Reclaiming Africa's Intellectual Futures'
and Accelerating Transformations During, and in the Aftermath of COVID-19 Pandemic

Official Opening Address
On the Official Opening Ceremony of the 2021 Academic Year
by Prof. Puleng LenkaBula
Principal and Vice Chancellor
University of South Africa
Friday, 12 February 2021
10:00
ZK Matthews Hall/ Virtual

Programme Director: Prof PJ Segalo, Associate Professor, Department of Psychology

His Excellency Dr Thabo Mbeki, Chancellor of the University of South Africa, and Former President of South Africa

Justice Bernard Ngoepe, South African Tax Ombudsman and Former Chancellor of the University of South Africa

Mr MJ Maboa, Chairperson of the University Council, and other Members of Council in attendance

Members of extended Management present here today

Your Excellences, Ambassadors and High Commissioners representing various Countries in South Africa

Professor Mandla S Mandla Makhanya, the former Principal and Vice Chancellor of the University of South Africa

Former Chairpersons of Unisa Council and Former Council Members present

Representatives from National, Provincial, and local Government present

Unisa Retirees present

Representatives from labour organisations and Unisa forums

Members of the NSRC and various students' structures present.

Alumni Chapters present

Nominees for the Chairperson of Council's Award for Excellence

Nominees of the University of Oldenburg Certificate

Members from the media Fraternal present

Members of the University Community present

Friends of the University of South Africa present here today

Ladies and Gentlemen

Reclaiming Africa's Intellectual Futures' and Accelerating Transformations During, and in the Aftermath of COVID-19 Pandemic

As the African proverb goes, *"no matter how long and dark the night is, a new dawn will break".*

As we officially open the 2021 academic year, the trepidations of the past year are glaring, yet somewhat in a blurred manner, we can already imagine the prospects for the future. Envisaging the future, however, should not negate some of the questions which many continue whether this year will be akin to 2020, – a year we wish we had never been through, for it turned out for many as '*annus horribilis,*' especially spawned by the Covid-19 pandemic and attendant complexities.

Our University's opening today takes place within trying circumstances. The deadly Covid-19 pathogen virulently continues to wreak havoc, mutating, and reconstituting itself into more fervent variants. Its hazardous persistence and negative impacts in South Africa, the African continent, and the world, has brought unimaginable pain. Not only has it disrupted economies and social systems, it also has equally dislocated the core mandates and businesses of many sectors, institutions, and lives. It sadly, has taken away many lives of loved ones, locally and globally, including some members of our Council, students, staff, colleagues, friends, families, and strangers. "The university is one of those institutions that pandemics have affected in a significant way, and at present, it is doing so in a manner that we do not fully understand."[1]

Let us pause for a moment as we remember those of our Council, students and staff who have passed away because of Covid-19, and other illnesses in 2020/ 202.

Context….

As we open the University to undertake 2021 mandate and strategic goals, it will be imperative to first understand the context within which the academic projects are grounded. For me, such contextual dimensions are shaped by the local and political dynamics, including but not limited to the economic, political, religious, ecological (environmental), geo-political and global multilateral and international arrangements. These are important for us, particularly because Unisa is not and cannot only be in the local contexts, for although local, its footprint is global and its business model as an Open Distance and e-Learning University, allows it to serve local and international students anywhere they are located. While context is import for our deliberations in this opening, some of the key questions which underline our opening speech today suffice, especially for Unisa's students, staff, and stakeholders locally and globally. These include the following,

- Have universities, including Unisa, been in the forefront of resourcing states, societies, and varied sectors, to proactively manage the conditions and implications of a pandemic that has forced new ways of doing things?

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[1] José Antonio Quinteiro Goris 2020 How will Covid-19 Affect International Academic Mobility refer to June 26th, 2020 https: www.iesalc.unesco.org

Have societies, our own students and staff looked at universities as sites of envisioning solutions to the pandemic that has affected the globe in a devastating way?

- How will universities project their public mandate and be a constitutive partner/ leader in the construction of new ideas, inventions, knowledge, and systems aimed surmounting the pandemic which has the eroded economies, livelihoods, lives, hope and meaning?
- What contributions will UNISA spearhead which will be at the forefront of determining the future and surmounting the negative effects of massive 'death and dying' and ill-health, and the heightened, economic disparities, unemployment and income losses spawned by, or accelerated by the pandemic?
- What types of epistemologies and knowledge systems, research would we need to put in place and in partnership with societies to overcome the untold suffering and marginalisation that economically vulnerable members of our societies and students continue to grapple with in the face of the pandemic or its aftermath?
- How we will be at the centre of igniting hope and therefore the making of constructive meanings and praxes for the future which has somewhat been halted by the pandemic?

The following questions are significant as they seek to interrogate the roles of higher education and Unisa in instituting constructive interventions toward shaping futures, and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and accelerated 4.0 industrialisation, popularly referred to as the 4th Industrial Revolutions.[2] These have massive impacts on the traditional and current modes of work. They seek to identify recommendations and solutions which will be imperative for UNISA in its efforts to strengthen its role as a leader and site of knowledge systems and innovations integral to the national and continental aspirations for '*a better world for all humanity*.

We open the university in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the global climatic changes and ecological degradation, the irruptions of fundamentalisms and populisms in the local and global arena, the increases in gender-based violence at home and abroad, and including in Universities, global economic disparities, the consolidation, and impact of the digitalisation and the fourth industrial revolutions. In this context, several important movements are also ensuing including but not limited, to the global advocacy and resistance against structural and global injustices in the economy, ecology and social arrangements, through global movements in South Africa and the world such as, "Black lives Matter," "# End Rape Culture (#ERC), the calls for "Universal access for persons with disabilities", the calls against homophobia and respect for the dignity of (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersexed and Asexual (LGBTQIA+) and gender non-conforming, non-binary persons, and promotion of ecological justice amongst others.

As we start the 2021, Academic year, we are also aware of the Ministerial task team on Unisa which aims at interrogating whether as the University we continue to commit to the national mandate, that our country, south Africa bestowed to us, as the comprehensive open, distance

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[2] Refer to Klaus Schwab, The Fourth Industrial Revolution

and e-learning university and accessible to majority of students pursuing their under-graduate and post-graduate studies anywhere in the world. Of reference to this project, has been, why are our students falling off the cracks in such high numbers? Whereas UNISA of the past had more students studying part-time and thus, not requiring the support that many students in the contact universities, Unisa today has young students who come to the university in ways akin to the contact universities, in a model that never took this into consideration, and therefore the question has arisen, is there a mission drift to this mandate?

Another important thematic area to note is that the start of the academic year takes place when calls for changes of the roles of higher education are pronounced. The universities institutional cultures which have, for a long time, been taken for granted as constitutive traditions of the universities are under immense scrutiny. Ongoing debates on the transformations of higher education in South Africa and the world are partly due to the democratisation of South Africa in 1994 and the demands for self-determination, freedom, academic autonomy, and scientific enquiry. Some emerge because of studies and analysis of the world, particularly the economic globalisation phenomena and its attendant practices and neoliberal logics. The institutionalisation of patriarchal-kyriachal cultures, often justified by cultural, religious, social, political, and economy, heightens Gender-Based Violence in many societies in the world and particularly in the post-school education have also become sites of analysis.

The **transformation of the higher education** sector remains alive. **The #MustFall** movements of 2015 - **#FeesMustFall**, **#RhodesMust Fall** and **#OutsourcingMustFall** - highlighted the deep-seated challenges of curriculum, institutional cultures, and the emergent or residual injustices and inequalities which continue to persist within our universities, and UNISA whilst it has historically been somewhat entwined with the anti-apartheid training of the liberation struggle, is not an exception.

These movements advocacy, primarily identified varied issues which universities must continue grappling with. These inter alia entail, questions of access and success; discontent against (curriculum) the content and relevance of academic offerings in universities; and the effects of the commercialisation, privatisation, and liberalisation of higher education or what they referred to as the neoliberal system hold and its effects on universities. The latter complaint, specifically referred to the outsourcing of critical services of the core agenda or business of the Universities to individuals or private business and the exploitation of workers responsible for administrative/ or supporting environments.

COVID-19 and Universities

A survey by the *International Association of Universities*, an affiliate organisation of United Nations Educational, scientific, and Cultural organisation (UNESCO), provides a picture of the global impact of the pandemic on universities. These entail among others:

- the physical closure of universities and therefore disruption to teaching and learning, with many shifting to different forms of distant and non-contact teaching and learning, including online.
- decrease in retention and new enrolment of students, with some current students dropping out as they could not cope with online learning, and prospective entrants to the system deferring their applications.

- weakening of partnerships between universities, as institutions became inward looking, focusing on coping mechanisms and new ways of self-management.
- negative impact on international student mobility, resulting in decreased international student numbers.
- disruption to examination timetables, with cancellations in certain regions, delays in the release dates for results, and delays in the resumption of the academic year; and,
- the negative impact on community engagement initiatives, while research output to contribute to finding of solutions to the pandemic increased.[3]

Our own experience as UNISA suggests that we were affected in multiple ways.

- Unisa physically closed its campuses and resorted to multi-modal learning systems wherein staff have had to work from their homes, and remotely.
- Because of the physical closure of our campuses, many of UNISA's students from low-income students who largely depend on our libraries for a conducive space to study and connectivity lost access of these amenities.
- The changes from on-site and venue-based examinations to e-examinations/ online examinations, whilst highly commendable, verified the fault lines of access and success in the pandemic contexts, where the digital divide has become a glaring challenge. It was for this, that UNISA has decided to provide students and staff with data. Equally, important for us, has been our resolve to negotiate accessible devices for the student populace. The shift to online tuition has lasting effects on the higher education, a challenge we embrace as an important theme in our imaginative ingenuity and strategic gaze.
- Unisa's progressive legacies of her/historically proffering education to persons who had no luxury for, and financial resources required by contact higher education, was contradicted by its location in a country whose higher education faces the challenges of low student participation rates as well as high attrition rates. In an era typified suddenly and forcefully by "the virtual mode" of doing business, the institution's identity as an open distance and e-learning comprehensive university, has not only become magnified, but re-affirmed, as it has become invaluable.
- Increased drop off and drop rates, as well as students' attrition rates at our university are worrying, as they expose our students to the persisting socio-economic iniquities and exclusions often very high in our country, continent, and the peripheries in the global north.
- We have also noted in similar ways as the International Universities association that whilst the lock-down period has resulted in increased publications, and that "knowledge production is the rationale of higher education; high quality knowledge production cannot be fully realized with a low student participation rate."[4]

[3] Marinoni, Giorgio; van't Land, Hilligje; Jensen, Trine (2020) *The Impact of Covid-19 on Higher Education Around the World: IAU Global Survey Report*. Paris, International Association of Universities. Accessed from https://www.iau-aiu.net/IMG/pdf/iau_covid19_and_he_survey_report_final_may_2020.pdf, on 01 February 2020.

[4] National Development Plan, Ibid, 271

At Unisa, the goal to harness technology in the pursuit of the academic project is among a key feature of the Unisa's strategic orientation as it asserts its existential essence as an African University in the service of humanity. In the 2016-2030 Strategy, we commit ourselves to

> "…harnessing ICT's to support the transformation of the business of the University, thus enabling high performance, service and quality to all its communities."[5]

We dare not slack in this pursuit.

Today, in our competitive environment, knowledge production and open distance learning is no longer the monopoly of higher education institutions. Institutions like science councils, non-governmental and privately funded research institutes, the SOEs and others also provide offerings like institutions of higher learning do.[6] How has the sudden advent of the abnormal normal impacted our throughput and pass rates? Has the lockdown for example forced a proverbial limping animal to climb a mountain?

Learning, Unlearning and Relearning as Unisa…

Looking at the past year, which lessons have we learnt? Even more importantly, how may those invaluable lessons of the past be reinforced for the benefit of all? Which new ways of doing things we may find to be suitable and beneficial for our context?

How may our pedagogy be restructured to blend smoothly with the new normal? Especially in those disciplines which set great store by field work and/ or laboratory experiments, which innovative ways can be used to ascertain that we blend effortlessly with the new normal? Could we make efforts to invest more on the Health Sciences for example? As spaces for knowledge production within the National Innovation System, the universities are called upon to intensify their efforts at the MIT's.

Perhaps the new abnormal normal in which the virtual mode has not only become the preferred but has become the new imperative impelling us to critically explore the 4.0 industry and its room", that is, the 4th Industrial Revolution. Our courage to face this reality, may enable us to already restructure our present curricula accordingly so that our products can achieve graduate-ness. In a nutshell, we will be able to produce context-relevant graduates.

Some of the institutions may consider introducing more online programmes, the effect may be on the competitive advantage that some of our programmes may lose as some of brightest and high-calibre students in the country may prefer to enrol at other universities other than UNISA. This may challenge our programmes and will require us to be more reflexive, strategic, and agile for self-improvement on our side as the competition increases by the day. We should not be complacent. We should learn from the tragic failures of large corporations which were in pole position but failed to constructive acknowledge the new digital technologies, their interfaces, and the industrialisations and folded. An example, of companies which have had to fold in our country such as Musica is a case in point, as so are international transnational

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[5] Unisa Strategic Document 2016-2030.

companies such as Nokia, Xerox, and Kodak, which still exist but do not have similar global footprint as they did in the past.

The *Inequality Trends in South Africa* report released by Statistics South Africa shows, amongst other indicators, that the labour market is heavily racialised and gender biased.[7] The report shows that Africans earn the lowest wages compared to other ethnic groups, with whites earning three times as high as what is earned by Africans. On the other hand, female workers earn approximately 30% less compared to their male counterparts.[8] The report further reflects that 60% of households depend on social grants. As just indicated, these would largely be African households in the townships, informal settlements, and rural areas.[9] It is my submission here today that we ought to consider and implement a renewed resolve to transform this university so that it can be relevant in the world characterised by the features that I have just outlined. To this end I propose that our efforts in the current and later years should be, *Reclaiming Africa's Intellectual Futures' and Accelerating Transformations During, and in the Aftermath of COVID-19 Pandemic.*

For us to articulate our vision of being "the African university shaping futures in the service of humanity", we must correctly analyse the state of higher education, and of UNISA. It is the duty of every staff and every student to transform this university to the state we have envisioned as a collective.

Let us consider a few key areas of development…

Even though the existence of universities has been under scrutiny over the past few years, it is our intention to use these contestations and emerging contradictions as inspiration to improve the UNISA mandate as a leading *e-learning* institution in the context of *decoloniality* and the use of *digital technologies*. Our aim in 2021 should be to continue cementing the e-learning and distant learning requirements that are the mandate of UNISA. This mandate is more relevant in the current context of social distancing due to the Covid-19 pandemic. As we worked in 2020 to improve our digital systems, this investment will set us up for a prosperous future in building and facilitating access to a broader use of digital technologies in multiple areas of everyday life for our society.

As we endeavour to contribute to finding solutions for the multiple challenges experienced in our country and beyond. The academic project pursued by UNISA facilitates the creation of solutions using epistemologies that are context specific/but with global impact and thus result in relevant solutions. In the past few years UNISA has developed as a *decolonial studies* hub in the country. This has contributed immensely to the transformation of research processes, teaching, and learning and most importantly to policy making processes across the higher education landscape.

Through the Open Distance e-Learning and Distance (*ODeL) system* UNISA will continue to contribute towards the training of skilled professionals even during the current crisis and to catalyse and strengthen Unisa as a leader in e-learning in the country.

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[7] Statistics South Africa (2019) *Inequality Trends in South Africa: A Multidimensional Diagnostic of Inequality.* Pretoria, Statistics South Africa. Accessed from http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report-03-10-19/Report-03-10-192017.pdf, on 01 February 2021.
[8] Ibid
[9] Ibid

For UNISA to contribute effectively to the academic project, engaged **research and innovation remain its fundamental purpose.**

Our research continues to contribute to our teaching and learning in ways that seek to find African solutions to African problems. This has been done first and foremost through engaging with the ideological struggles in our context and using epistemologies that centre decoloniality, indigenization and transformation. As such, our research plays an important role not only in the policy space but also facilitates thinking to create theories to help us engage further with our context. **Curriculum transformation/ Change** remains one of our important imperatives as we maintain a move away from stagnation that has 'plagued' historical universities that relied on a singular ideology of what is to be known and who is a knower.

Reclaiming Africa's Intellectual Knowledges, Civilisations, Traditions and Futures…

Africa has rich intellectual his/herstories.... Reclaiming African intellectual traditions is not only important in showcasing and inspiring South Africa/ Africa's youth and young adults to continue reclaiming and reinventing the future, but also a reassertion and call for Africa's institutions to carve their own imaginaries in constructing progressive futures. Reclaiming the future requires, re-reading, re-learning, re-igniting, inventing, and shaping futures.

The claims of the future require learning from the past and current innovations in higher education that Africa contributed and continues to contribute toward the global knowledge construction/ production which are not only aspirational but empirical and supported by factual historical data. We must continue to draw inspiration from our forebear's women and men who desired for education to become the lever for transformation and intellectual formation. One of the exciting legacies of these developments is that an established fact that the "oldest continuously-operating degree-granting university in the world", the University of Al Qarawiynn (operating today as the University of Al Quaraouiyine) in Morocco, was established by a woman, Fatima bint Muhammed Al-Fihriya Al-Qurashiya, in 859CE.[10]

There are many other examples that we may highlight to demonstrate Africa's inventive intellectual traditions which must continually shape our resolve as Unisa to seek and pursue new and globally resourceful curriculum, research, and innovations today. The continued invention or archival of these intellectual traditions are also attested to in the Middle Ages by interesting archives/ libraries such as the Timbuktu Manuscripts. These are amongst some of the indisputably the best-known treasures of scholarship in   in the areas of medicine, astronomy, mathematics and more.

UNISA must today, draw from the contemporary schools of thoughts, ideation and research embodied in the works on leading icons such as….Mahmood Mamdani has been helpful in assisting us to understand the development of ideas at Makerere and Dar es Salaam universities in Uganda and Tanzania, respectively.[11] Makerere did not only give us Ali Mazrui,[12] it also

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[10] Peters, Michael A (2019) Ancient Centers of Higher Learning: A Bias in the Comparative History of the University, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, Volume 51, Issue 11, pp. 1063-1072, DOI: 10.1080/00131857.2018.1553490. Please note that other sources give the date of establishment as 895CE. The differences do not affect the arguments in the address. Also note that Peters uses the semi-Anglicised name 'Al-Karaouine'. We use the proper Arabic name here.

[11] Mamdani, Mahmood (2019) Decolonising Universities, in Jansen, Jonathan: *Decolonisation in Universities: The Politics of Knowledge*. Johannesburg, Wits University Press

[12] Ibid

gave us Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and his uncompromising decolonial novel, drama, and non-fiction prose.[13] It was also the birthplace of radical post-colonial African literature.[14]

The emergence and growth of revolutionary feminist/ womanist intellectual traditions firmly anchored on and reflects the experiences of womxn and gender-non-conforming persons, anchored in the scholarship of scholars and advocacy for equality, such as the works, Patricia McFadden, Pumla Gcqola, Dzodzi Tsikata, Zen Tadesse, Eleanor Sisulu must gain support.

What then does this long intellectual tradition mean for us here at UNISA, and how may we draw inspiration from it?

Universities exist in order that they may serve the public good. The idea of higher education must be embraced by young people and adults who seek to change the world. Education as a transformative act, and higher education must be a tool of social justice, empowering the voiceless in society. It must help nations to liberate themselves from domination by others.

Against this analysis our institution must carry the torch of reclaiming and advancing the African intellectual traditions…... This we should do through our teaching and learning initiatives, and equally through our research efforts. **Reclaiming and advancing the African intellectual traditions means that we must not only think and publish; we must rethink and relearn what which we have learned. We must invent structures, systems, products, and processes which advance human flourishing, dignity, and ecological sustainability. This is an invitation that I wish to extend to our scholars. It is also my request today that we should is increase and strengthen our efforts at shaping the UNISA's identity as a true African university and not simply a university located on the African continent.**

In today's knowledge society, Higher Education is supported by a strong science and technology innovation system which is becoming more and more important in opening opportunities for people.[15] Science and technology are key to development as technological and scientific revolutions underpin economic advances, improvements in health systems, education and infrastructure.[16] It is no wonder that as part of the action plan to improve on Education, Training and Innovation, the role of Science and Technology is highlighted as that of creating an educational and national Science system that addresses societal needs. To that end, there is a need to increase participation rate in Higher education to more than 30%. There is a need to double the number of scientists and increase the number of African and women postgraduates, especially PhDs to improve research and innovation capacity. The preceding move will assist in accelerating the transformation of South Africa's scientific and academic communities to better reflect the population.[17] As an institution, we will do well, also informed not only by the national agenda in the preceding regard, but also by the legacies of the underproduction of Black graduates in Science and Mathematics, to channel our resources towards redress. The South African National Innovation System has brought to light the causal

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[13] Kiguli, Susan, N (2018) Up from Makerere: On the publication of Weep Not, Child, in Gikandi, Simon and Wachanga, Ndirangu: *Ngũgĩ: Reflections on his Life of Writing*. Woodbridge, James Curry
[14] Ibid
[15] National Development Plan, Ibid, 262
[16] National Development Plan, Ibid, 70.
[17] National Development Plan, Ibid, 263.

relationship between scientific activity and economic performance, in that way, a new way is introduced of rethinking science and technology in our country.[18]

Some Practical Suggestions on making UNISA a True African University

At a practical level, reclaiming the African intellectual traditions means that we need to make Africa the centre of our teaching and learning, research and innovation and engaged scholarship.

On the other hand, UNISA Press stands at the cusp of changing the publishing landscape. Its sheer size as the single largest publisher of academic journals in the country must be harnessed to provide training/ platforms for scholars who are dedicated to Africa-centred studies and (radical) intellectual traditions in general. The Press may consider having dedicated Series on a range of areas, as is the general practice by established university presses.

Relevance and Appeal of our Programmes

While centred on and advancing the African intellectual traditions ang global knowledge systems, our programmes should retain their relevance and appeal to local/global students. Three areas must be addressed in this regard.

- First, our programs must respond to and provide graduates with the critical skills necessary for them to navigate the challenges and opportunities the world provides. They should also entail creative graduate attributes which facilitate our alumni's opportunities to create work or be ready for employability in the difficult socio-economic environment. Of course, we do not subscribe to the myth that a good education is a guarantee to employment as that does not depend on education institutions but on the ability of the economy to absorb graduates from universities. Yet, the quality of our programs should be such that graduates stand a better chance against those from other institutions. In short, we should continue to enhance the quality of our output.

- Second, we must earnestly address some of the challenges that we have had to face in the past years. Challenges that are not limited to UNISA only but arise from time to time throughout the sector. Reference is made here to the accreditation of our programs. Examples in this regard are our LLB and MBL programs which, together with those from other universities, were at some point found to be lacking in certain areas, thus causing panic amongst our students and potential employers. The Social Work degree also suffered the same fate. But as we all know, all that was rectified, and we have learnt from that experience.

We shall continue to strengthen the required collaboration between colleges, the academic planning portfolio, our quality assurance portfolio, and monitoring of the expiry of our programmes at the Council for Higher Education, as well as liaise with all external regulatory and assurance institutions.

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[18] ST Manzini, The National System of Innovation Concept: An Ontological Review and Critiques. **http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/sajs.v108:9/10.1038**, *South African Journal of Science*, 2012: 7

- Third, we must ensure that our programs and research stand their own against peers internationally, both on the African continent and beyond. To this end the appeal of our programs and research must be enhanced. Earlier when reflecting on the impact of Covid-19 we referred to how the pandemic has disrupted some of the collaborations between universities and research institutes. We must find ways to maintain these links and expand them. Our internationalization program must therefore be expanded to include not only Europe and North America. It must especially reflect a strong African leaning, as well as spreading to other continents. This is what we refer to when we say all provinces of humanity must find resonance in our programs and research output.

- Of particular interest to us should be to create relationships with established research institutes on the continents such as the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA). I am aware that individual scholars have and continue to be active in the activities of CODESRIA. What I am referring to is institutional collaboration.

Responsiveness to the Community

While we must put an emphasis on the relevance of our programmes, particularly as it relates to the quality and the employability of graduates, we must at the same time avoid the pitfall of utilitarianism. That is an approach and understanding that education must exclusively have a technical utility value for the market.

Another important feature of education, perhaps the most important, is its transformative value. In his travails trying to develop an alternative view of education, Paolo Freire has left us a legacy of understanding education as a liberatory and transformative act. He referred to praxis as the endeavour to reconcile theory with practice for the betterment of the conditions especially of poor communities, and to liberate them from ignorance.[19]

The Ubuntu Philosophy, of which this university is a leading intellectual centre through its African Philosophy programme, discourages cognitive dissonance between our educatedness and concern for the poor and marginalised. Instead, the Ubuntu approach intertwines our whole being with the decisions that we make in life, and our responsiveness to our environment, both human and ecological. We must thus never be apologetic for being and promoting ubuntu which is essential for humanising people in our fractured world, especially a world which valorises monetary value over the intrinsic rights and dignity of humanity.

- Our community engagement/ Engaged Scholarship programs should be a manifestation of our praxis and our lived endeavour of Ubuntu. The university should reach out to communities, local and global to make its own contribution to improve the conditions in these communities. I therefore invite colleges to think through what they may do in addition to teaching and research to promote engaged scholarship and university citizenship. There are endless opportunities 'crying' out for our intervention. I outline only a few possibilities and thereby challenge us to think deep about what we may do.

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[19] Freire articulates this philosophy throughout his numerous books, but especially Freire, Paolo (1970 [2000]) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York, Continuum; and Freire Paolo (1974) *Education for Critical Consciousness*. New York, Continuum

- UNISA's regional libraries are already engaged in some good collaborations with local libraries. This work must be expanded as we contribute to the culture of reading.

With the deteriorating levels of success for our basic education learners in some communities, largely due to the lack of resources and in some cases, skills on the side of educators, who try their best, it could be that our College of Education and academic counsellors in the regions should develop coherent programs to empower educators within the public schooling system. Our core responsibility to help obviate educational bifurcations and outcomes in basic education, do not only derive from our position as a comprehensive university that has both physical and virtual reach. It also derives from the three pillars of our core business, especially the requisite need to be an engaged university which prioritises engaged scholarship and community engagement for the benefit of the public good. This, will not only help the basic education system but will provide our own students work-place experience, hone their critical encounters and teaching skills and improve our institutional citizenship as an institution established purposefully to advance public good/ service. We can and we should contribute to improving quality of education in South Africa, the African continent and illuminate the best lessons for us and other global environments. We also recognise that our country has been found lagging in promoting "STEAM" subjects. It is my suggestion that Colleagues from the specialist subject areas could join all efforts to improve mathematics, chemistry, physics, life sciences, accounting, and STEAM subjects whilst not trivialising the value of the humanities and social sciences. In this way UNISA will be contribute practically to the improvement of the quality of life of the country and continent, and of especially those on the underside or margins of higher education or Post-school and technical, vocational, and training environments.

This is but one example of what we may do as the university. We can think about many abstract and non-abstract ways to intervene as an institution in realising our relevance within the society. I therefore invite us all to develop engaging theoretical and practical community engagement/ engaged scholarship programmes, resource policy decisions at local, regional, and local governmental, public, civil society and private sectors and ensure that the constant interface of science and society, where knowledge, research and life intersect, become central to our existence and sustainability as a university.

Given that, knowledge production, research and engaged scholarship are no longer the monopoly of universities, and that, Open Distance and e-learning modality is no longer Unisa's domain but has become the normative institutional or business model of other universities, we must not be complacent but be inventive, agile, and proactive in identifying areas of success that we must focus on. Today, in our competitive environment, knowledge production and open distance learning is no longer the monopoly of higher education institutions. Institutions like science councils, non-governmental and privately funded research institutes, the SOEs and others also provide offerings like institutions of higher learning do.[20] **We should and must therefore establish niche areas in disciplines or** areas that we have never undertaken, and if we had, were not as optimal as we would have loved. I suggest that because of the decline in research and inventive areas that were undertaken by SOE's, before, such as Denel, Sasol, and others, we should delve deep and carve niche areas which will facilitate knowledge and technology sharing, first, with our Science Councils, other public universities, and technical

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[20] National Development Plan: A Vision for 2030, 2011: 262.

and vocational training institutions which form part of the national innovation system. To enhance these initiatives, we must also explore constructive and equitable partnerships with universities and institutions within the African continent, and those in Europe, Asia, North America, South America and the Pacific Islands as well as, Australia and New Zealand. The key niche areas which I suggest we should promote through the Vice Chancellor's Projects and Chairs of specific thematic and multidisciplinary areas should comprise of important knowledge areas such as; 1) Resources Sustainability and Energy research, 2) Cognitive Sciences, the 4.0 disciplinary and multidisciplinary disciplines and Futures Studies, 3) Feminist/ Womanist, African Womens' theorizations and Gender and non-binary/ Queer Studies 4) Aviation and Aeronautical Studies 5) Infrastructures and Built Environment Studies 6) Human Dignity, Rights and Ethics 7) African/ South African Languages 8) Marine and Water Resources Management, 9) International Relations and Multilateralism and 10) Micro-Finance, entrepreneurship and Finance.

I have observed that our strengths in research can be complimented by these areas, which are not only essential for resourcing the developmental trajectories of South Africa and the African continent but are globally entwined with the successes of knowledge and its contributions to society. Increased investments in the decolonial studies, STEAM, agricultural studies, Law, Religion, Philosophy, Health studies and biotechnologies/ nanotechnologies studies will suffice so that we continuously improve on Unisa's sites of academic excellence.

On Students

Students are at the centre of the academic project. It is for them that we impart the knowledge and skills that the academic staff has. It is for them that the university exists, of course also for research and community development.

The University of South Africa has a proud her/histories of providing access to the broadest range of students, from rural youth and young adults, teachers and senior citizens, politicians, senior public servants, and business leaders and students in rehabilitation/ restorations centres' (prisons) and international locations. This is an unparalleled legacy that we should jealously guard.

Today the profile of an average UNISA student has changed. Statistics from 2020 provides interesting features. Out of the 402 729 students, 239 480, which is 59.4% of our total student population, were 29 years or below. 120 690 of the latter number were 24 years and below. 66 students were 17 years or younger. This shows that the demographics of our students has changed dramatically over the years. The generational footprint has also changed. UNISA is now a university of young and many non-employed students. Many do not own any enterprises, whether small, medium, or large. Our finance department also point out that at least 57 percent of our students are dependent on the national financial aid scheme (NSFAS), which implies that they either come from low-income or no-income families, and thus, either dependent on state social grants.

In terms of race, 366 784 of our students were black – 332 624 Africans, 19 080 mixed descent (so called Coloureds,) and 15 507 students of Indian origin and the rest white. In terms of gender, 276 725, or 68.7% of the total student population, were female.

UNISA therefore carries the national burden of race, class and gender disparities in the public University sector as shown in the statistics above and figures the cited inequality figures from Statistics South Africa.

It is against this background that we must formulate our general posture and responses to the needs of our students. The average student we now teach is no longer a comfortable professional or semi-professional who wants to improve his / her education and earnings as it was the case with the old UNISA. The new UNISA is encumbered with the national challenge of poor, black, and mainly female student who wishes to acquire education so that they can extricate themselves from marginality, poverty, and inequality. Our long and successful her/histories of providing accessible quality higher education to local and international students attested to the quality of our alumni and their social impact all over the world, we must constantly seek to improve on our generational, gender and non-binary students, persons living with disabilities, international students, ethnicities, and income diversities. At core and co-curricular levels , our students plight requires at least three responses from our staff, both academic and administrative. First, our administrative systems must be accessible and easy-to-use for students, some of whom may be meeting an online platform for the first time as they apply, register, and receive tuition. Related to this is the need to have a robust system for student enquiries.

- First, we must ensure that our administrative systems, processes, and technologies are accessible and easy to use so that students can invest and focus on the academic project. Some of our students might only be exposed to digital and online platforms for their first time as they apply, register, and receive tuition here at UNISA. To ensure that they optimise these resources and receive the requisite student support and advisory, we must ensure that administrative and academic staff respond to their queries in all the relevant/ accessible communication platforms, including social. This will enhance their experiences and as such, their performance. **Any hinderances to students support through staff indifference to students calls, emails and/or any formal submissions will not be tolerated.**

- Second, we must show empathy to most of our students who may struggle to understand the basic concepts that a student from an affluent private school or rich public-school background may take for granted. Our tutorial systems and academic support in the regions must be enhanced, considering that inherent in that system, even if we may be unaware of that factor, is to close the gap between an average to poor basic education background and an advanced higher education system.

- Third, we must continue working on our throughput rate. We may be proud of the numbers of graduates that we produce on a yearly basis, and rightly so. We should at the same, and perhaps more importantly, **be concerned about the low throughput rate as a percentage of the student population, which results either in longer time to complete studies or even disturbing dropout rates**. *If there is a single most important issue about UNISA which has gnawed on my sleep and keeps me up at night is what radical interventions will we put in place to enhance students learning and reduce the failure/ drop off and drop-out rates, how will we ensure that students support and enquiries and service is improved, even in the pandemic context.* We should put programs and performance measures in place for professional administrative and academic staff to improve our throughput rate. I invite our colleges, with support from

the planning portfolio, to continue formulating strategies on how we may introduce improvements in our throughput rates, as well as the increase of post-graduate studies supervisory capacities. We should thus work toward scaling back on auxiliary programs and enhance our Masters, Doctoral and Post-Doctoral programs. Associated with the improvements in Post-Graduate studies, will be high publications rates, research, and innovation outputs, which are fundamental to Universities such as ours with long her/histories, size and shape.

- Lastly, **we must improve our counselling and wellness services for students**. The pandemic has shown us how vulnerable humanity is and how important we must be present for each other. The numbers of deaths, people getting infected with Covid-19 and ill-health will ease with time, and hopefully with the availability of vaccines. We however, in the meantime and constantly, be empathetic to students who need our support. Aware of the varied mental health and wellness challenges that many students contend with, which generally impede academic success, we must resource our co-curricular, wellness and psycho-social support divisions, such as, the Division of Student Affairs and Services with Human resources, skills, and financial support. Unless we **professionalise Students Affairs and Services, we will not succeed** in **promoting core co-curricular and psycho-social** support of our students. We ought not guard against promoting university education as the pursuance of academics without the twin sets of citizenship skills. The provision of counselling services entwined with great analytics will engender proactive and professional support vulnerable students before they fall through the cracks and drop off, drop out or utterly fail. The success of students, the primary stakeholder is the *raison d'tre* of any university existence, and the pursuit for knowledge.

Improving the System to Enhance Quality

Having outlined some possible interventions that we may consider let us now turn to the required environment and systems that will enable us to implement our plans.

- *Institutional Culture and progressive intellectual locus*

What we have outlined thus far constitutes the central mission of any university – the academic programme – comprising as it were teaching and learning, research, and community engagement/ engaged scholarship. We have woven in social justice, social cohesion, and social capital and social justice as important levers for our global citizenship as a University, knowledge community and contribution to the global higher education and the local post school education system (PSET).

Our aspirations for Reclaiming UNISA as a leader in the aftermath of COVID-19 Pandemic and the ensuing 4.0 industrialisation popularly known as the 4th industrial revolution (4 IR) will only manifest if we improve our ideation, research development and innovation, engaged scholarship and our university global citizenship. This will among others require the change management of impeding institutional cultures. Among others, we will need to re-activate and engineer conducive learning and work environments central to the support of the UNISA's missional mandate and its compact with the South African Government as articulated in the National Development Plan, as well as the continental aspirations expressed through the African Union agenda 2063 and many other associated and constructive dreams. Staff and

students must uphold the principles of Academic autonomy whilst also promoting the respect of the dignity of other's rights and humanity.

The South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) report on racism, bullying and harassment within the university remains an 'open sore' that we must continue to attend to and improve relations between members of staff/students across the university. Creating positive institutional cultures is a compelling mandate for all staff racial harassment, sexual harassment, bullying, and intimidation.

UNISA's staff is obliged to undertake all lawful instructions, execute their duties, and to accord the necessary space and respect to fulfil their obligations within the university and in support of the core academic project. Insubordination and intimidation will not be tolerated and ought not to form part of UNISA's culture. In simple terms, there must be mutual respect and sense of collegiality that runs through the 'veins' of Unisa's staff, students and stakeholders.

The interface of the curriculum and co-curricular work, and its discontents within the universities in South Africa and Unisa, and the requisite need for advancing scholarship and research attentive to the local and global contexts, and the questions of dignity, human rights and social cohesion were laid bare by the 2014/15 and 2016 varied expressions of social justice, albeit with some challenges in some instance. In the main, *The #RhodesMustFall*, # Fees Must Fall, and Insourcing, generally questioned the ' symbolic, real, and visual representation', co-existences of knowledge systems and languages of sciences in universities. They did not only impel us to explore whether universities allowed and promoted varied conceptual assertions, knowledge systems and academics to teach, research and engage. They also posed questions about the marginalisation of African knowledge systems, civilisations, languages and academic in the core-project. These questions continue to reverberate as many of these questions continue to being valid.

It is thus my contention that, whilst we cannot claim that all was good with the processes referred to herein, there were great lessons that Universities such as Unisa can draw from and built on. These include but are not limited to the idea that Unisa must be the home for African intellectual knowledge systems whilst also demonstrating proficiency and deep comprehension of other knowledge systems, as well global scholarship. Unisa must continue to harness Africanisation, endogenous knowledge systems, Decolonisation whilst also promoting excellence in other knowledge domains. We must excavate, analyse, contest and build on African intellectuals' traditions, whether the pre-colonial, anti-slavery, post-colonial and radical feminist, womanist and African women's traditions, or whether we learn from the learning traditions radical Feminist/ womanist and queer Intellectual Traditions that seek to challenge patriarchy and misogyny which continue to mar social equilibrium in universities' cultures and societies.

African Universities cultures must draw on the strong her/historical pursuits for freedom from varied forms of oppressions and colonialisms, and revive and continue to establish progressive curricular, epistemologies, philosophies, aesthetics, pedagogies, sciences, human dignity and rights traditions and the aspirations for self -determination, great work ethic and emancipatory development. These efforts could draw on the varied schools of thoughts, disciplines and intellectual traditions which robustly contested each other, without creating monoliths, but varied discourses, in ways akin to the task and roles of universities as epistemic communities. In particular, we must engage in some of the works of leading and emergent scholars who in

spite of demonstrating leadership in grasping the sciences they studied, or were experts in, ensured that their knowledges were not limited to the "ivory tower" some of the scholars who

I have found very inspirational in my own intellectual and academic journey, whether in Universities or in the pursuit for justice, freedom and economic development in my life, were leading scholars such as, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Archie Mafeje, Steve Biko, Paolo Freire, Cornel West, Amina Mama, Zen Tadesse, Adebayo Olukoshi, Christopher Lind, Henry Giroux, Pumla Gcqola, Charlotte Maxexe, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Frantz Fanon, Dinong Phaswana, Helmy Sharawy, Zodwa Motsa, Issa Shivji, Grace Khunou, Madipoane Masenya, Fatima Harrak, Dzodzi Tsikata, Vandana Shiva, Marilyn Legge, Mashupye Maserumule, David Mosoma, Puleng Segalo, Itumeleng Mosala, Liepollo Pheko, Christopher Lind, and mentors such as, Mokgethi Motlhabi, Omega Bula, Takatso Mofokeng, Sam Maluleke, Zakes Mda among others.

Critical Theory traditions of the late 20th/ 21st century and Radical Post-Colonial and Decolonisation Traditions of the Caribbean and African scholars will also form good sites for dialogue. Here at home the movement has revived the intellectual traditions of the New African Movement and the Congress/ African National Congress traditions asserted by scholars/ intellectuals such as Ntongela Masilela, Mcebisi Ndletyana, Thabo Mbeki and others, building on early African intellectuals during the colonial period. The movement revived the Pan Africanist traditions as articulated by Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe and the intellectual tradition of the Black Consciousness Movement led by Stephen Bantu Biko.

All these traditions, the assertions and demands made by students, and the established contributions made by many of our forebears and contemporaries raise the pointed questions: How do we build on the rich traditions that we inherit, and those that continue to be shaped; to enhance the transformation of this majestic institution?

Strong Administration

Anchoring the architecture of an accelerated transformation trajectory should be a solid administrative system. It is trite to remind ourselves that UNISA is the largest university in Southern Africa, the second biggest in Africa. With over twenty-seven (27) regional centres - including Ethiopia -- housed in an equal number of campuses, in addition to the main campus and the School for Business Leadership, plus over 400 000 students to manage, UNISA is a complex institution to manage. Added to that are the sophisticated administrative and ICT systems that are the backbone of our operations.

Managing an institution of this size and complexity demands three requirements.

- First, **we must guarantee that our operating systems,** from administrative through to ICT systems are solid and up to date, proactive, responsive adaptable and agile. In the era of advancements in technology, specifically those that display the features of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, UNISA must not be left behind in its technology offerings and the platforms that it employs for teaching, learning, research, and general administration.

- Second, **we need skilled agile workforce with Doctoral Studies training to enhance post graduate supervisory capacity and the development of master's and Doctoral candidates. Equally, the administrative staff must possess comparable skills sets to help the university to navigate the shifts in higher education and the developments in the digitalisation/ 4th Industrial revolutions.** The impact of Covid-19, particularly the forced move to online modes of working highlighted the need for professional staff who can adapt to the fast changes and deployment of technology. Not only should all staff be able to use with ease the multiple offerings that online systems offer, but they must be inventive and be in the forefront of initiating solutions. The quick changes into the virtual/ digital mode have challenged most colleagues to perform optimally in remote work, and thus will need to accelerate their knowledge and adapt to the new modes of work. In turn, we as Unisa must prioritise constant training and re-training of staff and students, and equip to leap into the future.

- Third, we must avoid **the danger of corporatism and managerialism** which 'creep in', often undermining the role of university in forming critical skills for the benefit of society and varied sectoral needs. In his book, *Scholars in the Market Place,* Mahmood Mamdani, cautions us on the subversion of the public university mandates for private purposes through privatisation and commercialisations. He suggests that, when market mechanisms are prioritised over and above the Academic project, the tendency is to subvert the public good for the benefit of private interest. This, however, does not mean that we should not learn with and from the best ideas from the private/ corporate sector. We must account for the resources that our government entrust into our care and the tools that the country has adopted for that purpose. Universities exist not only to construct ideas, to form student's intellectual acumen, or to invent new ideas, they exist also to rethink ideas and established conventions, to question established norms in society. For instance, it should be possible for us to not to be engulfed by corporatist language to define how we, as epistemic communities relate to one another. This could for example, range from disabusing ourselves from only being viewed as consumers and not in our full ontologies as peoples. For instance, semantics such as treating students as clients/ not students should be questioned if not contested. Reference of universities as enterprises and not knowledge communities also usurp the knowledge function of Universities and deter its academic autonomy and validity of its constant need to harness inquiry, inventions, and re-thinking. …. We are a university, not an enterprise!

- It should be possible to still comply with the structures of the accountability and promote universities as humanising epistemic communities and spaces where human dignity and ecological sustainability find expression. We must harness staff and students' talents for the benefit of the future and sustainability. UNISA's progressive, empowering, ethical and accountable African management frameworks can be pioneered as we continually and constructively transform knowledge systems and claim the future.

Ethical Leadership

- Having said all the afore mentioned we need leadership across the university that is ethical in its disposition and conduct. In an era where corruption threatens the very fibre of our society and global environments, Unisa must be in the forefront of promoting ethical leadership, inclusive, fair, committed to the role and value of higher education in our country and beyond. In the age where the harassment of colleagues unabated in many instances, it is our belief that actual practice of ethical norms and values should define our ontologies, structures, praxes, and support for students to access quality education and to succeed. It is my appeal therefore that we should ingrain ethical conduct throughout the strata of our organisational structure, and in our dealings with students. Our interactions with all external stakeholders must be undergirded by ethics as part of our distinctive identity. Our staff, particularly Academics and researchers who are not anything next to what Bwesigye bwa Mwesigire[21] addresses in his open letter to African Intellectuals:

> We find your names on lists published in western media, among the top African Public Intellectuals, sometimes among the lists of Global Thinkers. And we celebrate. 'Our' thinkers are shaping the world, we say. You appear in TIME's lists of Influential People. You have theorised about important things. About the end of capitalist hegemony. About the failure of the African state. About the representations of Africanness. About the rise of Afro-capitalism. About many things your Western audiences find very captivating. And therefore, they rank you highly alongside their own intellectuals. You are indeed one of their intellectuals as well.

As he aptly points out that Africa needs a different kind of intellectuals -- African contemporaneity outside the frame of Eurocentric orientalism and African romanticism. In other words, we must produce Academics that Mahmood Mamdani refers to Africa-focussed intelligentsia whose scholarship acumen is Pan-African in its outlook with a decoloniality character, whilst also resonating to the global knowledge arena

Conclusion

The academic project remains at the centre of any university. We need to re-centre Africa in our scholarship, whilst also exposing our students to the variety of other knowledge systems and civilisations (Asiatic, euro-american, south American,
Australian, New Zealand and Pacific regions). we must all join hands in offering strong leadership, support for one another, commitment and dedication, skilling and reskilling of the staff, and display of ethical conduct.

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[21] Bwesigye bwa Mwesigire, 2019. **https://thisisafrica.me/politics-and-society/open-letter-contemporary-african-intellectuals/**,Accessed : 31 January 2021 [Blog September 2019]

We must reclaim the future and sustain UNISA as a resilient institution which projects the best of Africa's talents, civilisations knowledge systems, innovations, and intellectuals within and to the world.

I wish you all a year full of hope and a positive perspective on life even as we go through 2021and beyond.

I wish to declare the 2021 Academic Year open.