



The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor

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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

STAFF ASSEMBLY

FLORIDA CAMPUS

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Good morning and a very warm welcome to you all. It is always such a pleasure to be able to visit this lovely campus that holds such a special place in our hearts and our institutional history. Whenever I come here I am reminded afresh of what growth and development are all about, as I see about me examples of a university that is intent on shaping futures while it advances educational excellence and transformation.

We are currently going through tough times now. We have grappled and we continue to grapple with serious and ongoing disruption emanating mainly from the *#fees-must-fall* and *worker-insourcing* protests, which began towards the end of last year and continue to absorb huge amounts of time and resources at our universities. The implications for Unisa have been serious and significant. We have had to revisit core HR functions and adjust our business and operational models in *real time* and without the benefit of longer term planning and financial forecasting, allocation and preparation. This is a very complex process that has a direct impact on the sustainability of Unisa. We are being confronted with operational challenges that fall outside of the realm of traditional and established university

management and operations - and even policy – requiring of us to think innovatively, and with a new kind of open-mindedness that are both challenging and exciting, I must say.

In this process though, I have been taken aback by a general and unsubstantiated polemic by some individuals, aimed at discrediting Unisa's management and intended to tarnish my reputation. I believe that if their purpose is altruistic (and they insist it is) then they would have requested a meeting with me. I am well-known across the University for my open-door policy, which I can assure you is very well utilized. But the conduct of these few individuals leaves me with little alternative but to guess that they have been canvassed by more entrenched interests bent on pursuing an entirely non-academic agenda.

And on the note of an open-door policy colleagues let me say that an open door policy does not mean that you can simply force your way onto my floor, abuse my staff and demand to see me. An open-door policy means that I am willing to listen to everyone and to meet with them where necessary *at a time which is compatible with my schedule*. I have a university to run and I cannot neglect my fiduciary responsibility as the CEO of this institution. I do try to accommodate all requests as soon as possible, but I cannot and will not allow the abuse of staff as a means of enforcing demands.

Such loud demands have become a feature of a small, but loud group of individuals at Unisa, whose motives are entirely disruptive and have resulted in criminal acts that have had to be stopped by legal interdict. The wanton destruction of property arising from their conduct cannot be tolerated when futures of 350 000 plus students are at stake and taxpayers money is being squandered. Unisa employs approximately 6000 staff members and the immature conduct of a few ill-informed and impressionable members of staff has resulted in *inter alia*, acts of arson and the torching of vehicles and an office next to the Chemistry laboratory on the Mucleneuk Campus, as well as harassment, intimidation and violence towards some fellow staff and students.

Since universities are publicly funded, the University management is honour- *and* duty- bound to act against such criminal acts. We are doing so. I will be honest and say that protest is not new to me – nor, I suspect, to many of you. However, what has really been an eye-opener and a matter of some shame I might add, has been the abuse and violence that has been meted out to staff, the vast majority of whom are women – by fellow colleagues and students. Colleagues, that goes against everything that we as a university and as a people, stand for, and as I said, the perpetrators are being dealt with. We will

however all need to work together to manage this tendency into more appropriate ways of venting anger and frustration. Violence will simply not be tolerated.

It is actually very surprising that those who have chosen the path of destroying this University claim not to know about my open-door policy. I am always available to discuss all issues with colleagues and many will confirm that I subscribe to, and practice, the precepts of Servant Leadership and institutional inclusivity. From my days as an academic in the Department of Sociology during the height of apartheid, and my later roles as Dean and Pro Vice Chancellor of the University, I have consistently encouraged open debate. The only conclusion that one is able to draw, fellow Unisans, is that such colleagues are incapable of conducting a rational and informed debate in the time-honoured tradition of academic engagement, or if that is not the case, that they actually have no interest in doing so, but prefer to advance uninformed diatribes via for example, social media.

The first five years of my tenure were spent embedding our institutional ethos, including the concept of Servant Leadership, and our inclusive institutional culture, which is based on the 11Cs plus one and our Charter on Transformation. We have amongst others, policies in place against bullying and harassment, and we have embedded an understanding of ethics across the institution. All of these are aimed at ensuring a conducive, caring and collegial working environment, which unfortunately, is sadly lacking right now. I therefore call on each and every one of us to reclaim and reinvigorate our working spaces, turning them into the kinds of environments that make us look forward to coming to work, and being proud and productive Unisans.

I say this, colleagues, because experience has taught us that in times of such fundamental transformation our most pressing challenges tend to dominate thought, actions and time, giving rise to the danger of an unwitting “sidelining” of the academic enterprise at Unisa. I would like to alert staff to this possibility and impress upon each and every one of us that this simply cannot be allowed to happen. At a time when we are dealing with an array of challenges, from registrations to quality service and tuition, now more than ever before we are called to attend to our core business with industry and energy and to keep our students at the centre. Our livelihoods and those of our students depend on it. It is really that simple.

Failure of the academic enterprise of Unisa will spell disaster for the sustainability of the university. The transformation project and our academic enterprise must therefore be driven with equal vigour and

determination. You see, woven through these two core institutional foci - that is transformation and the academic enterprise - is the connecting thread of financial stability for long-term sustainability. We are being faced with serious financial demands and challenges, which I am proud to say, are being met with diligence and integrity by our management and stakeholders team. It is likely that we will *all* be called upon to make sacrifices going forward, to ensure that we can meet our transformational demands. I trust that I can rely on staff and stakeholders alike to appreciate the gravity of our situation and to do their bit towards its successful resolution.

We also need to bear in mind that all of these dynamics have added to existing lacks in our service delivery and contributed to the reputational damage of Unisa. The financial toll arising from lost working hours and delays - not to mention damage to property and reputation, etc., - is but the tip of the iceberg. I am painfully reminded every day, of the knock-on impact, which has manifested in damaged relationships, broken trust and a debilitating loss of confidence in the university and what it means to our staff, our students and our nation. Our staff is apprehensive and many are confused about what is expected of them. Our focus is diluted. In fact, I don't think it would be untrue to suggest that Unisa is hurting - and we are collectively responsible for ensuring that we rally together and ensure that we refocus on that which we are mandated to do. We have to fix this – and we will – but it is up to each and every one of us to play their part in doing so.

Now more than ever before, as educators and as the foremost higher education institution on the continent, responsible for the greatest proportion of South Africa's graduates, we are called to focus on our core business of *education*. For those who may have felt confused, intimidated, apprehensive or unsure about what is expected of them, I would advise you to *focus on the jobs that you were appointed to do and do them to the best of your ability*. At Unisa that mandate is teaching and learning, research and innovation and community engagement, and it is that to which we must devote our time and our energies. Our students must and will remain at the centre.

All other activities, and I speak here in particular of the fees, insourcing and other transformation initiatives, are being taken care of via several teams and activities which have been set up with the express purpose of their advancement and resolution. Solid progress is being made and as I have already mentioned this is being communicated to you. I gave you the assurance that you would be updated on their progress and development on a regular basis, to ensure that we have a single, agreed source of official communication and information and we are keeping to that undertaking. There is no

need therefore, for you to listen to, or propagate corridor gossip, which can be quite inventive and mostly wrong - as we all know.

Unisa, like many other institutions, is facing a pivotal moment and turning point in our history and our practice, and we are called to create a conducive environment and generate a positive spirit that will define this moment as a positive and productive impetus towards a better Unisa – one that lives up to its promise of being “The African University Shaping Futures in the Service of Humanity” as proclaimed in our Vision Statement.

Turning to our core business colleagues, Let me start by saying clearly, *Unisa is unique*. As I travel the country, Continent and the world, including in my capacity as the President of the International Council on Distance Education (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 (In 2013 , there were 983 698 enrolled - of that number, Unisa enrolled 355 240, just over 36%¹); and that offers formal, quality-assured and accredited qualifications that are acknowledged nationally and internationally by many countries and institutions, especially commonwealth countries. When it comes to the pedagogical merits of ODeL, Unisa has a tremendous advantage, and it is also in this domain that we have an unparalleled opportunity to assert our African voice and presence in global higher education from a very solid platform, as we move more concertedly into the revitalisation of our PQM to reflect our African heritage and character. So I must say colleagues, that it bothers me that we spend so much time putting ourselves down because of operational issues, when in fact we should spend some time celebrating and marketing our uniqueness as well.

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. Internationalisation (especially in Europe and North America), Quality and Quality Assurance, and Leadership and Governance are gaining increasing traction as key trends in higher education. These are matters which we as an institution should be discussing to a greater extent and in fact, I used the opportunity at our academic assembly on 15 April 2016, to encourage our

¹ Statistics on Post School Education and Training. 2013. Department of Higher Education and Training, March 2015. www.dhet.gov.za

academics to immerse themselves in that process and to re-assert the centrality of the academe in our university.

I have to say that I feel a real sense of assurance when, in the current, *very* large, dynamic unstructured ODeL environment, and at all of the conferences and meetings that I attend, I *know* that Unisa *is* International; that Unisa *has* well recognised, 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.

The Unisa brand is envied by many, especially internationally, and our infrastructure and capacity make us sought after as partners on the continent and the world. Unisa is seen as a well-resourced strategic resource, and we must be confident that any partnerships that we enter into have reciprocal benefits, failing which Unisa will suffer a capacity and resource drain, with possible implications for its longer-term sustainability.

Speaking of infrastructure, I can tell you for example, that nationally we have 7 regional offices and some 20 linked centres. Gauteng and Kwa-Zulu Natal top the list in size. Enrolments per region to date are as follows: Eastern Cape: 12,431; Gauteng: 111,364; KZN: 60 710; Limpopo; 16,221; Midlands: 21,073; Mpumalanga: 13, 359; Western Cape: 22,762.

When it comes to the numbers that have enrolled per colleges, in 2015, CAES enrolled 9 754; CAS 33 379; CEDU 85 551; CEMS 82 968; CHS 52 818; CLAW 42 402 and CSET 22 214. The 2016 numbers have yet to be finalised.

Since 2013, the number of Unisa students aged 24 and below has averaged at between 23 and 24%. Figures for 2016 are currently lower at 21.13%, but we still have another registration to complete, and so that percentage is likely to change. So, a full 76% of Unisa Students are what DHET terms "mature students" - in fact the largest cohort of Unisa students (59.4%) lies in the age band 25 – 39. When one considers that in the White Paper on PSET (2013), Unisa is advised to keep its focus on mature students then we seem to have the enrolment balance just right, although we need to be careful that we also allocate our resources for student support accordingly.

There is no institution nationally or internationally, that I know of colleagues, which is producing the numbers of graduates with *formal* qualifications that we are. 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. We are proud to be continuing our tradition of being a major contributor of really quality graduates to teaching and the accounting sciences. The hard work that is being put into these colleges is clearly paying dividends, with some really pleasing results having being realised.

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.

Colleagues, we well into year one of our 2016 - 2020 strategy. A lot of hard work lies ahead but as intellectuals, as a university, we should be as stimulated, more than we are cowed, by the task ahead. I am convinced that 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 as a benchmark by others, (and not the other way round) of quality ODeL. That work has already begun and we have to build on that momentum.

Unisa is undoubtedly facing many difficult challenges. But if we are to be honest, all higher education institutions are facing similar challenges. However, as is always the case, Unisa's challenges tend to be magnified because of its size and complexity! When we feel overwhelmed we would do well to remember the "other" Unisa that I have shared with you - the Unisa that is respected globally, that is seen as a beacon of hope for the hopeless and that has made *the* major contribution over nearly one-and-a half centuries, to the shaping of this country, and continent and to South African society. Let us not take this Unisa for granted. It is incumbent upon us all, to build on the very solid developments and achievements of those who have gone before, and to ensure that the legacy of this iconic South African university continues.

I thank you.