



The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor

PROF MANDLA MAKHANYA, PRINCIPAL AND VICE-CHANCELLOR

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

WELCOME: 2020 UNISA FOUNDERS LECTURE

"Covid-19: What it reveals about who we are and what we could be"

TEAMS

23 September 2020

14:00 – 16:00

Thank you Programme Director, Prof Makoe, Chair of Commonwealth of Learning: Open Education Resources/Practices (OER/OEP) at Unisa

- Our Chancellor, President Thabo Mbeki
- Former Chancellor, Judge Bernard Ngoepe
- Members of Unisa Council present

- Our keynote speaker this afternoon, Professor Adam Habib – outgoing Vice Chancellor and Principal of the University of the Witwatersrand
- Dr Marcia Socikwa, Vice Principal: Operations and Facilities
- Dr Jeanette Botha, Director in the Vice Chancellor’s Office
- Members of Unisa’s executive and extended management
- Representatives from Government, the Business Community and Institutions of Higher Learning
- Members of Unisa National Student Representative Council and other student and labour formations
- Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

On behalf of the Council, Senate, Management and staff of the University of South Africa, it is my honour and pleasure to bid you a very warm welcome to Unisa’s 2020 Founders Lecture.

Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules to hear the thoughts and views of one of South Africa’s most seasoned educators, Professor Adam Habib. In so doing, you have aligned yourselves with those public and private intellectuals who seek enlightenment and solutions through the time honoured and proven practice of sober intellectual immersion and engagement. I would venture to say that in a world in the grip of the disruption caused by

the COVID -19 Pandemic, and the inevitable conspiracy theor-ism, fake news and social turbulence, such spaces for sober intellectual immersion and reflection as this one, offer a welcome and necessary respite from the babble of social media. Prof Habib, you are most welcome, sir.

We are indeed living in interesting times. But ladies and gentlemen, if the truth be told, it seems that there has hardly been a time in South African education, especially over the past 50 years or so, when the sector has not suffered externally imposed or propelled disruption and transformation.

Prior to the attainment of democracy, higher education was split along racial and linguistic lines and was deeply unjust and unequal. Our universities were very much a part of the struggle for freedom and democracy, and once this had been won, further disruption ensued in the form of the radical reconfiguration of the higher education landscape, which was characterised by the merger process. Scarcely decades later, the *Fallist* movement unleashed a wave that came with fundamental higher education transformation. All of this, ladies and gentlemen, happened where institutions had to operate in an ongoing and ever-constrained environment – particularly in regard to available resources and capacities.

Post these developments, the sector was hard at work in making investments at different levels in responding to the challenges facing our students. And then, just when we thought things couldn't get any worse, they did. The glimmers of hope which saw the more positive of our citizens calling 2020, "Twenty-Plenty," turned to disbelieving dismay as the COVID-19 Pandemic wreaked its disruption and destruction on the world. Now, as we approach the end of 2020, we are still riding that very scary roller coaster of hope, despair and frustration as the pandemic unfolds in unanticipated ways, often with disastrous consequences.

For a higher education sector that was, and still is, wrestling with the entire notion of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and its promise and peril for (South) African higher education, the COVID-19 pandemic perhaps served as a timely reminder of our propensity to be reactive, rather than proactive. I wonder for example, how many of our institutional risk assessments identified and anticipated the impact on our institutions and the sector, of particularly this disruption? Could we have predicted the likelihood of this pandemic actually occurring? I guess not. This results in us being reactive and thus inhibiting our agility in times where our quick steps with mitigating actions would have saved us. We have seen this situation in many parts of our country and some parts of the world.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed our weaknesses and shortcomings as a sector, and as individual institutions. But ladies and gentlemen it has also shown us our strengths, and provided us with a very unique window – a very rare moment in time - for us to change things around.

At last year's Founders Lecture welcome, I spoke of 4IR and our preparedness for it in regard to potential job losses and appropriate skills and training. I asked: *"how prepared are we for the change that is upon us? What are we doing about it? 4IR is not going away. And we as (South) Africa's universities, endowed with larges reserves of intellectual capacity and creativity, must surely be at the vanguard of the necessary transformation."* A year later, those questions remain pertinent, yet perhaps more relevant in a time of COVID-19.

Ladies and gentlemen, if ever there was a moment in time, that has shown up our weaknesses in regard to our attitudes towards technology and our uptake thereof, this is it. We are paying the price, I believe, for a reluctance to embrace the inevitable. And in so doing, we have found ourselves on the back foot, scrambling once again to survive, rather than to be sufficiently prepared as to capitalise on the opportunities that present themselves, right here and right now, for new and innovative ways to grow and flourish.

One year later almost to the day, this Founders lecture finds us with yet another layer of complexity to add to an already fraught higher education context. How are we faring? Today I must ask, what have we done that has positioned us as Universities to better navigate the impact of COVID-19? The mad rush to emergency remote learning, and all that goes with it would seem to suggest – not enough.

But ladies and gentlemen, in case you think it is all doom and gloom, the COVID -19 pandemic has also brought to the fore the human factor, which has once again demonstrated resilience and fortitude in dealing with the realities and the uncertainties of our world in transition. The fact is, we know our contexts and we are responsible for ensuring our own futures. How we do that going forward is up to us. But we have to change 20th century attitudes for 21st Century higher education.

Change and transformation are perhaps the key characteristics of human development and progress. They are also dynamics that are difficult to accept, let alone master. We are indeed living in trying, but exciting times. I remain firmly of the view that human ingenuity can and will triumph.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen you are most welcome to the Founders Lecture 2020. I am pleased to welcome my peer Prof Adam Habib once more to speak to us this afternoon.

I thank you.