



*The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor*

**PROF MS MAKHANYA, PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR  
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA**

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS: GALA DINNER: RESEARCH AWARDS CEREMONY  
4<sup>th</sup> FLOOR FUNCTION HALL  
KGORONG BUILDING  
UNISA MUCKLENEUK CAMPUS**

**3 March 2016**

- Madame Programme Director, Dr Genevieve James
- Professor Les Labuschagne, Acting Vice Principal: Research, Postgraduate Studies, Innovation and Commercialization, and members of Unisa's executive and extended management and staff here present
- His Excellency JJ Baril, Ambassador of Haiti
- Dr D Selematsela, Executive Director of the National Research Foundation
- Dr D Parker, Deputy Director General: University Education, DHET
- Mr OSM Lebeso, Member of Council
- Mr H Bopape, Director: Directorate of Research Support
- Unisa's student and labour formations
- Our honoured guests this evening: recipients of our research awards
- Our entertainers this evening, the New Kopano Quintet
- Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

A very good evening to you all. On behalf the Council and Management of Unisa, it is my pleasure and honour to bid you all a very warm welcome to our 6<sup>th</sup> Unisa Research and

Innovation Awards Ceremony.

At our academic opening and the installation of our new Chancellor, Dr Thabo Mbeki, former President of the Republic of South Africa, this past Monday, our university was treated to a celebration that epitomized the joy that is so much a part of African celebrations. Much more than that though, the event showcased the esteem in which Unisa is held, through the acknowledgement of its seminal role in higher education, nationally and on the Continent.

Speakers praised Unisa's contribution to South African higher education as they emphasized our impact on the socio-economic development of this country and continent. What was particularly significant ladies and gentlemen, was the acknowledgement by the Minister of Higher Education and Training, the honourable Dr Blade Nzimande, of Unisa's contribution to the national graduate pool, as well as our improvement in research outputs - and the importance of *both* in regard to our national development. It was a telling moment that vindicated publicly the huge amount of work being done by Unisa's academics to contribute to and participate in a meaningful and measurable way to South African scholarship.

As facts and figures were quoted I was struck anew not only by our cumulative impact on South Africa and this Continent's development over the years, but perhaps more importantly, by the uniqueness of Unisa, the value of its human and infrastructural capacity, and perhaps more importantly, the massive potential that we have, to shape and grow in a very fundamental way, quality African education. This was something that was openly acknowledged by our speakers throughout.

There *is* no other university on the Continent that is better placed than Unisa, to drive and to a significant extent, direct and shape the transformation and developmental agenda that is currently gripping our country and continent. And I speak here not only in terms of the more traditional understanding and practice of research as part of the core mandate of our universities, but of scholarship, which includes both research and teaching and which implies that as we focus on our five niche research areas as a university, we should also be focusing on the research that needs to be conducted and applied in the redrafting and redesigning of our courses and their content, to reflect our African context and relevance in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century world.

If I look at the number of awardees on our programme this evening – well over 60, then I know that we have a wonderful pool of expertise and commitment on which to draw as we continue building on the successes of the past.

Colleagues, there is much work to be done. Despite quite rapid growth in outputs, research emanating from Africa stands at just over 2% of the global total with approximately 1% of that total emanating from Sub Saharan Africa.

While increased research outputs are critical across all disciplines (and this has been achieved at Unisa), in 2016 Unisa's best performance was in the sciences. Well done! I hope that we will see this trend continue. We are duty-bound to claim both our voices and our intellectual spaces in national continental and global discourse and practice. The time is now and I find it hugely exciting and invigorating.

But in order to be able to do that optimally colleagues, we need to establish what has been done in our university already and we need to leverage and build on that. I was, for example, struck by the Minister's mention of our institutes and the valuable developmental and social justice roles that they are fulfilling. I am also aware of the huge repository of knowledge that Unisa has in its library, representing really up-to-date-and relevant research that has been conducted by our own staff as well as our post grad students. We need to tap into that as well. We also have a number of working groups, such as the one that is headed by Prof Leonie Steyn, which is looking at the relevance and quality of our course content. All of this capacity needs to be identified, pooled and leveraged to the benefit of scholarship at Unisa.

My exhortation to you this evening then, as we celebrate your achievements and successes, is that we renew our focus and "up-our-game" to ensure that our scholarship is focused on strengthening our university towards becoming a leading provider of postgraduate programs on the Continent.

Our Research, Postgraduate Studies, Innovation and Commercialization Portfolio provides a space where innovative thinkers flourish; and the good news is that they reward innovative ideas. Driven by a desire to both explore new worlds and to apply new ideas to real-world problems, research at Unisa is not conducted only by academics and graduate students. Research opportunities are also provided for professional and administrative staff, making research a truly university-wide enterprise. Our commitment to advancing women in research, and especially black women, is a matter of pride and is bearing fantastic results. Fundamental to our approach is a commitment to excellence and support for our early career researchers, emerging research leaders and researchers from designated groups. It is quite simply, the right thing to do if we are to meet and overcome the challenges posed by our developmental state, and the imperative for genuine and lasting transformation.

The Joint Science Academies' statement: *Science and technology for African development* asserts:

“African countries must be able to develop, adapt and exploit scientific and technological solutions appropriate to their specific needs, otherwise they risk becoming ever more dependent on advice and assistance from the developed world.....*Without embedding science, technology and innovation in development we fear that ambitions for Africa will fail.*”<sup>1</sup>

In fact, given the current “decoloniality” emphasis, it is only appropriate that we should be asking about the relevance of our research to our society, our country, our continent and the world that we all inhabit. Is it - can it be - a quality force for transformation? I would suggest that that it must be. Are we confident of the relevance of our research to our national and continental developmental agendas such as the NDP, Africa Agenda 2063, and the 2016 SDGs? Unisa’s historic MoU with the African Union Commission, and its profile as a key participant in the Continental developmental agenda, has given rise to research and innovation expectations that will have to be thoughtfully considered and managed. There is a lot to be gained from considered partnerships. Our membership of BRICS has for example, opened up many valuable collaborative research opportunities, and since the partnership was launched we have been engaged in a number of very exciting, mutually beneficial projects.

After a week of showcasing our research and innovation programme under the theme: “Research Matters” I think that we would agree that Unisa is a true home to researchers and a centre for innovation - a place where boundaries are pushed, new thinking is sparked and knowledge is shared – even across disciplines. This week has seen you being inspired by many local and international thought leaders and experts in a way and to an extent that demonstrates very clearly, that Unisa is indeed, *serious about research*.

Tonight we have gathered to honour our brightest and best for their professionalism, their consistent dedication to research and innovation and the demonstrable success that they have achieved. Well done to you all, for your dedication and your commitment to your disciplines and for striving consistently for excellence. It is not easy conducting research while teaching. It requires of you to go the extra mile – and this is often at the expense of those at home, and so we thank your families and significant others as well for their support and sacrifice.

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<sup>1</sup> 3. <http://www.interacademies.net/File.aspx?id=6431>

To our awardees this evening, thank you for your dedication, your professionalism and your sacrifice. We are honoured to acknowledge your efforts and achievements tonight. We salute you, congratulate you and share in your pleasure and pride.

I thank you