

# *UNISA's Unique Academic Odyssey*

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*UNISA – University of South Africa*

*After conferment of the degree of  
Doctor of Literature & Philosophy (honoris causa)*

*Pretoria, 5 May 2010*

*Remarks by  
Sir John Daniel*

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Graduands; Academic Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I express my deep thanks to the University of South Africa for conferring on me this singular honour and to Professor Moeketsi for her generous citation. I am thrilled to be here.

First, I congratulate the graduates for the awards that they have earned through hard work and diligence. My degree is honorary, but yours has been earned through many months of study and the passing of examinations. Moreover, you have obtained your new qualifications in the most difficult way possible – by distance learning.

You have had to develop the qualities of self motivation and perseverance necessary to succeed in a study system that does not spoon-feed you with regular lectures. But these qualities of self-organisation and tenacity will serve you well. Employers are beginning to place special value on graduates of distance teaching universities like UNISA because of the personal attributes they have developed alongside the knowledge and skills that they have learned.

I also congratulate the parents and friends of the graduates. Having a distance learner at home or in the workplace makes demands on partners, spouses, children and colleagues. All have also had to make adjustments and sacrifices in order that each of today's graduates could succeed. Thank you for your patience, understanding and support.

It is a pleasure to commend the staff of UNISA on their good work. My organisation, the Commonwealth of Learning, has benefitted greatly from the impressive skills of two of your former colleagues: Wayne Mackintosh and Paul West.

UNISA has a unique history.

In 1871 the government of Cape Town applied for permission to hold University of London Exams. For more than 150 years the University of London External System has been a flagship for all forms of

distance education. Its most distinguished student was your own Nelson Mandela, one of five students in London's programme who went on to win Nobel Prizes. He is also UNISA's most famous graduate.

London was a long way away in the 1870s, and the local tutors wanted to make the curriculum and exams more relevant to South Africa. So in 1873 the Cape Parliament created the University of the Cape of Good Hope – what an evocative name! It received a Royal Charter from Queen Victoria in 1877, giving its degrees universal recognition.

For the first years of its existence, it operated like the External Studies System of the University of London, as a federal body that offered examinations but not tuition. I understand that UNISA's Department of Music still continues this function.

In 1916 the University of the Cape of Good Hope was renamed the University of South Africa and two years later the headquarters moved here to Pretoria. Just like the University of London, UNISA had a number of university colleges within a federal structure; and, as at the University of London, these colleges became, one by one, fully autonomous universities. They bear the names: Witwatersrand, Natal, Rhodes, Bloemfontein, Potchefstroom, Zululand and Pretoria. UNISA was the nursery of South Africa's higher education system.

In the 1940's, as its colleges became fully-fledged universities, UNISA entered another phase. It was clear that students trying to study on their own for examinations needed tuition, so UNISA began teaching them by correspondence. With the establishment of the Division of External Studies in 1946, South Africa's first university also became the pioneer of higher distance education in the western world, a quarter of a century before the UK Open University admitted its first students. Since then UNISA has been a metaphor for the turbulent, but truly inspiring evolution of South Africa itself.

I first came into contact with UNISA at a conference of the International Council for Correspondence Education in the UK in 1975. As UNISA staff made a presentation, delegates from the SACHED Trust distributed pamphlets protesting apartheid education policies.

Ben Turok and I presented a joint paper on *Teaching by Telephone* and, in my conversations with Ben, I learned how UNISA's role was contested, despite its multiracial student body, by those who had a vision of a new South Africa based on democracy and equality.

Two decades later, when that new South Africa began to emerge, I knew some of the protagonists, both foreign and South African, on each side of the vigorous debate about UNISA's role in the new polity. Some urged closing UNISA because it had reinforced the apartheid system. I sided with those who believed that a better strategy was to harness UNISA's remarkable administrative systems and logistics to the goals of the new nation.

That was what happened and you know better than I that the transition was not plain sailing. No university in the world has faced a more challenging trajectory than UNISA in the last two decades. I refer not only to the daunting task of transforming the philosophy, pedagogy, structures and people of a massive institution while continuing to teach students effectively. While engaged in that transition you faced the further challenge of bringing together UNISA, Technikon SA and Vista University into one of the world's largest mega-universities.

Hundreds of people, many of you here today were among the dedicated artisans of those wrenching changes, but permit me to name three of them whom I count as special friends.

I met Professor Antony Melck on my first visit to South Africa. Ever since then I have admired his roles in steering UNISA through difficult moments and in bringing his clear economic thinking to bear on the financial structures of a whole new higher education system. Antony, you have made a lasting contribution!

The name Jenny Glennie is synonymous with distance learning in South Africa. She was a UNISA tutor in the 1970s and has been involved in its governance for over a decade. Now the Commonwealth of Learning is benefiting from her skills as she represents South Africa on our Board and chairs our Audit Committee. Jenny we greatly appreciate your commitment and wisdom.

Professor Barney Pityana has, in his visionary, principled and humane manner, been the reassuring face of UNISA to the world. It is my privilege to pay tribute to him, on behalf of the international distance education community, for his outstanding leadership of the transformation of UNISA and the expansion of distance learning across Africa. You have been extraordinarily fortunate to have such a remarkable man at the helm as you negotiated these troubled seas. I was pleased to learn that Professor Pityana has enrolled as a student at UNISA while serving as Vice-Chancellor. I also became a student when I was VC of the UK Open University. Barney, South Africa is indebted to you.

Let me end on a lighter note. I am delighted, through this honorary degree, to have this formal link with UNISA because some people have long associated me with you. It all started in 2005, when you hosted the inaugural conference of the African Council for Distance Education and Professor Pityana became its first president. I gave the closing plenary address with the title: *'Open and Distance Learning by Africans and for Africans'*.

The satchel that UNISA gave to the delegates at that event was by far the best of the many conference bags I have received and it has served as my briefcase ever since. It is perfectly designed, with just the compartments required, and it is extremely sturdy – a credit to South African manufacturing. The bag goes with me everywhere and has circled the globe many times. Its eye-catching Zulu beadwork and the name UNISA lead people to strike up conversations with me in buses and airports. I have tried to be a worthy advocate for UNISA on such occasions.

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor: I doubt that you have made me an honorary doctor simply for being a globe-trotting advertisement for UNISA. However, my signature briefcase is just one more reason why I am thrilled to receive this award.

Long live UNISA.

Thank you so very much.