



The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor

PROF MS MAKHANYA, PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR

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ZK MATTHEWS HALL, MUCKLENEUK CAMPUS

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Building a dynamic high performing university for the 21st century:

Shaping futures 140 years on....

- Madame Programme Director, Professor Divya Singh
- The Chairperson of the Council of the University of South Africa, Dr Mathews Phosa
- Members of the Unisa Council
- Pro Vice Chancellor, Professor Narend Baijnath

- Members of Unisa’s executive and extended management
- Staff and students of Unisa
- Honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen

A very warm welcome to you all this morning. Allow me to echo the well wishes of our Chair of Council, Dr Mathews Phosa. I trust that 2013 will be a year of great achievement – both for ourselves and this vibrant institution, which for the majority of us, is our home away from home.

Although it seems that we have been back at work for ages, there is nevertheless something really exciting and energizing about new beginnings and the untainted hope that they bring with them. I think our Chair has very aptly and realistically sketched the kind of commitment and determination that is required to turn that hope into a reality and I suppose the question that we should all be asking ourselves, is: “Do I have what it takes?” I believe that we do, and I look forward to working with you in realising our aspirations this year.

I have titled my address: **Building a dynamic high performing university for the 21st century: *Shaping futures 140 years on....*** because it encapsulates not only the future that we aspire to, but also the past that paved the way and informed the Unisa brand which has become a ubiquitous feature of our South African landscape and heritage. I would go so far to say that Unisa is as South African as “pap

en wors,” much loved by generations of students whose key characteristics are their drive and their diversity. I deem it a privilege to lead this remarkable institution and I am really excited about the role that we have to play in contributing to the growth and development of our country and its people, and our continent.

We would all agree that education in South Africa, and not just higher education, is going through tough times. On Monday this week, we held an Organisational Architecture workshop to discuss the best possible business model for our students in an increasingly digitised future. Various colleagues gave presentations that left one in no doubt as to the seriousness of the challenges that we need to overcome. We were confronted with deeply worrying statistical data on student demographics; a very clear digital divide; a socio-economic milieu which is marked by massive disparities and deprivation; financial constraints; lacks in capacities and skills – the list is endless. But colleagues, that is our reality, and as Dr Phosa mentioned, we need to roll up our sleeves and get on with it – and I believe that we will.

But you know there was another aspect that emerged from the workshop, and that was the genuine excitement and enthusiasm amongst the staff about the opportunity that they have to play an influential role in crafting a future for the Unisa students, that will

ensure that they are able to move into the workplace well equipped and confident. We are actually part of something that is truly innovative. We are moving into a higher education future that is so fluid and mercurial that no-one can predict with any certainty where we will be in 10 years' time, and we are being called on right here and now, to provide a solid foundation for that future. While we may feel intimidated by that, we would do well to remember colleagues, that we are standing on the shoulders of giants – men and women who have not only walked the same path, but done so fearlessly and successfully. I believe that we will be equally successful. As one colleague said very firmly: “You know, you keep on speaking of training us academics and getting us on board for a technological future. Don't underestimate us – we are quite capable of doing what needs to be done.” To that I say: “Well said!” It is that kind of attitude that will ensure our success, bearing in mind that we are in fact shaping the futures of every individual.

Unisa has consistently produced quality graduates – not only for South Africa but also for the world. The contribution over the past 140 years has been major - huge - and I can assure you that if you were to sit in on any high-level meeting in any company in the country, you would find one or more Unisa graduates. Almost without fail on my travels,

Unisa is the university that is acknowledged first when one mentions that one comes from South Africa. Everyone knows Unisa. We are a well-known global brand, and there is a huge store of goodwill towards us. So we need to ask: “What does that national and global acknowledgement mean for us at Unisa?” Are we in danger of compromising it and if so, what do we need to do to build on it?

Aligned with the changes in higher education emanating from innovations in technology and socio-economic and political fluctuations, is the undeniable fact that we are facing a teaching and learning crisis. The situation in South Africa echoes the global picture and is not limited to Unisa. Despite massive increases in enrolments, success and throughput rates are disappointing to say the least, and questions are being raised – quite justifiably some might argue - as to whether the public is getting an equitable return on their tax Rands. The drop-out rate is simply unacceptable, and while we know and understand many of the reasons for this, we need to begin to address in a more concerted manner, viable means of turning the situation around. At Unisa this will not only entail designing appropriate learner support solutions, but it will also mean looking at our own contributions – the guidance, advice and support that we give to our students through our contact and our assessment. At a recent

discussion on semesterisation at Senate, I mentioned the fact that although I am quite pleased with our progress in Teaching and Learning, Research and Innovation and Community Engagement, there is most definitely some cause for concern.

The Degree Credit Success Rate has shown an upward trend since 2008 on both UG and PG below Masters level. However, although it would seem we are reaching Ministerial targets, we should not be patting ourselves on the back. There is much room for improvement. In fact, one could be forgiven for thinking that we are going for “quick wins” especially at undergraduate level. We must improve our degree success rate which is not very impressive at all, especially when compared with our sister institutions. These are all matters that we will address together. As the largest HEI in the country we should be making a far greater contribution than is currently the case. Clearly we need to improve our efficiencies, but while efficient service delivery is in itself an institutional goal, we should never forget that its attainment is ultimately intended to drive and ensure quality and excellence in our core business: Teaching and Learning, Research and Innovation and Community Engagement.

Colleagues, we need to bear in mind that everything that we do at Unisa is aimed at providing our students with the best possible learning

experience and ensuring that they graduate from our institution with the knowledge and competencies that will facilitate their success in a *very* dynamic national and global environment. Where we previously had a clear understanding of the kind of “graduateness” that would continue the success and quality of Unisa graduates, that too is changing as our world gets to grips with the consequences of the technological revolution. Fewer people are being employed world-wide and those who are employed need to be skilled very differently. So we need to ensure that our teaching and learning are appropriately responsive to those dynamics, and in good time. Our failure to do so will impact adversely on our students.

The research that we do should both innovate and contribute to our African articulation and production of new knowledge. I am pleased to say that this is an area at Unisa that is really showing solid gains. We also need to bear in mind that universities are no longer ivory towers, but deeply rooted in, and responsive to, the communities that we serve, and the needs of our country. That is our purpose colleagues, and that is what underpins our every effort.

Of course, being appropriately responsive means that we all need to be on the same page; not only in terms of our core business, but also in terms of the mindset, ethos and culture that will contextualize our

efforts and ensure that they are expended in a conducive, encouraging and affirming environment. To that end I have tasked Senate Teaching and Learning Committee, under the leadership of the Vice Principal Academic: **Teaching and Learning**, to work together at coming up with an institutional *Charter on Teaching and Learning* that outlines with clarity and purpose, the desired ethos and the commitment of the academe to the highest order of teaching and learning, research and innovation and community engagement. In line with our practice of ensuring that the institutional voice is heard, I envisage that this will be a broadly consultative process and that the end product will align seamlessly with our Service Charter and our Charter on Transformation.

Colleagues I am very excited about this project because I believe it will create a space for self-reflection and engagement with what it really means as individuals and as a collective, to be highly professional and effective educators in a very dynamic environment. You will recall that I spoke last year of the need to open up spaces for reflection and deeper engagement, to the extent that we begin to “rewire” our thinking patterns, our engagement with our colleagues across the institution, and the exercise of our professions. This is one such space, and the question begs – do we lead or do we follow? I look forward to your answers. There is one thing we can be sure of - our continued

relevance and our competitive edge are not assured merely by dint of our current status as the only dedicated distance education in the country. That is changing as we speak, so the ball is in our court.

When it comes to our delivery model, as an institution we have taken a decision to move increasingly into an online teaching environment. I mentioned that on Monday we held an Organisational Architecture workshop, during which several presenters sketched scenarios and shared views on teaching and learning in an online environment. The response was largely positive, with agreement being reached on a deliberate and steady move forward from a blended model to online delivery, in line with our social mandate and cognizant of the country's needs. The process has already begun and as we proceed it will be carefully monitored, evaluated and adjusted to derive the best possible outcomes for our students. One key issue that emerged from the deliberations was the cost factor, and it was made very clear that we will need to strategize carefully to ensure that we apply our funding and our resources judiciously, fully aware of our fiduciary *and* moral and ethical responsibility to ensure Unisa's sustainability, and to be worthy stewards of our country's resources. We are a public institution and we work with public funding. We cannot and will not engage in wasteful expenditure. We are fortunate indeed that Unisa is amongst

the best managed institutions in the country when it comes to our finances, and this is a status which I intend maintaining.

Colleagues, while we have an ethical responsibility in regard to our financial management, that ethical responsibility extends beyond mere finances to every aspect of our daily functioning: to the way in which we interact with one another; to our professional conduct; to our stewardship of Unisa's resources; to the quality of our teaching and learning; and to the service that we deliver to our students and our other stakeholders. Last year we began a systematic process of promoting and inculcating the notion and practice of an ethical, risk-averse institution. That process will be deepened and extended this year. Our Chair of Council is quite justifiably proud of our corporate governance model at Unisa and he has actively promoted its development, in line with King III, to include risk, ethics, co-operative governance and sustainability. We are the leaders in this field, so much so colleagues, that I think that it would be a very good idea to establish a School of Governance at Unisa – in fact, this is something which I will take up with yourselves as members of our university community, our Senate and our Council. While some colleagues may associate governance with business, that would be rather short sighted. If ever there was a time when sound corporate governance was needed in our

country - it is now, and if Unisa can play a key role in teaching and inculcating the appreciation and practice of good governance in our country, then I believe that it is to be encouraged. So Mr Chairman, I think we will need to have some discussion on that.

Colleagues we are embarking on a very big year. I will share some of that shortly. But as we do so, it is important to understand that in all that we do at Unisa, in all of our celebration and activities, Teaching and Learning is at the centre. It can never be subsumed into any agenda – it is our agenda. I cannot emphasise enough how important your role is, in ensuring that our students succeed in their studies; in understanding that you are laying the foundation of these men and women's lives – in appreciating that their futures hinge to a very significant extent on the manner in which you exercise your profession. And if you do indeed appreciate that then you need to be excited about your work. I think Dr Phosa said something like: *Those who don't get carried away should be*. That about sums it up. We need to reflect on our own work and the impact that it can and does have on our students – and we have to take it seriously. Similarly we must raise the bar and be high performers in research and innovation as well as in community engagement.

Finally colleagues, I will be conducting my usual regional and institutional visits this year. But this time I will be asking staff to share with me gaps that they have identified in the way in which we do things at Unisa, and suggestions that they might have for improvements. These will all be taken into consideration as we move into our next strategic phase. I would ask that you apply your minds thoughtfully, bearing in mind what I have just shared on teaching and learning, and that our students are at the centre.

At our closing assembly last year I shared the story of Unisa's *Idomeneo* sculpture and how, at its installation, then Principal and Vice-Chancellor, Theo van Wijk described *Idomeneo* as "*a symbol of the university, a radiance that is at once both spotlight and beacon, searching for and enticing all those who would gain by studying through distance education at the university.*" Using my mosaic analogy, I spoke of the need for Unisa to be agile in the current higher education environment. By changing and shifting its shape and form (the changing mosaic pictures and patterns) in line with emerging higher education needs and priorities, but nevertheless retaining the integrity and individual capacities of every single staff member (each piece of the mosaic), Unisa will be able to shine its multi-hued light into the future for many years to come – still a beacon of hope and possibility. I

suggested that *Idomeneo* had become a symbol of all that Unisa stands for and of the potential and promise that it embodies.

On walking to the Theo van Wyk building these past weeks one has noticed the famous Unisa brand “flames” and other Unisa brand symbols exhibited in a colourful mixed horticultural display. (And our thanks should go to our garden staff for their innovation and commitment to our brand.) But I wonder how many of us know what those flames and the other brand elements stand for? The Unisa brand identity is rich in African iconography, drawing inspiration from African philosophies of community, learning, time, unity, hospitality and strength. The Unisa flames are an African symbol of unity and humanity, signifying the University’s central role in providing service to humanity, as well as the interdependence of the African community and various University stakeholders.

Colleagues, I don’t know about you, but I find a wonderfully concrete pattern of continuity in these two works of art which are coincidentally positioned quite close to one another. They provide a daily reminder of who we are: *The African University in the Service of Humanity*; what we provide – *a quality education experience*; and what we are - *a symbol of the university, a radiance that is at once both spotlight and beacon,*

searching for and enticing all those who would gain by studying through distance education at the university.

Today we will be acknowledging and recognizing a number of staff whose efforts and commitment mirror those of our colleagues who have gone before us ensuring that Unisa is able to hold its head high nationally and globally. We are proud of them and we congratulate them. They provide an example for us to emulate. As we move into a new and exciting year and future – may we all let our lights shine, keeping alive the hope, the opportunity and the excellence for which this grand old institution is renowned.

I thank you