of wisdom - wisdom that has been gained over many years of study and which, if you take it to heart and apply it, will contribute to the successful completion of your studies and to your development into accomplished students and scholars.

Unisa is unique globally, in terms of it being a formal and subsidized part of our higher education sector and in terms of its quality assured and accredited offerings. That is very important, because it means that your degree has the same value as a degree from any other university in South Africa. We should never underestimate that. Unisa is not second-rate. We educate our students using a different model.

No other institution can compare with us internationally or nationally, in terms of the numbers of accredited graduates that we produce, (in increasing numbers by the way) year, after year, after year; despite the challenges that we are dealing with in regard to service and systemic efficiencies and more recently socio-economic and political upheavals. We are a huge national asset. Let me share some of those numbers:

Last year, Unisa has hosted 116 graduation ceremonies, during which we awarded a total of 47 777 degrees, diplomas and certificates. This number included 243 doctorates and 1 011 master's degrees. No other university compares, in this country or on the continent. This year we will host more than 140 graduations and the number of graduates will continue to grow.

When it comes to our contribution to South Africa, the figures for 2015 indicate that:

- 20.9 percent of all South Africa Graduates come from Unisa – that is one-fifth of all South African graduates.
- Unisa produce nearly 21% of all South African Education Doctoral degrees (which includes 56% of all Foundations of Education qualification, 23.4% of all Teaching, Leading and Researching in School Contexts [grade R and Foundation Phase], and 73.5% of Teaching and Learning Support).
- We produce nearly 25% of all Business and Commerce degrees (which includes 29.1% of all accounting and related service degrees, 41.9% of all Business Administration, Management and Operations Degrees, 21.5% of hospitality administration/management, and 18% of Business Economics and Management studies).
- We produce 21.5% of Communication, Journalism and related studies graduates; 22.25% of Language Linguistics and Literature graduates; 27% of Philosophy, Religion and Theology graduates; 18.4% of Public Management and Services graduates, and 26.6% of Social Services students.

Unisa students, Unisa is, without a doubt, South Africa's key contributor of graduates, and a genuine national and continental asset. We enrol more than one-third of all higher education students in South Africa and the majority of African graduates from outside of Southern Africa. So, believe in yourselves as Unisa students, and believe in Unisa.

Once you have completed your qualification and you graduate, you will become a Unisa alumnus. I can tell you that Unisa alumni, are to be found in every level of society, business and industry and best and most productive citizens and business people in the country, the continent and the world.

But what do we know about you, our students?

Unisa is the only dedicated DE University in South Africa. Although the White Paper on PSET (2013) opened DE to all universities, statistics show that DE enrolments at most of the residential universities have declined and those enrolments tend to focus on niche areas of provision (such as teaching at the University of Pretoria). Advances in technology have seen some of the Historically Advantaged Institutions (HAIs) offering exploratory online courses, but so far these have tended to be administered in partnership with external companies such as EDx. There is no large scale provision of distance education programmes apart from Unisa, at the moment.

Unisa's student body has traditionally been, and largely remains, mature adults. At present the provisional 2016 student profile is as follows:

- for the age group 18 – 24, is 21.13%;
- age 25 – 29 is 25.78%;
- age 30 – 34 is 20.63% ;
- 35 - 39 is 14.12%;
- 40 – 44 is 9.58%;
- 45 – 49 is 5.12% and
- 50 and above is 3.65.

This means that only 21.13% of Unisa students are deemed to be young, school leavers. The rest are mature students, the majority of whom are working or unable to afford, or qualify for, face-to-face education. In fact, Unisa’s mandate is to focus on predominantly mature students.

It must be remembered that when we speak about a “full-time student” at Unisa, it doesn’t mean that same as it means to UJ or WITS or UP. It merely means that these are students who are unemployed and who regard their studies as a full-time responsibility. In terms of Unisa’s constituting statute, in other words, legally, Unisa is a dedicated *distance education* institution and the entire reason for distance education is that it can happen from a student’s location – anywhere, any time. There is for example, no legal or policy provision for students’ residences and these would most certainly not be funded by government, because Unisa students study at a distance.

It is in fact somewhat problematic when students who regard themselves as full-time, feel that they are entitled to have the same university experience as students at our contact universities. We are not able to provide that because we are distance education. We only get 50% of what the face-to-face university gets in government subsidy for each student at undergraduate level, *precisely* because we are a distance education university. Furthermore, focusing on the demands of so-called full-time students is unfair to the vast majority of students who do not see themselves as full-time, but who are fully entitled to the same student benefits and experience.

As an academic institution we aim to reinvigorate our reputation of quality and excellence in our course and content design and development, and to produce excellent and highly skilled, quality, graduates. But being a quality graduate means making the most of that quality education. It means aiming to be the best and it means more – much more – than just enjoying the social life that goes with being a student. There is a time for play and then there is a time for work, and I can guarantee you that our most successful students and graduates are those who manage to get the right balance between the two.

Second, Unisa regards itself as an authentically African university and a core part of our institutional mission is to create amongst our staff, students and the public-at-large, an appreciation of our African history and heritage as lived, interpreted and articulated by Africans themselves. We see this as a process of education and enlightenment, of exposure to additional and alternative narratives and as a process of conscientising this generation and those to come to a history and legacy of which so many are unaware. Essentially, we see ourselves as serving South Africans and Africans towards an expression of quality higher education that can be benchmarked against the best in the world.

Our distance education character is also reflected in our regional structure which includes 7 regions, namely Gauteng; KwaZulu-Natal; Limpopo; Midlands; Mpumalanga; Eastern Cape and Western Cape. Together these comprise a total of 27 hubs, service centres and agencies which service many thousands of our students. I can assure you that we strive continually to provide the same levels of service to everyone in the regions but I will acknowledge that this is not always easy or even possible – mainly because of challenges that we experience around infrastructure. But it is something that we continue to address.

So what kind of support do we offer our students? How do we go about making your study experience more successful and more rewarding?

From the moment you apply at Unisa every system that is in place in the University is galvanised into action with the sole purpose of ensuring that you receive the best study experience possible. I will mention a number of these, but there are many more and it is seldom that we are not able to address and resolve legitimate students' queries and needs.

The Unisa Directorate: Counselling and Career Development supports students before, during and after their Unisa studies. We provide career, academic and personal guidance and counselling to prospective and registered students in person, by telephone, e-mail, letter or fax or printed publications. The resources provided on our website and in print provide you with the opportunity to develop the skills that you need to manage your studies, your career and your life. How are these services provided?

- In-person: You can see a counsellor or academic literacies facilitator in person.
- Workshops: Career- and academic related workshops are offered at each centre. Contact the centre closest to you to find out about the programme.
- Telephone: You can speak to a counsellor or academic literacies facilitator telephonically.

- E-guidance and counselling (counselling@unisa.ac.za): We provide an e-guidance and counselling service to prospective and current undergraduate and postgraduate students regarding career decisions, qualification and subject choices and orientation to studies at Unisa.
- E-consultation (acalit@unisa.ac.za): Unisa's Reading and Writing Services support the development of student reading and writing through online facilitation for students who are unable to attend individual consultations and workshops. Facilitators help writers develop effective strategies for academic reading and writing. This service is aimed at both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Students can send extracts of their writing (at a maximum of 10 pages) to acalit@unisa.ac.za. The turn-around time for on-line assignment feedback is 10 working days. Please note that assignments are NOT edited. Rather, facilitators give students guidelines about how to improve their individual writing.
- Online: Our website contains information about career, personal and academic issues. The aim is for you to be able to help yourself with the option of contacting us through e-mail, telephonically, by fax or letter or in person should you get stuck.

And of course we have our Unisa library, the largest on the Continent, which has just won an award for being the 13th largest online repository in the world. I would encourage you to tap into these wonderful resources as you enrich your student experience at Unisa and as you strive to be quality students.

All of this information and more can be found on the myUnisa website and I would like to urge you to make this website your "NBF" – your *New Best Friend*. It has *all* of the information you need - and more. You must make your Unisa mail address your default address because this is your key channel of communication with the university and your lecturers. You can download and upload your assignments, check your account and read up on all of the services that are available to you as a Unisa student.

I hope you have all already checked out the <http://togetherwepass.co.za/unisa-brochure-2017/>. This online brochure offers information and everything that you need to know and how to go about doing it. It provides step-by-step direction that are really simple to follow. I have tested this site myself and it is really quite impressive. You can even read about what is happening at Unisa and in so doing you can share in the life of the University. Unisa also has its own facebook and twitter accounts, as well as a large number of youtube videos, so join in and become *facebookers*, *tweeters* and *youtubers*. And please, don't forget our Unisa Radio which is a vibrant and very informative

platform of information and topics focused on our Unisa students. With all of this information at your fingertips you should never feel alone as a Unisa student. So don't tune out – plug in!

The point to be made is that as an Open Distance Learning institution and as South African students we have to move with the times and sometimes that means adjusting to uncomfortable situations. This is the 21st Century and you are a new generation who will be facing challenges that my generation never imagined. You have to adapt or you will be left behind. I can assure you that the discomfort of change does not last long. It is soon overcome by a sense of pride in having mastered and learned something new and in realising that you are in fact equipping yourself for a future in which you will be a valuable, productive citizen. So for those of you who are able to, I would really encourage you to use the online facilities by all means possible. Over and above the need to ensure that you are comfortable with technology, you will find that the acquired skills and competencies will make your lives a lot easier on a day-to-day basis. I can tell you that the momentum has really begun. By far the majority of our students are now registering online and the use of myUnisa is growing day-by-day.

For those who don't yet have access to computers and the internet, I can assure you that the University is working very hard to help you to remedy the situation. But of course that involves a number of stakeholders, including government, who is responsible for ensuring that the necessary broadband infrastructure is in place to be able to connect to the internet. In the meantime you will be able to choose to have your study materials posted to you or e-mailed to you.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the Office of the Dean of Students and the role that it plays in the strategic growth, management and development of Student Affairs. Your SRC, represented here this morning, resides in this portfolio.

Unisa takes pride in the fact that we have an engaged SRC that is showing growing maturity in the execution of the responsibility that has been entrusted to them. As a university we believe that the SRC has a voice and a contribution to make where our students are involved, and we are working very hard to provide a productive framework for that to happen. The University has made it clear to the SRC that we expect of them to provide disciplined leadership within the national and regional structures in a way that not only demonstrates a clear understanding of their mandate, but that also shows an appreciation of the need for sound, ethical and transparent governance, and tolerance for other views and voices.

Equally importantly, your SRC leaders must provide leadership in their own conduct and example as students. In other words, we expect our SRC members to be exemplary students just as we expect you to be exemplary students! You are after all, all Unisa students. They must succeed in their studies just as you must. The SRC is called to serve you, our students, in terms of their mandate and the trust that has been placed in them, and in order to do so they must listen to you and be in a position to advise you and support you correctly and in good faith, on higher education issues. I am pleased and proud to say that I believe that we do have an SRC that listens to you and that is open and willing to learn - for example, about the context and functioning of the higher education environment and about leadership and management. This is very encouraging because it demonstrates a mature understanding of the complex business of ensuring that all voices are heard in ensuring a quality, conducive higher education environment and experience for our students.

Finally, a few words of wisdom from someone who has spent many years as a student myself. In fact I am sure you have heard it all before. Discipline, discipline, discipline. That's it. As an ODL student you need to take *full* responsibility for your own studies. There is plenty of advice available on planning your studies – use it and implement it. It gets very frustrating when I receive complaints from students about a lack of service and about lecturers being unavailable when in fact all they are looking for is information that is in their tutorial letters or on the website. All of the information you need is provided to you in advance of your studies. It is your responsibility to make sure you access and use it properly. Keep to assignment due dates - they are provided to all students – and don't expect the university to bend the rules because you have been too lacking in discipline to finish and submit on time. If there is a problem at the university, such as the ones we had last year, please remember that we will never punish our students for that. We will make sure that our students are accommodated and we will communicate with you using a variety of means including *sms's*, So please make sure that we can contact you at all times and also, make you that you check in on your mail account regularly.

When you submit an assignment, do the very best you can. I can assure you, if you can't even be bothered to put in the time and effort at this stage of your studies, you won't make it. It might sound harsh but it is the truth. Cultivate good study habits now and you and your families will be rejoicing at your graduation in a few years' time. Don't just pack in your studies because you are facing personal challenges or because you think there will be another chance to complete later on. That is a defeatist attitude. In life you will be faced with many challenges, many curved balls, and you will have to deal with them and overcome them. That is your responsibility and no-one else's. Unisa students have to be tough - a lot tougher than almost all other students. Unisa students have to be

proactive. They have to help themselves. Nothing will be handed on a silver platter. You have to seek out your own information and make it happen. But let me tell you, that is why Unisa graduates are so sought after. They do not have an entitlement mentality and by the time they have graduated they have learnt to work independently and proactively and to go and get what they want. They are consummate go-getters! These are qualities that will serve you in your lives and in your careers.

You also need to take responsibility for your behaviours and your health. Without those you will have a very limited future. Embarking on higher education represents a new phase in your development as an independent young person. You are no longer a child under tight supervision but a young adult who must rely on your inner strength and wisdom to guide you through life. You will be exposed to many new influences during this time in your lives – some good and some bad. Choose wisely and responsibly. Make sure that you are informed and that you behave in ways that protect your health and your safety. Avoid factors that compromise safe behaviour; equip yourself for your roles and obligations in society and make use of the campus health services for advice, help and support. Being a student is so much more than just studying. It is a preparation for life - for successful life - and all aspects of your development need to be attended to.

Lastly, don't see this certificate, diploma or degree as the end of the road. Become lifelong students and dream big. If you have the patience and discipline and if you put in the hard work, there is no reason why you cannot reach the highest level of education or the highest level of success in your chosen career. ODL studies produce very special graduates. They are proactive, independent, self-disciplined and self-starters – all qualities sought after in the workplace – all qualities which make for successful, mature and rounded human beings.

On behalf of Unisa's management I would like to wish you the very best with your studies. May you do yourselves, your families and Unisa, proud!