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**MR AS SIMELANE, CHAIRPERSON OF COUNCIL**  
**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA**  
**OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE UNIVERSITY AND AWARD CEREMONY**  
**MAIN CAMPUS**  
**14 February 2020**

Programme Director, thank you for allowing me to address this seminal gathering on this day, the Official Opening of the University. The Official Opening of a University is always a significant moment in the life of any university. It is always a pompous and glittering occasion where academics in their academic regalia inspire students and visitors to the virtues of education. In the process showing off and signifying the social and economic value of a university as a place of intellectual rigour and debates where differences of opinions are encouraged and nurtured. In addition, it is at this ceremony that the university community comes together, where the university leadership shares information about the performance of the institution and sets the agenda for the year. This agenda includes setting targets and the identification of institutional performance indicators. It is on this occasion that the university community is informed of the

challenges that the university might experience during the year. Furthermore, it is at a ceremony like this that those staff members who went beyond their job descriptions are recognised and rewarded for their excellent role in providing quality service to Unisa and its key stakeholders. Programme Director I will focus my address today on on Six things,.

This year, as the VC has already indicated, will be a busy year, in that the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) will be conducting an audit of the university to see whether our systems, policies, procedures are in line with quality enhancement strategies as set by this important statutory body.

Programme Director, this is an important and exciting exercise, and I am happy that the university saw it fit to invite the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) to conduct a trial run in 2019 to assist in preparing for the upcoming HEQC audit. As Council, we look forward to receiving and engaging with the contents and implications that will emanate from the final COL audit report. Colleagues, quality, and initiatives to enhance it are non-negotiable as **it is at the core of who and what we are.**

The second point I want to highlight as important, Programme Director, is to mention that this year, we are completing the first five-year period of implementing the Unisa 2030 strategy. As the VC has already indicated, we will be revising the current strategy to align it with the challenges the

university is experiencing as well as ensuring that we focus more on being a genuinely African ODeL institution. The move to implement the ODeL model is critical, in view of the need to incorporate the much-talked-about Fourth Industrial Revolution.

The question that we need to ask is, how does one develop a five-year strategy in a dynamic and ever-changing environment like the higher education sector? My answer is that our strategy is not static but, rather a living document that should be revised as and when the situation and conditions on the ground demand, or when aspects become obsolete. In revising the Unisa 2030 strategy, it is essential to take note of the views of Geschwind (2019: 383)<sup>1</sup> when he states that in analyzing the rhetoric of change and transformation, which inform any strategy development, a deeper understanding of the concept of legitimacy is a useful, albeit a broad analytical concept. He argues that legitimacy is a “generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of *norms, values, beliefs, and definitions*”. To me, the norms referred to, are the approaches the university employs in developing a strategy. As it is not the first time the university is developing a strategy, it is crucial to understand what worked in the past and what did not work. At the apex of norms that have been employed in the past, is that any process of strategy

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<sup>1</sup> Geschwind, L. Legitimizing Change in Higher Education: Exploring the Rationales Behind Major Organizational Restructuring, *Higher Education Policy*, 32: 381–395

development must entail a consultative process for it to be owned by the majority of stakeholders. As Council, we have developed a growing, albeit concerning awareness, that the first five years of the current strategy was not sufficiently accepted and owned by the majority of stakeholders. Clearly, this is an unacceptable status quo and going forward, We need to ensure that processes are consultative so that the strategy is broadly accepted.

Regarding the *values*, I am of the view that the values we will ultimately adopt should be appropriate and aligned with our mission and vision of the institution. Furthermore, these values must permeate all the university's operations, that is, we must "live them". I propose that we use a tool to test whether we are living these values. This test should result in us in making Unisa a truly African and decolonised university, which is home for all irrespective of race, gender, and class.

About *beliefs*, I suggest that we move with speed to ensure that we indeed become a comprehensive ODeL institution that uses technology to provide quality service to our students and other stakeholders. The reason for this is, our believe is that the only way we can become competitive and achieve our social mandate, is to become a fully-fledge ODeL institution that is accessible to all irrespective of their location. Finally, it is my firm believe that to achieve this noble goal, it is important that we reach 'sufficient' institutional consensus regarding certain critical *definitions* that continue to undermine our vision, of being an *African University shaping the futures*

*in the service of humanity*. Some of the definitions that we must unpack for this purpose include terms such as, Africanisation, decolonisation, ODeL, comprehensiveness, and many more. Unless there is clarity regarding some of these concepts I have highlighted, there is a slim chance that the strategy will be legitimate in the eyes of multiple stakeholders.

The third critical issue for 2020, from a Council perspective is for the university to make a concerted effort to improve the student experience, including making our infrastructure accessible, safe, secure, and appropriate. Over the last few years, we have been receiving many complaints from students regarding problems they are experiencing with Unisa. Council is concerned that the university seems to be struggling to implement appropriate measures to enhance the student experience. I appeal to the university management to assess all systems, policies, and structures, including infrastructure that deal with the enhancement of student experience. In this regard, the views of Dougherty, K.J & Natow, R.S. (2019: 15)<sup>2</sup> can prompt and encourage the assesment when they argue that as a University, we must raise many questions about the explanatory usefulness of neoliberal theory that we have adopted and implemented regarding student experience.

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<sup>2</sup> Dougherty, K.J & Natow, R.S. 2019. Performance-based funding for higher education: how well does neoliberal theory capture neoliberal practice?, *Higher Education*,

They contend that, although some of the neoliberal systems, policies, and structures adopted appear to “produce improvements in instructional and student-support practices, research administration, and faculty research productivity, there is little evidence that, on the whole, this produces better student retention and graduation rates.”,these produce many “unintended impacts” that neoliberal theory largely ignores. The theory properly points to compliance costs and drops in output quality but fails to anticipate such other unintended impacts as reduced admission of less advantaged students, narrowing of institutional missions, rising inequality among higher education institutions, growing stratification of the academic labour force, and the damaged motivation of higher education personnel.”

Programme Director, I submit that there is a need for an honest and thoughtful assessment of the impact and costs benefits of the interventions implemented, and to ensure that they are aligned with our mission, vision, and values, including our strategy going forward. In this regard, the role of Regions, as the first point of contact with the university students, is very critical. I am hopeful that the recently approved Regional Model, as well as its associated infrastructure challenges, will be implemented to enhance the ability of the university to improve student experience.

The fourth issue I want to address briefly is the focus on improving student success and graduation, including their employability. These are important as they relate to our social mandate. We are all aware that Unisa is not performing as expected with respect to these issues. I suggest that the university adopt a *participatory approach to student success*. In this regard, Chang, London, and Foster (2019: 481<sup>3</sup>) contend that “participatory approaches to student success framing and programming might advance more relevant and responsive conceptions of student success and facilitate organizational processes for achieving these more expansive aims.” They argue that the “prevailing conceptions of student success reflect a variety of interests that may not actually reflect the expressed needs, hopes, or aspirations of students attending institutions of higher education and/or the faculty and staff who aim to serve them” (Chang, London & Foster, 2019: 482). These scholars have identified three types of interventions that they believe are aimed at achieving the most “expansive notions of student success.” These are adapting *departmental and classroom structures using more culturally responsive approaches* to teaching; instituting *more participatory, student-driven approaches to program development*; and attending to a *sense of belonging on campus*” (Chang, London & Foster, 2019: 489)

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<sup>3</sup> Chang, E; London, R.A & Foster, S.S. 2019. Reimagining Student Success: Equity-Oriented Responses to Traditional Notions of Success, *Innovative Higher Education*, 44:481–496

The views expressed above are supported by our focus for the Africanization and decolonization of the university, including its systems, policies, procedures as well as its operations. As part of this process, we will need to address the unintended impact of the neoliberal implemented in our Universities. Programme director,

Programme Director, I am raising these issues because if we fail to address inequality in our institution, we will not succeed in achieving our social mandate, namely to provide equity of access, opportunity, and outcomes to staff, students, and other stakeholders, including access to diverse knowledge.

The fifth issue that I want to highlight as critical for this occasion revolves around addressing the financial situation of the institution, including its financial sustainability. This is a significant threat to the university's sustainability but is also the most contested due to conflicting positions adopted by different stakeholders within the university, meaning there is no common understanding of the financial situation of the university. These contestations were sharply raised during the current salary negotiations that sadly deteriorated to the level they did over the last two weeks. I implore the university Management to have an honest consultation with organised labour as well as student leadership to share information about this matter. I also appeal to those internal staff members who participate in Council to play a role in educating the broader



university community on how decisions are taken in Council meetings relating to the finances of the university and how its financial sustainability could be assured. As Council, we have been made aware of the ever-escalating costs of human resources and have interrogated the University Management's plans to address this, but it is increasingly becoming apparent that these interventions are not yielding the required results. We need an institutional commitment from all to secure the financial sustainability of this vital institution. There is no alternative. In this regard, the situation at UKZN immediately after the merger around 2005 might provide valuable lessons for all of us.

**The sixth issue** I want to address relates to the university's reputation. Programme Director, over the past year, the university has been in the news for the wrong reasons. It was sad to observe that majority of the stories that appear in newspaper were provided by internal staff members, who felt aggrieved by the university in one way or another. I appeal to all staff members to raise their grievances with the university using internal processes and that they ensure that all internal avenues have been exhausted before running to a newspaper or posting their unhappiness on social media. The role of other stakeholders, such as students, alumna, and convocation, in leaking confidential information to the media as well as posting on social media platforms should also be discouraged. There are internal processes to be followed if one feels one's right has been violated, please follow this process before embarrassing the university and thus

damaging its reputation. I have deliberately raised the matter of leaking confidential information to the media in the manner, in which I have done, because this is getting out of hand. We need to stop this. If it means reviewing our disciplinary policy and procedure, I would suggest we do so, to protect the reputation of the university.

As Council we are worried about this constant and never-ending damage of the university reputation. The exam leaks concerns Council as this undermines the integrity of the university's academic project, including its qualifications. What is also worrying is the fact that we seem to be unable to nip this in the bud. Despite the involvement of the country's security establishment, this problem persists. Does this mean this is an internal problem related to how examinations are planned and managed at the university, including the appointment of invigilators? If so, have we considered the deployment of our own staff members, including academics as invigilators. The latter issue will be relevant, if and only if, the problem originates from the invigilation process? I appeal to the university management to develop creative ways of addressing this matter once and for all. We cannot have another exam leak in 2020.

Programme Director, it does not mean nothing has been done in the past to address the problem of institutional reputation. We are looking forward to receiving a report on the impact these interventions have made in addressing the university's reputation. I am of the view that to address the

brand and reputation damage, we need to deal with the toxic institutional environment and cultures that have been normalised in the university. We have been reminded of these toxic cultures and how they have been normalized by the investigation that was conducted in 2018 by the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) after a request from the university. The Commission made the following observations, among others:

- There are systematic and institutional challenges at UNISA that could not be solved through a single form of intervention.
- Unisa continues to experience high levels of racial tension, intimidation, sexism, and discrimination based on prohibited grounds of race and gender, despite the availability of policies.
- A failed implementation of policies (lack of consequences for violations) and a lack of commitment to transformation.
- There seems to be credence to the allegations that there is a culture of racism, sexism, harassment, and intimidation within UNISA.
- Governance structures within UNISA are not fully cooperative in assisting with the transformation agenda.

These are grave observations. As Council, we are aware that the university has developed programmes to deal with this. We are expecting a report on how far the university management has addressed some of these matters because as I have mentioned, brand and reputation are linked to

institutional environments and cultures. Brand and reputation damage is a symptom of a toxic and unwelcoming institutional culture.

In conclusion, we are all aware that this is the final Official Opening of the Academic year by the current Principal and Vice-Chancellor, Prof Mandla Makhanya, who has been at the helm for the past ten (10) years. As Council, we are grateful for what he has done over the years and look forward to getting a new Principal and Vice-Chancellor who should take the University forward. As the VC has indicated in his welcoming message to staff at the beginning of the year, Council is leading the process in recruiting, selecting and appointing the new VC. The university community will be informed in due time of the process being followed. Therefore, there is no need for panic. I take this opportunity to appeal to all present, to continue our mandate to provide quality service to our key stakeholders, while we allow the process to unfold.

Finally, in this ceremony, we will be awarding prizes, including the Chair of Council Award to staff members and students who have been ambassadors of the university by going beyond their job descriptions and doing their bit to make Unisa a university that is living its values. We are honouring them because we want to encourage others to follow in their footsteps. Being recognised for an award is the highest form of acknowledgment by one's supervisor, peers, including one's exceptional performance in a particular qualification. I wish to congratulate all those who are receiving awards

today and appeal to them to continue performing at high levels as a way of encouraging others in their areas of work to do the same. It is only when all of us perform at that highest level that we will be able to deal with Unisa's service problems. I know the impact of quality service can only be felt when delivered by a team and not by individuals. In this regard, it is important to understand that customer levels of satisfaction are more or less proportional to the preconceived expectations of what the service quality should be. For example,

- If the service delivered fails to match expectations, then customers perceive the service delivery to be substandard.
- If the service delivery matches expectations, then the customer is satisfied.
- If the service delivery exceeds expectations, then the customer leaves with the impression that service delivery is excellent <sup>4</sup>

We recognize these colleagues today because they are aware of this simple fact about service. To all these staff members and students, I say congratulations and enjoy your prizes.

I thank you.

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph, M; Yakho, M and Stone, G. 2005. An institution's quest for service quality: customers' perspective, *Quality Assurance in Education*, 13 (1): 66 - 82