



CONVOCATION & ALUMNI

15 August 2017

COMMUNIQUE TO MEMBERS OF CONVOCATION/ALUMNI & UNISA COMMUNITY

Dear Fellow Convocants

Over the years of our existence as the convocation and alumni of the world's largest ODEL institution, we have become accustomed to not having interactions of any kind outside the confines of our annual meetings. My writing to you as President of Convocation is thus certainly an unusual occurrence – and yet it is also a warranted and yearned-for step towards establishing an engagement with members of the Convocation, the alumni and all Unisans in their entirety. Let me hasten to state that I am borrowing the word “Unisans” from UNISA's Principal and Vice-Chancellor, Professor Mandla Makhanya, who first coined this word to describe everyone who is part of the vibrant UNISA community.

I have after a lengthy reflection, deemed it appropriate to establish an ongoing interaction with the members of - Convocation and with all Unisans. A thoroughgoing and robust interaction is even more necessary in light of recent developments in the higher education sector – developments from which our beloved institution UNISA, has not been insulated. Given the advancement in the state of ICT as well as the resilience of UNISA's databases, we should be in a good position to engage deeply and consistently elicit the generation of ideas able to contribute towards shaping the discourse in the sector and towards resolving its challenges. To this end, I will be engaging with relevant offices within the institution to expedite the creation of interactive platforms leveraging both existing ICT and remote infrastructure.

The impact of #FeesMustFall and #OutsourcingMustFall on the University

Recent developments in the sector, including those which have taken the form of hashtag movements such as #FeesMustFall and #OutsourcingMustFall, have demonstrated an urgent need for a thorough reflection on practices in the higher education landscape where the status quo has simply outlived its relevance and must now be ended. Revelations of exploitative and debilitating working conditions, as well as non-legislation compliant salaries paid by contractors to outsourced workers, are a disturbing and confrontational reality that bears testimony to statistical evidence that we are the world's most unequal society as measured through the Gini-coefficient.

The required contribution of Convocants at Unisa

I must hasten to extend my immense gratitude to the members of UNISA Convocation who took interest and

participated in Multi-Stakeholder Task Team (MSST) established by the UNISA Council and charged with the responsibility of facilitating the insourcing of previously outsourced workers. The contribution of Convocation representatives in the MSST resonates with an empirical finding by Stone (2001)¹ who asserted that former students organised in the form of a convocation, along with alumni, have the potential to contribute both financially and socially to increasing the credibility, longevity and sustenance of their alma mater. It remains our responsibility, as the Convocation, to contribute towards shaping the discourse in UNISA and to ascertain the sustenance of this colossal institution which is over one hundred and forty years old. This we should endeavour to do, not merely to keep its doors open for another century, but also to maintain the quality and integrity of its academic offering and relevant research output.

It is also important to reflect on the financial contribution that we, as the Convocation, should make towards UNISA in order to provide a cushion against the escalating financial difficulties faced by students. Notwithstanding the fact that the fees protests less intense at UNISA than they were at other institutions, it is important to recognise that this might be explained by the fact that over 60% of our students are in employment outside of their studies, as well as by the ODEL character of the University – a factor that weakens mass mobilisation. However, this does not negate the fact that we have to urgently devote our efforts towards making a financial contribution to the university in order to cushion it from the impact of the capped tuition fee increment percentage resulting from the #FeesMustFall protests. Furthermore, we also need to complement the efforts of the UNISA Council which has set up a fund to cater for the payment of tuition fees for the benefit of previously disadvantaged students.

Convocation in mapping the future of the University

The need for contributions towards tuition fees is urgent in our context – even more so in light of South Africa's recent credit ranking reviews and the concomitant technical recession in the economy. Against the backdrop of these country level developments, we may see further job losses and, consequently, more and more of our previously employed students will find it difficult to pay their fees. It for this reason that I have taken the lead in resuscitating the Convocation Bursary. Details of how this bursary – including disbursements – will operate will be communicated soon. I shall also be engaging with strategic partners within and outside UNISA in a bid to leverage the capacity and the vastness of Convocation to establish a customised UNISA crowdfunding platform for tuition fees.

In addition to the tuition fees issue, as detailed above, the University has been contending with the challenge of study material distribution. In terms of the institutional statutes, Convocation is charged with advising management and Council on matters of importance and study materials are both a most basic aspect and an important enabler of the university's teaching and learning agenda. Late delivery or non-delivery of study material has placed our University in a very serious negative light and this matter therefore requires urgent attention. Although this has been a challenge for some time now, the matter appears to have escalated to intolerable levels by the first semester of 2017. The Convocation needs to contribute in the form of ideas and advice to assist the University in overcoming this challenge.

In conclusion, I have noted with serious concern the revelations made in the recent SAHRC report². This report reveals that institutions of higher learning and other role players in the higher learning landscape have demonstrated a narrow understanding of what is meant by the word "transformation" – indeed, in some instances there has been a total lack of such understanding. This is disturbing, especially given the challenges of transformation inherent to the sector, some of which have been briefly reflected in this communiqué. The struggle

¹ Stone (2001) as quoted by the higher education transformation network

² South African Human Rights Commission report on transformation at public universities in South Africa

of insourcing outsourced workers is a transformation issue than it is a social justice issue. I have also noted that UNISA, a sole service provider, did not participate in the national hearings conducted by SAHRC, yet this very report was formally presented at UNISA. Although I have not yet been apprised of the reasons why UNISA did not participate in this important undertaking, I shall be participating in the UNISA Council workshop. I plan to foreground transformation matters in my presentation to this workshop, from the perspective of the Convocation.

I am looking forward to a variety of initiatives that will result in our communicating frequently so as to edify our engagements and to solidify our collective contribution to our alma mater, UNISA!

Thank you

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Mr Sabelo Mhlungu
President of Convocation