



*The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor*

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

**THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE 2017 ACADMIC YEAR AND THE  
INSTALLATION OF THE CHANCELLOR, PRESIDENT THABO MBEKI**

**ZK MATTHEWS HALL, MUCKLENEUK CAMPUS**

**27 February 2017**

***The African University shaping futures in the service of humanity***

Thank you Programme Director, Dr Somadoda Fikeni.

I greet you all on this very special day in the history of the University of South Africa.

In the life and journey of any university there are defining moments that mark its history just as celestial objects align in the deep skies to mark the dawn of changing seasons. What we are witnessing today is one such special and historic occasion. We are hosting three very important, distinct and yet related events.

- The academic opening of the academic year in which we highlight our achievements and set the agenda for the year, as well as recognise individuals for their academic achievements.
- The launch of a book, *Degrees of Excellence*, that profiles outstanding South African, continental and global figures who have received honorary degrees from this university for the profound impact they made in our society and on humanity in general.
- And we are also installing our new chancellor. Of great significance is the calibre and global stature of President Thabo Mbeki, a towering African intellectual, who is assuming this role.

My address will, therefore, depart from its conventional format on this important occasion and I hope that our university community will pardon me on this one.

As we meet in this auditorium which has hosted many historic events over many decades, we are conscious of the gaze of an African intellectual giant of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Professor ZK Matthews, after whom this auditorium is named. His granddaughter and our current Minister of Science and Technology, Minister Naledi Pandor, has also graced this occasion. Professor Matthews was instrumental in crafting one of South Africa's most important documents, the Freedom Charter, which has shaped the constitutional destiny of this country and influenced democracy on the continent.

A hundred years ago, South Africans heard tragic news of the sinking of Mendi in which over 600 black South African volunteers participating in the First World War perished in the freezing waters of Europe. Also in 1917, South Africa would also receive a gift of life as the late President of the ANC Oliver Reginald Tambo was born in a village near Bizana. He became a political giant and a servant leader with a great heart. I can only imagine what he might have said about his protégé, President Thabo Mbeki, today. I can only be left to ponder in the workshop of our

minds. Forty years ago, in 1977, we also witnessed the naked cruelty of the apartheid regime when one of the intellectual giants of our liberation struggle, the late Steve Bantu Biko, died in a prison not far from here. He would have been 70 years this year.

When the three universities, Unisa, Technikon South Africa, and Vista Distance Education Campus merged in 2004, a mega university was born which now enrolls more than 350,000 students. But what matters most is not the size and reach of Unisa, but its intellectual and academic influence in shaping the futures of our graduates in the service of humanity.

The installation of a chancellor always marks a new era in the life of a university. In our case, we are welcoming a leading intellectual who has defined the African agenda for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and who has been instrumental in crafting what became the African Union and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), and has facilitated Unisa's programme to be a leading African university in the continent's development. 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. Opening the 2017 academic year therefore

represents another phase of our long history since 1873, including more than 70 years as a premier distance-education university which has alumni of in excess of seven hundred thousand in South Africa, across our continent and around the world.

South African higher education has been beset by a wave of protests that has rocked its foundations in the last two years on a scale that has not been experienced since the advent of our democratic dispensation. The demands for a free education, dramatic transformation and social justice are at the core of these uprisings. The key constituencies of universities have proactively created spaces for constructive engagement to define the futures, as our Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande, has directed. Minister Nzimande has challenged us to provide leadership in this era of change.

My interactions with colleagues from across the world also indicates that challenges facing South African public universities are not unique. Elsewhere difficult and complex questions about the role and purpose of universities are also being interrogated. Universities, as centres of knowledge creation, ought to be at the forefront of finding solutions to socio-political and environmental problems that threaten our existence.

Equally important is higher education's introspection about the human resources, thought leaders and societal leaders it needs to produce.

Unisa embarked on its profound transformation programme a few years ago and this, I'm pleased to say, has yielded credible results. Current events simply heighten the sense of urgency. In 2014, Unisa Council approved our current Strategy 2030 which, among other things, seeks to reposition Unisa as the leading Africa-centred and Africa-focused university, which is globally competitive. Unisa today is host to the highest concentration of Africa-focused centres and programmes.

Annually we host international conferences which focus on the decolonisation of knowledge and on social and academic transformation. Unisa changed its language policy in 2016 to create a meaningful space for and development of indigenous languages. We have also set up an institutional mechanism to review and transform our curricula across colleges. A forum has been established to ensure maximal participation in this process. This is designed to move university transformation beyond the usual rhetoric and symbolism to concrete, implementable programmes.

We will therefore focus on the recommendations of the South African Human Rights Commission Report on Transformation at Public Universities in order to articulate a clear plan, which will draw on the policies, practices and Council-approved Unisa Strategy for 2016-2020, to lead transformation in higher education. This means profiling our transformation goals, implementing our human-resource recruitment and retention policies, improving the academic performance of our students, giving substance to our revised language policy through its special Unit, and inculcating multilingualism in our communication. We also need to respond to recommendations in the report related to curriculum and pedagogical transformation to achieve academic and social justice, as well as gradueness in the context of a developing economy.

Moreover, we need an urgent overhaul of our institutional culture to promote inclusivity and ethical governance. Perhaps most importantly in the present crisis of higher education, we must face head-on the challenge of student funding and the allocation of financial resources within the university. In leading change in 2017, we have therefore decided on a theme for the year: 'Transforming Unisa: Academic and Social Justice for Development', and we have devised a programme of seminars and roundtables which will open up debate and give direction and content to our transformation strategy and plan.

In October 2013, Unisa signed a collaboration agreement with the African Union Commission and we already have programmes that are in place to realise the objectives of the AU Agenda 2063. Since 2011, Unisa has provided training in the Management of Democratic Elections in Africa. Thirty-nine countries have participated. Unisa is one of the universities selected to host the Obama-Nelson Mandela Young African Leadership training programme. We are also collaborating with various government departments to advance our developmental state and its national goals.

Moreover, Unisa has signed a collaboration agreement with the Africa forum, which is an association of the former heads of state and leaders on the African continent. We have established a unique state-of-the-art Nano-science laboratory facility on our Science and Engineering Campus in Johannesburg, thus demonstrating the wide range of advanced academic offerings of our comprehensive, open distance learning university. The many other achievements and flagship programmes is too long to be mentioned in this opening address.

I therefore ask you to engage as constructively as possible in our mission, because if Unisa is to be properly transformed for a new era

under President Mbeki's chancellorship, we have to work together. We have to find common solutions and we need to locate ourselves in African ideas, philosophies and contexts. We have to find a positive way forward for our tens of thousands of students, staff and alumni, as well as our donors and sponsors, not to mention the wider South African and continental community which is eager to see us *be* 'the African university shaping futures in the service of humanity'. The time for talk is over. We have to live our vision.

Today we also recognise the achievements of our staff. Our successes should be celebrated without losing sight of higher goals. Our research record has been consistently impressive. Unisa's accredited publications increased by 53 per cent between 2011 and 2015 and the preliminary data for 2016 confirm this upward trend. Since 2013 our research outputs have grown by more than 13 per cent annually. This is extremely gratifying for a comprehensive university and makes us very competitive, even with research-intensive institutions.

In 2016, Unisa awarded a total of 47 777 degrees, diplomas and certificates. This number included 243 doctorates and 1 011 master's degrees. Among these were many of the leaders in South Africa and on the continent. No other university compares, in this country or on the

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

- 21 percent of all South Africa graduates come from Unisa – that is one-fifth of South African graduates.
- Unisa produces more than 20% of all South African doctoral degrees in Education and 73% of graduates in Teaching and Learning Support.
- We produce nearly 25% of all Business and Commerce graduates, which includes 29% of all accounting and related service degrees, 42% of all Business Administration, Management and Operations degrees, 21% of hospitality administration/management, and 18% of Business Economics and Management graduates.
- We produce almost 22% of Communication, Journalism and Media Studies graduates; 22% of Language, Linguistics and Literature graduates; 27% of Philosophy, Religion and Theology graduates; 18% of Public Management and Services graduates, and 26% of Social Services students.

As this portfolio of evidence shows, Unisa is, without doubt, a major contributor to the South African knowledge economy through its graduates, and is clearly a national and continental asset. We enrol more than a third of all higher education students in South Africa and

the majority of African graduates. Today we also acknowledge the excellence of our graduates in the annual awards at under- and postgraduate level.

Unisa has a proud recent history reflected in the book, *Degrees of Excellence*, compiled by a former Registrar, Professor Louis Molamu. It reads our democratic past through the lens of honorary graduates of our university, especially those who have promoted human rights in South Africa and beyond. It is in many ways a celebration of our democratic thought leaders and intellectual activists whose visionary leadership earned the respect of Unisa, beginning with the global icon, the late President Nelson Mandela.

It is a *who's who* of bold leaders across many fields and disciplines in our modern history, from notable women in struggle politics and parliament, Rivonia trialists and prominent justices, to liberation poets, musicians, religious leaders and researchers. It recognises the contribution of international figures, such as Kofi Annan and our new chancellor. President Mbeki's role as a revolutionary activist and advocate of the African Renaissance is prominently profiled in this beautifully produced volume in which we celebrate Unisa's honorary

graduates of 1994 to 2014. We are indeed privileged that our new chancellor brings such knowledge, experience and stature to Unisa.

The commemorative volume, *Degrees of Excellence*, captures the spirit of Unisa as 'a university of the people' across boundaries of race, class, gender, creed and nationality, fully committed to social justice as well as intellectual excellence. It also reminds us that the social obligations that accompany rights become even more important in times of transformation. Universities dare not remain aloof when inequality persists and knowledge is lodged in colonial archives.

We need to exercise our rights with a strong sense of how the majority has been excluded from the citadels of learning and research. Ultimately, Unisa should deepen its connection with community as a reciprocal knowledge partnership. We therefore take pleasure in launching *Degrees of Excellence* at the 2017 Academic Opening.

The strides made by Unisa in the past years are the result of the combined efforts its various stakeholders -- council, management, academics, administrative staff, labour unions and students. I would like to acknowledge the outstanding role of our past chancellor, Judge Bernard Makgabo Ngoepe, and the previous council leadership and

Vice-Chancellors who laid Unisa's foundation. If we forge common interests as a Unisa family to advance the knowledge project, I believe that nothing can stop us.

The installation of our new chancellor will simply give us more impetus. In times like these, I am sure I speak for all of us when I say that we are proud to be African. We face the future with bold conviction that Unisa will achieve its bold vision of being 'the African university shaping futures in the service of humanity'.

Nkosi Sikelela iAfrica

Nkosi sikelela iUnisa