Sanibonani, good afternoon

I am grateful to be joining you today in officially launching the engineering programme of my Alma mater, the University of Zululand.

This is not only a milestone for the University, but it is a milestone for the Zululand region, the province, the Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs) and for South Africa and her people.

I am reliably informed that this is the first in 40 years that an engineering programme is being introduced at a South African university. It is definitely the first engineering programmes at the University of Zululand, 60 years after its founding.

You have indeed given yourselves a wonderful sixty (60) anniversary present! If this is anything to go by, I can safely say to the Council, the
Management of the University, the team that worked tirelessly behind the scene to deliver this project, congratulations, you have done us all proud!!!

This moment comes at a time when the South Africa and the world is grappling with a fourfold crisis of COVID 19, together with deepening economic crisis (globally and domestically), multiple crises of challenges of socio-economic sustainability for families, households and communities, and Climate Change.

At a personal level, as an Alma mater of UniZulu, and as the Minister of Higher Education, Science & Innovation, I wish others can take a leaf out of your book of displaying this level of fortitude.

I will be remiss if I do not recognise many efforts that were undertaken by those who came before the current Council and leadership of this university.

The likes of Mr Gamede, the former Chair of Council, who is in our midst today. Siyabonga Magadlela, Mkholwa, Sebenzakhaya!!! And the rest of the team that you worked with.

I know that together with your team, you worked hard to ensure that we are where we are today. Having appointed you and the rest of our Council members was indeed not a mistake.

The significance of today’s event also lies in the fact that the mission of these universities when they were established in the early 1960s (Turloop, Zululand, and a refocused Fort Hare) were never meant to provide skills beyond the management of the Bantu education system, the planned bantustan programme of the apartheid regime, and to train black professionals to manage the affairs of the black population. Another entity that was in the league of these apartheid created institutions was the University of Natal black section which was meant to
train black doctors so that they can look after black patients! Today marks a fundamental break with history! None of the black universities had faculties of engineering when they were established as blacks were not supposed to be engineers according to the apartheid-capitalist agenda of the time.

Programme Director

It is undisputed that the introduction of engineering programme at the University of Zululand comes at a crucial time when we are grappling with repositioning our economy to respond to the skills and development needs of our country and the continent.

This is amongst the reason why I have publicly (and recently) announced the latest National List of Occupations in High Demand (OIHD) in South Africa.

The list reflects the work undertaken by the DHET, through the Labour Market Intelligence research programme, to support human resource development in our country.

This list is updated every two years, and marks an important step towards helping us understand better the needs of the labour market and signals opportunities where our students and graduates are likely to stand a better chance of finding employment.

This list tells us which occupations are likely to have such vacancies and which occupations are likely to grow due to new investments, especially by government.

In this list, we have identified 345 occupations that are in high demand out of a total of 1 500 registered in our Organising Framework for Occupations.
Many of the occupations on the list can be associated with key areas and sectors identified as crucial for the Reconstruction and Recovery Plan as announced by President Ramaphosa, such as the digital economy, energy, infrastructure development, manufacturing, tourism and agriculture, data scientists, web developer, computer network technician, electrical engineer, concentrated solar power process controller, mechatronic technician, toolmaker, gaming worker, crop produce analyst, agricultural scientist, just to name a few.

I want to reiterate my call that our universities, our TVET Colleges and private education and training institutions as well as other training providers to use this list to inform their selection of programme offerings, their resource allocations and enrolment planning processes, as well as the identification and development of new qualifications and programmes that are more responsive to the needs of the economy and society as a whole.

I must say that today’s launch of the engineering programme at UniZulu sits very well with the launch of this list of Occupations in High Demands and engineering is amongst the critical skills identified.

Ladies and gentlemen

During the restructuring of higher education in the early 2000s, the University of Zululand was assigned to be a comprehensive university but without having been merged with a university of technology.

This meant that the university had to change its identity from a traditional to a comprehensive institution by developing more career focused and professional qualifications that respond to the local, regional and national needs of economic and professional skills development.
I am pleased that today the University of Zululand is actually responding to its mission and established values.

As we may know, the launch of this engineering programme today is a culmination of a project that started in 2013, when the University submitted a business case for the establishment of a facility to offer engineering qualifications at the Richards Bay Campus of the University.

I must indicate that UniZulu's commitment to strengthen its relevance and quality of academic qualifications and programmes, the quality of programme delivery, the aggressive upscaling of staff qualifications, the recognition and strengthening of stakeholder relations as well as the upgrading of teaching, learning and research infrastructure has been compelling since the University became a comprehensive institution.

All of these needs are intersecting at various levels and layers within the institution as it strengthens and positions itself as an institution producing top-end intellectual capacity.

I must commend the university for demonstrating this type of exemplary leadership and commitment.

The establishment of an engineering facility at the Richards Bay Campus and particularly the accreditation of engineering qualifications will contribute significantly to the expression of the comprehensive identity of UniZulu through responsive career focused and professional programmes.

I wish the university well in its decision to initially offer bachelor degrees in the field of electrical, mechanical, mechatronic and computer engineering and diplomas in computer systems, electronic communication systems, process instrumentation and control and mechatronics in the next ten years (2021 – 2030).
I am also pleased that over time you plan to introduce degrees and diplomas in civil, chemical, metallurgical, maritime and industrial engineering will also be introduced. Diplomas are especially essential given the huge shortages of technicians and other mid-level skills, especially in the field of engineering.

I am also pleased by the fact that the Engineering Council of South Africa’s (ECSA) has positively evaluated and supported the establishment of these qualifications. This effectively means that the UniZulu engineering qualifications will be internationally comparable and recognised.

It is encouraging to note that the engineering qualifications proposed by UniZulu were identified through various modes of consultation with local industry and municipalities within the region, including through hosting workshops, distributing questionnaires and holding discussions with individuals and groups of critical stakeholders in the Richards Bay area.

This therefore means that the proposed qualifications are reflective of engineering needs in the area of Richards Bay and the university and students will be supported across all sectors and industries, particularly when they have to undertake on the job training and for future employment.

This partnership with industry is very important because practical training through student job placement and internship remains a critical component to produce a highly skilled and competent students and graduates, especially in the engineering field.

I therefore would like to congratulate the local industry and the university for reaching this important achievement. We also urge state owned enterprises to seek partnerships with the university for skills development and leave state capture behind as they forge a new and relevant identity for themselves.
Ladies and gentlemen

To run these qualifications successfully, the University required that we develop large scale physical and laboratory infrastructure to a tune of R2, 5 billion over a period of ten years.

Developing this infrastructure also required the adoption of an integrated district infrastructure development model which created interdependencies and strong collaborations between the University, my Department of Higher Education and Training, the uMhlathuze Municipality, the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Department of Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs, and the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure.

This type of collaboration is in line with the Presidential District Development Model which aims to improve the coherence and impact of government service delivery. As a Zululand District Model Champion, I am delighted that the sector in which I am leading, is showing leadership in championing this model through stakeholder cooperation.

I also wish to encourage the university to intensify its campaign against corruption, and to clean the image of this institution, and for all internal and external stakeholders to support Prof Mtose in this effort. We need a compact and a partnership to make this institution to realise its potential. This institution is a place for education and empowerment of our youth and not a place for tenders and self-enrichment. Masingaphenduli isikhungo sethu sezemfundo sibe ngumhume wabaphangi!!

The cooperation amongst stakeholders ensured that land is provided to develop physical infrastructure, roads and bulk services, electricity, water and sanitation, science and technology infrastructure linked to the Richards Bay Industrial Development Zone, local firms and the university.
I am pleased to announce that my Department allocated the UniZulu R90 million for the development of the new engineering building during the current infrastructure funding cycle.

We also have provided the University with support to build capacity to procure, develop and manage such buildings and all university infrastructure effectively and efficiently.

I will also be requesting my Department of Science and Innovation to explore other possible partnerships and projects to be attached to this engineering school in order to advance the goals and objectives of our national system of innovation. This must include the establishment of a technology station at this school.

Ladies and gentlemen

The decision by UniZulu to offer qualifications in engineering in Richards Bay is very strategic because the Port of Richards Bay is one of the two largest and busiest ports in Africa, creating huge potential for the area to be one of the major industrial investment opportunities.

The Richard Bay Port plays an important economic role not only for this province but for the whole of South Africa and the African continent.

This area is the third most important in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) in terms of economic production, contributing 16.7% to the national GDP whilst also the third most important primary manufacturing area in KZN in terms of economic production.

These engineering programmes will therefore not only strengthen the large-scale industrial strengths of the uMhlathuze area and the Richards Bay Industrial Development Zone (IDZ), but it will boost the economic outlook of the entire KwaZulu-Natal province.
It therefore becomes important that the KwaZulu Natal provincial government, its agencies and the private sector continue to invest in the development of Science, Technology, Engineering and Innovation in this district in a manner that will further strengthen the development of these engineering qualifications and research output of UniZulu.

In conclusion, I must indicate that as the Department of Higher Education, Science and Innovation we will continue to support this initiative and like-minded initiatives by UniZulu and any of our historically disadvantaged universities in contributing towards the skills revolution as dictated by the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and the economic needs of all South Africans and that of the entire African continent.

To the university management, I want to appeal to you not to compromise standards in offering these engineering programmes, but you should always be pegged at the top-end benchmark of programmes offered in other leading universities in the country and internationally.

I trust that those who are appointed to teach in these qualifications also hold the best qualifications in the engineering disciplines and command the best experience from related industries.

I also call up industries in Richards Bay and the region to rally resources together, invest in the development of engineering infrastructure at this University and provide good experiential learning opportunities for students who will be pursuing their engineering qualifications.

May this launch serve as platform in which we can find those niche areas in which we bring our competitive capabilities and contribute towards the building of the economic success of our country and of this region in particular.

I thank you