



The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor

PRINCIPAL'S STATEMENT TO SENATE

This final meeting of Senate finds me at King's College London taking time for refreshment, study and research. It is a wonderful environment for intellectual engagement and for the pursuit of one's academic interests. As the Desmond Tutu Visiting Professor in Post Conflict Societies I have a programme which entails two major college lectures, the first of which is on 13 December and I have chosen the topic, *On Being a South African Today*. I also attend the weekly senior graduate seminars in Theology and in Law where staff and research students present papers on their current undertakings.

Remarkably the issues that King's is concerned about are no different from those that we at Unisa and South African universities in general, are grappling with. There is a major multi-million pounds redevelopment programme currently underway: there is some preoccupation about the dissembling of the London university system, for which King's and the University College London are founding members; there are challenges of integration following a series of mergers and incorporations in recent years which has grown King's to become one of the largest of the London

colleges at 20 000 students; there are issues about facilities that require constant improvement; and, of course, as one of the Russell Group of universities, research and teaching are uppermost in the maintenance and development of the prestige of King's as a centre of academic excellence. In a recent survey, the Law School at King's achieved the highest student satisfaction rating.

Two developments bear comment. One, that I sit in an office in a section which used to be the Chemistry Department, now closed down because of a lack of student enrolments to keep Chemistry at King's – that, alongside other universities in the UK who have closed down Chemistry Departments. The block where my office is situated is at the site where researchers Wilkins and others discovered DNA, and which produced two Nobel Prize Laureates in Science! Now it is no more, and the chances of other such eminent researchers and Nobel laureates among this and future generations from King's is diminished. Two, I am fascinated by the tremendous integration that has taken place at King's, as in other British universities – students come from all corners of the globe, and so do academic staff (the Principal is an American academic, and not a retired general!); in the corridors a variety of languages are spoken, and King's College London even has a Muslim Prayer Room! It's a long way from the King's of the 1970s when I was a student here. There has also been a great deal of curriculum reform which has served to make King's courses that much more innovative and academically challenging. One would never have thought that King's would import as American an institution as the DMin, for example!

What about Unisa? A recent report by a Pretoria University academic cites the fact that South African scholars and South African universities

do not feature among the world's scholars. The scholarly output from South African universities is overshadowed not just by first world countries, but just as much by developing countries in whose league South Africa counts itself. Among the South African universities though, leading research is confined to some six universities out of the 23 national universities, and in only a few disciplines. A journalist from the *Sunday Times* characteristically asked Unisa to comment on the study and the fact that Unisa did not feature among the nation's research-active universities. Whatever criticism one can level against the study as Prof TS Maluleke has so ably done, questions remain about the academic output of Unisa.

One thing is clear, 2006 has been the most difficult throughout my tenure at Unisa. After all, this has been the year when we have had to deal with systems breakdowns and administrative failures; our reputation being dented as a reputable distance education centre of learning by our apparent inability to meet the needs of our students; we have been in the news from disillusioned students; and questions are being asked by the media about the capacity of Unisa to deliver quality service to its students. There are even reports that the examinations now underway are, to quote one newspaper, "chaos". The labour relations situation at Unisa remains very precarious, and the environment of distrust and hostility towards Management continues to be fuelled by some elements within the university.

But that is only one side of the coin which does not represent the whole picture. The reality is that through much of what postmodernists call the "chaos theory" there is a new birth. Matters have been allowed for far too long, to undermine the capacity of this university to be what it is capable of becoming. Somehow we have to challenge those who define the

identity of this university by the past, and forge a new future for our beloved institution. The identity of the University of South Africa is being shaped as we speak. For many of us (I notice that Nic Coetzee of APSA does not share this!) the *Unisa 2015: A Strategy for Transformation* document serves as a guide, a lodestar. In some ways this will represent the difference between the Unisa of the past and the new Unisa.

The Unisa we must focus upon is one where the Bargaining Forum is at work, shaping a labour relations regime for the university, in mature debate, looking at all the options and hopefully, determining ultimately what is best for the university and for its future - without which there would be no future and no security for any of its staff. I look forward to the day when the Conditions of Employment and Remuneration are finalised so as to secure the future for our staff. Along the way there will indeed be some hard choices, which we must face squarely together.

Some major interventions this year, we hope, will go a long way towards directing the university into a glorious future. Like King's and other British universities, we have to face the prospect of rationalising our academic programmes. This matter however must not be allowed to go on for too long. We need to complete course and programme rationalisation sooner so that we can continue to develop to our strengths. Second, we must tackle decisively the endemic problems of failure rates and drop-out rates. I trust that the task team chaired by the Pro Vice Chancellor will soon come up with proposals to deal with the matter. Work on our research outputs shows great promise, worthy of commendation. At the administrative levels, we trust that the Accenture intervention will lead to fundamental improvements in the way we do our business. Above all, our

Change Management strategies which include the institutional strategy processes driven by Ms Liana Griesel, the institutional culture change model driven by Dr TND Sidzumo-Mazibuko, and the work that Prof Alwyn Louw champions will all lead to a significant difference.

I regret to advise Senate, however, that I am unable to offer reassurance about the progress of our consultations with the Department of Education regarding the Merger Operating Plan which, it will be remembered, was submitted to the Minister on 30 November 2005. The meeting with the Minister held on 3 October was inconclusive. The Minister has some concerns about the MIOP and has asked us to continue consultations with the officials in the Department, advising us that the situation will be reviewed within a month from the date of our meeting. The result is that on various matters that I am aware colleagues are deeply concerned about, there is no movement. That includes the future of the Florida Campus, staff relocations etc. Prof N Baijnath will conduct the consultations on these matters with the Department, and the Pro Vice Chancellor should schedule a meeting with the Minister later. It is difficult to be confident, but one hopes that these matters will be resolved by year end.

I am glad to hear from Dr Sidzumo-Mazibuko who has been monitoring this on my behalf, that the university is very much on target with regard to the objectives we set for ourselves in the three core focus areas: customer orientation and service excellence, an IT-enhanced learning and management environment, and the programme delivery models. I trust that a newsletter setting out these achievements will be available before the end of the year. I wish to thank all the staff at all levels of our organisation who have shown sensitivity and commitment to these ideals

in their daily operations. Worthy of particular mention is the work on the Service Charter, which Dr Sidzumo-Mazibuko with the assistance of colleagues too numerous to mention, has caused an awareness across the institution about this critical part of our focus. I am also glad to report that the University Ombudsman will be in place by the beginning of term.

With such a critical programme ahead of us, I am pleased that this year we have put together a senior executive management team which will drive it to success. I regret to have to report that shortly before my departure I had to relieve Prof GJ deJ Cronje from the post of Vice Principal: Finance and University Estates. I have arranged that he takes retirement a few months before he was officially due to do so. This move became necessary in order to ensure cohesion and singularity of purpose within the senior executive management team. I wish to take this opportunity to pay just tribute to Prof Cronje for the work he has done as portfolio manager for both Finance and University Estates, especially over the last five years, and for many years before then as an academic at this university. Prof Cronje will be remembered as the one who was at the helm to stabilise the university's finances, and especially to introduce a strategic orientation to financial management. He has also brought into being an ambitious programme of development of the facilities and estates of the university, as part of the programme of building a new Unisa.

Likewise, I also pay tribute to Prof CF Swanepoel who also retires at the end of the year. He has worked to ensure that the academic interests of this university are at the centre of institutional life, and that academics deserve to be given space for creativity and innovation. Alas, as he retires, that work still has far to go before it can show fruits. But Prof

Swanepoel has left a legacy which others may follow. The academic re-orientation of this university has to be paramount in all our endeavours.

I am glad to report that since beginning of October we have been joined in the senior executive management team by Prof Barney Erasmus in the portfolio Operations, and in an emergency situation, Prof Kobie Kleynhans in Finance and University Estates. I wish them both everything of the best in their new responsibilities. I also welcome Prof DL Mosoma in his new responsibilities as Vice Principal: Student Affairs and Learner Support. It is good to have in the Office of the Vice Chancellor two additions in Prof DH van Wyk as Assistant Principal, and Prof AH Louw as Advisor on ODL. I wish them all the very best.

Several new appointments have also been made. Dr Buhle Mbambo-Thata has joined us as Executive Director: Library Services. We wish her everything of the best, and thank Dr Judy Henning, the Library Chief Operations Officer for acting as head of the Library as she has since 2004. I expect that the appointments of Prof PH Havenga as Executive Director: Academic, Prof Divya Singh as Deputy Registrar, and Dr DN Abdulai, a Ghanaian national living and working in Malaysia, as Executive Director: Unisa Graduate School of Business Leadership, will make a timely and sound contribution to the institution's management. Another significant appointment is that of Prof Mogube B Ramose, as Director of the Addis Ababa Learning Centre. The Ethiopia regional operations are currently underway, thanks to the work that Prof AH Louw and Mr Nicolas Bwakira, in particular devoted to this initiative. The keys should have been handed over to the Pro Vice Chancellor by now and the official opening is scheduled for January 2007.

I wish to end my note by thanking Prof N Mathabe, Pro Vice Chancellor for acting on my behalf as Acting Vice Chancellor during my absence. I trust though that she has the support of colleagues in the Management team and throughout the institution, to make the burden lighter and more enjoyable. Thank you, Neo.

N Barney Pityana

London, 24 October 2006.