

**STATEMENT OF THE UNISA CHANCELLOR, THABO MBEKI, AT THE
CELEBRATION OF THE 145th ANNIVERSARY OF UNISA: UNISA
PRETORIA/TSHWANE CAMPUS, 4 JULY 2018.**

Programme Director, Dr Somadoda Fikeni,
Honourable Minister Naledi Pandor,
Chairperson of UNISA Council, Mr Sakhi Simelane,
Principal and Vice-chancellor, Prof Mandla Makhanya,
Madame President of the National SRC,
President of the Convocation,
UNISA Council, management, staff, workers and students,
Fellow celebrants:

I am happy to join our colleagues who have spoken before me to convey my own brief message of congratulations to UNISA as we celebrate its 145th anniversary.

Anybody interested in the development of the system of higher education in our country since the last quarter of the 19th century would be well advised to study the story of this University.

As has been said, for many decades this University in its earlier years as the University of the Cape of Good Hope was the only institution in our country that conducted examinations leading to the award of university degrees.

And indeed, it later also served as what was called a federal university. This federal university did not provide any tuition. Tuition was provided by colleges affiliated to the University of the Cape of Good Hope, which became the University of South Africa (UNISA) in 1918.

So central was the role of this University in the evolution of the system of higher education in our country, since 1873, that it even awarded the matriculation certificates that enabled students to enter university.

Accordingly, a study of the story of UNISA would, among others, open a window to the understanding of the beginning of access to higher education for the indigenous African majority in our country, and the attitude of the University to this very matter.

For instance, in his book, *Spes in arduis: a history of the University of South Africa*, Maurice Boucher says that in 1880, Simon Peter Sihlali, the later

congregational religious Minister, became the first African matriculant in the country.

He was followed by John Tengo Jabavu who matriculated at Lovedale in 1883 and later founded and edited the newspaper, *Imvo zabaNtsundu*. Boucher says that African girls began to matriculate towards the end of the 19th century.

One of the major problems at the time was that the colleges, which supplied the students who were examined and awarded degrees by the University of the Cape of Good Hope, admitted very few Africans. This is what drove Africans such as Charlotte Maxeke, John Dube, Pixley Seme, and others, to seek university education abroad, mainly in the USA and the UK.

As we all know, the South African Native College, the later Fort Hare University College, was established in 1916.

Given the role UNISA, formerly the University of the Cape of Good Hope, would continue to play to encourage the development of higher education, we would expect that it would welcome the formation of the Native College.

When it became operational in 1918, legally authorised to serve as a federal institution, UNISA had six constituent colleges. Fort Hare, or the Native College, was not one of them.

Boucher explains that the reason for this was that if Fort Hare became one of the constituent colleges of UNISA, "the race problem would certainly arise over the admission of its representatives on Senate and Council".

Finally, the 'problem' of the Native College was 'resolved' by having it affiliate with Rhodes University, with the report which suggested this saying "no hostility on racial grounds" existed at Rhodes.

In his *Critique of the Curriculum at the University College of Fort Hare in its Pioneer Years*, David Burchell says:

The originator of the scheme for an African university college, E.B. Sargent, educational adviser to Lord Milner, envisaged the South African Native College...(as) providing a rather narrowly utilitarian education which would include industrial training as a compulsory component. His overall aim was to create a moderate African elite who would act as the junior partners of colonialism and who would largely fill subordinate positions in a class and race stratified society.

UNISA would surely have taken it as one of its central tasks to defeat this purpose if it had the Native College as one of its constituent institutions.

The fact that the vision which inspires UNISA today is – *Towards the African*

University: shaping futures in the service of humanity – shows how far the original 1873 University of the Cape of Good Hope, and the successor 1918 federal University, have travelled.

All of us who constitute today's UNISA community share a common obligation to ensure that the University does indeed live up to the vision I have just mentioned.

As long ago as July 1972, the Association of African Universities held a workshop in Accra, Ghana to discuss the topic – 'Creating the African University: Emerging Issues in the 1970s'.

Reporting about the outcome of this workshop, the late Professor Tijani M. Yesufu from Nigeria wrote in a book published in 1973:

The African university must in the 1970s not only wear a different cloak, but must also be differently motivated. It must be made of a different and distinctive substance from the traditions of Western universities, and must evolve a different attitude and a different approach to its task. The truly African university must be one that draws its inspiration from its environment, not a transplanted tree, but growing from a seed that is planted and nurtured in the African soil.

It is in the context of the imagined future that all of us will work to live up to the vision of reconstructing UNISA as practically the African University, that I am honoured to salute all those, staff, students, management and workers of UNISA who will be the architects of this outcome.

The noble result born of the selfless efforts of all these will serve as justification for the message we convey today, namely to congratulate UNISA on its 145th anniversary!

Thank you.