



The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor

PROF MANDLA MAKHANYA

PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR'S ADDRESS TO ALL NEW STUDENTS

ZK MATHEWS GREAT HALL, MUCKLENEUK CAMPUS, UNISA.

27 March 2015

- Programme Directors: Mr Percy Mthombeni and Ms Ayanda Mbele
- Sign Language Interpreter: Ms Sophy Mabaso
- Members of executive and extended management
- Professor Michael Temane – Acting Registrar
- Professor Puleng Lenka Bula, Dean of Students
- Dr Vuyo Mahlati, Executive Chairperson of Siyaya and President of the International Women's Forum South Africa
- Ms Phuti Mahanyele, Chief Executive Officer of the Shanduka Group

- Mr Mduzuzi Mabuza, President of Unisa's National SRC
- The Unisa Tshwane SRC dance group
- Musa Sukwene – our musician today
- Members of Unisa's NSRC and all our Regional SRCs
- Most importantly, new Unisa students

Good day and a very warm official welcome to the University of South Africa, Class of 2015! A warm welcome too, to those returning students who have successfully completed a year's study and are now moving on to the next level. To you I say well done - long may your success continue!

Allow me to begin with a very famous quote, which many of you may have heard, but whose wisdom endures yesterday, today and tomorrow.

“Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that a son of a mineworker can become the head of the mine, that a child of farm workers can become the president of a great nation. It is what we make out of what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person from another. Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”— [Nelson Mandela](#)

If were to ask you what Unisa means to you and why you elected to study at this university, what would your response be? If I were to ask you how much you knew about Unisa before you registered, what would you tell me? I am often amazed by how little our students, and even our graduates, know about Unisa. So besides welcoming you as new Unisa students today, I would like to tell you a bit about this wonderful institution. By doing that I hope that you will share in my pride in Unisa; that you will be proud, proactive and diligent Unisa students; and that you will understand a bit more clearly what role Unisa is playing in the socio-economic development of this country and Continent.

I would also like to tell you about the kinds of support that you can expect from Unisa, and what will be expected of you as a Unisa student and perhaps even offer you some words of wisdom - wisdom that has been gained over many years of study and which, if you take it to heart and apply it, will contribute to the successful completion of your studies and to your development into accomplished students and scholars.

In terms of its legislated typology, the University of South Africa is a *dedicated comprehensive distance education institution*. That means that Unisa provides both formal and non-formal qualifications from the certificate to the doctoral levels, across a very broad range of disciplines, in both the academic and vocational streams, to all

students who qualify for entry to our university, irrespective of age, location or personal circumstance. This ability to access the university from where you are, is in my view, the beauty of distance education, or, as we now call it, Open Distance Learning (ODL). And by the way, it is now called ODL because of the influence of things like ICT developments and the internet, on the way in which we deliver education to our students and the environment in which our graduates will have to work in the future. We are obliged to educate our students for the 21st Century and not keep them in the past that we experienced where none of these existed.

UNISA enrolls more than one-third of all South African students, as well as the majority of those from the Continent who are studying in South Africa. Unisa thus has a very significant influence on national success and throughput rates and of course, individual and national socio-economic growth and development. So you will realise that this university has a huge responsibility to you and to our country and continent. Even as we accept that responsibility, we are unflinching in our commitment to quality. All of the formal courses that you will be studying have been quality assured by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) in the same way as it happens for all of the universities in our country. So you may rest assured that you are not getting an inferior qualification! But as is the case with any qualification at any university, being a quality

graduate means making the most of that quality education. It means aiming to be the best and it means more – much more – than just enjoying the social life that goes with being a student. There is a time for play and then there is a time for work, and I can guarantee you that our most successful students and graduates are those who manage to get the right balance between the two.

Second, Unisa regards itself as an authentically African university and a core part of our institutional mission is to create amongst our staff, students and the public-at-large, an appreciation of our African history and heritage as lived, interpreted and articulated by Africans themselves. We see this as a process of education and enlightenment, of exposure to additional and alternative narratives and as a process of conscientising this generation and those to come to a history and legacy of which so many are unaware. Essentially, we see ourselves as serving South Africans and Africans towards an African expression of quality higher education that can be benchmarked against the best in the world.

Unisa serves approximately *400 000* students from across South Africa, Africa and other parts of the world and is considered to be South Africa's most productive university when it comes to the number of graduates that it produces. This, combined with the fact that Unisa has increased its African student population to the extent that they are now in the majority, leaves no doubt that Unisa is the

university contributing most to the transformation of the South African higher education landscape.

Our distance education character is also reflected in our regional structure which includes 7 regions, namely Gauteng; KwaZulu-Natal; Limpopo; Midlands; Mpumalanga; Eastern Cape and Western Cape. Together these comprise a total of 26 hubs, service centres and agencies which service many thousands of our students. I can assure you that we strive continually to provide the same levels of service to everyone in the regions but I will acknowledge that this is not always easy or even possible – mainly because of challenges that we experience around infrastructure. But it is something that we continue to address.

The fact of the matter is that we are the biggest university in the country and the continent and certainly one of the mega universities in the world. You know, my job as Principal and Vice Chancellor - over and above leading our academic project - also requires me to travel, and on a regular basis I meet my peers and colleagues from across the continent and the world. Let me assure you that Unisa is seen in a very favourable light by everyone! We are regarded as innovative thinkers and a foremost example of effective ODL. Our qualifications are also very well regarded. So this then is what you receive - *mahala* - when you become a Unisa student; a globally acknowledged institutional reputation and an acknowledged quality

education. It is what *you* make of it that will determine your success or failure!

To give you some idea of the size of this institution and the role that we play in higher education in South Africa, I can tell you that there will be 70 graduation ceremonies around South Africa between now and the 19 June this year. Over this period we will graduate students in Pretoria, and our hubs in Bloemfontein, Nelspruit, Durban, Cape Town, East London and Polokwane – and these are just the first set of graduations for 2015. A second set of graduations takes place in the latter half of the year. Unisa's graduates are not only famous – but they can also be found in senior positions all over the world and more especially, South Africa. In fact, Madiba is a Unisa graduate – so you are all in very good company. We are indeed, a truly African university, shaping futures in the service of humanity. I trust that you will be keen to be involved alumnus once you graduate.

So what kind of support do we offer our students? How do we go about making your study experience more successful and more rewarding?

From the moment you apply at Unisa every system that is in place in the University is galvanised into action with the sole purpose of ensuring that you receive the best study experience possible. I will mention a number of these, but there are many more and it is

seldom that we are not able to address and resolve legitimate students' queries and needs.

One of our student support directorates in the university is the Directorate for Counselling and Career Development, which engages in the pro-active and reactive, co-constructive counselling, career, academic and personal development of prospective and registered students in all the phases of the student walk by providing high quality counselling and support services and products, aimed at the inculcation of skills, attitudes and values relevant to a complex environment. For students who are in the teaching and learning phase – that is you - and to ensure that students are able to manage their studies in a successful way, the DCCD will:

- provide face to face consultation services in the personal, career and academic areas for those students who are in a position to visit;
- provide counsellors at the main campus and the regional and learning centres where such professional services are provided;
- provide technology (telephone and web based) driven counselling and academic literacy services of similar quality as the in-person services;
- provide a range of in-person and online workshops dealing with life skills, career and academic development issues;

- view telephone and web based counselling and responding to students' enquiries by letter as important forms of information and development; and,
- provide support to the peer collaborative learning network in collaboration with the The Directorate: Instructional Support and Services (DISS).

The Directorate: Instructional Support and Services (DISS) is another directorate that provides useful learner support. This directorate is under ongoing development and uses the following strategies to ensure that learners who need academic support have access to it: Face-to-face tutorials; Interactive video (videoconferencing); Peer-group support services; etc. Tutorials are available at UNISA Learning Centres throughout the country. I'm sure I don't have to tell you that learning centres are dedicated decentralised places where our students can go to in order to get various forms of support with their studies. Learning centres offer: regular face-to-face tutorials; the opportunity to meet fellow learners who have similar academic hurdles to overcome; examination preparation; counselling services; study space; computer laboratories and peer study groups.

All of this information and more can be found on the myUnisa website and I would like to urge you to make this website your "NBF" – your *New Best Friend*. It has *all* of the information you need - and

more. Once you have registered you will be provided with a free email address and you will be able to communicate with the university and your lecturers in your own time. You can download and upload your assignments, check your account and read up on all of the services that are available to you as a Unisa student. You can access *My Studies* which will offer advice on planning your studies and the various student services that are available to you, including those I have just mentioned. You will for example find information on student affairs, registration, learner support, regional services and tutorials and assignments and examinations. MyUnisa also provides an A-Z guide, contact information, information on bursaries and applications and information about jobs, scholarships, prescribed books, assignments, examinations, graduations assistance and student associations. That is a lot of support in anyone's book! You can even read about what is happening at Unisa and in so doing you can share in the life of the University. Unisa also has its own facebook and twitter accounts so join in and become facebookers and tweeters! And please, don't forget our Unisa Radio which is a vibrant and very informative platform of information and topics focused on our Unisa students. With all of this information at your fingertips you should never feel alone as a Unisa student. So don't tune out – plug in!

The point to be made is that as an Open Distance Learning institution and as South African students we have to move with the times and sometimes that means adjusting to uncomfortable situations. This is the 21st Century and you are a new generation who will be facing challenges that my generation never imagined. You have to adapt or you will be left behind. I can assure you that the discomfort of change does not last long. It is soon overcome by a sense of pride in having mastered and learned something new and in realising that you are in fact equipping yourself for a future in which you will be a valuable, productive citizen. So for those of you who are able to, I would really encourage you to use the online facilities by all means possible. Over and above the need to ensure that you are comfortable with technology, you will find that the acquired skills and competencies will make your lives a lot easier on a day-to-day basis. I can tell you that the momentum has really begun. By far the majority of our students are now registering online and the use of myUnisa is growing day-by-day.

For those who don't yet have access to computers and the internet, I can assure you that the University is working very hard to help you to remedy the situation. But of course that involves a number of stakeholders, including government, who is responsible for ensuring that the necessary broadband infrastructure is in place to be able to

connect to the internet. In the meantime you will be able to choose to have your study materials posted to you or e-mailed to you.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the Office of the Dean of Students and the role that it plays in the strategic growth, management and development of Student Affairs. Your SRC, represented here this morning, resides in this portfolio.

Unisa takes pride in the fact that we have an engaged SRC that is showing growing maturity in the execution of the responsibility that has been entrusted to them. As a university we believe that the SRC has a voice and a contribution to make where our students are involved, and we are working very hard to provide a productive framework for that to happen. The University has made it clear to the SRC that we expect of them to provide disciplined leadership within the national and regional structures in a way that not only demonstrates a clear understanding of their mandate, but that also shows an appreciation of the need for sound, ethical and transparent governance, and tolerance for other views and voices.

Equally importantly, your SRC leaders must provide leadership in their own conduct and example as students. In other words, we expect our SRC members to be exemplary students just as we expect you to be exemplary students! You are after all, all Unisa students. They must succeed in their studies just as you must. The SRC is called to serve you, our students, in terms of their mandate and the

trust that has been placed in them, and in order to do so they must listen to you and be in a position to advise you and support you correctly and in good faith, on higher education issues. I am pleased and proud to say that I believe that we do have an SRC that listens to you and that is open and willing to learn - for example, about the context and functioning of the higher education environment and about leadership and management. This is very encouraging because it demonstrates a mature understanding of the complex business of ensuring that all voices are heard in ensuring a quality, conducive higher education environment and experience for our students.

Previous student surveys and voter turnouts have indicated student disappointment and dissatisfaction with the SRCs. This is an issue that has been taken seriously by both management and the SRC, and in the context of the role of the SRC that I have just mentioned, and their own enthusiasm and commitment to learning and growing, we look forward to an approach by the SRC, that places students right at the top of the agenda. I am confident that this is happening, and I would advise all of you as students that you should hold your SRC to account for this, just as you *both* hold the university to account for the service we must render to you.

Yes, it is not only the SRC who need to ensure excellent levels of service to our students. As a university we need to be equally

diligent in that regard. We face many challenges, many of which are faced by all higher education institutions in the country, but the fact that we serve in the region of 400 000 students, magnifies our challenges exponentially. Issues around, access, quality and affordability require innovative thinking and institutional agility in adapting to changing higher education dynamics and accommodating our student needs. Underprepared students need quite intensive learner support, while large student numbers require that we employ innovative assessment techniques that will ensure and preserve quality in teaching and learning.

Resolving our challenges requires a very complex balancing act that is impacted to a very large extent by our business model, which relies heavily and fundamentally on agencies over which we have no control, such as the postal service, access to broadband infrastructure across the country, power outages, and the socio economic status of our students, especially in terms of acquiring the devices that will enable 24/7 access to the internet. You can imagine that (for example) postal strikes and a lack of internet access impact in a very fundamental way on the service that we, by all means possible, try to deliver to our students. On the positive side, UNISA has learnt to be very innovative in overcoming obstacles! But there are times when we feel that we are the proverbial “messenger” who is being shot by the public and our students,

because of these external dynamics that affect us and you so directly. I might add that it is also incredibly costly to make alternative arrangements to get study material to our students and to deal with assignments when servers are rendered unavailable. But at all times, we refuse to compromise on quality and we try to adapt as quickly as possible, to these challenges as they arise.

I am also aware that our students are complaining about their treatment at the hands of some of our Unisa staff. I want to thank our NSRC for bringing these complaints to our attention. I can tell you that your NSRC represented your voices very ably at our Senate meeting on Monday (Senate is the highest decision-making body on academic matters in the university). While I will acknowledge that being students themselves they are still learning the art of academic debate and engagement, they were nevertheless very well prepared and their message was heard loud and clear – we will not tolerate poor service. To our NSRC let me say: “We heard you”. Given the complex nature of our situation at Unisa, it will take some time to get where we want to be, but I can assure you that this issue is receiving dedicated attention and action at the highest level.

Finally, a few words of wisdom from someone who has spent many years as a student myself. In fact I am sure you have heard it all before. Discipline, discipline, discipline. That’s it. As an ODL student you need to take *full* responsibility for your own studies. There is

plenty of advice available on planning your studies – use it and implement it. Keep to assignment due dates - they are provided to all students – and don't expect the university to bend the rules because you have been too lacking in discipline to finish and submit on time. When you submit an assignment, do the very best you can. Don't settle for mediocrity – you are better than that. I can assure you, if you can't even be bothered to put in the time and effort at this stage of your studies, you won't make it. It might sound harsh but it is the truth. Cultivate good study habits now and you and your families will be rejoicing at your graduation in a few years' time. Don't just pack in your studies because you are facing personal challenges or because you think there will be another chance to complete later on. That is a defeatist attitude. In life you will be faced with many challenges, many curved balls, and you will have to face them and overcome them. That is your responsibility and no-one else's. Unisa students have to be tough - a lot tougher than almost all other students. Unisa students have to be proactive. They have to help themselves. Nothing will be handed on a silver platter. You have to seek out your own information and make it happen. But let me tell you, that is why Unisa graduates are so sought after. They do not have an entitlement mentality and by the time they have graduated they have learnt to work independently and proactively and to go and get what they want. They are consummate go-getters!

These are qualities that will serve you in your lives and in your careers.

You also need to take responsibility for your behaviours and your health. Without those you will have a very limited future. Embarking on higher education represents a new phase in your development as an independent young person. You are no longer a child under tight supervision but a young adult who must rely on your inner strength and wisdom to guide you through life. You will be exposed to many new influences during this time in your lives – some good and some bad. Choose wisely and responsibly. Make sure that you are informed and that you behave in ways that protect your health and your safety. Avoid factors that compromise safe behaviour; equip yourself for your roles and obligations in society and make use of the campus health services for advice, help and support. Being a student is so much more than just studying. It is a preparation for life - for successful life - and all aspects of your development need to be attended to.

Lastly, don't see this certificate, diploma or degree as the end of the road. Become lifelong students and dream big. If you have the patience and discipline and if you put in the hard work, there is no reason why you cannot reach the highest level of education or the highest level of success in your chosen career. ODL studies produce very special graduates. They are proactive, independent, self-

disciplined and self-starters – all qualities sought after in the workplace – all qualities which make for successful, mature and rounded human beings.

On behalf of Unisa's management I would like to wish you the very best with your studies. May you do yourselves, your families and Unisa, proud!