



The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor

THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE ACADEMIC YEAR 2008¹

Madam Programme Director;

The Honourable Justice Dikgang Moseneke: Deputy Chief Justice of South Africa and our honoured guest speaker on this occasion;

Dr Mathews Phosa: Chairperson of the Unisa Council and members of the Unisa Council;

The Pro Vice Chancellor: Professor Mandla Makhanya;

The Deputy Vice Chancellor, Prof David Mosoma and colleagues in the Executive Management of the university;

Professor Louis Molamu: the University Registrar and Unisa's first Mace-bearer;

Executive Deans of the colleges at Unisa; Members of staff, students, honoured friends of the University of South Africa, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

I believe that I can say without any fear of contradiction that the official opening of Unisa's Academic year has become an event occasioned by high expectations, excitement and hope for an academic year of fulfilment and academic excellence. This event has come to generate a sense of excitement - a "buzz" - that speaks not only to the normal enthusiasm that marks new beginnings, but also, I am increasingly beginning to sense, to an enthusiasm about the exciting developments which lie ahead, and the role that each of us will be playing as we forge a new identity for our beloved Unisa.

And in that spirit of excellence and the forging of a new identity, you will have noticed our magnificent new mace, highly symbolic in its ebony and ivory composition, and

¹ Opening address on the occasion of the official opening of the academic year, 2008 held in the ZK Matthews Great Hall, Unisa, Muckleneuk Campus, Preller Street, Pretoria, on Wednesday 30 January 2008.

designed as a symbol of office and authority for use in Unisa's official ceremonies such as our assembly this morning, graduation ceremonies, and at the installation of the Chancellor and inauguration of the Vice Chancellor. The unveiling and blessing of the mace brings to fruition a branding exercise that began in 2005 for the newly merged, dedicated, comprehensive distance education institution. It gives character and identity to the new Brand Unisa which builds on years of service to higher education by all our merging institutions.

Today the university mace is being unveiled, and will be blessed by Bishop Jo Seoka, the Anglican Bishop of Pretoria, and our own Prof Tinyiko Maluleke, President of the South African Council of Churches. We wish to thank both Bishop Jo and Prof Maluleke for this act of blessing and dedication which can only direct the course of this university aright. The mace bears witness not only to a new Unisa tradition, but also, Unisa history in the making, as Unisa claims its place among the hallowed university traditions from time immemorial. I think we have every reason to feel honoured and proud. The Mission and Vision of the university and its core values are represented in the symbols etched or sculpted on this mace: *towards **the** African university in the service of humanity.*

We are equally delighted to have as our guest speaker today, the Honourable Justice Dikgang Moseneke: Deputy Chief Justice of South Africa. Our Programme Director, Professor Singh will be introducing Deputy Chief Justice Moseneke in a short while. In paying tribute to Justice Moseneke, though, one must mention that the Deputy Chief Justice is a native of this City of Tshwane and an alumnus of this university. His dedication to higher education and to this university was in evidence when he served as Unisa's Goodwill Ambassador to mark the 130th anniversary of this university in 2003. He is also the illustrious Chancellor of Witwatersrand University, Johannesburg, an outstanding intellectual and leader on all fronts of our national life. Deputy Chief Justice, we are indeed honoured to have you with us this morning.

At the inauguration of the academic year last year, I ventured to suggest that 2007 would be a watershed year in the annals of this university. Indeed it was. Last year, through some vigorous negotiating processes, new Conditions of Service were agreed and implemented; following the merger and incorporation, a comprehensive

programme of staff placements and staff adjustments was completed. Since the merger, we saw yet another year of sound financial performance and robust investment returns for the university. Student numbers continued to show a consistently upward trend. Last year 251 266 headcount student registrations were recorded signifying that Unisa is fast becoming a university of choice for this nation's young and emerging scholars.

January last year saw the inauguration of the Unisa Regional Learning Centre in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia by the Prime Minister of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia in the presence of President Thabo Mbeki giving effect to the development partnership between South Africa and Ethiopia. After one year of operations in Addis Ababa we have noted a marked interest in Unisa programmes and increased registrations in postgraduate programmes and the MBL. Following a recent visit by our academic colleagues and after extensive consultations with the Minister of Education and Presidents of partner universities there, Unisa has been identified as a niche provider of post-graduate programmes to meet the needs of the higher education system there and to contribute to high level skills in the economy.

Internally, much was done to address system breakdowns and inefficiencies through a new business architecture model and the adoption of a Charter of Service Excellence, and a dedicated programme of staff training and development. This intervention has contributed in no small measure to improved services to students as the Student Satisfaction Survey conducted at the end of last year showed. Arguably, the Commonwealth of Learning Trial Audit was the highlight of the year. An international panel of experts spent a week at Unisa and examined all our systems and processes, academic structures, course, module and programme offerings, standards and general compliance. They tested the university against the criteria set by HEQC. The result was a report which made some commendations and recommendations for quality improvement. We are now more than ready for the HEQC Quality Audit which will be conducted in August this year.

In 2006, Unisa's overall *course success rate* was 54%. This reflects the number of passes in relation to total registrations per course - the measure used by the Ministry and Department of Education. This remains below the recently approved Ministerial target of 56%. Beneath this overall figure, considerable variation among the Colleges is

evident - ranging from 39% to 70%. While the preliminary 2007 examination results indicate a slight improvement over 2006, the University faces considerable challenges to improve its success rate and meet the ministerial target.

It is important to note that the 2006 overall *examinations success rate* (that is the number of passes in relation to those who wrote the exams) was considerably higher at 61%. However, attrition at the course level (as the combined result of non-admissions to, and absence from the examination sittings), reduced this to the final course success rate of 54%. Over 10% of our registered students do not make it to the writing of their exams. Improving our overall success will therefore depend not only on fewer failures, but also on providing the required learner support and guidance to radically reduce the current unacceptably high attrition rate between registration and exam writing.

In 2006, Unisa's overall completion rate (excluding occasional students) was 6, 5%. This still remains considerably below the Ministerial target of 8, 4%. Here, the University faces even more challenges to meet the Ministerial completion rate target. To achieve this, we will have to provide effective support and guidance to reduce attrition at the qualification level - that is the number of students who - for a variety of financial, social and other reasons - simply drop out of their studies.

Regarding the crucial level of Masters and doctoral students, Unisa graduates around 10 to 12% of its current Masters enrolments each year, and around 8 to 10% of its doctoral students. However, this rough throughput measure hides the fact that Masters and doctoral students generally take a long time to complete. On average, research Masters students take between 4 to 4 ½ years to complete and doctoral students between 4 to 5 years. A lot of work is being done to improve completion rates for research students and the results of these interventions are becoming evident. For example in 2006 we saw a 14.5% improvement in our Masters graduation rate and 1% in doctoral student results.

We are very proud that through various partnerships various chairs have been established. Prof Dele Braimoh was appointed the Unesco Chair in ODL, and Prof Catherine Odora Hoppers was awarded the Research Professor in Development

Education under the National Research Chairs Initiative (SARCHi). Alongside this, the Unesco Chair has also been established the Institute for Open and Distance Learning which will serve as a centre of excellence in the training and development of expertise in ODL as well as research in policy and practice in ODL. ABSA endowed the Chair in Banking and a successful International Conference in Banking Studies was held. Murray & Roberts, Exxaro and Noah Investment Group also endowed new chairs at Unisa. The School of Accounting Studies received accreditation by the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants, as well as a commendation for contributing to the highest number of qualifying candidates for chartered accountants. The School of Engineering also received accreditation from the Engineering Council of South Africa for our engineering programmes. Unisa was also awarded the first Research Centre of Excellence in Relativity, Astrophysics and Cosmology by the STC. And the NRF approved the research niche in Ecotoxicology, Bio-organic and Natural Products Research. This is an interdisciplinary research project which shows collaboration by scientists in Chemistry and in Agriculture.

Following approval of our first multi-year Operational Plan 2008-2010 by Council last weekend, Unisa is set on a major academic development and transformation programme. The report from the Advisor on ODL will be implemented during the course of this planning period in a manner that should radically change the way in which we do our business at Unisa. Council therefore approved a renewed focus on academic identity and focus for this year, wherein our PQM will come under scrutiny, new programmes and qualifications emerge and multi-disciplinary and integrated studies at undergraduate level will grow. We are being challenged to think afresh about the African identity of our institution and the programmes we offer. Much will be done to engage the institution on the meaning of a “Unisa Graduate” and the meaning and significance of “the social mandate of Unisa” that we often speak about.

We are also set to make interventions to address the problem of throughput and drop out rate at Unisa. A Throughput Forum has been established. The Forum is currently modelling the factors that influence student success. A plan to address course and modules with low pass rates will be put in place this year. We are undertaking audits in targeted departments to check the quality and consistency of our examinations, marking system and the integrity of the results. We are also undertaking an enquiry into the

failure rate at Unisa, and we are examining an appropriate assessment system for the institution. We continue to address problems with Registrations and Student Administration at Unisa at various levels and a dedicated learner support programme is underway. We wish to appeal especially to our alumni to make themselves available for this extended and integrated tutorial support programme that was unveiled recently.

The growth in student numbers has put much pressure on learning facilities throughout the university. With support from the Department of Education and from Council, improvements and developments in our student facilities are underway or planned in Pretoria, Polokwane, Durban, Cape Town, as well as mobile libraries and learning centres to penetrate the rural areas where many of our students have no access to learning facilities. Council has confirmed that the Florida campus will be developed into a Science Centre for Unisa for teaching and research. That will address the problems of Unisa students in respect of their own dedicated laboratories, and those of our research staff who will have research facilities, equipment and machinery. Consultations should lead to the finalisation of the plans this year but we do not expect relocation until 2010. To meet the need for a new calibre of academic and administrative staff for Unisa, Council has approved the development of the Irene Unisa Park as a training facility, and also the further development of the ICT Academy established last year. We are indeed proud to announce that our ICT Department received the ISO Certification for excellence in quality and professional service - the first university department to do so.

We are very proud that Unisa hosts the Africa Regional Office of the IFLA in addition to us providing a home to several other African initiatives like the African Futures and the African Association of Political Scientists. Unisa therefore will become a regional centre for the training and development of libraries and librarians, and enhance collaborations among libraries in Africa and abroad. On 20-23 February Unisa will be co-hosting together with the African Council for Distance Education, a consultation on the exploration of a Pan African Consortium of Open Universities and a stakeholder workshop on quality assurance and accreditation for distance education in Africa. This gathering will bring together institutions, academics and policy makers involved in distance education in Africa. It should lead to better collaboration and identification of expertise in ODL and to the establishment of a Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency for ODL in Africa that should give assurance of uniform standards and

maintain scholarship, excellence and prestige of distance education programmes and qualifications in Africa.

There can be no doubt that three years into the merger, the new look Unisa we see today is far more functional and participative than was the case back in 2004. When I think back on the Unisa Inspired week in August last year and I recall the enthusiasm of our staff, the excitement and pride that they evidenced in their work and the commitment they showed to Unisa, I saw the seeds of what I am confident will blossom into a vibrant, proud, professional Unisa community. The meaning of the word “Inspire” bears repeating. It means “To give somebody the desire, confidence or enthusiasm to do something well.” I believe that I speak on behalf of management and Council when I say that the work that we have done these past three years, and the gains and successes that we have achieved, have laid a sound foundation for us to move forward, confident and inspired, into a new focus for Unisa. “Inspired” has become the “punch-line” for the new Unisa. This dynamic endeavour is perhaps best underlined by Unisa’s subscribing to the UN Global Compact, the only university in our country to do so and one of two in Africa. By so doing we have committed ourselves to a core set of values embracing human rights, the environment and anti-corruption.

Considering the clamour and impatience in society about the performance of our education system, Unisa is reviewing the structure and provision of Education Studies in our College of Human Sciences. We are resolved to establish a dedicated School of Education under one of the Deputy Executive Deans, to specialize in in-service teacher education and enhance research. Towards this end a Centre for In-Service Education and Training in Education is being established this year. The Centre will work with the provincial education departments to identify pressing needs and customize training to improve capacity and the quality of educational provision.

We have already begun focusing on a few critical, ‘impactful’ issues that we will use as a basis to turn the institution around. Many of these areas are included in the 2008 -2010 Institutional Operational Plan and will be supported by an evaluation of the promotion criteria and the use of the Performance Management System as drivers of change. Everything in the institution must contribute to the transformation of the academic culture and identity. Conversation circles will be used as a vehicle for interrogating the

direction/social mandate of the institution and we will investigate the appropriate structure for a university in Africa and ascertain the appropriate content in terms of our teaching and research. In support of this aim, we will have to leverage our partnerships and work with partners to grow future leaders in our institution and our country. This will require a process of developing new and innovative thinking, and we will need to identify people who can think differently, and use their skills creatively and innovatively.

We are on our way towards creating a vibrant academic culture and ethos at Unisa, assisted, I submit, by the new Conditions of Service which will help us attract and retain the best academics in our country and Continent, and reward high calibre and performing scholars. We have a plan to attract, mentor and establish new scholars to the academic enterprise and to create at Unisa an environment affirming of critical scholarship and a culture that entices this nation's best minds to academic life as a career of choice. I can foresee a time when higher education institutions and academics in general are no longer viewed with the disdain that I sense currently in the prevailing anti-intellectual atmosphere in our country.

Finally colleagues, I am pleased to announce and welcome some senior management appointments at Unisa: Prof MS Makhanya, previously Executive Dean of the College of Human Sciences, has assumed office as Pro Vice Chancellor of Unisa. Dr NS Mahao, formerly Dean of the Faculty of Law in the Mafikeng Campus of Northwest University becomes the Executive Dean of the College of Law, and Prof Mamokgethi Setati, comes to us from the School of Education at Wits to take up the position of Executive Dean of the College of Science, Engineering and Technology. They have been joined by Prof Dele Braimoh, the recently appointed Unesco Chair in ODL and Director of the Institute for ODL at Unisa. He comes to Unisa from the University of Zululand, and Prof Catherine Odora Hoppers, the Research Professor in Development Education comes to us from Sweden. They all assumed office on 1 January 2008. We trust that they will soon settle in and join us in leading from the front in quest for a new Academic Focus and Identity. **ends**

N Barney Pitsoyana GCOB
PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR
University of South Africa
Pretoria, 30 January 2008.