



ADDRESS BY THE MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION, DR BLADE NZIMANDE, ON THE OCCASION OF THE INAUGURATION OF VICE CHANCELLOR AND PRINCIPAL OF UNISA, PROFESSOR PULENG LENKABULA AT THE ZK MATHEWS GREAT HALL - UNISA

2 September 2021

Programme Director

Chancellor of UNISA, former President Thabo Mbeki

Chairperson of UNISA Council, Mr MJ Maboja

Members of University Council

Vice Chancellor-elect and Principal of UNISA, Prof Puleng LenkaBula

Vice Chancellors and Deputy Vice Chancellors present

UNISA staff and students

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen

Thank you for the invitation and opportunity to address you at this special occasion of the inauguration of Professor Puleng LenkaBula as Vice Chancellor and Principal of the University of South Africa (UNISA).

This is indeed a historic moment for the university to install its first female Vice Chancellor since its establishment about 148 years ago.

This is an important development to be proud of, but also it is an indictment on us as a society that 26 years into democracy it is only now that one of our biggest institutions of higher learning is having its first female head.

This is a clear indication that perhaps we are not moving as fast as we should in ensuring gender equality and representation in key leadership positions in various institutions across the country.

This is something that we need to pay close attention to as we march forward with our transformation agenda and efforts to make our institutions fully inclusive and accommodative to all the people of South Africa, irrespective of race, gender and class.

Mr Chancellor, allow me to take this opportunity to congratulate Professor LenkaBula on her appointment as Vice Chancellor and principal of UNISA.

Professor LenkaBula brings extensive experience into this position having been Vice Rector: Institutional Change, Student Affairs and Community Engagement at the University of the Free State and Dean of Students at the University of Witwatersrand where she was a member of the Vice Chancellor's Office (VCO) and the Senior Executive Team.

She previously held management positions at different institutions, including here at UNISA, where she had a successful stint as Dean of Students.

I believe that UNISA Council has made the right decision in appointing a person of your calibre as Vice Chancellor to lead and steer this institution in the right direction especially during these challenging times in the life of our universities.

Increasingly our universities have to grapple with the impact of limited funding as the state tries to balance national budget to respond to a myriad of needs affecting our people.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has not helped the situation as the repurposing and reprioritisation of funds has become an absolute necessity.

Notwithstanding all these challenges, UNISA remains an important institution in South Africa, in terms of the provision of access to the largest number of our student population through distance education.

Over the years, UNISA has established itself as a dedicated Centre for Open, Distance and e-Learning on the African continent and beyond. It has managed to make university education accessible to millions of people from different localities, young and old, who otherwise would not have had the opportunity to obtain tertiary qualifications on the practicalities of not being able to attend contact classes.

Many prominent people and leaders in South Africa and Africa today owe their higher education studies and progress in their careers to UNISA.

It is these special characteristics of accessibility and affordability that make UNISA the unique institution that it is today, and I trust that your

leadership, Professor LenkaBula, will build on these features to further strengthen the capacity of the institution to continue offering affordable quality education to the people of South Africa.

At the same time, I am deeply concerned that the new leadership, supported by Council, must firmly tackle fundamental challenges that have been raised about the trajectory of UNISA's mission, strategic orientation and underlying business model as a 'distance-based, open-learning' institution in recent years, as well as also concerns about the stability of its governance and management systems.

Perhaps the single most important challenge facing UNISA today is that of placing and reinforcing the academic project at the centre of its mission. Some might say why I have to emphasize such an obvious point. It is because the pass and throughput rates at this institution are unacceptably low. In addition, a number of our higher education institutions are plagued with the problem of being sites of personal accumulation for some individuals, with focus on supply chain issues trumping the academic project.

Prof LenkaBula, if you were to ask me, what mandate am I giving you today, it is that of mobilising and leading everyone in this institution to prioritise the academic project. And that is how my Ministry will seek to engage and support this great university.

Because of some of these concerns, and in concurrence with UNISA Council, I have appointed a Ministerial Task Team on Unisa which will hopefully provide an objective basis for assessing what needs to be done to ensure its long-term sustainability.

Once the Report is published for public comment, we hope to engage with the Vice Chancellor and Council on the best way to proceed on these vexing issues.

Reclaiming Africa's Intellectual Cultures

I have been requested to address on the theme of this colloquium, namely, "***Reclaiming Africa's Intellectual Futures***".

This is indeed an interesting theme precisely because many scholars across Africa and abroad, especially in the diaspora, have reflected deeply on this topic before and produced voluminous body of literature.

The theme is also interesting because, in my view, it can and in fact has been approached from many different perspectives.

Recently in the South African higher education system we have experienced vibrant conversations on decolonisation or decoloniality, the latter putting more emphasis on the philosophical underpinnings of the concept.

UNISA has been an important part of these conversations. In fact various initiatives at UNISA in recent years have been speaking to the subject of African agency and the need to develop and foreground African scholarship in order to address and seek solutions to many problems afflicting the continent.

The clear examples are the *Thabo Mbeki Leadership Institute* and the *Archie Mafeje Research Institute*, to mention just two. I am also aware of the work done by the *African Decolonial Research Network* here at UNISA in deepening conversations about decolonisation and Africa's intellectual history more broadly in order to produce knowledge that is centred on the needs and worldviews of African people.

I commend the Network for its work in providing mentorship and support to young graduates interested in developing their knowledge and producing research on Africa's intellectual history and decoloniality in general.

For me I characterise this task as that of the absolute necessity to transform the relations of knowledge production in our higher education system, especially its racial, patriarchal and class features.

It is critical that reflections on important subjects such as these do not just end in high-level theorisation confined to workshops and seminars, but indeed, culminate in concrete research projects and publications, and by so doing adding to the existing body of knowledge in these areas.

As you are aware conversations or, rather, calls for decolonisation are not new. They can be traced as far back as the 1960s and 1970s when many African countries rose against colonial rule and fought for freedom for their people.

The calls took different names such as "Africanisation", "indigenisation" etc, the common and underlying message being that Africa must break free from the clutches of foreign European control and begin to craft a

future for itself drawing inspiration from the rich history that colonialism has for many years sought to subdue or misrepresent.

As Riana Oelofsen writes in her essay **titled *Decolonisation of the African Mind and Intellectual Landscape***, decolonisation is the change that colonised countries go through when they become politically independent from their former colonisers. However, decolonisation is not merely a matter of political independence.

Structures of government and other institutions, the way in which a country is economically organised, as well as the way in which former colonial subjects were encouraged to think, are often still determined by the former colonial powers in post-colonial countries, as a result of the economic and cultural power the former colonisers wield.

At the centre of these conversations must be the need to question and seek to transform the established relations of knowledge production, including its colonial foundations.

Transforming relations of production and rooting our scholarship in Africa does not mean a mechanical dismissal of scholarship from Europe or other parts of the world, but engaging it from the standpoint of Africa and its challenges. For UNISA, transforming relations of knowledge must be premised on defending, protecting and advancing the academic project!

Transformation of knowledge production understood in this manner calls for engagement and dialogue between different epistemic traditions with the view to expand and enrich the scope of our knowledge or the knowledge disseminated through our universities and schooling system.

It is a clarion call for cognitive justice and the sharing of the knowledge base.

Universities are by their nature spaces for the construction and development of ideas and are built on the values of openness and free circulation of ideas no matter how unpopular or discomfoting these ideas may be.

It is within universities that students and scholars are able to experiment with ideas and test their validity and application against other established ideas.

It is actually absurd to imagine a university, worth the name, only comfortable with mere regurgitation of old ideas.

I have raised concern previously about the tendency and practice in most of our universities in general to propagate a singular idea especially with reference to economics.

We are inundated with this one dominant view of neoliberalism as a panacea to all our socio-economic problems. Development is hardly imagined outside the neoliberal frame of reference. This is despite the inherent structural weaknesses of the neoliberal model laid bare by the global economic crisis of 2008.

My plea to our scholars as we reimagine the future of an African university and bring to the fore previously silenced voices and knowledge systems, to also think of different economic models that can speak to our socio-cultural realities and be able to take us forward without always having to

refer back or seek approval of those who claim to have figured out how to be in the world.

And by this, I do not imply that different societies and civilisations cannot learn and borrow from each other.

It is the unequal exchange of ideas and weighting of experiences that I have a problem with, and firmly believe, needs to be interrogated.

Just by way of sharing, the Department of Science and Innovation and the National Research Foundation, working together with international partners, have recently launched the Covid-19 Africa Rapid Grant Fund to contribute to the African and regional response to the pandemic.

A number of projects from 17 African countries have been supported through this fund. The aim is to bolster Africa's initiatives in the fight against Covid-19 and also to highlight the idea that Africa has an important role to play in generating high level scientific knowledge about the Covid 19 pandemic to the service of, not only the African people but, global community at large.

The relevance of this to the discussion we are having today is that the world is increasingly coming to terms with the fact that Africa has agency and the requisite expertise, and will be part of the solution to the problems afflicting humanity.

Programme Director

Allow me to conclude with a quotation attributed to Edward Said, one of the leading theorist on postcolonial studies, in his article published in 1991 with the title “*Identity, authority and freedom: the potentate and the traveller*”, which I think has relevance to conversation we are having here today. He writes:

...a single over-mastering identity at the core of the academic enterprise, whether the identity be Western, African or Asian is a confinement, a deprivation. The world we live in is made of numerous identities interacting, sometimes harmoniously, sometimes antithetically. Not to deal with the whole is not to have academic freedom.

This was of course in critique of the western canon, but I think it applies to all, totalising narratives that seek to emerge at the expense of others and thus silencing them in the process.

Let me take this opportunity to thank you for participating in this inauguration of Professor Puleng Lenkabula.

Thank you

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