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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

WELCOME AND SA HIGHER EDUCATION PERSPECTIVE

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP CONVERSATIONS ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Disruption at the base of the pyramid – (therein) unfolds a paradox

Function Hall, 4th Floor, Kgorong Building, Muckleneuk Campus

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Thanks: Programme Director, Ms Sedzani Musundwa

- Mr Phillip Ntsimane, Chairperson: Risk Management – Audit and Enterprise Risk Management Committee of Council (AERMCoC), Unisa
- Prof Khehla Ndlovu, VP: Strategy, Risk and Advisory Services
- Ms Ziphora Mamobolo, ED: Department Risk and Compliance
- Members of Extended Management
- Ms Nomathamsanqa Ashom, Director: Assurance Services - Ngubane and Co.
- Ms Busani Maluleke, CEO: New African Bank
- Mr Christopher Palm, Chief Risk Advisor: IRMSAE
- Mr Linda Khumalo, Founder of SafeCyberLife: Education Service
- Our Keynote speakers: Ms Shamila Batohi and Prof Mervyn King

- Our Panel Discussion facilitator, Ms Olga Granova-Mooi: Head of Internal Audit, University of Pretoria, and our panellists:
 - Prof Ahmed Bawa, CEO: Universities South Africa
 - Prof Adam Habib, VC: University of the Witwatersrand
 - Prof Jonathan Foster Pedley, Dean: Henley Business School
 - Dr Somadoda Fikeni, Unisa
- Ms Tsholofelo Duba
- Ms Daphney Twala, Praise Singer: National Council of Persons Living with Disabilities (NCPD)
- Tau Tsa Koma Cultural group
- Amavinnkivonko Gumboot Dancers
- Unisa Male Voices
- Colleagues from sister institutions
- Unisa staff, students and stakeholders
- Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

Greetings! I see a number of familiar faces here this morning – you are most welcome, colleagues! I also see a number of new faces, which I would like to believe speaks to the dynamism and scope of a field that, for many, represents the *thin blue line* between order and total chaos and collapse. A very warm welcome to you as well. I trust that your presence here, at this late juncture in our academic year, speaks to a collective commitment to the restoration of professional

risk and assurance to their rightful place in our society. We are delighted to have you join us today.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have been asked to provide an overall perspective on Higher Education in South Africa. However, it needs to be said that South African higher education does not function in isolation. We are shaped and informed by what is happening globally and continentally. And that, in itself is a very illuminating space at the moment.

Global higher education finds itself occupied with the nature and purpose of education and the role of the University in the 21st Century. We note the strong emergence of nationalism and populism in the socio-economic and political domains, and the concomitant fragmenting of higher education into national and regional enclaves, in which context it is playing an increasingly influential role. Context has become a defining reality in the provision of higher education. The wholesale entry of private and for-profit, commercial providers into the traditional higher education field has changed the space and the balance of power to the extent that it is now estimated that more than 65% of new knowledge is produced outside of the traditional university sector. Much, if not all of this transformation has been driven by technological and digital advances. It is in this

environment that universities must ensure that societies, leaders and management, staff (academic, professional and administrative) and students of all ages unlearn, re-learn and learn anew so that they are able to navigate and succeed in the “new world” that has come into being through the so-called 4th Industrial Revolution.

Given the limits of time, I will not say much about higher education on the Continent. Let me make just one observation. The mean age of the Continent is only 18 and the population is exploding. Given continental unemployment figures, these young people might well see higher education as their only viable recourse. We are completely unprepared for this – it is a ticking time bomb. We need to act with great urgency. We are the youngest continent in the world, and Africa is predicted to comprise one-third of the world’s population by the turn of the century. How will we educate these masses of young people and for what will we educate them – especially when it is so difficult to predict the future?

The context I’ve just provided indicates not only the urgent necessity of conducting research to prepare South Africa and the Continent for the huge challenges that lie ahead in regard to the socio-economic and political ramifications of massive growth and massive poverty deficits, as well as our own radical transformation imperatives, but

they also speak to the equally urgent necessity for visionary strategising and planning to ensure (South) Africa's sustainability over the longer term. There is clearly much work to do, with limited resources and capacity.

Closer to home, most, if not all Higher education institutions in South Africa are wrestling with complex and disruptive challenges, including very fundamental transformation for social justice, access and equity, as well as rearticulation towards a decolonised programme and qualifications mix that retains quality while ensuring contextual relevance and the development of our African knowledge canon. The rampant politicisation of our campuses has added an explosive dimension to the mix, that requires innovation, fortitude and endurance when it comes to leadership and management.

Since 2015, University leadership has had to deal with violence and destruction on a number of campuses, and while the *#feesmustfall* phenomenon has died down considerably with the introduction of fee-free education for many, as is so often the case when societies are undergoing complex transitions, our stakeholders have now turned their sights onto other complex demands, and this also has to be managed.

As university leadership, we also have to navigate disruptive challenges which are driven by a wide variety of factions or “stakeholders” whose interests are often more political than altruistic. Hard decisions need to be made in the interests of institutional sustainability in the context of these challenges. It must be borne in mind that while universities are called upon to be responsive to stakeholders, such responsiveness must be tempered with the fiduciary responsibility that Council and executive have, to be responsible and ethical stewards of our institutional resources. Financial probity must always be exercised, even where this incurs displeasure, in order to ensure that there is preservation of the institution for future generations. We tend to be locked into a perpetual balancing act. But *this is where risk and governance play such an important role*. To what extent, and how successfully, have South African HEIs successfully identified risks and put in place appropriate mitigation strategy over the past decade? I would hazard a guess that we did not perform too well, particularly in light of the volatility of the sector. How many foresaw these challenges? Could we in fact have foreseen this? How good is risk identification in the current higher education context?

The fact of the matter is that right now, in South Africa, and one suspects in other countries, universities are becoming proxies for

state social services, metaphorical lightning rods that are absorbing the energies and aggression of young men and women who would otherwise be venting their ire, in even more destructive ways, upon their government. We are in an invidious position, which can be immensely stressful and exhausting. University stakeholders will always mobilise and agitate, and it therefore makes sense to exercise maturity and foresight in risk identification and mitigation while ensuring that we focus more concertedly on our core business – teaching, learning, research and innovation and community engagement.

Current societal dynamics and challenges require higher education solutions which are flexible, integrated and holistic and which should not only include transdisciplinarity and engagement with professional bodies, business and industry in the development of courseware and teaching practice, but also an openness to different modes of student support, assessment and credentialing to meet different societal requirements and student expectations. There is a growing emphasis on the Recognition of Prior Learning as a means of drawing more experienced yet non-credentialed students into the system, and acknowledgement that concerted attention should be given to the upskilling of mature learners as a means of ensuring their ongoing employability in the transforming world of work.

Furthermore, higher education institutions should be open to very fundamental restructuring (including administrative) to ensure the responsiveness and agility that is required for ongoing relevance. This is particularly true in the current global context of massive socio-economic inequality and poverty gaps.

This will require a different kind of leadership; one that truly understands and is able to navigate the complexity and pressures of the prevailing context, which extends beyond that for which they have traditionally been responsible, and includes, but is not limited to:

- the influence of the socio-economic and political forces globally, continentally and nationally on the academic and the administrative functions and mandate of the institution
- an ever-increasing community of role players and stakeholders whose interests may be in competition with those of the university, and crucially
- *delivering a relevance and quality of pedagogy that will ensure the relevance of graduates into the future*

Such leadership will need to be comfortable with pushing the boundaries of transformation and driving the mindset change that is

required for a productive workforce and an agile, efficient and effective institution.

Key to achieving this is an invested academe. A conducive environment in which to conduct the core business of the university, namely teaching and learning, research and innovation and community engagement, will become increasingly important in retaining a calibre of staff who will ensure quality offerings and quality service. Changes in society, student expectations and advances in digital technology (including social media) are changing the way in which we teach and how students learn and are motivating a re-evaluation of pedagogy and teaching methods. This is being seized upon by a growing number of public and private universities, who are tailor-making quality, relevant offerings to suit student needs in the context of rapid transformation and the 4IR. Many public and private residential universities and entities (globally, continentally and nationally) have begun offering niche subject areas of quality assured and accredited courses and degrees, at competitive rates. They offer excellent service and support precisely because of their smaller enrolments. These institutions will begin to start attracting a calibre of student who is prepared to pay for this type of higher education, as they believe that the qualifications of these institutions will begin to garner global traction.

Currently, there are also moves afoot in South Africa for private institutions to receive approval, equivalence and accreditation for courses offered by public institutions. Furthermore, private institutions and entities are also largely exempt from the protests and strikes experienced at public HEIs that can be debilitating and that impact on seamless operations. These factors have the potential of siphoning off those students and potential students whom we have previously taken for-granted as being “ours”. The relative monopoly that has traditionally been enjoyed by public higher education institutions has begun to crumble. And I remind us about the 65%-plus of course materials that are produced outside of universities.

I am of the view that universities that wish to remain sustainable have no other option than to reinvent themselves through a futures-centric mindset that includes a multi-stakeholder, broadly participative leadership and management, collaborative business models, a fundamental commitment to sustainability through ethical stewardship of the institutional and the planet’s resources, a genuine appreciation of the people who comprise the university community, and quality, relevant courseware, assessment practices and student

support that will prepare graduates for an uncertain future and provide a foundation for future flourishing.

In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, the respected Africa Growth Initiative at Brookings Institute publication, titled: *Foresight Africa: The top priorities for the Continent for 2019*, identifies *Bolstering Good Governance: the Imperative for Inclusion and Efficiency*, as the number one priority for our Continent.

Now, I have no need to tell you that while South Africa – traditionally – has had the most advanced governance model and infrastructure on the Continent (in fact, in the past, it has regularly been ranked second in the world), when it comes to its implementation and operationalisation, we fail miserably, to the extent that we don't even feature in the *top 10* list of African Countries who are exhibiting healthy growth. Rather, the scourge of corruption, driven and abetted by terminal governance failure, has sucked our country into a morass from which it is going to be extremely difficult to recover over the longer term – forget about the short-to-medium term!

I would venture to say that, in many cases, the state of our universities mirrors the state of the nation. I say that because education features as a key contributor to this decline – in terms of

governance failures, poor leadership, political interference and a lack of political will, and woefully inadequate financial stewardship of declining resources. Worse still, our graduates are often deemed to be inadequately prepared for the world of work.

The knock-on effects are evident in the fact that 27 African countries' education scores registered deterioration in the past five years. We are among that number and we feature right at the bottom of some of the rankings. It is, therefore, not surprising that the second most pressing priority on our Continent is *Managing Debt and Mobilising Resources: A delicate balance to sustain economic growth* (reconciling financing needs and rising debt.)

Nationally, we are in a mess when it comes to governance of the higher education sector. There was a stage when 13 of 28 of our universities had been, or were currently under, administration (some of them for the second time). These statistics speak directly to challenges that cannot be ignored.

University leadership must therefore truly understand and be able to navigate confidently the nexus of the academic and the administrative; the plethora of stakeholders and role players who will need (or want or demand) to be consulted and engaged; national

and global trends and contexts; and the kind and quality of pedagogy that will ensure the competence and relevance of its graduates. Leaders will have to manage and lead quite radical transformation while ensuring the efficiency and effectiveness of the university through business models (and structures) that reflect a nuanced appreciation of the challenges to be overcome.

In this context, risk and assurance come into their own as foundational to our sustainability and our flourishing. I am therefore delighted to have noted the scope of this very dense programme, and I trust that the keynotes, presentations and discussions will result in a coherent picture and understanding of the importance of risk and assurance in achieving long-term institutional health and sustainability.

Allow me to conclude by wishing you well for the rest of the programme.