

**MR S SIMELANE, CHAIRPERSON OF COUNCIL**

**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA**

**CLOSING OF THE ACADEMIC YEAR 2020**

**ZK MATTHEWS HALL**

**4 DECEMBER 2020**

**Greetings to my fellow Members of Council, the Principal and Vice Chancellor Prof Mandla Makhanya, members of Executive and Extended Management present, staff and students present.**

In our African culture, the end of a season such as this one is always marked with festivities, celebrations, feasting, dancing, mingling, hugging and shaking of hands. However, today it is a pity that the current climate occasioned by the restrictions of the pandemic disallows us that natural human expression of closing the year in a way we would have wished to. Well that is life, it has the good and the bad, summer and winter as well as beginnings and endings – and ours is to balance these natural binaries of life.

#### **1. The Man and Nature Contest**

Talking about the restrictions imposed by nature on us humans, today we are sharply reminded of the year that was – the year 2020 -- which, like any year,

began with much vigour, promise, determination and expectations and solid plans for staff, students and Council alike. But nature being what it is, some of these plans had to be modified or completely cancelled. It was in the first quarter of the year that all humanity halted and went back to basics as the world was visited with a plague never seen in human history – the Corona Virus pandemic -- that swept us all like the worst hurricane. Programme Director: **In memory of those who have left us, I wish to pause and ask that we observe a moment of silence. May they rest in peace.**

## 2. **Sailing the Uncharted Waters of the Covid-19**

Programme Director; the beauty of us humans is that we have the intrinsic animal instinct for self-preservation to either fight or flee. Facing the challenges of the COVID-19, as Unisans we chose the former; we braced ourselves and fought our ever-present sibling – nature -- to save the academic year. We did not let down our guard as citizens of this university but worked hardest against the odds and upheld the calling to serve students and saved the academic programme. This was seen in the rare but highly commendable teamwork across major sectors of the university which worked like Siamese twins, for long hours that are not even prescribed in their contracts of employment **to deliver examinations online a few weeks after the national lockdown was declared.** We as Unisans truly scoffed at the face of danger; we broke the silos and opened seamless collaborations between and among the colleges, portfolios and departments as we brought into the solution-seeking mix the ICT, science, health and wellness; human

resource and pedagogical expertise became a singular frontline to fight vile nature and protect the core business of the university. This is commendable.

On a lighter note, I laughed a little and said to myself – “*Niyakhona kanti* (so you can do it)?” The superficial silos that have dogged us for years melted as all colleagues resolved to save the academic year

3. Clearly the passing year was not without its challenges of course as we all tried to keep the course despite all these turbulent storms around us. The sad reality is that matters of student access to facilities and gadgets of learning became even more pronounced as the gap between the “richer” and the poor was revealed. The other perennial pain in our society is the pain of **Gender Based Violence**, which is said to have escalated during the pandemic.

It is for a good reason that we stand against gender-based violence and want our institution to be free from all sorts of social ill as Council. I therefore wish to emphasise that **the SAFETY of All members of this university** remains a critical matter to Council. Thus, the agile move of the Council to pronounce on the institution of the GBV unit within the Vice Chancellor’s office is to make practical our serious intents to fight against the pandemic of gendered harassment and brutality – particularly against women. As Council, we believe that these are serious issues of national urgency because safe and violence-free campuses certainly play a big role in **the silencing of guns on the continent, which is one of the transformational outcomes of Agenda**

*2063: The Africa We want.* We know, nobody out there can transform Africa but ourselves in our individual and collective spaces.

While talking about planting a good seed into a prosperous and strong Africa of 2063, let me quickly touch on this subject and then proceed. It would be disingenuous to only dwell on the glossy part and be mute about the not-so-good occurrences of the passing year. The university was visited with some strikes more than once in 2020. Painful as strikes can be at times – it is heart-warming to observe the maturity of our democracy in the open discussions and negotiations that have accompanied such occurrences. We are indeed a maturing democracy, but this also means that our steps may still falter in some ways that call for astute behaviour which befits and defines mature democracies in the world. I am particularly mindful of the levels of **intolerant behaviours that sometimes visit our community**. When one individual or a group of individuals fails to sway others to their own views and will at the negotiation table. These individuals often display the acute shortage of the virtues of good citizenship. That is why we then observe acts of brutality and sometimes violence. That is bad citizenship.

As a human society, **we should train ourselves to manage losing out in a debate or contest** of whatever nature, as did our forefathers in times of old. Legend has it that even if two young men were involved in duelling (stick-fighting) and hurt one another, after the fight they would go to the river and wash off each other's bleeding heads. It is the same lesson that we learn from

the debating teams of old. The losing team would stand up and congratulate the winning opponent. Ladies and gentlemen, I belabour this seemingly mundane point because it carries a strong **value of cooperation, communication and collective leadership. Intolerance has the potential to destroy.**

#### **4. The Transformation - the Key to Social Justice**

Transforming the university and ensuring epistemic, linguistic and social justice – among others is of a high premium in the Council’s programme of action. As Council we believe UNISA still has a considerable journey to travel in transformation. The conscious creation of *Strategic Focus Area (SFA) 4* in the university *Revised Strategy 2016 - 2030* is meant to provide the framework for accelerating change in the university. Transformation is not easy, I know. But it driven by the basic principle of **social justice** that seeks to put to an end all forms of domination especially in Language, Race, Gender and Institutional culture. Therefore, the full participation of all Unisans shall ensure that as a university, we reach the goals we have set for ourselves, of centralising Africa in our business. We cannot fall into the trap of bigotry and reverse segregation where we encourage the driving of certain languages and knowledges to the sea. No. We want to centralise Africa and her languages and knowledges and be truly THE African university. Ladies and gentlemen, this is not a sheer slogan for political correctness; it is a serious undertaking in which **the Council is tasking the whole university community to seek justice by keenly focusing on language issues, Africanisation, exploring the**

**Indigenous Knowledge Systems, and to engage and apply the concept of decoloniality to liberate Africa from colonial chains.** What I am saying is that we as Council are committed to supporting you in transforming the curriculum, the language and the lived experiences of staff and students in this university.

Please note that the **implementation of the Transformation Strategy is in your own hands, it resided in your office, your unit, your department, School, College and Portfolio.** If it is not happening there where you are, believe you me, it is not happening at all.

## **5. In Service to Humanity**

As I move to closure, I wish to state that we, the Unisans, have more than demonstrated our resolve not *“to let bad weather confine us to bed”* as it can be seen in the strides that we attained this passing year. I shall not steal the Vice Chancellor’s thunder by going into statistics and graphs. His State of the University reports cover that most expertly. Mine is to quickly remind us of some highlights which will give us reason to celebrate the closing season. Ladies and gentlemen, there are many seminal highlights to our work, but we cannot but mention the following:

- *The Thabo Mbeki African School of Public and International Affairs* (22 September 2020) to enable Africa to engage and produce knowledge that advances our African identity, amongst others;

- *The Ministerial Task Team* that accorded us the prime opportunity to share the possibly unknown good work of the university;
- The survival of the *Academic Project* exemplified in the exams, the graduations and the seminars that were held in the course of the year;
- The appointment of a new Vice Chancellor – Professor Puleng Lenka-Bula - as the incumbent, Prof Mandla Makhanya, retreats gracefully, without putting up any fight and without “refusing to concede”.

These, ladies and gentlemen are great achievements amongst many, and as Chair of Council I am truly enthused by all these successes.

**In conclusion, programme director,**

Today is my last address as the member of council and Chairperson of this magnificent institution after more than 8 years of association with this Institution. I am leaving here today with a wealth of knowledge I will always treasure. Working here has been a fantastic learning experience, and I am thankful for the skills I've acquired. I feel as if being here with you each day has made me completer and more well-rounded person.

*I've learned how to take direction, criticism, and compliments.*

*I've also learned to be open-minded, to value other people's opinions and to consider other ideas along with mine, to end up with a great final result.*

Being part of a team has taught me skills that I can use in more than just the professional area of my life. My relationships on a personal level are in a better place than they were, thanks to some of the things I've learned from many of you.

Unisa has over time gone through several challenges and difficulties ranging from administration issues, political issues such as the fees must fall and insourcing campaign and many others. We have however weathered the storm together. If we so happened to have rubbed one another in a wrong way. It wasn't personal or intentional but, it was all with a view of making Unisa the best institution ever. I've come to realize that being a part of a community is more than just sharing credit. A team effort takes compromise. When you are in a team you have to at times lead, follow, and more often than not, meet in the middle.

Programme Director allow me to thank Prof Mandla Makhanya for his leadership, patience and commitment to the Institution. We have indeed come a long way and he tolerated all my stubbornness, perfectionist, analyst and many other tendencies from persons of my age. .... I wish him well in his new endeavours as I am certain that he is still too young to retire.

To all the stakeholders of the Institution, Nehawu, APSA, NSRC, Women Forum, Black Forum, and many others. I want to appreciate the level of respect we have afforded one another even when difficult issues had to be

discussed or agreed on. Keep up the respect and robust engagement with the leadership of the institution. Your difference in ideologies should continue to be the strength and not a weakness. Continue in the spirit of good citizenship, Africa is blessed to have you.

To my Fellow Council members, thank you for the support and tolerance level you have afforded each other while tackling difficult matters.

Lastly, let me thank all those who have been part of my life and supported me behind the scenes since day one of my appointment as Chairperson. To name a few; Dr Adv Baloyi, Gilbert Mamorobela, Siyanda Boniwe, Linky Mogano, Dr Bopape, Prof Motsa Madikane and many more others. The respect and support you have given me during this period is remarkable and unforgettable.

In my opening and maiden remarks back in 2016, I noted that:

**“I believe deeply in the value of Unisa, its *critical* contribution to the national agenda, and the role that it can and must play in shaping South Africa’s future. Unisa has an incomparable pedigree in this regard and a legacy that should never be forgotten as it charts the future.”**

This has not changed. So, I end where I started – bidding farewell to the then Chair of Council, Dr Mathew Phosa. In that tradition of seasons changing, I wish to introduce to you the new UNISA Chair of Council Mr James Maboja. Congratulations Chair! May I end by saying to you all we truly have the inner ability to steer and steady this great ship called UNISA and serve South Africa, SADC, the continent of Africa and the rest of the world. Farewell, and do well.

Programme Director as a spiritual man, It just wouldn't feel right if I don't end with a scripture, Allow me to quote from the holy Bible the book of Jeremiah 29: 11 "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

All the Best God Bless

Thank you!