

**Minister Pandor's address on the occasion of the University
of South Africa's 145th anniversary celebration**

Department of Higher Education and Training

UNISA, Pretoria

Wednesday 4 July 2018

Chancellor

Vice-Chancellor

Deputy Vice-Chancellor

Chairperson of Council and

Council members

Academic staff, and

All staff,

Students,

Guests,

Ladies and gentlemen.

I am very honoured to have been invited to address this special occasion for the University.

I heartily congratulate the University of South Africa as it celebrates its 145th anniversary. This is an awesome achievement, so too is the contribution that the University has made to the development of South Africa as a country.

Anniversaries such as these must be celebrated, and we must also use the occasion to reflect on what the institution's contribution has been, where it is now, and how we should seek to position it for the future.

Higher education in South Africa stands at an important crossroads. On one side there is significant opportunity to pursue and achieve levels of institutional and societal transformation of a type and character that has eluded us for more than two decades or that we have been too timid to aim for.

On the other side we are confronted by inhibitions and detractors both internal and external who have made it their obligation to ensure that we do not achieve our historic purpose. This purpose is shaped by our legacy which is terrible in its complex dimensions; but history is made not by those who acquiesce to be trapped in inherited legacies but by those who strive to conquer and confound legacy. Time is a cruel taskmaster and as Biko so aptly reminded us we are on our own and it is us who must define ourselves anew through practical action.

Distance education and open learning have a major role to play in providing opportunities for people who are not able to study full-time, including working people who need to upgrade and improve

their qualifications, and young people who are looking for a flexible way to study, and maybe in and out of work.

In South Africa at present, distance education accounts for just over one-third of university enrollments, with the vast majority of the distance enrollments at Unisa.

Over its 145 year history, Unisa has provided opportunities for a diverse range of students to access university studies, especially those who could not or who were prevented from accessing traditional pathways. It has thus made a significant contribution in providing access to student from marginalised groups.

Unisa was founded in 1873 as the University of the Cape of Good Hope and for most of its early history was the South African examining agency for Oxford and Cambridge universities. It officially opened as the University of South Africa (or Unisa as we know it) on 2 March 1918. It was our first university and most of our other established universities, the University of Cape Town, the University of the Witwatersrand, University of Pretoria, University of Fort Hare, amongst others, started their lives as colleges under its governance. It was the incubator from which most other universities in South Africa are descended.

Under apartheid many political prisoners were able to study through Unisa: Nelson Mandela, Andrew Mlangeni, Ahmed Kathrada, Dennis Goldberg, Neville Alexander, and many others. Many of our political leaders, jurists, intellectuals, clergy, writers, artists, business people and public servants have studied here. My grandfather, ZK Matthews, graduated with a Unisa degree in 1923 from Fort Hare, the first African graduate from a South African University, and again from Unisa with his LLB in 1930, the first African graduate with an LLB in South Africa.

Large numbers of successful South Africans in the country and abroad can be thankful for the education opportunities that Unisa provided. Managing universities is complex these days. Large numbers of students, and a diverse body with students of many different ages and educational backgrounds, requires flexibility and the ability to adapt to change.

Unisa offers programmes in a wide range of fields, has a large staff, and like all universities in the country, must adapt to rapid social and technological change. Managing and governing such a university is a complex responsibility.

Unisa is in a key position to contribute to the development of our country and continent in support of its motto of an "African university in the service of humanity". In order to do this it must

recognise the changing context, adapt to new challenges and pay attention to the importance of quality teaching and learning, with the success of its students at the heart of its institutional mission.

Unisa has the institutional capacity and intellectual resources to make a critical contribution to the many important challenges confronting South Africa. One of the first challenges is the University in all its systems, practices and support interventions, must embrace the fact that access must result in success. Too many students are entering our universities to fail, we cannot afford such a waste of human resources. This means all our institutions need to devote increased attention to improving teaching and learning. I hope that UNISA will use funding from our University Capacity Development Grant to provide for expanded academic support to students.

It is possible for Unisa to become a premier teaching and research institution through effective deployment of technology and use of the artificial intelligence opportunities of the fourth industrial revolution. I have noted UNISA's contribution to increased post graduate graduation numbers. This is an area in which South Africa and the entire African continent still have much to do.

Increases in doctoral graduations especially in Science and Engineering will substantially increase Africa's pool of knowledge workers and innovators. Prof Hoppers (2017) has vigorously argued for us in Africa to become part of the global science agenda and to use our participation to pursue our own development agenda and to influence global science policies and strategies in our national and continental interests. This renewed relevant focus on our goals must be led by UNISA.

We tend to appropriate notions of science and development that are delinked from our particular challenges and interests. I have been pleased to see that Unisa is focusing its science research agenda on developing local solutions that will have global impact. I am keen to see much more of this ambitious project.

I suggested earlier that we are at a critical point of decision as we approach our 25th year of democracy. Our progress has been remarkable by any measure of change. Our people and our ANC government must be congratulated and acknowledged for this. Notwithstanding these positive elements it is clear that our successes exist alongside failures that have a likelihood of entrenching reversals and limiting the full achievement of our national objectives. We must confront these threats.

Our third challenge is to enlist the active participation of all our university community and our nation broadly in the tasks of change and development. We have tended to narrowly define change as a task left to government and thus absolved our institutions and ourselves from practical concrete participation in social change in South Africa and the African continent.

Linked to this broad community engagement is the fourth task, that of giving careful attention to the ethical and intellectual character of the graduates that emerge from our institution. What do these graduates know, what skills of analysis, strategic thinking and ideas generation do they possess? What is their posture on the rest of Africa and the transitions it must undertake. Let me be so bold as to argue that developing such intellectual activists requires setting aside some of our selfish notions of entitlement that tend to obscure and even diminish our obligation to the needs of the poorest in our country.

We have entered a critical crossroads. Our government and our people have relieved us of the burden of financial need. For the first time we have fully subsidised higher education for the poorest first year students in our universities and colleges as well as for continuing NSFAS students this is a significant and fundamental change in policy. So, our first task is to work hard to honour the trust our people have placed in our ability to make good on their

investment in us. I am hopeful that as you mark 145 years you will devote some time to envisioning what kind of person you wish to be produced by this university.

Your choices are clear - will you become the classical Fort Hare of old that could produce a Seretse Khama, Nelson Mandela, Chris Hani, Ivy Motsepe, ZK Matthews or the old Stellenbosch University that produced a Verwoerd, a Malan, a Hertzog?

In my view the technological opportunities of the 21st century, the academic ability of Unisa imply this university can with vision, imagination and innovation ensure that all its graduates become the greatest South Africans who have ever lived. I wish you 145 years more of great learning and teaching.