



Office of the Principal and Vice Chancellor

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Vice Chancellor and Principal of UNISA

Address

**VC/Principal Address to the Unisa Employees Disability
Forum (UEDF)**

21 September 2015

Muckleneuk Campus, Unisa

-  Programme Director
-  Leadership of UEDF
-  Members of UEDF
-  Unisa Management, Staff members and students in attendance
-  Distinguished audience
-  Ladies and gentlemen

Sanibonani

Molweni

Dumelang

Gooie More

Good Morning

Ndomachirone

Bon Dias

I am happy to have an opportunity to address and interact with the gathering of this important stakeholder of our institution. I always make sure that these engagements with you become a regular feature of my annual programme given the importance of you as a stakeholder within the university and the society at large as well as the peculiar set of challenges that you are often confronted with.

As I address you on this beautiful spring morning I am reminded of the motto of the disabled people which has had a profound and guiding principle in my life and leadership style, "Nothing about Us without Us." It is

for this particular reason that I will resist the temptation of delivering a long narrative essay on what the university is doing or promising to do as I believe this should essentially be an interactive session. All I will do is to highlight a few things within the university and South African policy environment as well as the undergirding and compelling principles for embracing the crucial role of people who are differently abled and physically challenged.

Perhaps let me start by stating the obvious in our country's policy landscape that speaks to and cater for the people with disabilities. Our Constitution of 1996 is our foundation document from which flow a range of legislations that must comply with constitutional requirements. Our world-acclaimed Constitution is very specific in instructing the society to promote diversity and prevent discrimination on the basis of, among others, disability, gender and race. We have a range of Employment and Labour Relations laws, Occupational Health and Safety Act No. 108 of 1993, as well as the Promotion of Equality and Elimination of Unfair Discrimination Act of 2000 (Act 4 of 2000). Unisa, primarily informed by the aforementioned policies, has formulated and adopted a range of policies and programmes, taking

into account its specific needs as a higher education institution. These include and are not limited to:



Unisa Charter on Transformation;



Employee Disability Policy;



Harassment Policy for Unisa Employees; and,



Student Diversity Policy.

We have all these adopted policies as the university, and these have now been reinforced by the recently adopted Unisa Strategic Plan 2016-2030 which defines the soul of the Unisa as being an institution with Ubuntu/Botho. In essence we crafted this section in order to ensure that we create a caring institution at all levels of its service offering to all its key stakeholders and clients. In the same document the key values of the institution include embracing diversity. As my 2nd term as the Principal and Vice Chancellor of this institution I want to make sure that the notion of the soul of Unisa as Ubuntu/Botho as well as the value of embracing diversity are experienced as a reality beyond their expressions in our strategy documents.

I am acutely aware of the fact that it is one thing to have policies and programmes and yet another to live up to them and enforce or ensure full compliance. I am equally aware of the fact that an institution of our size can easily gloss over the active promotion of diversity that accommodates, in fact embraces, the people and students with disability. Very often diversity tends to focus on race and to a lesser extent, gender, whilst neglecting what may be seen as an invisible minority of people who are physically challenged and differently abled. I will always remind Unisa that our greatness lies with affirming those who are languishing in the margins of our institution and society. Hubert H. Humphrey eloquently articulates this point when he stated that:

"The moral test of government is how it treats those who are in the dawn of life . . . the children; those who are in the twilight of life . . . the elderly; and those who are in the shadow of life . . . the sick . . . the needy . . . and the disabled."

I am, therefore, receptive and open to constructive engagement to ensure that we ensure Unisa lives up to the real practical meaning of its policies that aim to affirm and enable people with disabilities to actualize their full professional potential without prejudice or hindrance. With new information and communication technologies and new physical infrastructure and buildings

being put in place I often ask a simple question as to whether there have been sufficient consideration and consultation with this important structure, UEDF, to ensure proper consideration that meets all our diverse needs as the university and national policies instruct.

Our biggest challenge sometimes is the attitude and sensitivity of persons who should ensure compliance with these requirements. Jeffrey Walton apprehends this in a simple and yet profound way when he asserts that,

“I have learned that the biggest disability any one of us may face is our own attitudes.”

Scott Hamilton puts it in a lightly different way when he warns that, “the only disability in life is bad attitude.”

The course of disability is close to my heart as I grew up interacting with people with disability in my extended family and community, and I was always aware that they were differently abled but in a society that never appreciated that thus failing to provide opportunities that allowed full realization of dreams of these

persons. In my new Vice Chancellor's Nelson Mandela Day charity programme I have adopted the Mamelodi School for the Disabled as one of the institutions that will benefit from resources that I mobilize.

It is my undertaking that in my second term I shall pay particular attention to the innovative implementation of policies and programmes that target our staff members who have disabilities. I will work closely with the office of Dr Thandi Sidzumo-Mazibuko who is the Executive Director of Diversity Management, Equity and Transformation, as well as the Directorate of Advocacy and Resource Centre for Students with Disability. In all this I will ensure that Unisa Employees Disability Forum is fully involved from inception to implementation phase. In so doing we shall live up to the realization of the Ubuntu/botho-embedded soul of Unisa that embrace diversity. In the incisive words of Dr Veena Kumari we shall "Enable

the disabled; translate disability into ability, capability, a winning opportunity- indeed a reality.”

If iconic global giants and scientific guru of science of the universe like Professor Stephen Hawkings could rise to the level he has then it affirms the notion that people who are physically challenged are merely differently abled when the doors of opportunities are opened to them.

Again I thank you for this opportunity and look forward to our interactions here and hereafter. I wish you and your families a great fulfilling experience for the remaining part of the year.

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