

**OFFICIAL LAUNCH OF THE UNISA
REGIONAL LEARNING CENTRE
Akaki, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia**

- Your Excellencies. Mr Meles Zenawi Prime Minister of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and Mr Thabo Mbeki President of the Republic of South Africa;
- The honourable Mr Judge President Bernard Ngoepe: Chancellor of the University of South Africa, and Mrs Ngoepe;
- Your Excellencies, members of the diplomatic corps;
- The Chairperson of the Council of the University of South Africa, Dr Matthews Phosa;
- The Hon the Minister of Education in Ethiopia;
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- His Worshipful the Mayor of the City of Addis Ababa;
- My colleagues, Prof Neo Mathabe, Pro Vice Chancellor, Vice Principals and senior executives of Unisa, and Prof Andreas Eshete, President of the University of Addis Ababa and senior executives of the UAA.
- Prof Mogobe Ramose, Director of the Addis Ababa Regional Learning Centre, and staff at the Centre;
- Mr Lucky Phosa and Ms Nqobile Shezi, President and Secretary General respectively of the Students' Representative Council at Unisa
- Honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen:

... the human race will never see the end of trouble until true lovers of wisdom should come to hold political power, or the holders of political power should, by some divine appointment, become true lovers of wisdom.

I am reminded of this dictum by Plato as we gather here today on this historic occasion for our university and our Continent. Today, the Prime Minister of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia will inaugurate and declare open the Learning Centre that marks the presence of the University of South Africa as a service provider of higher

education by distance education in Ethiopia. It is a signal honour that our head of state, President Thabo Mbeki is here to share in this joyous occasion and deliver the keynote address. By some coincidence this event takes place at the beginning of the 8th Summit of the African Union where the theme is on science technology and innovation in Africa. There is a partnership unfolding here that was made possible by the foresight and commitment in particular, of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, and with the support of the Education Ministry in South Africa.

Plato's statement suggests to me that higher education must be at the heart of the development agenda in Africa. The seeking after knowledge, the creation and development of knowledge, the acquisition of skills in a fast developing knowledge society equips men and women to take their rightful place in and contribute meaningfully to the advancement of humankind. This is a privilege that we should all aspire towards, and an honour to achieve in one's lifetime. We would like to see the re-discovery of the historic pact between the academe and society which Paul Tiyambe Zeleza and Adebayo Olukoshi typify as one in which higher education was valued as a public and intellectual good which dovetailed into visions of nation-building and national development.

The University of South Africa is not a private provider that seeks to make profit in this fast developing higher education industry. Unisa is a state institution which, with the support of the Government of the Republic of South Africa, offers higher education qualifications from diplomas and degrees to doctoral levels. The university also has a portfolio of short learning programmes that seek to supplement already acquired learning, customised for particular environments, and which serve as entry points to formal studies as well. As a distance education institution, we are proud to assert that by means of distance education we make it possible for many to realise their dreams; to extend opportunities for higher education to many who might not have benefited from such opportunities as may have been available. Our model of distance education places at the centre of the learning project an active learner, with creative learning materials produced by highly-trained professional staff and academics, aided by technology and state-of-the-art library resources. We trust that through learner support we shall enhance effective and

successful learning, and increase participation in higher education, especially at the level of higher degrees in Ethiopia.

We are not unmindful, however, of the enormous challenges we face in the process. In some respects this is an experiment for Unisa, as we have never operated in this manner outside of the borders of South Africa. The imperatives of distance education mean that we have 30 learning centres in different parts of South Africa, the idea being to cut “distance” from distance education. It also means that materials are designed in South Africa, largely with a South Africa learning environment in mind. Now, our course writers and creative designers must have in mind a learner in a different cultural and social milieu. They have indeed been doing this. They have been training course writers in places as far apart in this Continent as Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Kenya and Sudan. We are also in conversation with scholars in East Africa especially in Ethiopia for the development of electives which have a country-specific focus, and also in regard to acting as co-supervisors with us in post graduate studies.

From a Unisa point of view, this centre is not for budget enhancing purposes. It is intended that in time the Addis Ababa Regional Learning Centre will become a self-sufficient value centre that meets its own costs and generates its own revenue. We are conscious that there may be no tradition of fee paying here. I wish to point out however, that fees enable the Centre to maintain the facilities, upgrade resources and enhance services. The students in Ethiopia will not be paying any more than the South African students do. The South African government will pay into our subsidy for Ethiopian students no less than it does for South African students. The University of South Africa will provide its own share of support for students here to the same extent that we do for South African students. I have undertaken to the Minister of Education that I shall seek the support of the Council of the University of South Africa to provide a grant of R2m financial aid support to needy students here. I therefore urge the embassies from donor countries here in Addis to match or better that grant.

It is our hope that the Addis Ababa Regional Learning Centre will be abuzz with learning activity. I foresee the Centre being like a honey pot with worker bees and the queen bee engaged in intellectual industry. We look forward to the Centre offering various forms of support to the community, and working in partnership with communities to maximise the utilisation of the facilities. Prof Ramose, for example, wishes me to announce the launch of a Lecture Series beginning in April on “Africa: Deliberate Politics and Change”. Drawing from the wealth of talent in a cosmopolitan and Pan-African city as Addis Ababa, the lecture series will also be supplemented by discussion roundtables and seminars on various topics. The idea is that we should all get talking about our Continent and seek common solutions in dialogue with our intellectuals and leaders.

The Centre will, of course, be engaged in the deliberate and mundane matters of academic management, administration and development. We shall be registering students for Unisa courses, there is a library and computer facilities, there will be a counselling and advisory service, a Writing Centre to assist students master academic language and writing, marketing and communications, study and lecture facilities and, one hopes, a vibrant student life. By all these means we trust that the Centre will add value to the efforts of the Ethiopian government to extend educational opportunities, as well as to provide the Pan African and international organisations based in Addis Ababa with high-level skills and academic development.

For all this we thank the Government of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia, especially the Office of the Prime Minister and Office of the Minister of Education. Thank you for presenting us with this challenge that comes but once in one’s lifetime.

Thank you.

N Barney Pitso, GCOB
Principal and Vice Chancellor
University of South Africa

Addis Ababa, 28 January 2007.