



*The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor*

**PROF MS MAKHANYA, PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR**

**ACADEMIC ASSEMBLY, MUCKLENEUK CAMPUS**

**15 April 2016**

- Prof Gugu Moche: VP Academic: Teaching, Learning, Community Engagement and Student Support
- Prof Mamokgethi Phakeng: Vice Principal Research, Postgraduate Studies, Innovation and Commercialisation
- Executive Deans, Deputy Executive Deans, Directors of Schools, Chairs of Departments
- Members of Unisa's academe

Thank you Professor Moche and a good morning to you all colleagues

At our Academic Opening and our first Senate in March, I spoke of the disruptive start to our year and of the need for us to focus on that which we have been appointed to do. For the academe, that means scholarship. And not just scholarship, but *quality, relevant* scholarship within the context of our new Strategic Plan 2016, especially Focus area one. You will no doubt be working on the implementation of the objectives under Focus area 1 going forward, and I'm sure you will be workshopping these quite extensively in your colleges. So what I would like to do is speak at a more strategic level, about the enormous impact that you can and will make as the academe, if we get it right.

At the beginning of this week we had our first Extended Management Lekgotla, during which our portfolio managers shared the *status quo*, expectations and challenges in their portfolios, in relation to the 2016-2020 strategy. And you know, as we grappled with those, and as I reflected on the

complexity and interconnectedness of this huge institution that is Unisa, I realised that we are sometimes so overwhelmed by the details, that we lose sight of the impressiveness of this university; of what we have accomplished; and of the impact that we are making in the country and the world.

So I thought it would be timely to remind us all of a few truths about Unisa.

Unisa is unique. As I travel the world, including in my capacity as the President of the ICDE, I have come to realise that we are one of the very few dedicated distance education institutions in the world, that I know of, that is a formal part of the government's higher education structure, that is funded by government, that enrolls more than one-third of a country's students, and that offers formal, quality assured and accredited qualifications that are acknowledged nationally and internationally by many countries and institutions, especially commonwealth countries. It often bothers me that we spend so much time badmouthing ourselves, when in fact we should be celebrating and marketing our uniqueness.

Now our minds might turn to the OUUK as an example for benchmarking, but they have changed their business model and they are currently dealing with the outcomes of that. Let me just say that there have been repercussions. I would encourage you all to conduct a little research to update yourselves on the success of some of those models that we have tended to use as benchmarks.

I can say unequivocally that when it comes to formal learning, Unisa is working, and working well, in an ODeL environment which quite frankly, is now so diverse, that it makes benchmarking and comparisons around business models very difficult, if not pointless. "Social learning," which in many cases refers to informal learning, as well as other forms of non-formal learning hold sway at the moment, with profit being the motivator. Internationalisation (especially in Europe and North America), Quality, and Leadership and Governance are gaining increasing traction as key trends. Are we as academics discussing this amongst ourselves? I have to say that I feel a real sense of assurance when, in this very large, dynamic unstructured ODeL environment, and at all of the conferences that I attend, I *know* that Unisa *is* International; Unisa *has* accredited, quality assured programmes and Unisa *is* arguably the leader in the area of higher education ethical leadership and governance. Make no mistake colleagues, in the world in which I live and move as Unisa's VC and as for example the President of the ICDE, Unisa is an asset of the highest order.

There is no ODeL institution nationally or internationally, that I know of colleagues, that is producing the numbers of graduates with formal quality-assured qualifications that we are. Furthermore, we

have just seen some 25 000 students with *both degree and non-degree qualifications* crossing our stages – and that is just our first series of graduations. 25 000 is a staggering number, proof if we wanted it that we are doing something right. And pleasingly, our success and throughput rates are increasing steadily, although we continue to work on improving them. Prof Moche will be able to share that progress with you.

Colleagues, we also have a good story to tell when it comes to our research and the performance of our M and D students. It is most gratifying! There has been *marked* success and improvement in our outputs and our ratings and this speaks as much to the professionalism and commitment of the academe as it does to the efforts of our students. Prof Phakeng is there to share this with you.

So why then is there such a sense of isolation- almost sadness - amongst so many of our academics? Much of it I suspect, has to do with the many changes that we have been obliged to undergo since the merger – which jolted some out of what was a very comfortable, well run, relatively small, professionally established academic environment, into a comprehensive, mega university with dissonant cultures and huge numbers of very different students. That process has never really let up, and when accompanied by what many perceive as disrespect for their professionalism and their disciplines, in favour of the ascendancy of the support function, this has in some instances, lead to despondency and withdrawal on the part of academics.

This year colleagues, *must* mark the turnaround of that status. It is my own, and the desire of management and Council, that Unisa’s academe re-invigorates and reinvents itself to a status of collective pride: in your disciplines and professions; in this truly unique university; and in the quality of the qualifications that we offer and the students that we produce.

I am regularly asked, what happened to collegiality? Well, *we* happened to collegiality. Somewhere down the line, we simply stopped being the kinds of academics that we were trained to be and, I suspect, we succumbed to apathy.

Now let me say right upfront that there were undoubtedly reasons for some of that, but equally, there is never one transgressor in the equation. I must say too, that I think there may have been a creeping conflation of the transactional and the pedagogical environments in the thinking of some. Ultimately the transactional environment *must* be fully online as is the case with every university. All universities are “going online” administratively. That is a matter of efficiency, agility and service. The extent to which the same will happen in regard to *pedagogy and research* colleagues – is up to you. There is a model in place. There is a strategy in place – but the *quality* of our content, the

quality of our teaching and our mentoring of our students, and the quality of our research is not only up to you, but it is also public reflection of your calibre as academics. Equally, the degree of effective, workable integration between the scholarship and transactional environments will depend as much on you, as it will on the support staff.

From this year in particular, we are going to try by all means to support you in revitalising your craft and the environment in which you function. And administratively I can assure you that no effort is being spared in bedding down the best possible transactional environment, so as to ensure that seamless integration that we all crave.

But colleagues, even if this university ran like clockwork administratively, I would like to suggest that we would still have a rather dispirited academe, and it is in this regard that I am calling upon you all to re-engage – particularly with one another. I am aware that this is happening in pockets across the university but what is required to get this massive academic engine that is Unisa firing on all pistons, is collective, concerted and deliberate engagement – at a personal level, socially, and of course, around your disciplines. Instead of sending a mail - pick up the phone, or pop next door and let your humanity manifest itself! Reinvent new models for your colleges and departments if need be, but colleagues, for goodness sake, let's get talking, debating and provoking toward the dynamic revival of the academe. How prevalent are regular staff seminars, the sharing of research, the discussion of challenges and the sounding out of innovative and creative ideas? I know you are probably all thinking : “Time,” but I know from my own experience as Dean that it can be done, and that once you really start feeling a sense of shared purpose, of collegiality and community - success and achievement almost become second nature. We all want to feel nurtured and affirmed – I can think of no better place to start that process, than with one another.

Colleagues we are moving concertedly into year one of our strategy, that is, 2016. Your prime focus area is Focus area 1: *Towards becoming a leading ODeL, comprehensive university in teaching and learning, research, innovation and community engagement based on scholarship.* That needs to happen in the context of an African university. I believe that this moment in our history at Unisa, offers a truly unique opportunity for all of us to contribute to that characterisation of Unisa. As academics you should be both challenged and excited at the thought of (re) conceptualising your disciplines to that end. A lot of hard work lies ahead but as intellectuals we should be as stimulated, more than we are cowed, by the task ahead. And as I said, if we work supportively of one another, we will find that a wonderful sense of collaboration and pride will emerge in the knowledge that we are the creators and crafters of a truly African Unisa, that will be used by others, (and not the other way round) as a benchmark of quality OdeL .

Council and management have decided that from this year academics and the academe must be re-asserted as the foundation stone and driving force of this university. Unfortunately we will be doing this in an environment of austerity and dynamic socio-economic conditions, which I am sure you all understand. This only serves to make it more imperative that we focus on the task at hand.

Colleagues you will have my support and my ear. Let us harness our intellect and our innovation, mindful of the challenges that we are facing, in energising the academic space at Unisa. I have noted with such pleasure and excitement the many seminars that are being presented on really topical issues, across the disciplines - so the fire of revitalisation has undoubtedly been lit! I believe very firmly though, that we will only realise the full potential of the intellectual capacity that resides in Unisa, when we have all of our academics similarly enthused and active, and when that enthusiasm cascades into our mentorship and encouragement of our students. I have seen some evidence of that from our Executive Deans and the results that they continue to share with me and the VPs, speak for themselves.

Colleagues, my challenge to you is this: Will I, in six months' time be able to see and feel a palpable difference in the academic life at Unisa? Will doors be open (yes, even after one o'clock), will people be chatting in the corridors or over a cup of tea in the kitchens and common rooms? Will I hear laughter and camaraderie as progress is shared and challenged in staff meetings and fora? Will I see our students feeling affirmed and performing excellently because of your nurturing and encouragement?

No doubt this will be a time-consuming process, but the first extended management lekgotla has given me genuine hope that we can take our truly unique and powerful university to even greater heights. My call to you is that you will acknowledge and treasure the asset that is Unisa, and work together to make it happen.

I thank you.