

Last but Not Least



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Prof. Dr. Puleng LenkaBula



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Prof. Dr. Ada Pellert

Prof. Dr. Puleng LenkaBula is a Professor of Ethics and Systematics and the Vice Chancellor and Principal of the University of South Africa. Since her Appointment as the Vice Chancellor, UNISA's Matrices of success in Research and Innovation, Governance, Financial and Resource Sustainability, Africanisation and Internationalisation have improved. She is a visionary and strategic leader.

Prof. Dr. Ada Pellert has been Rector of the University of Klagenfurt, Austria, since December 2024. Before this, she headed the FernUniversität in Hagen, Germany, for almost nine years. In addition to her work as a university leader at various universities in German-speaking countries, the economist also worked as a professor of organisational development.

What is your understanding of a future-oriented leadership?

Ada Pellert: Leaders have to translate the challenges of the world into challenges the organisation can cope with. They need to help the institution live with uncertainty without fear. The basis of a joint vision is an inspiring organisational culture that enables people to recognise the purpose of their contributions to the institution.

Puleng LenkaBula: It is about recognising that geopolitical, socio-economic, and environmental challenges are inseparable from the life of a university and the societies it serves. It is also centering the formation of students as global citizens who will contribute to society through knowledge and research. Universities must therefore lead through collaboration, mobilising research, engaged scholarship, and innovation to support ethical, evidence-based and progressive public policies. This requires co-creation with government, industry, civil society, and communities, grounded in mutual respect and shared purpose. Future-oriented leadership also creates space for inter-generational dialogue and diverse voices, affirming that inclusion strengthens knowledge production. In doing so, the university acts as a trusted public institution, advancing the common good and sustainable development for all.

Three remarkable things about distance universities.

Puleng LenkaBula: Distance universities deliberately close access and success gaps through the optimisation of multimodality, research-led scholarship of teaching and engagement, ensuring that no individual with the requisite intellectual capabilities and committed to the pursuit of university education is left behind in the knowledge economy. CODEL or ODeL Universities promote accessibility and inclusion by extending higher education to working professionals, mobile occupations, rural communities, and individuals excluded by geography, disability, or socio-economic barriers. Through flexible learning pathways, students can study at their own pace while institutions serve large, diverse cohorts beyond traditional campus constraints. In the era of artificial intelligence, open educational resources, and digital platforms, these universities cultivate digital literacy, self-regulation, and adaptability, thus producing graduates who are resilient, employable, and responsive to evolving societal and labour-market needs.

Ada Pellert: a) Their contribution to equality, by offering higher education opportunities to new groups of people. b) They force us to constantly reflect on which educational content fits best in which educational format, thereby contributing to educational quality. c) They help adult learners reinvent themselves through education at various stages of their lives.

What is the biggest challenge for leading distance universities in these times?

Ada Pellert: There is a risk that they may lose their comparative advantage, which means they must pay particular attention to didactic innovation within their study models.

Puleng LenkaBula: The digital divide has the potential to undermine both the scale and quality of care a university can provide. While our mandate is to serve large and diverse student populations through meaningful learning, strong academic standards, and responsive support systems, funding constraints, socio-economic inequalities, rapid digital transformation, uneven access to technology, and limited resourcing risk deepening disparities. Addressing these realities requires leadership grounded in strategic foresight and values-driven purpose. By strengthening academic integrity, investing in staff wellbeing, enhancing student support, and mobilising adequate financial and technological resources, we can mitigate attrition and uphold equity, quality, and institutional resilience in a rapidly evolving environment.

How do you prepare your university for the future?

Provide us with one action you take.

Puleng LenkaBula: I have instituted ten Catalytic Niche Areas (CNAs) to spawn research-intensive strategies for our university. These research and knowledge niche areas are relevant for South Africa, Africa and progressive development for economic

and development transformations. These CNAs are strategically aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, national and continental development frameworks, and global science and innovation agendas. Anchored in an adaptive, student-centred institutional vision, they ensure access to relevant, high-quality academic programmes while strengthening research, innovation, and engaged scholarship.

Ada Pellert: I prepare my university for the future by strengthening collaboration competence, as the future will belong to intelligent forms of cooperation.