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**MR S SIMELANE, CHAIRPERSON OF COUNCIL  
THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA  
OFFICIAL OPENING CEREMONY OF THE 2019 ACADEMIC YEAR  
ZK MATTHEWS HALL  
15 FEBRUARY 2019**

- Members of Council
- Principal and Vice Chancellor, Prof Mandla Makhanya
- Vice Principals and member Extended Management
- President of the NSRC, your executive members and all student leaders
- Leaders of NEHAWU and APSA
- Leaders of all organised structures
- Our esteemed staff members and students
- Members of the media fraternity

Programme Director, we gather here today against the backdrop of various developments in the life of our country - the State of the National Address and related debates, the various Commissions of Enquiry underway,

challenges faced by Eskom, and, closer home, student protests on campuses over tuition, accommodation and subsistence.

As we reflect on these developments we do so having emerged from the year-long celebrations of our 145 years of existence as a university. The university has, over these years, evolved into the biggest on the continent. However, this prestigious position brings with it several challenges.

The best place to start may be to reflect on the year that was – 2018.

There are three areas that I addressed during the 2018 Opening of the Academic Programme which I wish to reflect on, and assess how far we have come as a university.

I emphasised the fact that we have set ourselves the ideal of being an *African university shaping futures in the service of humanity*. Are we living up to that vision?

The second point that I made last year was the need to massify our enrolment figures, with a view to contributing towards the Sustainability Development Goals for the country, in line with the targets set by the United Nations.

The final point that I addressed last year was to announce that Council was embarking on a dedicated effort to transform the institution.

How far have we gone to attain those lofty aims?

The best place to start by way of reflection may be with our efforts to transform the university.

I am happy to report that Council has adopted a comprehensive Integrated Transformation Strategy. This Strategy contains a clear vision on the type of a university we wish for Unisa to become. The Strategy was presented to various stakeholders and contains Eight Dimensions of Transformation which we have turned into Workstreams. These are:

- Staff equity, development and work experience
- Student equity, development and achievements
- Students' living and learning experiences, including their socialisation in an ODeL environment
- Knowledge, epistemology and language
- Governance, leadership and management
- Institutional culture and social inclusion
- Funding and resource allocation, including sources of private funding and BBBEE

- Infrastructure, including buildings, facilities, ICTs

Our resolve to focus on these eight areas means that we wish for the total transformation of the university. Dedicated efforts will be directed not only at changing the profile of the university. Efforts will be made to change and improve the contents of our academic offerings, and the experiences of both students and staff.

It is my hope that the Strategy shall assist the entire university community to understand what transformation is, and the need for the university to continue the trajectory of transforming itself into a true African University that shapes futures. For us, transformation is an imperative that should, in very simple terms, be understood to be a non-negotiable platform to help undo historical injustices.

Having adopted the Transformation Strategy and now accelerating the pace thereof I wish to highlight a few key concerns that must occupy us during the current academic year. Unless we address these, we will find ourselves in a difficult space to assert our claim as one of the best universities in the country.

First, we need to take a hard look at our enrolment patterns. Central to our focus on enrolment patterns must be how we view ourselves as a strategic player in the developmental agenda of the country. We must therefore

increase the numbers of black and women students enrolled for the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects. Therefore, no College must be undersubscribed by students from these designated groups. The College leadership must be challenged to correct any enrolment anomalies that might arise and present themselves to us.

We must pursue this trajectory while understanding that we are faced with constraints in how many students we may be able to absorb. That is a difficult engagement that we continue to have with the Department of Higher Education and Training.

Related to the enrolment patterns is the throughput rates. My overall concern, which I know many of you share, is that our throughput rate is just too low. While not advocating for an artificial inflation of throughput rates we must take a long and hard look at what we might not be doing right, which lead our students to fail in such high numbers.

Of concern relating to throughput numbers is the number of black students who graduate with designated degrees such as Bachelor of Accounting Science, Bachelor of Science, and others.

The second major concern that I have is around the quality of our qualifications. It was with deep embarrassment that we were all thrust into

the national radar because some of our degrees were found to have not been fully accredited. Let's take a hard look at this worrying pattern.

A few years ago, we were thrust into the same space around our Master of Business Leadership. That we were in the same ship with other Business Schools should not be an excuse.

As if that was not enough, we were again thrust into that space when our LLB was found wanting. Again, that we were in the same ship with other Law Schools should not be an excuse. The same happened with our Social Work degree.

Now, we have just survived another scare around our LLM and other degrees. Surely, this circle must stop. We must improve our Quality Assurance Management around our course offerings. This starts with course compilers, who must be experts in the different fields and should know what is required by the industry and related professional bodies.

We must fulfil all the strictures laid down by the Department of Higher Education and Training, the Council for Higher Education, and the South African Qualifications Authority. Course leaders, Departmental leadership, School leadership, College leadership, Institutional Quality Assurance managers must never, and I repeat NEVER, shift their eyes from the bouncing ball of qualifications accreditation and standards.

I hope that we will not have a repeat of the said embarrassing episodes.

The concern around quality assurance takes me to the third and related area of concern. I am the first to acknowledge that our research output has improved, compared to the previous years. Yet, the yardstick that we should use for any improvements should not be the low output rates of the yesteryears. Our yardstick must be the size and strategic importance of this university.

Our research output in the form of publications is still low. We should not be comfortable with our status. We should do more. Our publication rates must therefore be increased substantially.

But it is not just the quantity with regards to research output that we should be preoccupied with. Indeed, some of you may have high outputs rates. However, a closer inspection of where we publish may reveal that we are concentrated at low level journals and publishing houses. So, we must place an emphasis on publishing with high impact journals and top academic publishers.

The same should apply for the type of conferences that our academics attend. We must not be satisfied to attend some obscured conference, when we should be seeking to attend top conferences.

The fourth concern that I would like to raise is around our visibility in the arena of ideas within the country. Our Institutional Development Department must take a long and hard look in how we package the university. For instance, we must be aggressive in placing our programs in the national media, such as Inaugural Lectures, Guest Lectures and so on. We must not be shy to shape debates and national discourse around topical issues.

Programme Director, having outlined the challenges that we must address I wish to submit that there are at least three major tasks ahead of us, framed within the transformation agenda that I outlined earlier, while addressing the challenges that I have just highlighted.

First, we must build a resilient university. Borrowed from the corporate world the idea of a resilience refers to the “the ability of an organisation to anticipate, prepare for, respond and adapt to incremental change and sudden disruptions in order to survive and prosper.”

The call therefore is for us to continue building an institution that can stand the challenge from other universities, which are expanding their open and distance learning offerings. Ours should remain the best.

Second, we must position the university to remain relevant and respond to the developmental needs of both our country and the continent. Ours is a university located within and serving a developing country and emerging economy. Unisa must therefore influence the shape and content of the ideal society that we all wish for – a prosperous society whose resources are shared equitably by all.

Third, our academic offerings must prepare student who are highly conscious of developments in the country and the continent. Our students must be equipped with the tools of analysis that identify with the country and continent's needs. They must, of necessity, preoccupy their minds with how they will contribute towards the advancement of the continent and its people.

A careful examination and further expansion of the three tasks that I have just outlined suggest clearly and is a call to all of us to make our contribution to ensuring that we continue to have a growing and dynamic *African University shaping futures in the service of humanity*. It is a call to the Vice Chancellor and his Management to manage this institution in such a manner that it is resilient, answers to the developmental needs of the country, and prepares students to make meaningful contributions to the country and her people.

It is a call to the staff – both academic and administrative – to ensure that they roll up their sleeves and make Unisa a beacon of excellence.

It is a call to the students to work hard and take advantage of the excellent offerings that are at their disposal, as they prepare themselves for future contributions to make South Africa and the African continent dynamic spaces to live in.

On behalf of the Council I wish to pledge our support to the Vice Chancellor and his Management Committee, to the entire staff, and the student body; that we shall continue to work hard and selflessly to make this institution a university of choice.

Let us all pledge to take Unisa to greater heights.

I thank you!