



The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor

PROF MS MAKHANYA, PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR, UNISA

1st EXTENDED MANAGEMENT LEKGOTLA

KGORONG BUILDING, MUCKLENEUK, UNISA

10 – 11 April 2017

***RECLAIMING THE ACADEMIC SPACE: GETTING BACK TO BASICS:
QUALITY, EXCELLENCE AND SERVICE.***

Thank you Dr Fikeni and good morning colleagues

Introduction

This lekgotla is the first of two strategic sessions aimed at revisiting Unisa's role, relevance and impact in the higher education environment;

the institutional strategy; and progress on the implementation of the strategic goals and objectives in line with the APP.

Given the current volatility in the global and national HE environments, Unisa needs space to reflect on the challenges it is, and will be, facing, and how these will be addressed. We are operating in an environment where we are likely to lose our reputation and prestige if we do not address the problems that are currently confronting us, be it with our systems or our service to our students or anything else that calls into question our preparedness to do our work: endangering our dominance of the ODL environment and our status as a quality HE provider of excellent graduates. Furthermore, Unisa is facing challenges around declining student numbers and de-accreditation, which can be linked directly to quality issues, poor administration, weak communication and a worrying lack of relevance amongst others.

This meeting will be used to address these challenges and to determine what needs to change or be implemented, to ensure that the risks inherent in these challenges can be mitigated in the implementation of the strategy. This needs to happen in alignment with the progress we have made on the 2016 APP and the planning that needs to be done to ensure that the issues raised at this lekgotla can, where necessary, be factored into the 2017 APP.

Background

Colleagues, it is now widely acknowledged, and this is supported by a growing body of research, that Distance Education has morphed into a diverse agglomeration of traditional, private and for profit providers, the vast majority of whom purport to be able to provide open access to affordable (or free), quality education to students via a plethora of modes that currently 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 can be operationalised. Every provider calls what they are offering “Education”.

This has resulted in a lack of clarity in regard to commonly understood and traditional notions of Distance Education and its subsequent iterations, both globally and nationally. Traditional DE providers are being subsumed in this opaque environment with two key outcomes:

1. A dilution of the traditionally understood conceptualisations and practice of quality assured and accredited distance education globally, with a resultant decline in esteem and acknowledgment of these typologies and their qualifications.

2. Excessive and competing demands on the academy to be a competitive player in the global online movement while simultaneously trying to adjust and adapt to a dynamic and volatile environment, including the national environment (including particularly, the regulatory environment), have complicated the space within which we are working and that has brought with it new and additional demands and challenges. This is affecting both the academic space and the conduct of teaching, learning and research, as well as our operations, and is impacting on aspects such as service and quality; especially in regard to course content, pedagogy and student support.

I am of the view that the most effective way to tackle these challenges decisively, is by *reclaiming the academic space* and *getting back to basics*. Those basics are very simply: **quality, excellence and service**. Our academics need to reclaim the academic space and re-energize the excellent quality and service for which we have been renowned and in which its reputation has been vested.

The Extended Management Lekgotla

We have to ask ourselves a question whether the academy is in a slump. If that is the case, then we are in trouble. We are facing two threats i.e., firstly, de-accreditation if we don't pay attention to quality, and secondly, the attack from students as our service remains at intolerable levels. We have a lot on our plates and we have to appreciate that we cannot operate successfully and effectively in isolation of our context. It cannot simply be *business-as-usual*. We can no longer allow the academe to be a casualty, and I am of the view that our academics will need to step into the breach and take charge of their own destiny, so to speak. Our academics will need to reclaim their space and drive scholarship to excellence. Colleagues, I believe that our scholarship is not realizing 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.

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. Now, more than ever before, we are being challenged from all sides, 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, I'm sure I have no need to remind you that assets can lose their value if they are not maintained and developed.

So, some questions that we need to be asking ourselves this morning as we engage with one another are:

1. What vision of excellence do you desire for your Portfolio/College/Department and how are you fostering this in line with the institution's vision?
2. How do you feel about your own development as academics and support staff?
3. What would you like to see being done to instill the pride that should accompany excellence and inspire loyalty?
4. Do you know and understand your student profiles and how each grouping needs to be catered for in terms of communication, service and support? Are you using the vast data base that is available at Unisa to assist you in this regard? (both the library and the Department of Institutional Research, Analysis and Business Intelligence)
5. What are our students struggling with academically and how are you using innovation to address these challenges?
6. To what extent are you supporting one another through these difficult times and what collaborations are you engaged in to this end?

7. What are you doing to produce cutting-edge relevant content and pedagogy?
8. To what extent are you engaged in and contributing to relevant national and global research and dialogue?
9. Are you managing your Portfolios/Colleges/Departments optimally, believing in a one-size-fits all approach? Have you for example considered the Semester *versus* Year module pros and cons?

These are but some of the matters I would like us to consider as we weigh our challenges against the progress we have made on the 2016 APP and as we develop the input for the 2017 APP.

Colleagues the reason why this is so important, is because since the inception of formalized planning at Unisa, we have consistently struggled to get the balance right between vision and viability – between perceived possibility and pragmatism. We have consistently over-estimated our capabilities, not appreciating fully I believe, the impact of an increasingly restrictive and prescriptive regulatory and compliance environment. We have tended to learn reactively, from bitter experience, rather than planning proactively and pragmatically: resulting in too much going-back-to-the-drawing board, not to mention wasted time, capacity and financial expenditure. We have not yet built in the necessary institutional agility that we need to adapt to the volatility of the environment and the

increasingly *ad hoc* nature of planning and management in this environment. Research and the social media have been articulating this changing context for years, and yet we have consistently glossed over this in our planning – from the bottom up. Who in your portfolios is doing the environmental scanning that produces the research that must inform your scholarship and planning?

Essentially, when it comes to planning and implementation, we have over time “*made a rod for our own backs.*” Sadly, one suspects that we are sometimes so overwhelmed by our fraught environment that we tend to lose sight of the uniqueness and impressiveness of this university; of what we have accomplished; and of the impact that we are making in the country, our continent and the world - and 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. And when I see the huge amount of time and effort being expended by colleagues in Mancom and I assume we have a similar situation in executive committees of Colleges and Departments, I must come to the inescapable conclusion that we are *working hard and not smart*. Only we can change that, and change we must.

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. I can assure you that I am committed to doing everything in my power to retain our status as the premier distance-education university in South Africa, our continent and globally. A significant part of that is involving Unisa academics in reclaiming the academic space. (We are not yet an African University – we are becoming one – we are not yet inclusive – our students feel excluded. If we are serving – to what end? Service should be selfless and I don't see that. We need to work towards that. Until we get there we can't say that we already are an African university. It is incumbent on all of us to take charge and make it happen. We need to understand what we mean when we say quality graduates – we can't just claim that we produce them. We need to understand what it means.) We need to interrogate ourselves as leaders of this August university and make the change.

I would like this lekgotla to be the formal inception of that process.

I thank you