



The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor

PROF MANDLA MAKHANYA, PRINCIPAL AND VICE-CHANCELLOR

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

ADDRESS: 145 YEARS OF STUDENT LEADERSHIP AT UNISA

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

KGORONG FUNCTION HALL

22 NOVEMBER 2018

18:00 – 22:00

- Programme Directors: Ms Judith Matlou and Ms Nompandolo Mkhathshwa
- Mr Sakhi Simelane, Chairperson of the Unisa Council
- Dr Faroon Goolam, Unisa Registrar and members of Unisa's executive management present
- Dr Sibusiso Chalufu – Dean of Students
- Dr Bandile Hadebe, Progressive Youth in Business Managing Director, Etaform: Middle East and Africa

- Unisa's first Dean of Students, Prof Olga Makhubela –Nkondo, Health Studies, Unisa
- Mr Console Tleane Unisa SRC Convenor 1995 – 1996
- Rev Nango Enoch, Unisa SRC President 1996 – 1998
- Mr Sabelo Mhlungu, President of the Unisa Convocation
- Mr Vuyo Mhaga, Unisa Student Leader and SRC Member 2000 – 2005
- Mr Thabo Rabalao, Unisa Student Leader and SRC Member 2005 – 2010
- Ms Zandile Sodladla Unisa SRC President 2016 – 2018
- Mr Wadzanai Mazhetese, Unisa SRC President 2018 - 2020
- Our outgoing SRC members: :
 - President: Ms Zandile Sodladla
 - Deputy President: Mr Sello Nkhatho
 - Secretary General: Mr Tsholofelo Kgaswane
 - Deputy Secretary General :Mr Siyabonga Zulu
 - Treasurer General: Ms Zonke Xanti
 - Education and Training Officer : Mr Itumeleng Molefe
 - Sports and Cultural Officer : Ms Grace Sebake
 - National Postgraduate Officer and incoming SRC President: Mr Wadzanai Mazhetese
 - National Undergraduate Officer : Mr Rodney Mabusela

- All SRC members in the regional structures
- Incoming SRC Members:
 - President: Mr Wadzanai Mazhetese
 - Deputy President: Mr Xola Nyirenda
 - Secretary General: Mr Siyabonga Zulu
 - Deputy Secretary: Ms Nkgabiseng Dube
 - Treasurer General: Vacant
 - Education and Training: Ms Zona Majambe
 - Sports and Culture: Mr Moses Baloyi
 - Post Graduate Officer: Mr Lucas Mamabolo
 - Under Graduate Officer: Mr Amukelani Ngwenya
- Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

Good evening and welcome to this milestone celebration. It's really heart-warming to see that our students are so invested in our university that we have all come together to celebrate and acknowledge student leadership at Unisa both past and present, our student leaders' academic excellence, and to pay tribute to the IEC and identified partners in the successful management of our recent SRC elections.

Let me perhaps start by sharing with you that Unisa has never had 145 years of student leadership. Far from it. In fact, our first interim Student

Representatives Council was instituted in 1995 (under the Vice Chancellor-ship of Prof Marinus Wiechers) in response to demands from Unisa students and within the context of a raft of new legislation, post-democracy. The reason why it took so long for this important step to happen was that the opinion that held sway up to that point, was that as a Distance Education University, and with no students on campus, Unisa's widely dispersed students needed no representation. We obviously disagreed with that.

Well, shortly after the institution of the interim SRC in 1995, a student/staff Committee on Transformation (COT) was formed and this in turn resorted under the quite seminal Unisa Transformation Forum, later called the Unisa Broad Transformation Unit (these were established across all universities, with the aim of achieving consensus on a national framework for Universities, post democracy). Does that sound familiar? It seems hard to believe but it speaks of a trend which I will highlight at the conclusion of this address.

But, if the truth be told, in the Unisa set up, the impact of the UBTU was not readily visible when considering the manifestations of the kind of transformation that was envisaged. Perhaps in our excitement at the prospect of fundamental transformation, we underestimated what it

takes to move a monolithic institution like Unisa. What it did do, however, was to get the transformation conversation going and promote the establishment of a number of institutional forums such as the Employment Equity Forum (established in 1998), as well as a number of policies aimed at eliminating various forms of discrimination in the workplace - thus laying the groundwork and framework for future transformation at Unisa. So in that sense the SRC was a key part of a larger grouping that sought to transform the university at that time.

The fact is that during this period there was so much volatility and resistance at Unisa (and in South Africa) that management never endorsed the Unisa strategic plans, prompting the Black Forum, Nehawu and the SRC to withdraw from the UBTF and threatened rolling mass action. This was averted by the establishment of the Unisa Alliance, whose seemingly unimplementable demands prompted the resignation of the Vice Chancellor in 1997.

In the intervening years, that is 1997 – 2002, Unisa continued in an unsettled and contentious manner under the Vice-Chancellorship of Professor Anthony Melck who fortunately managed to stabilise the very precarious financial situation into which Unisa had descended. During this time the SRCs continued to play an influential role in the university,

but as had been the case since their inception, the political instability in the country and the lack of continuity in the sector, impeded any profound or meaningful transformation or impact.

As is the case with any change in leadership at Unisa, there were fierce personal, professional and political contestations which diverted attention from the genuine transformation of the University even as various stakeholders were advancing claims that transformation was in fact their agenda.

So, prior to the Vice-Chancellor-ship of Prof Barney Pityana from November 2001, Unisa was beset by one dramatic event after another (sounds familiar!) made worse by the announcement of the mergers during the same year in 2001. Prof Pityana, by the way, was the second President of the South African Students Organisation (SASO), following in the footsteps of his close friend and fellow Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko, who was the first SASO President. Banned and under threat of the same fate as Biko, Pityana went into exile, returning to South Africa in 1990. It was largely his struggle credentials plus his time in Geneva at the WCC's programme to Combat Racism and then at the helm of the SAHRC, that Pityana was deemed the best possible candidate to

see the merger through and to simultaneously advance the Africanisation agenda at Unisa.

I believe that Prof Pityana's steering of the merger to completion was mostly successful and it is no mean feat that Unisa's merger with TSA and Vudec was not only the largest and most complex of all the HE mergers, but widely regarded as the most successful. Certainly Professor Pityana made many enemies, especially amongst academic staff in his "firm" – some might even say "harsh" treatment of their complaints, especially around conditions of service and the appointment of black and women staff in line with the EE policy at the time. Yes, that sounds familiar too! However it would also be true to say that during his tenure, the SRC, along with other University stakeholders such as APSA and Nehawu, were never able to play the kind of role, nor have the impact that they envisaged. The merger severely disrupted university operations across the sector. Every single aspect of institutional functioning was under reconstruction and there was contestation from all stakeholders every step of the way. This extended to SRC activities which were similarly obliged to "merge." Such was the disenchantment with the status quo that in 2005, the combined SRC congress (comprising the SRC's from the former institutions) was deemed to have failed. In addition different political and geographical factions and perceived power struggles

contributed to an ongoing lack of coherence and unity of purpose, which obviously affected the efficacy of the SRC.

Most disconcertingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, given the context at the time, voting in SRC elections was so low (I seem to recall 1.5% and 2% at some stages) that the 2008 elections were, for example, re-run in 2009. Given the prevailing highly politicised context it is understandable that students felt that the SRC's were not responding to their issues or to ensuring a quality student experience, but rather that they were more interested in their own political agendas and power struggles. The regions, I can tell you, were similarly affected. We were all in a state of disequilibrium if the truth be told.

However, there can be no denying that Prof Pityana and his management team saw the merger through, advanced equity quotas and especially the representation of (black) women across the institution, and embedded in the institutional psyche the notion of the Africanisation of Unisa. It must be said, however, that Africanisation at Unisa had a more continental and international focus at its inception. It was also during this time, that our vision: "The African university in the service of humanity" was entrenched.

I assumed office in 2011 and immediately set out fulfilling the undertaking that I had given to the university in my presentation to an institutional assembly during the selection process. My analogy was that of a beautiful mosaic, made of many different coloured and shaped pieces, but which nevertheless contributed to a harmonious and complete image. This would be done through a process of inclusion, undergirded by the 11Cs + 1 and the more deliberate institution of ethical and transparent governance. It was, and remains, my belief that all stakeholders at Unisa should have a voice and a say in the way in which the university functions and that in particular, our students' voices should be heard and responded to in appropriate and humane ways.

Anyone who might care to, can go back to the majority of my addresses and they will find the golden thread of responsiveness to our students, the right of students to enjoy a quality learning experience, and the duty and responsibility of academic and support staff, to provide that. And so our student unions became more organised and more formally and actively a part of the institutional stakeholder group. In line with the governance impetus at Unisa, we commenced training of our SRC leadership, which included leadership training and training on the role and functions of the university in the sector. Our students from a previous SRC produced their own Student Ethics Charter and committed

publicly to passing, and passing well, each year. I think that to an extent they have achieved this but much work needs to be done in showing stronger and more visible leadership in student academic excellence at Unisa. Rhetoric should be backed up by action if it is to be believed and emulated.

One of the most innovative and successful programmes of the SRCs during my tenure is the involvement of the IEC, joined more latterly, by other partners, in the running of our SRC elections. The success of this initiative has been proven beyond any shadow of a doubt and the IEC and our more recent collaborators may take pride in this innovative practice which I have no doubt will soon become the norm rather than the exception. Congratulations and a very sincere thank you to you all.

This year we achieved another seminal milestone. That of electronic voting which has succeeded beyond our expectations. I think that it is very appropriate that as an ODeL university this should be the norm and I am so proud of our SRC and the University Mr Dean of Students and the recent former President, for showing to the sector, just what we are capable of. Coming from a platform of low participation we have grown steadily to participation of well over 50 000 students in the most recent SRC elections. This electronic voting system is something that I trust we will refine and develop in line with our needs and institutional dynamics.

It is also something which I suspect will be adopted by other universities as well, and so once again I think we can feel proud that we are the trendsetting institution in this very important part of SRC governance. I think you can give yourselves a round of applause for that!

We are also pleased at the role of the SRC's in securing a better learning experience for our students and I look forward to seeing how this is going to materialise in the near future. This is after all, the core business of the SRC. My plea to you all would be that the lobbying for support of our students should be done in a more collaborative and less combative manner. As a university we share the same goal of a quality student experience.

It would also be remiss of me not to raise the plain fact that factional infighting, demands for more and more personal benefits and perks, and unfortunately sometimes, public displays of bad behaviour, and ill conduct, not only do harm to personal reputations, but render SRCs less effective than they may be and damage the reputation of the university. It is a lose-lose scenario.

This brings me to my concluding remarks colleagues.

A brief trip down memory lane in regard to the different epochs of SRC's raises a few pertinent observations:

1. Unisa has been in a constant state of fundamental transformation since the advent of democracy in 1994. This has resulted in our universities and the sector trying to implement radical transformation across very broad fronts while the State itself has been in a process of very fundamental transformation itself. Instability been and continues to be the only constant. SRCs are a cog in the very large wheel of national and institutional transformation. Unisa's situation and the SRC's situation look set to continue as we face yet another year of very real socio-economic and political instability. No-one knows what the future holds. What lessons should our SRC take from this?
2. SRCs and in fact, all other institutional stakeholders in our universities, including the unions, ultimately present as microcosms of that disruption, and they have to an unfortunate degree, been constrained by it. But what has added to that constraint is political infighting and sometimes, personal agendas, which at times have overridden concerns about student welfare. This is very unfortunate indeed and it is something that requires a bit of introspection, I think.
3. Traditionally student leadership has been associated with conflict and struggle. So it is not unusual - or wrong - that in the minds of many students, SRC leadership and membership still means that

relationships are necessarily adversarial and often, characterised by conflict, struggle and adversity. But genuine and productive activism should always be undergirded by **service** and most importantly, **discipline**. Our country and our university and its students, are facing many, very tough challenges, and even though there will inevitably be contestation, addressing and resolving those challenges requires the same type of discipline and the same kind of service mentality as that which shaped the success we have achieved as a nation and a university. Leadership without an ethos of ethics, integrity, service and discipline is not leadership at all. I think we could rather call it populism or autocracy, or just plain greed, and we need to avoid such labels at all costs.

And so the challenge for us this evening as a collective, is to reflect on the kind of leaders you are and the kind of leadership you are providing - to one another and to our students. In my view, successful student leadership exhibits three vital characteristics: ethical and consistent leadership; leadership by personal and academic example; and leadership that is in touch with the students it represents and serves and that understands not only their challenges, but the capacity of the university to contribute to their resolution.

All of you as you have served as SRC leaders: Thank you for your dedication, your hard work and your genuine commitment to our students and our university. To the recent former SRC leaders, you have ushered in a different era of SRC engagement and involvement in the affairs of the university and our students, and no doubt they will be reaping the benefits going forward. And by the way before I bring my remarks to a close, let me reiterate my concern at the absolute dearth of women in our SRCs. It is embarrassing quite frankly. We can do so much better! I would like us to get to a place where we at least have gender equity in our SRCs. Let us work on that going forward.

To our incoming SRC, let us build on the approach to student leadership that places studies and students at the top of the agenda. Let us work together to that end. If we do that I truly believe that we will be setting a course, not only for improved success and throughput rates, but also for the growth and development of a leadership cadre who will stand comfortably and proudly on the shoulders of the giants who have gone before them. So, to our newly elected SRC members, on behalf of the university Council, executive and extended management, staff and students, I would like to wish you all a very sincere word of congratulations on your elections to this important stakeholder group. I look forward to the important and impactful work that I know you will

be doing to ensure the best possible learning experience for our students, and to grow and develop your own leadership skills and abilities towards excellent service to our country and people.

I thank you.