



*Office of the Principal and Vice Chancellor*

Vice Chancellor and Principal, Prof Mandla Makhanya,

Address to the University Community.

ZK Mathews Great Hall, Theo van Wijk Building

Muckleneuk Campus; Pretoria

-  Programme facilitator
-  Members of Unisa management team
-  Academic and administrative staff members
-  NSRC, leadership of student organizations and students in general
-  Representatives and leaders of Unisa statutory bodies
-  Representatives and leaders of Unisa labour organizations
-  Distinguished audience and member of Unisa family

I greet you all and welcome you to this important gathering. Let me also express my appreciation that you have honoured my invitation to attend this Assembly. In the aftermath of the protests and industrial action that impacted on the normal operations of our university in the last two weeks, I felt that I

needed to call you to this meeting in order to communicate with you directly on what has happened, what has been resolved, and the continuing work that still needs to be done to resolve some of the more complex issues. In addition, I must share with you the recovery plan for student services particularly the applications and registration processes. However, most importantly, I want to share with you my plan for the future to ensure that Unisa deals with the current and anticipated challenges in a more effective, creative and proactive manner that ensures the sustainability of Unisa. I don't intend to give you a long treatise or thesis on these challenges, their implications as well as their possible solutions. Rather, I shall highlight salient issues, mindful of the fact that some details will be provided in various units of the university and even more important, to assure you that this is the first of many engagements and conversations with the university community and its stakeholders that I will be holding on a regular basis to allow space for deeper reflection on the direction of our university and collective work in identifying solutions to our problems. This session is also designed to present Unisa's official position on issues that have received various interpretations, sometimes contradictory messages, in the social media and in both print and broadcast media.

As we gather here today we have just emerged from two weeks of turbulence and uncertainty mainly over the issue of the working conditions of workers who are in the employment of service providers. Firm and bold steps have been taken to resolve these issues, as stipulated in the agreement of the 22 of January 2016 that was communicated to the university community. The Unisa Council, at its special meeting of 23 January endorsed and further reinforced the steps taken.

In August last year our university also experienced protests over the challenges facing students and this matter was attended to with steps taken to resolve the issues concerning students. Both the first student protests and the more recent strike and protest action are, in many respects, part of unprecedented nationally organized campaigns for relieving the financial burden on students and the improvement of their study conditions as well as a call for the end of outsourcing that is associated with poor conditions of workers contracted under these services. As we tackle some of these issues we must be mindful of their national character and institutional context and manifestation.

As I stand here before you I would be the first one to admit that even though important steps have been taken to resolve the aforementioned challenges, the most complex and crucial work lies ahead as we have to deal with fundamental issues at the root of these challenges to ensure that their resolution is irreversible and solutions are sustainable. Whilst these are deep challenges we must seize this opportunity to mobilize everyone to work towards a better university that is able to deliver on its core mandate of teaching, learning, and research to enhance our societal impact. Out of these challenges let us create the right environment and generate a positive spirit that will define this moment as a turning point for Unisa on our journey to a better Unisa that lives up to its promise of being “The African University Shaping Futures in the Service of Humanity” as proclaimed in our Vision Statement.

Negative energy, inter- and intra-stakeholder conflicts, and perennial tensions between management and staff or stakeholders will only achieve the opposite and the university will always be the net loser. Let us engage openly, honestly and in a robust manner on the issues: however, I want to stress that these engagements must always be conducted constructively and in a manner that is sensitive to human dignity and acknowledges the rights of every person. I will

do all I can to create this positive and conducive environment as we reposition ourselves to deal with great challenges of our times and seize all opportunities available to our institution.

#### **A. OUTSOURCING AND INSOURCING ISSUE**

Early in November 2015 I consulted stakeholders and shared my intention to proactively tackle the issue of outsourcing and insourcing. Steps were taken to establish a multi-stakeholder task team. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of December of last year this matter was escalated to our Council. Council approved insourcing as a principle position of Unisa and further urged that an inclusive and broad Multi-Stakeholder Task Team be established. On the 8th of December 2015 efforts to convene stakeholders to give advice on the council decision on the creation and composition of a new Task Team were aborted due to poor participation of stakeholders. With the commencement of the 2016 academic year, the issue of the establishment of the Task Team was again raised with council with a call for the urgent establishment of the task team and a claim that management was dragging its feet in establishing the multi-stakeholder task team. This was coupled with demand for immediate end to outsourcing and the absorption of workers working for contracted services, who are mainly in the area of security, cleaning, garden and catering services. The reported

expulsion of two employees of a security company who were described as being victimised for participating in demands for insourcing seem to have been a trigger point for the protests and strike action that followed. During this period Council leadership was being briefed on a regular basis on the situation and on the steps being taken to resolve issues. After a standoff of almost two weeks and aborted engagements which impacted on operations of the main campus and the registration centre at Sunnyside, I convened a meeting of my management and a range of university stakeholders on 22 January 2016. In this meeting an agreement, whose content has been communicated to the university community, was reached that led to an immediated end to the protests and the strike action.

I will highlight some decisions and steps taken to resolve this matter. A Multi-Stakeholder Task Team has been established and its composition is being finalized. Advocate Terry Motau has been appointed as an independent chairperson of the Task Team and his deputy chairperson is in a process of being appointed. The appointment of the independent chairperson and the establishment of the Task Team are council decisions as the matter was escalated to council level. The Task Team will have strict timeframes with regular reports to council. It is expected that by June or even earlier the work

of the Task Team will have been completed and recommendations approved by Unisa Council. I urge each and every one of you - particularly participating leaders of structures and units - to give their maximum support to the work of the Task Team and also to give it space to succeed in dealing with these complex issues around outsourced services and the intended insourcing.

In the meantime, Unisa management is embarking on a process of engaging with the service providers to ensure that they assist in addressing issues reflected in our agreement with the stakeholders. Moreover, the university will, within a very short space of time, ensure that every one of the service providers comply with legislative requirements for the employment conditions of service.

## **B. STUDENTS AFFAIRS AND REGISTRATION PROCESSES.**

We must always be reminded of the fact that the core mandate of any university or institution of higher learning is the academic enterprise of teaching and learning as well as research. Students are the primary stakeholders at the heart of an academic enterprise. Greatness or weakness of any university is judged through its performance in the area of its academic

enterprise and this is an outcome of a range of factors, from excellent student support services and quality of academics mainly indicated by the quality of teaching and learning.

In the last ten years Unisa has seen the most dramatic increase of its enrolment numbers in its effort to answer the national imperative of providing access to higher education. This increase in numbers was not accompanied by commensurate increase in resources and facilities. Moreover, there has been a fundamental shift in the profile and demography of an average Unisa student from the traditional middle to old age working part-time learner to young fulltime learners with a different set of demands. University has been trying to deal with this backlog in the last few years. I will not bore you with the details of last year's agreement in resolving student issues that included re-opening of examination venues in areas easily accessible to students, the reversal of the acceptance fee payment within ten days as well as the events that led to the announcement by government of a no fee increase for 2016 academic year. As you all know, there is still the national call for free education by students, something that the presidential commission is looking into.

A solid IT platform is crucial for any university support services and operations and it is profoundly more important for a mega Open Distance Education institution like ours. Unfortunately, last year we identified some concerning weaknesses in some of our vital IT platforms handling applications and enrolments. Some of these platforms are not articulating with one another. This created a challenge that has impacted on our ability to effectively handle applications and general registration. Disruption of registration process in the past two weeks further compounded this problem. An emergency task team made up of different affected units has been established to effect a recovery plan to deal with the backlog and resolve outstanding issues. A two week extension of registration has been implemented and widely communicated. We are putting extra resources in place and opening support and enquiry services for an extended period to allow for students to register and receive support within the shortest possible time. The Registrar and his unit will be updating current and prospective students in greater details on the extraordinary measures we have put in place. We are also putting extra efforts in making sure that study material is dispatched to students and the material that was damaged during the recent strike is reprinted and dispatched. I would like to take this time to apologize for any inconvenience that students have experienced and make an undertaking that we shall spare no effort in resolving

the remaining and outstanding issues. I am informed that a majority of cases have been resolved but I am mindful of the fact that the outstanding cases and the waiting period are grossly inconveniencing affected students. Hence, a need for an urgent resolution of these challenges.

There are longstanding problems that have impacted negatively on our academic enterprise and student support services. In an effort to come up with a permanent sustainable solution to these challenges, Prof Songca, the Dean of the College of Law, has been appointed to chair a multi-stakeholder Task Team to focus on identifying problems and crafting solutions.

### **C. NATIONAL RESPONSES TO CHALLENGES AFFECTING UNIVERSITIES**

As I indicated earlier, the challenges afflicting universities, particularly the issue of fees and the demand for free quality education was escalated to the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande, who initially pronounced on a 6% fee increase ceiling after consulting with university leadership and student leadership. But this matter was further escalated to the president of the country who pronounced that there would be no fee increase for 2016 and also established a commission to look into the issue of the

implementation of free education. As university principals we have also been engaging, sometimes lobbying, government and the president in our quest for resolution of current challenges facing our universities. I will update the university whenever there are new significant developments on our engagements with government or on any policy changes.

#### **D. IMPLICATIONS OF CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS FOR UNISA**

It is expected that both the “Fees Must Fall” and “Outsourcing Must Fall” campaigns will have resource and financial implications for the universities in South Africa. While some government intervention is given to financially assist universities to deal with the expected decrease of student fee contributions, it is unlikely to make a substantial contribution given the challenges of our national fiscal situation. Universities will then be left to deal with the outcome of insourcing as well as the shortfall of student fees. To illustrate the point, when Minister Blade Nzimande announced a 6% capping for fee increases Unisa had to make a downward adjustment to its projected income of R84, 317 640 million rands. The no fee increase or 0% increase translated into a R289 million shortfall for Unisa. Critical to note is that Government has made a contribution to cushion our financial burdern , but the University is still left with a shortfall of R86,7 million that will have to come from our own coffers.

This has forced Unisa to adjust its budget and indirectly some of its operational plans. We shall share with you the full financial impact once the picture is clear and certain after registration. There may be need for further adjustment as the situation is fluid and punctuated with many uncertainties. This calls for more efficiency in our operations but making sure that quality is not compromised. This is a complex task that will need cooperation of all of us and appreciation of the prevailing circumstances. It can no longer be business as usual. This calls for resource consciousness at all levels.

#### **E. TURNAROUND PLAN FOR UNISA**

As part of dealing with the challenges outlined above I have come up with a turnaround plan that will need our collective and individual commitment and maximum participation. At this stage I will not elaborate on the detail of the plan but the final touches are being put to it and we will communicate it to the university community shortly. It will suffice to highlight salient aspects of this plan.

- A. Development and implementation of a more effective communication and stakeholder engagement strategy. This will include improvement of relationship between and among stakeholders as well as agreement on the terms and principles of engagement.

- B. Establishment of a resource mobilization and fund raising entity to assist students especially the category that is now called “The Missing Middle.”  
A concept to develop a Unisa Shaping Futures Fund is being finalized and will also involve participation and mobilization of our alumni through The Unisa Convocation. I have already established the Vice Chancellor’s Bursary Fund that will be open to contributions from management and staff alike.
- C. An initiative to launch the Unisa Transformation Programme
- D. An Academic Enterprise Task Team to look into challenges facing student support from registration to teaching and learning as well as examinations.
- E. A review of IT platforms to ensure proper integration, migration and articulation for effective support of the academic enterprise.

In closing, this is a turning point and a defining moment for Unisa. Every step we take at this juncture will make or break Unisa. I, therefore, appeal to you all to support and participate fully in the programmes that will advance Unisa and take us to the next level. We also have to be realistic as the challenges we face are complex and cannot be fixed in one week and there is no shortcut if we are to address fundamental issues at hand. I do not promise instant solutions nor

do I anticipate a journey without setbacks but it is exactly these challenges that we should anticipate and deal with relentlessly. I also appeal to leaders of stakeholders to accommodate and accept each other as well as cooperate in our quest for solutions as tensions between and among stakeholders can only hinder progress and agility in dealing with real challenges. Collectively and individually, as leaders, we must be prepared to take difficult decisions in the service of Unisa. Here I am reminded of the Ethiopian proverb which says “The man who is not hungry say a coconut shell is hard.” We should be driven by hunger for success of this institution such that we will find no obstacle too hard to overcome.

I would like to conclude with the insightful words of wisdom from our global icon, Nelson Rolihlahla Dalibhunga Mandela, when he concluded his book, Long Walk to Freedom. He writes, “I have walked a long walk to freedom...but I discovered that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. But I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my walk is not yet ended.” By now many of us have come to realize the responsibilities that come with freedom as well as many hills that Unisa still need to climb. We overcame challenges of the past, we overcame complex challenges that marked the merger process

and I am convinced that we shall, working together, overcome the current challenges. But let me be clear, it can no longer be business as usual. We must commit that we must do things differently if we are to rise to the occasion and reposition Unisa as a leading Open Distance Learning university. Let us go back to our workplaces, let us go back to our study spaces with a deep sense of conviction that out of these challenges there is a real possibility of a new dawn and a new season in which the promises of our Vision 2030 will become real.

I thank you.

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