



The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor

PROF MANDLA S MAKHANYA: PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA
CONVOCATION ADDRESS
TEAMS MEETING
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- President of Convocation, Mr Sabelo Mhlungu
- Members of the Executive of Convocation
- Convocants

Good morning to you all and thank you for taking the time on a Saturday morning to join us for this very important assembly, especially in a time of the pandemic when our movements are restricted to ensure our health and safety.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education has experienced many disruptions this past decade, but 2020 must surely go down in our history as the year of the disruption that has blindsided the whole world. As is my duty and responsibility, I will report on some of that today. I have no doubt that once you have heard what I have to share with you, you will appreciate the need for convocation to focus more concertedly on its fundraising role and on the inherent value and capacity that resides in our alumni, which may be leveraged to the benefit of the university. Reiterating what I say each year, I would like to see our Alumni contributing more directly to the sustainability of our university, and the security of our future students.

THE SOCIOECONOMIC AND POLITICAL IMPACTS OF COVID-19

There can be no denying that the pandemic has been a global *game changer* that has weakened an already fragile global economy. As second waves of infections sweep across the world, the chief takeaway is that the pandemic is not going away any time soon and that it is only an effective vaccine, rolled out globally and simultaneously, that might offer some hope for its mitigation. Either that or that the virus should stop mutating and magically burn itself out. That said, there is already research questioning the long - term efficacy of a vaccine for a mutating virus.

South Africa is in the relatively fortunate position of having had the pandemic arrive on our shores a few months later than our global counterparts. This has enabled us to learn by observation and example and in so doing, prepare as best we could (and can), given our own resources and capabilities. This has been a very significant advantage and has undoubtedly saved many lives, as has the wearing of masks and social distancing. Also, much research is being done as to why Africa seems to have been spared the worst of the pandemic, but despite some interesting speculation, there is nothing yet that is certain. That said, complacency must be avoided at all costs for fear of a second wave that might reverse the humble gains and advantage that we currently enjoy.

THE STATE OF OUR UNIVERSITIES

Our universities have been severely affected by the pandemic. As it lingers on, nearly all schools and universities have adopted some or other form of online learning (or “emergency remote learning” as many have called it). In that process the stark reality of the very real gap between the “haves” and “have-nots” has been exposed around the world and has contributed to social agitation, dissatisfaction and much questioning and soul searching around the role and content of education and of our institutions of higher learning.

Although we are still not sure what Teaching and Learning will look like in the future, as its transformation is unfolding in real time, one nevertheless notes a growing appreciation for a more holistic approach to higher education delivery to ensure its ongoing relevance and agility in the prevailing context. We are simultaneously seeing the centrality of the curriculum, and this is accompanied by a very sharp spike in interest in Learning Design, which essentially refers to the framework that supports student learning experiences. Many face to face institutions that are now compelled to adopt forms of online learning in order to service students and ensure longer term sustainability, are upskilling their staff in learning design. One thus discerns how the pandemic has impelled a concerted focus on the redesign of pedagogy in line with the growing reliance on technology.

Even more evident is a global trend indicating that technology is now uppermost in everyone's minds when it comes to higher education delivery. If there had been any doubt, it is now evident that technology will, and is already, play(ing) an increasing role in higher education delivery and that the entire global higher education community is looking at ways and means of ensuring their relevance and sustainability

while simultaneously trying to develop curricula that will produce the quality graduates that they pride themselves on.

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

Unisa cannot allow itself to be left behind. It is therefore understandable that the institution will incur very significant financial ICT-related expenditure for the foreseeable future, over and above the massive investments that have already been made as a result of the immediate operational response to the pandemic, that is to move fully online as swiftly as possible. This is being attended to as perhaps *the* institutional priority. That said, there can be no doubt that Unisa has a significant advantage in terms of both infrastructure and capacity, and future expenditure is aimed at entrenching this advantage and building it to increasingly sophisticated levels for improved efficiencies and effectiveness, rather than building from the ground up.

Our ongoing review of the entire institution and the concomitant revision of our strategy attest to the fact that we have identified and are dealing with these realities. We are therefore well on our way to arriving at the optimal model for a quality online learning experience. Curriculum; vision; infrastructure, facilities, resources, hardware and support; professional development; student learning support;

partnerships; and research and evaluation are receiving ongoing attention. I am in fact proud of the amount of work that has gone into the very significant progress that we have made in the wake of the pandemic to ensure that Unisa remains relevant and sustainable.

However, a key part of this necessary transformation will have to accommodate the reality of changed/reprioritised budgetary requirements on the part of both the state and universities. We have already noted that infrastructure subsidies will be withheld in many instances, while those monies are channelled into COVID-related expenses (for example). This means that Unisa will have to anticipate and adjust in real time to the changes that are likely to be made to our subsidy income and offset these by focussing on generating the income to make up the shortfalls and still provide for the desired additional projects.

We are going to need to generate income and access resources outside of our traditional subsidy income base and we are going to have to prioritise and urgently. To meet these needs, many universities, including Unisa, have set up business or enterprise entities/units that are aimed at leveraging resources, setting up businesses, focussing research on innovations that can be patented, exploring win-win collaborations that

will contribute to growth and development and looking at Short Learning Programmes for additional income generation – to name but a few. We are having to think differently and operate differently, and we are already seeing some exciting results. It is in this context of third stream income generation and collaborations that we would like our alumni to come on board and make their contribution to our institution and its future relevance and sustainability.

Unisa has adopted a multi-pronged collaborative approach that aims to harness and share capacities that are required to achieve our institutional strategy – which is to be *the African University shaping futures in the service of humanity* – and to drive radical socio-economic transformation, inclusive growth, and development. We recognize that there is a desperate need to kick-start institutional initiatives that will generate income and develop capacity and competencies, to meet the demands that we are faced with while contributing to national growth and development – more so in this time of COVID-19.

Ladies and gentlemen, now more than ever before, we can't do this alone. Universities are primarily in the business of knowledge creation and knowledge generation. The key outcomes of our core business are our graduates, as well as the knowledge and intellectual property

generated through our core research programs. If suitable knowledge transfer mechanisms are established, research outcomes can also contribute to enhanced social and economic benefits. In fact, the pandemic has shown us just how crucial the role of research is, and what can be achieved through collaboration - between scholars and between universities and business. The most obvious examples of this are of course the sharing of data on the pandemic and the massive intercontinental and international collaborations in regard to the development of a number of vaccines.

MOVING TOWARDS A FULLY ONLINE UNIVERSITY

Having said that Unisa has taken a decision to move into fully online learning as swiftly as possible, I can advise convocation that we have already begun with online examinations which have been really successful despite the fact that these were done in real time. We have had very positive feedback overall and we are confident that as staff and students gain more experience in online learning and examinations we will entrench our position as the leaders in a delivery model where everyone is currently trying to play a catch up game.

As Unisa moves deliberately into fully online learning I would like to raise the following points:

- *Changed working conditions* for staff will have ramifications both financially and politically.
- The same applies to *the number and calibre of students that Unisa will be able to accommodate*. This is a serious matter. Over-enrolments will garner no sympathy from DHET; in fact massive fines may be imposed over and above the loss of subsidy income for students enrolled above the agreed targets. The situation poses severe financial risk and must be carefully managed and communicated. Unisa cannot afford to revert back to a similar situation previously where the unfunded student issue had a very negative impact on the university finances and our relationship with DHET. This needs to be flagged as a high risk.
- *Changed/reprioritized budgetary requirements on the part of both the state and universities*. Unisa will have to amend/adjust its budgeting requirements and needs in line with the state subsidies. We have already noted that infrastructure subsidies will be withheld in many instances, while those monies are channeled into COVID-related expenses (for example). Unisa will have to anticipate and adjust in real time to the changes that are likely to be made to our subsidy income and to generating the income that will offset the shortfalls and still provide for the desired additional projects. Most recent news is that Unisa has too many NSFAS

students and that the state cannot afford this, especially where the throughput rate is not satisfactory. Furthermore one has seen in the media that NSFAS has deregistered 5000 students who were found to have applied using incorrect information (we do not know of that number, how many are Unisa students) and in these past weeks one has read in the media that the entire issuing of laptops from the NSFAS funding is being reconsidered. Most recently one has learnt that 5 tenders have been awarded for the acquisition of laptops but as yet there is no certainty about delivery dates and times yet. Unisa must therefore ensure that it is prepared for the any financial impact on the institution, which these developments may incur.

- *Ongoing uncertainty.* The current mode of adapting to changed circumstances in real time, is likely to continue, making accurate planning and forecasting virtually impossible. Universities will therefore need creative thinkers who are able to capitalize on these uncertainties, find innovative means of accommodating their realities and still provide a quality learning experience. This will require a mindset and a culture change at Unisa if we are to overcome and progress. Any change and transformation initiative must incorporate these vital elements.

We are clearly going to need to generate income, funds, outside of our traditional subsidy income base and we are going to have to priorities and urgently. I must reiterate that the Unisa Enterprise, the Unisa Foundation and our alumni are going to have to play a far greater role – by committing to fund-generation targets and achieving them. Likewise, as an Institution, we are going to have to be innovative and creative in regard to fund generation.

We continue in a hugely disruptive HE cycle, and it is unusual or innovative thinking, as well as fiduciary responsibility and stewardship of the highest order that will determine our future sustainability. Ours is a huge responsibility but I believe that we have the will and the capability to overcome our challenges and flourish. Progress thus far has been satisfying within a challenging environment.

SOME FACTS AND FIGURES

Unisa has the most extensive and well-resourced higher education infrastructure on the Continent, which makes it a sought after and strategic collaboration partner with institutions across the globe. We are committed, open and keen to collaborate on projects and partnerships that would grow our respective developmental agendas. As a Pan

Africanist University, we especially welcome collaborations from across our Continent in particular, and across the globe generally.

Unisa is a dedicated *comprehensive* Open Distance and e-Learning university. The comprehensive designation means that we offer academic, professional and vocational qualifications, via Open, Distance and eLearning mode and soon in fully online mode. Unisa's uniqueness - and this is what genuinely sets it apart from most ODeL institutions, lies in the fact that our qualifications are quality assured and accredited in the same way that our country's residential institutions are. We are also publicly funded in the same way that our residential universities are, albeit at a different rate that is based on time-to completion and teaching inputs/outputs. However, we receive the same funding as contact institutions for our Masters and Doctoral students.

While we do offer certificate courses, our focus is on diploma, undergrad and post grad degrees up to doctoral level, we have eight *colleges*, which in other institutions would be called *faculties*. These are the Colleges of: Graduate Studies; Accounting Studies; Agriculture and Environmental Sciences; Economic and Management Sciences; Education; Human Sciences; Law; and Science, Engineering and Technology. We also have

a School of Business Leadership which earned a status of being a college from 2019 onwards.

Unisa remains the largest of South Africa's 26 public higher education institutions. In 2019 audited enrolments stood at 342 797 representing more than one-third of all public HE enrolments. You will therefore appreciate the importance of Unisa to South Africa's HE sector, to distance education in general and to the socio-economic development of South Africa and the Continent.

It should be noted that the preliminary 2020 unduplicated headcount enrolments of 389 187 exceeds the 2020 target of 376 000 by 3,5%, which is outside the permissible band allowed by DHET and is therefore likely to result in a penalty. In 2020, the preliminary first-time entering enrolments exceeds the target of 57 703 by 34,9%. This too will result in a penalty by DHET as it exceeds the agreed target by far more than the acceptable margin.

African students continued the significant upward trend and in 2019 represented 79,7% of all unduplicated headcount enrolments.

The contribution of female students to the unduplicated headcount enrolments continued with the steady upward trend from 63,3% in 2014 to 67,8% in 2019 and preliminary 69,3% in 2020. Similarly, the contribution of male students to unduplicated headcount enrolments continued a declining trend from 36,7% in 2014 to 32,2% in 2019 and preliminary 30,7% in 2020. In absolute numbers, female students increased from 232 250 in 2019 to a preliminary 269 745 in 2020 and male students decreased from 110 517 in 2019 to a preliminary 119 442 in 2020. It is therefore evident that the female students are increasing faster than male students.

The number of graduates continued to increase. 48 906 students graduated in 2019. The percentage pass rate for undergraduate students in 2019 was 72.6%. In 2020, despite COVID-19, the percentage of students who wrote in May/June of this year, in our first fully online exams, increased. A total of 973 222 exams were written by students in May/June 2020, which is significantly higher than in the previous years. Furthermore, the exam absence rate was lower on 1,4%, compared to 2,6% in 2019. It is therefore also important to note that the normal pass rate (NPR) was almost ten percentage points higher than in 2019.

PEDAGOGY, SUSTAINABILITY AND TRANSFORMATION

Pedagogy at Unisa is undergoing fundamental transformation in line with its decoloniality strategy, in terms of didactics, curriculum and assessment. Teaching methods continue to move to a more facilitative role for educators; far greater student involvement; increasing use of technology; content that is more contextually relevant; and more streamlined and efficient assessment practices. Generally, students are now much more interested in interactive and self-guided approaches in their studies. With so much information online and available for free, greater use is being made of Open Education Resources (OERs) and open learning practices to restructure curricula, to stay current and equip students appropriately for a world of work that requires flexibility, innovation and a change mindset. It has been pleasing to note that our move to fully online education in 2020 was matched with free data for specific periods of time, for both staff and students. This no doubt contributed to the success of the online examination. Much work however remains to be done in getting to the optimal state of access for staff and students and this work continues unabated.

I am able to say that I am really pleased with the work that has been done in the academe this past year. Unisa has adopted a decolonial approach that is informing the transformation of its curriculum and we have made

some progress. As a COVID-19 pandemic took hold it was a revelation to see how staff came on board and made the changes that need to be made in regard to both teaching and assessment to ensure that the academic year would not be lost. Our academics in fact played a fundamental role in ensuring the success of the online examinations, with the majority working long hard hours together with our support staff, to rise to the occasion and to overcome all of the challenges that were presented along the way. I would like to acknowledge our staff for that contribution, which has not been easy under lockdown conditions.

A key part of this deconstructing and reconstructing process has involved a large number of seminars, colloquiums, debates, public lectures and discussion on a whole host of topics. These are in our view, crucial conversations that we should be having as a nation as we reshape our identity and rediscover our voices. I can say quite honestly that I believe that Unisa is at the vanguard of decoloniality and transformation in South African Higher education and that is something of which we can be really proud. It is difficult and complex work, but it is also very necessary work.

But I am proud to say that our transformation has not been uni-dimensional. At Unisa we have an academe that has demonstrated its

commitment to their own development and progress and to the growth of their disciplines and research, including through collaborations. The number of our rated researchers is growing year-on-year, our academics are receiving accolades and being appointed to important boards and committees in acknowledgement of their professionalism and expertise, and we are proud to say that we have a number of academic staff who are at the forefront in their fields. It is perhaps not fair to single out any discipline or field, but we are receiving a lot of attention for the work we are doing in Sustainability, Agricultural Sciences and in Science, Engineering and Technology. Much of that work is linked to community engagement, to Multi-inter-and transdisciplinarity and to collaborations across institutions and borders. Our academics are really coming to the table and showing just what this institution is capable of when our staff exercise genuine professionalism and commitment to their disciplines.

Unisa's Business Enterprise is also now operational. We hope that it will soon be engaged in a number of projects. The aim of the business enterprise is to harness and leverage internal capacities (including intellectual property), innovation and collaboration towards business opportunities that will generate additional income streams for the university. Given the challenges and financial constraints that I mentioned earlier on in this address, a Business Enterprise entity is an

integral component of many universities nowadays. This is something that we hope to grow quite rapidly to ensure that we make a deliberate contribution to our own sustainability.

Unisa has an Advocacy and Resource Centre for Students with Disabilities (ARCSWiD), which is responsible for providing a wide range of services to students with disabilities. We actively recruit and support these students to ensure genuine inclusiveness. The same applies to our staff. While the centre faced some challenges as a result of COVID-19, it continues to be the voice of this cohort of students and I am confident that as an institution we are making a real and necessary contribution to access and inclusivity for our students with disabilities.

It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge our students in this time of COVID-19. Like all of us, they have had to deal with a lot of uncertainty and change. They have risen to the occasion and proven yet again, that Unisa students possess characteristics which are sought after in the workplace – courage, proactiveness, resilience and tenacity. This has not been an easy year. Writing examinations online has been a completely new experience for most. There was little by way of preparation but our students rose to the occasion – and in so doing they gave us the confidence to move forward into fully online examinations. Together we

have been pathfinders and I am extremely proud of that. So, to our students I must say: Well done – we are proud of you.

Finally, you will by now know that my tenure concludes at the end of 2020. Council requested me though to stay on until the end of April 2021 to ensure a smooth handover to our incoming Principal and Vice Chancellor, Professor Puleng Lenka-Bula. Professor Lenka- Bula will take up office at a difficult time. The institutional review currently underway will be concluded in February and it will be her task to implement recommendations that might emanate from the review while continuing our current transformation trajectory. We should therefore all offer Professor Lenka-Bula our assurances of our support and encouragement and also wish her well for her tenure.

For my part I would like to thank our alumni for their ongoing support of this wonderful university and exhort you to become involved in contributing to Unisa's future success.

In conclusion ladies and gentlemen, we acknowledge that we have some ongoing challenges around service delivery. But in the same breath I can tell you that we have finalised the new ICT blueprint for Unisa, and we are busy with its implementation. I have every confidence in that the

implementation of our blueprint will begin to extricate us from the unnecessary challenges that keep on raising their ugly head. We are hopeful that the focus on ICT as the foundation of our move to a fully online business model, will deliver the desired results.

Service delivery issues aside, Unisa, I believe, is doing well in the most crucial areas of its mandate of Teaching and Learning, Research and Innovation and Community Engagement. Our transformation strategy is delivering the desired results. As we bid 2020 farewell and look to 2021, we do so not knowing where the pandemic will take us but being fully prepared and capable of dealing with whatever may come our way.

As I thank you all for your attendance and for your contributions to Unisa as our Alumni, I invite you all to become more proactively engaged in the sustainability of the university. We value your contributions.

It remains for me to wish you and your loved ones well for a blessed and relaxing festive season.

I thank you.