

**ADDRESS ON THE OCCASION OF THE OFFICIAL  
OPENING OF THE ACADEMIC YEAR 2007**

Madame Programme Director;

The Deputy President of the Republic of South Africa: the Hon Ms Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, MP;

Dr Mathews Phosa: Chairperson of Council;

Prof Neo Mathabe: Pro Vice Chancellor, and colleagues, members of the Executive Management team at Unisa;

Executive Deans of Colleges and the Executive Director of the Unisa SBL;

Staff and Students; distinguished guests, honoured visitors, and friends:

It has become a tradition at the University of South Africa, to make the commencement of the academic year an event of excellence, in keeping with the vision and aspirations of the institution. The occasion provides us, the Unisa community, with the opportunity to reflect on what we have achieved; to articulate our goals for the coming year and to reaffirm our commitment to our institution and the constituency it serves.

It is a signal honour for Unisa to have as our guest speaker today, the Deputy President of the Republic of South Africa, the Honourable Ms Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka MP. The Deputy President will be introduced properly in a short while, but I would like to say at this stage Madam Deputy President, that we are very delighted and honoured to have you among us on this occasion. Your presence on this platform on this day is evidence enough that government understands the role of higher education in the realisation of the nation's aspirations. For you, especially your championing of ASGISA/JIPSA gives this audience a first-hand opportunity to understand and commit to the objectives that you have so passionately advanced since you took over this portfolio. We look forward to that with much anticipation.

Ladies and gentlemen, 2007 promises to be a watershed year for this institution. Never before has Unisa been faced with so many challenges on so many fronts; all of them integral to the successful functioning and growth of the new Unisa. And were it not for the sound foundation that has been laid over the past four years of the merging

process, we would not be in a position to even begin to confront the challenges that we face.

I started off my address last year by confirming that 2006 would be the year of consolidation of the merger, and indeed, that to a large extent, has been the case. 2006 was also the year which saw us focus on three core areas over and above our normal operations, which we believed needed immediate, urgent and ongoing attention. These areas are: Service Excellence and Customer Care, ICT Infrastructure and Systems and Product Range and Delivery models. We are now in the process of reviewing our institutional performance in all these areas and assessing what impact if any, such a campaign has made on functioning of our systems and operations.

Without doubt 2006 has been a difficult year for our institution. Foremost amongst our concerns must be the ongoing difficulties being experienced in ensuring a smooth registration process, as well as an acceptable standard of service delivery to our students at various levels, including at assignments and examinations. I will deal with this shortly. Unfortunately, the bad press being given to this matter (which of course is largely justified and of grave concern to us all) has had the consequence of overshadowing, and in a sense, negating the significant amount of really good work done by our colleagues in Unisa during 2006. I would like to turn now to some of that good work.

Unisa has embraced the 2015 Strategic Plan: an agenda for transformation, which has become firmly embedded in our institution's operations. The Strategic Plan is core to all of our planning and it informs every initiative that we undertake. I am aware that a number of management colleagues have made a concerted effort to familiarise their staff with the Strategic Plan and to ensure that they understand the strategic value and importance of the role that they play in the institution. I would encourage all managers to take their staff through a similar process because it is quite evident that when a member of staff understands how his or her actions impact on the overall functioning of the institution, there is a greater sense of belonging and an increased readiness to work as a part of the Unisa team. The Strategic Plan has now been translated into plans for various business units in the institution. This process must continue, and must inform, once again, our annual operational plans for 2007.

During our opening assembly last year I made certain commitments. In line with the three cores areas and in support of the Strategic Plan, I committed management to the drafting of a Unisa Service Charter; the appointment of an independent Ombudsman; vigorous staff training programmes; and the rollout of training in a Performance Management system. I am really pleased to be able to report that we have met all of those commitments. Unisa now has a Charter of Service Excellence which was workshopped and widely consulted about, and which will be disseminated within the next two weeks. I am glad to announce the appointment of Adv SA Mlonzi as the University Ombudsman. Adv Mlonzi is a retired member of the Johannesburg Bar who understands the operations of a university, having himself been a university teacher in Lesotho and Tanzania. Information on the Ombudsman is now available on the website, and so are the formalities for approaching the Office of the Ombudsman.

A large amount of staff training has taken place, initially in so-called “hot-spot” areas, and aimed at improving the skills and competencies of staff to provide efficient services to our staff and clients. This training will be intensified this year and will be supported by a number of change workshops that will be facilitated by Mandate Molefi. We have also been working with Accenture to improve the quality of our services, and, through the “Ops Room” we review daily how are systems are functioning and address any system breakdowns. In this way, we are also training our staff on service efficiencies and quality operations.

I am particularly pleased with the success of the rollout of training in Unisa’s Performance Management System. The training team has done extremely well to cover between 60 – 80% of the institution since August last year, with limited staff and a difficult time schedule. We expect every staff member to have a Performance Agreement by March this year. There have been calls for a Performance Management System for some time and we trust that this new measurement and monitoring tool will contribute to an improved ethos of professional pride and improved service delivery.

On the academic front, there has been good progress with the rearticulation process. A number of courses have been phased out in an ongoing plan to reduce the university’s overloaded courses portfolio more in keeping with best practice in ODL.

We are engaged in consultations with the Department of Education about our proposals for the PQM and we are looking forward to the finalisation of the Policy on Distance Education. The initiative entrusted to Prof AH Louw is designed to align the university's PQM, systems and processes according to best international practice in open learning and distance education. This must be seen as part of the transformation agenda of this university alongside the Change Management processes Dr TND Sidzumo-Mazibuko champions, and the strategy and planning under Prof N Baijnath. These three elements working together mark the best possible hope of truly becoming *the African university in the service of humanity*, as our vision statement so boldly asserts.

There has been a marked increase in research outputs and initiatives. I am becoming persuaded that the University of South Africa, if like is compared with like, has reason to believe that our research output in areas like the Social Sciences and Law far surpasses most South African universities. We propose to build on this strength as the initiatives in the College of Human Sciences indicate. Of special excitement is the work of the Graduate School in the improvement of qualifications in research degrees. In this regard I believe that the new strategy of research chairs is worthy of note. Specialist chairs like the Primedia Chair Genocide and Holocaust Studies in Africa, the Albertina and Walter Sisulu Centre in Heritage Studies, the Chair in African Intellectuals, the upcoming Oliver Tambo/Eskom Chair in International Relations and Diplomacy all add to a vibrancy and excitement we have been experiencing in that College. This year we also hope to see the establishment of the already approved Unesco Chair in ODL.

I am pleased to announce that the College of Human Sciences proposes to raise its profile as a foremost centre for applied social science research in this country with a new research unit on the Family. It is hoped that a research professor will be appointed soon, and in March, Prof Fiona Williams of Leeds University will spend a week at Unisa helping us develop the research profile for the Centre. We believe that this initiative is critical and timely. It should contribute to a better orientation of public policy in a wide range of issues from schooling, children and the environment in which our children are brought up and cared for, juvenile delinquency and the sources of anti-social conduct in society etc. I am pleased at our academics'

enthusiastic response to the exhortation to increased research outputs. It is to be commended.

On 30 August we celebrated the launch of the College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences. We envisage that this new College will provide a much needed service to students in an area that has debilitating skills shortages. This establishment has been warmly welcomed by the agriculture industry including the Minister of Agriculture and Land Affairs who was the guest speaker at the event, and by the emerging black farmers.

As a university we have made our commitment to the challenge of skills acquisition clear. Through HESA we have submitted what this university is capable of achieving. Our portfolio of Short Learning Programmes will go a long way towards training for on-the-job skills and expertise. Already large numbers are enrolled in the many programmes we offer both at the SBL with their customised executive programmes, and at our main campus. It occurs to us, however, that nothing short of a revolution is required to break the back of the critical skills shortage which handicaps the growth and advancement of our economy. For that reason, we are exploring the possibility of a dedicated Summer Term Programme which would cover ten weeks of teaching from November to January. One hopes that such a programme can be done in conjunction with our sister institutions in Pretoria, to offer much needed training and teaching in priority skills as identified by JIPSA, and especially to supplement the qualifications of many of our graduates whose qualifications are not ready for the world of work. We view such an intervention as an emergency programme.

We welcomed our new SRC in 2006. I must say that I am particularly impressed with the calibre of the young men and women who are represented on our SRC. They have evidenced a maturity in their interactions with management, and an understanding, not only of student matters, but of higher education issues in general. They have actively pursued an agenda aimed at improving the service we offer to our students and in so doing they have raised issues that have enabled management to take concrete decisions and actions. I look forward to continued fruitful interaction with Unisa's SRC this year. Congratulations are due especially to the National Executive of the SRC especially the President Mr Lucky Phosa and the Secretary General Ms

Nqobile Shezi, both members of Council. One is also excited to see previous leaders of the SRC emerge as national leaders in their own right. Unisa must be proud of one like Mothupi Modipe, now a member of the National Youth Commission.

We remain committed to improving our facilities and services to our students. In this regard work has now started in the refurbishment and redevelopment of Sunnyside into a Student Hub. The complex should be ready for occupation in October 2007. As our student numbers increase, with more and more younger students studying with Unisa full-time, our facilities and infrastructure can no longer cope to support the levels of demand they were never designed to support. Work has now already begun on the redesign of the entrance and access to Unisa, together with the new Service Centre Complex coming up in Preller Street. This development should be ready by the end of 2008.

I am pleased to report that through a partnership with Sun International and the Wild Coast Community Trust in Mbizana we shall open officially the Learning Centre in Mbizana, the birthplace of the late OR Tambo. We believe that this initiative will open up learning opportunities for the communities of southern KZN and Eastern Cape that have been neglected for far too long. We thank Sun International for the facilities that have been provided for our students in that region. Just last weekend, Unisa opened its first regional learning centre outside of our borders, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Our delegation was so well received, and the sense of excitement among the Ethiopians was tangible. Again this initiative was made possible by the foresight of the Prime Minister of Ethiopia who invited Unisa to offer distance education in Ethiopia. We were pleased that President Thabo Mbeki was able to take time off from the AU Meetings to participate in the event, and so were the Chancellor of the university, Judge President BM Ngoepe, the Chairperson of Council, Dr NM Phosa, members of Council especially the leadership of the SRC, Mr LM Phosa and Ms N Shezi and members of management.

Steps are being taken to address the challenge of throughput and drop-out at Unisa. Plans are underway to introduce a system of tutors and to enhance learner support. Academics are being sensitised to various processes of assessment; we are introducing technology support to promote an exciting learning environment for our

students. However much we do though, there is not much that can be done if students themselves are not motivated enough to learn to success. I sometimes fear that so many of our younger generations no longer values the moral high ground that brought our nation to where it is today, and lacks the drive towards aspiration and achievement.

Reflecting on similar concerns in England recently, *The Guardian* (2 January 2007) columnist Max Hastings attributes this to a combination of factors: lack of public trust in politicians and anyone who exercises authority including professionals like doctors, nurses, teachers, lawyers – even judges and clergymen. What has come up in return is excessive consumerism, an acquisitive society where one is inclined to receive without working for it or deserving it. He notes that the English culture of deference to another has gone. No one respects the other, especially someone who occupies a higher office, there is no respect for the elders – one never doffs one’s hat, for example. Instead there is a propensity to blame. Nothing happens because of our own actions, someone else must forever take responsibility. This is what Hastings calls the “blame culture.” This is equally true of our society. Somehow, we are breeding a culture of mediocrity, where excellence and aspiration are no longer “cool” or fashionable; where too many of our young people love the high life but do not wish to work for it- and where there is lack of aspiration.

I wish to point our young people to the example set by our politicians. It is amazing that so many of our senior politicians and cabinet ministers are studying and continuously improving their qualifications. We have had reports of Minister Sidney Mufamadi but one can also mention other ministers like Thoko Didiza, and Geraldine Fraser-Moloketi who recently graduated at universities in this city, the Minister of Trade and Industry and Deputy Minister of Finance Jabu Moloketi are actively studying, and of course so is our Deputy President working on her doctoral degree. With such wonderful examples why would our young people lack role models? We need to restore a desire for aspiration and achievement in our students if we will ever improve the throughput rate and cut back on drop-out from tertiary institutions.

The greatest challenge we face in 2007, though, is to address the unfinished business. Top of the list has to be the labour relations environment at Unisa. I am glad to report

that the UBF has been hard at work throughout 2006. I am advised that the critical issues of Terms and Conditions of employment are nearing resolution. We are currently engaged in the placement of staff at levels below Director, and we are continuing with the programme of outsourcing units that have been a drain on the resources of the university. At the same time as we note such promise, we continue to be locked in litigation with some of the unions especially over the liquidation of the PRMA, and the recognition agreement with APSA. I have to make it very clear that the university has no issue with staff seeking to be represented by APSA. Our only issue is that there must be recognition that this being the new Unisa, new conditions of employment, and different relationships and arrangements with the unions are necessary. We cannot compromise on that, for to do so we shall only be short-changing the future of this institution, and migrating bad practices of the past into the future.

But, ladies and gentlemen, probably the most critical focus for our institution for 2007 is our preparations for the Quality Audit by the HEQC in May of 2008. Preparations began last year with the drafting of a Quality Policy, a Quality Plan and the establishment of Quality committees in all of the functional areas. It was the view of Management that a trial audit should be undertaken in 2007 to test the robustness of our system and to identify and address any shortcomings that might come to the fore. Last year, Unisa entered into a partnership with the Commonwealth of Learning. The main thrust of the partnership was collaboration on ODL interventions on the Continent, but a further benefit was the agreement that COL would undertake the trial audit with the assistance of a panel of experts, in June of this year. The Quality Audit is of crucial significance for our institution. It is our opportunity to show evidence to the State and the academic community, that Unisa is a quality institution. I urge all staff to commit themselves to the success of these initiatives.

Our enrolments continue to rise, and this only serves to increase the pressure on those who are already overburdened. Most recent registration figures indicate that for the registration period to 23 January this year, there has been a 56% growth in registrations compared to the same period last year. Registration is set to close on 8 February. This presents this university with a dilemma. We are aware that enrolment capping will mean that many of the students enrolled at this university will not be

receiving a grant from the Department of Education. And yet our burgeoning enrolments suggest a need out there for the services of this university. We are working on this matter. With the approval of Council we may need to introduce an enrolment management plan next year, prior registrations, and limiting walk-in registrations.

We are mindful of the pressure on staff and facilities that this growth in enrolments poses. We urge all staff to make every effort to treat our students with courtesy and dignity and to process registrations with as little inconvenience as possible. I would further request that our academics make a particular effort to be available to those students who may need counselling and authorisations which our admin staff cannot provide. An improved attitude and a team effort will make a compelling difference to the difficulties we are currently experiencing. A word of appreciation, however, is warranted. To the staff at registration points at our main campus in Muckleneuk and in our regional centres who have been working long hours to process applications, to the staff at the Call Centre and those who have been handling enquiries and complaints, I believe that Unisa is capable of showing some professional expertise in the handling of our clients. Thank you.

Ladies and gentlemen I end my address by welcoming all of the newly appointed staff many of whom assume duty at this time. May I now formally welcome Prof Rita Mare who assumes duty as Vice Principal: Academic and Research, Prof Peter Havenga, the Executive Director: Academic Planning, and Prof Divya Singh, Deputy Registrar. All of these are, of course, internal appointments. We welcome these colleagues to their new duties in the institution. I especially wish to announce, with excitement and gratitude that after a long wait, that the Executive Director of the SBL assumes office today. Dr David Abdulai, a native of Ghana, comes to us from Malaysia where he has been teaching economics and served as dean of Economics and Management Sciences in one of the universities there. Dr Abdulai comes to this university with our goodwill and best wishes. I wish to thank Prof Helicy Ngambi who has dutifully served as the interim executive Director of the SBL for almost two years while the search was underway. In March Prof Ngambi will return to her substantive position as Deputy Executive Dean in the College of Economics and Management Sciences.

I had hoped to announce the appointments of the Executive Deans of the Colleges of Science, Engineering and Technology, and of Law. Unfortunately, the appointments are now being processed and an announcement will be made in due course. I can assure colleagues in the two colleges, though, that two excellent appointments are in the offing.

We also welcome all Unisa students; those who are continuing their studies and those who have enrolled for the first time. I trust that our commitment to service excellence will see Unisa becoming the kind of institution that inspires pride and confidence; in our staff and students.

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

Pretoria, 1 February 2007.