



The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor

PROF MS MAKHANYA, PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR
KEYNOTE ADDRESS: GALA DINNER: RESEARCH AWARDS
CEREMONY
6 March 2015

- Minister Naledi Pandor, Minister of Science and Technology
- Recipients of our research awards.
- Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

A very good evening to you all. On behalf the Council and Management of Unisa, it is my pleasure to bid you a very warm welcome to our celebration this evening – a fitting finale to intense, week-long programme on research and innovation at the University of South Africa.

The theme of our 2015 Research and Innovation week has been simply, ***“Serious about Research.”*** And indeed, Unisa is serious

– and excited – about research and innovation. Unisa aims to advance the realization of excellent research and innovative solutions that address important national and global questions, and contribute to the economic, social, cultural and environmental well-being of South Africa and the African continent. Unisa’s geographical reach - nationally and on the continent - as well as its high public visibility, provides significant opportunities to work alongside government researchers and the policy-makers who initiate and guide national research initiatives in government departments and science councils.

Our Research and Innovation portfolio is focused on strengthening our university towards becoming a leading provider of postgraduate programs on the Continent. They provide 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 fostered for professional and administrative staff, making research a truly university-wide enterprise.

This is something of which I am also particularly proud. Unisa has demonstrated an innovative response to a growing global

reality in higher education: that 21st Century higher education institutions need to employ, highly-qualified administrative professionals and experts who will ensure the implementation of the academic project, as well as the efficient and effect administration of the institution. It is for example, the ICT, financial, management and governance experts who will be called upon to do this, and it is only fitting that they should be seen as an integral part of our research cohort.

Fundamental to our approach is an unrelenting commitment to excellence and support for our early career researchers, emerging research leaders and researchers from designated groups. Here again I can tell you that Unisa's support and incentivisation of its researchers, is the envy of many of our peers, but we have a profound belief that it is the right thing to do if we are to meet and overcome the challenges posed by our developmental state. And if our long list of awardees is anything to go by, we are succeeding in our research strategy and mission.

However, in embarking on our research, we need to adopt a pragmatic approach that is calculated to ensure the relevance of our research and the judicious disbursement of the funds that have been entrusted to us. We must surely guard against

producing research such as the following, which are not likely to contribute much to the development of humankind:

- Several researchers at Shiseido Research Centre in Yokohama came out with a study concluding that people who think they have foot odour do, and people who don't, don't.
- The State University of New York at Albany released a report entitled "Chicken Plucking as Measure of Tornado Wind Speed.
- The University of Surrey, England performed a study called "The Possible Pain Experienced During Execution by Different Methods." They concluded that in spite of the perception that most forms of capital punishment are relatively painless - with the exception of intravenous injection, this view is almost certainly wrong.
- The University of Bristol performed a study that was published in Nature Magazine on the optimal way to dunk a biscuit.

While one is left in no doubt that human curiosity has been satisfied, the question must be asked, to what end? How is this possibly relevant to the growth and development of society?

Globally one discerns a growing trend towards *targeted* or *niche* research, whose aim is aligned to national developmental agendas. This is very likely as a consequence of the global economic squeeze and the pressure being placed on Universities in particular, to do more with less. In our case, South Africa finds itself in the midst of ongoing, deep structural socio-economic and political challenges and it is 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. As key generators of new knowledge, we are called to ensure that our research agenda and foci, and our research initiatives, will make a measurable contribution to national growth and development (in our case the developmental trajectory is set out in our National Development Plan).

This undertaking should also be cognisant of the continental development agenda which is currently articulated in the Africa Agenda 2063. 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. Our membership of BRICS has for example, opened up a veritable Pandora's box of collaborative research opportunities, and we are already engaged in a number of very exciting projects that have been made possible by this membership.

The challenge for universities and researchers today, I would suggest, is to find the optimal balance between research that accommodates the entire spectrum of scholarship, which adds to the body of knowledge, but which may *not* foster national development *per se*, and research that fosters the national agenda. Many institutions the world over still find themselves with curricula that perpetuate outmoded disciplinary traditions, while in many cases, real world problems now require trans-disciplinary approaches. At Unisa we have taken deliberate steps to accommodate transdisciplinary research, in acknowledgement of that real-world paradigm.

Transdisciplinarity in the manner which Cheikh Anta Diop practiced, offers rich possibilities for intellectual research and dialogue on Africa.¹ When one considers that such eminent scholars as Kwame Anthony Appiah, Achille Mbembe, Dismas

¹ Nabudere, *Cheikh Anta Diop*, 24.

Masolo, Jean Omaroff, John Comaroff, Elias Bongmba, James Cochrane, and Paul Zeleza, have also studied Africa from interdisciplinary perspectives² then one begins to appreciate the value of this kind of research for Africans and for Africa.

In addition, while we take seriously the assertion in the new White Paper on Post-Secondary Education and Training (2013) that all higher education institutions should conduct research, this is done cognisant of the concomitant call for collaboration and the optimal leveraging of our resources. Research and innovation in South Africa today demand broader participation; they must become part of the societies that we serve. We need simultaneously to innovate, *and* conduct research that will make a concrete, measurable contribution to our development as a people, nation and continent.

Much of our research is publicly funded, and given our developmental challenges and the overarching imperative to develop an African expression in the generation of all new knowledge, we do have a moral obligation and indeed, responsibility, to utilise our funding for research that will contribute meaningfully to the amelioration of our situation. For the moment, we do not really have the luxury of

² Elias K. Bongmba, *The Dialectics of Transformation in Africa* (New York, n.y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

conducting research that has a very limited interest and application or that is conducted merely in pursuit of personal edification. As much as our hearts and our natural inclination long for the freedom and funding that will allow us untrammelled research, we need to be pragmatic and look at ways of channelling those inclinations and passions into research that will contribute more manifestly to our developmental goals and aspirations. We have a lot of work to do!

“Examples from the Newly Industrialized Countries (NICs) and from other emerging nations such as Brazil, China and India, where sustained economic growth have been achieved, indicate a strong determination to build indigenous science and technology capacities. It is evident from their R&D expenditures and the number of researchers per million inhabitants. The NICs spend US\$66 per inhabitant while China spends \$17, India \$11 and Africa \$6. Sub-Saharan Africa has 113 researchers per million population compared to China’s 454, India’s 151 and NICs’ 595. We should have these figures in mind as we chart visions and dreams of industrialization by 2010, 2020 etc.”³

The Joint science academies’ statement: Science and technology for African development asserts:

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

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.*

At Unisa, under the very able leadership of Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng, we most certainly are *embedding science, technology and innovation in development* towards the advancement of social and economic empowerment.

Tonight, after a week of showcasing Unisa's research and innovation programme, 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. As we salute them and congratulate them we share in their pleasure and pride.

Allow me to leave you with these very profound words by Peter Morville: **"What we find changes who we become."** Let me leave you with this challenge: "What will your contribution be to who we become?"

I thank you

It is now my honour to introduce to you our next speaker, Minister Naledi Pandor, Minister of Science and Technology.

Minister Naledi Pandor is South Africa's Minister of Science and Technology. A life of exile from 1961 until 1984 resulted in an international flavour to her education. She holds a BA from the University of Botswana and Swaziland and an MA in Education from the University of London. In 1992 she studied for a Diploma in Higher Education, Administration and Leadership at Bryn Mawr in the USA. In 1997 she completed an MA in Linguistics at the University of Stellenbosch and a Diploma in Leadership in Development at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, while she was serving as an MP. She became an MP in 1994 and has amassed impressive experience in positions of public office, including deputy chief whip of the ANC in the National Assembly from 1995 to 1998, deputy chairperson of the National Council of Provinces in 1998, and its Chairperson from 1999-2004. Her experience in education policy planning made her a welcome appointment as South Africa's Minister of Education from 2004-2009. She was appointed Minister of Science and Technology in May 2009, and Minister of Home Affairs in October 2012. She was again

appointed as Minister of Science and Technology in May 2014 following the 5th democratic elections in South Africa. The Cape Peninsula University of Technology and Stellenbosch University have awarded her honorary doctorates.

You are most welcome, Minister Pandor.