

**MR AS SIMELANE, CHAIRPERSON OF COUNCIL
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA
NAMING CEREMONY OF UNISA BUILDINGS
MAIN CAMPUS
21 August 2019**

Programme Director

Council Members present here today

The leadership of the University, led by Prof Makhanya

The leadership of government, both national and provincial government

Deputy Minister in the Presidency, Prof Mkhize

Deputy Minister of Human Settlements, Water and Sanitation, Mr Mahlobo

Representatives of other institutions of higher learning

Members and guests of the Madikizela-Mandela family present

Members and guests of the Radipere family

Ambassadors and all guests present here today

The Unisa family at large that includes all stakeholders

All protocol observed

Good morning.

Programme Director, thank you for giving me the opportunity to address this august gathering on this particular day; the day we are making a radical statement about Unisa's identity and DNA. I call this a radical statement, because we are all here to witness Unisa publicly committing itself to becoming a *truly* African university, shaping the futures in the *service of humanity*. This process of becoming a truly African university is part of the university's programme of transformation and renewal. For me, the process of naming and renaming Unisa facilities is the first critical and formal step of reconstructing Unisa's identity and has the potential to enhance its ability to achieve its vision, though symbolically.

The reconstruction of an identity involves reclamation of our history and rewriting our own stories as Africans and as Unisa - who are we? In justifying the need for Unisa to reclaim the true history, it is important to understand where we come from. We come from a past, where our history was defined for us. In this regard, Steve Biko¹ correctly states that:

Not only is there no objectivity in the history taught us but frequently there is an appalling misrepresentation of facts that is sickening even to the uninformed student ... a lot of attention has to be paid to our

¹ Steve Biko. 1973. Black Consciousness and the quest for true humanity.
http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf_files/remar72.3.pdf

history if we as Blacks want to aid each other in our coming into consciousness. We have to rewrite our history and produce in it the heroes [heroines] that formed the core of our resistance to the White invaders. More has to be revealed and stress has to be laid on the successful nation-building attempts by people like Shaka, Moshoeshoe, Hintsa. These are areas calling for intense research work to provide some desperately-needed missing link. It would be too naive of us to expect our conquerors to write unbiased histories about us anyway. We have to destroy the myth that our history starts in 1652.

Programme Director, this is the reason why this renaming and naming ceremony is important as a formal reconstructing of Unisa's identity. The more substantive aspect of identity construction will start in earnest when we follow the five pillars of change or theory of change, which the Principal and Vice-Chancellor referred to in his speech, that have been identified to drive transformation at Unisa. While I do not want to repeat what these are, I just want to mention one pillar of change, transforming knowledge, epistemology and scholarship. The role of knowledge, epistemology and scholarship in driving transformation is very clear. At Unisa, the production of knowledge is at the centre of our transformation agenda. In this regard, Charles Ngwena² is correct, when he argues that the knowledge we use:

... to claim what is true or false about Africa and Africans is derived from a socially constructed archive which, like the identity it seeks to

² Ngwena, C. 2018. *What is Africanness? Contesting nativism in race, culture and sexualities*. Pretoria: Pretoria University Law Press:p 42.

name, is always in a state of becoming and being. We never quite finish knowing. By implication, we never quite finish constructing our identities for our own selves or having our identities constructed for us by those with power over us or who desire to have such power. The knowledge that is deployed in the construction of identities does not exist in a vacuum. It comes from somewhere and is always contextual.

Furthermore, Ngwena³ states that when “thinking about identities, naming carries power, or lack of it, through the statements it implicitly makes as a signifier. Naming has explanatory value, not least if the naming at issue has come to be invested with an enduring archive of alterity”.

Programme Director, what comes out clearly from the above quotation is that naming “carries power” and has “explanatory value”. As Council, we think Unisa is making a statement, which has meaning, namely that we recognise differences. Historically, the university adopted the strategy of naming its facilities after previous Vice-Chancellors, who, as is to be expected, were, in the main, white males and Afrikaners. The message had a power and explanatory value - white Afrikaner males were in charge and exclusively so. There was no question of the university being conscious and recognising differences, or the “other”. Today, we are saying, diversity matters and is part of the new South Africa. The “other” must be recognised as well. In the process of recognising the “other”, knowledge is

³ *Ibid.* p 47.

at the centre. One can only acquire new knowledge by disrupting the inherited knowledge we have of the “other” and things around us. The need to disrupt existing knowledge is aptly captured by Steve Biko⁴, when he states that as

people existing in a continuous struggle for truth, we have to examine and question old concepts, values and systems. Having found the right answers, we shall then work for consciousness amongst all people to make it possible for us to proceed towards these answers. In the process towards the answers we have to evolve our own schemes, forms and strategies to suit the need and situation, all the time keeping in mind our fundamental beliefs and values.

Programme Director, the renaming ceremony should provide the university with a new understanding of the heroes and heroines we are honouring today. Secondly, the university should “live” by the values that these leaders have exhibited throughout their lives. This, to me, will be the great honour the university can bestow on them. If not, what then is the purpose?

As Council, we expect the university to practice the leadership ethos and style exhibited by Mma Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Prof Nkoana Radipere and Mr Anton Lembede. I am not going to repeat what the Principal and Vice-Chancellor vividly said about the roles that they have played in our

⁴ Steve Biko. 1973. Black Consciousness and the quest for true humanity: p 6.

http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf_files/remar72.3.pdf

lives. All I want to say is that I expect Unisa to have serious debates about the identity we are now constructing in our journey towards the Unisa we are visualising for 2030. Such debates should provide innovative solutions about decolonising, deracialising, demasculanising and degendering the university, to create an inclusive Unisa that is intolerant of all forms of discrimination. The symbolic process of eliminating discrimination has started by renaming our facilities after “other” heroes and heroines.

Programme Director, I want to submit that the main purpose of organisational identity construction is to create a socially cohesive organisation and deliver quality service for the public good. We accept that the process of reclaiming African history and rewriting our own stories is a contested space and very emotive, because some people will have to lose their unearned power and privileges. I want to submit that it is possible though, to move beyond contestation and drama, if we adopt a transformation lens to understand and drive our agenda and programme. In dealing with the expected contestation, it is critical for all to understand and appreciate the role that ideology plays.

In addition, to address the contestation that will ensue, and which is necessary, a university, as a “noisy space”, must encourage honest debate that involve all stakeholders. These stakeholders should buy into our resolve to rename our facilities. Programme Director, this is important,

because, without this common perspective of repositioning Unisa, it might be difficult for the university to deliver on its social mandate.

Part of the university's strategy of dealing with contestation was to open and encourage all stakeholders to submit proposals. In this way, the process of renaming and naming was, from Council's perspective, fair and transparent. This was done to ensure that the process was as inclusive as it could be, by involving everyone.

In conclusion, Programme Director, the value of the ceremony lies in how the renaming itself is used by all at Unisa. It is my wish, and Council's wish, that this ceremony and renaming process should be understood as a transformative way of creating a new Unisa. A new university that can play its civic function in the community, rather than be for the exclusive use of the elite.

The Unisa Council takes this Constitutional imperative of inclusivity seriously and we have, in this regard, taken the necessary steps to put in place mechanisms, structures and processes to ensure that the process of name-changing is fully consultative and representative of all stakeholders.

The people have spoken and have put up the name of Mama Winnie Madikizela-Mandela for the naming of this building. The Mother of the

Nation needs no introduction and explanation to people of Unisa and South Africa at large.

The larger issue is, however, how does the university use this ceremony to honour our heroes and heroines as a repositioning strategy? This can be done, I submit, if the leadership of the university uses this ceremony to achieve the four things that have been identified by Bjørn Stensaker (2015).

These are to use

- **identity for interpretation** of Unisa's identity and DNA. In this process it is important to listen to multiple voices and experiences, because no stakeholder has the absolute right to determine Unisa's strategic direction and priorities, not even Council.
- **identity as image**, that is, for branding and managing its reputation. In other words, to use the renaming to tell both internal and external stakeholders about Unisa's brand as a university aspiring to be a fully-fledged OdeL and comprehensive institution of first choice.
- **identity as innovation**, that is, to start a deliberate process of reinterpretation of Unisa's image and put in place strategies and plans to address its weaknesses.
- **identity as integration strategy**, informed by a serious institutional integrative sensemaking, so that we collectively can answer the question: Who are we?

I thank you.