

MESSAGE OF CONGRATULATION BY THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY, DR PHIL MJWARA, AT THE INAUGURATION OF THE VICE-CHANCELLOR AND PRINCIPAL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA, PROF. TAWANA KUPE, ON 23 MARCH 2019

Prof. Wiseman Nkuhlu, Chancellor of the University;
Ms Ntombifuthi Mtoba (Chairperson of the Council;
Academics;
Government leaders;
Business leaders;
Distinguished guests;
Ladies and gentlemen:

Opening remarks

It is my honour and privilege to be speaking to you today. Let me start by conveying the apologies of the Minister of Science and Technology, Ms Mmamoloko Kubayi-Ngubane, who was obliged to change her schedule, but would have liked to be here.

We are all glad to see the appointment of a Vice Chancellor of the calibre of Prof. Kupe to this esteemed university.

The role of UP in supporting government's development agenda

The Department of Science and Technology regards the University of Pretoria as a world-class academic institution that is actively supporting government in achieving its objectives. Through the University's Strategic Plan 2025, and in line with government's National Development Plan, the University of Pretoria is pursuing research that helps us to find solutions to our country's complex socio-economic challenges.

Just one example of this university's research excellence is its work in forestry. UP hosts the Centre of Excellence in Tree Health Biotechnology under the auspices of the Forestry and Agricultural Biotechnology Institute and, working with the Agricultural

Research Council and other universities, carries out world-leading research that contributes directly to development needs and the global competitiveness of the forestry industry in South Africa.

The Forest Molecular Genetics Programme is a joint venture with South African forestry industry partners and stakeholders, aimed at developing biotechnology applications for tree improvement on the genetic basis of tree growth, wood formation, defence against pests and pathogens, drought resistance and the reduction of the harvesting time, to enhance industry competitiveness.

The University's centres and programmes – too many to list here – support many government initiatives to make people's lives better, including efforts to embrace innovation and enhance the competitiveness and modernisation of key sectors of the economy.

One important collaboration – again, just an example – between the University of Pretoria and my department is UP's co-hosting of the Centre of Excellence in Food Security with the University of the Western Cape.

The Centre of Excellence in Food Security is virtual organisation that brings together the expertise of numerous South African and international institutions and over 100 researchers across various disciplines to conduct research, build capacity and disseminate findings that will promote a sustainable food system in South Africa. The research is concerned with the scale, nature, causes and consequences of food insecurity in South Africa and elsewhere on the African continent.

We also acknowledge the role of the University in the training of postgraduate students. Over a 12-year period (2002 to 2014), UP has consistently had the highest number of students enrolled for master's degrees in engineering – 19% of all master's engineering degrees. The skills they are building are vital for our economy.

The need to produce socially relevant research

The world is changing more and more rapidly, and in spite of all the progress made by humankind, we require ever newer approaches to solving problems. The changes are driven by socio-economic and geopolitical factors such as demographic shifts, climate change, urbanisation, rising inequality and youth unemployment, the rise of China and India as economic powers, and scientific and technological advances. Perhaps the most challenging of these is the Fourth Industrial Revolution in which we find ourselves, where the lines between the physical and digital spheres have become blurred.

As a response to this rapidly changing world, Cabinet recently approved our new White Paper on Science, Technology and Innovation. This White Paper seeks to use STI to accelerate inclusive economic growth, make the economy more competitive, and improve people's daily lives. At a more practical level, it aims to help South Africa benefit from global developments such as rapid technological advancement and geopolitical and demographic shifts, as well as respond to the threats associated with some of these global trends. In a nutshell, the White Paper seeks to steer us towards sustainable growth and development in a changing world.

How should universities help our country and continent prepare for this new world?

We see the University of Pretoria as an important part of realising the goals of the White Paper, through research and human capital development.

Given its record of producing highly skilled graduates and postgraduates, we see UP helping us respond to nation-wide challenges like as the low numbers of university staff in South Africa that have PhDs, limited supervisory capacity, a lack of critical mass in some engineering fields, and low participation rates of women in postgraduate engineering studies.

In a world where ideas and technologies evolve rapidly and the challenges we face are multifaceted and transnational, Africa needs a new generation of original thinkers

and innovators, with international perspectives, yet with a scholarly vision and voice that is rooted in Africa.

One of the key objectives of our new White Paper is an integrated African science, technology and innovation agenda. We see the University of Pretoria's new Future Africa campus, which will be launched next week, as a critical enabler that will create a conducive environment for Africa's leading scientists and scholars, including those in the diaspora, to come together and produce transdisciplinary research to address the grand challenges that face Africa and the world.

Critically, the campus will assist with fostering Pan-African networks, friendships and partnerships. Under Prof. Kupe's leadership I have no doubt the Future Africa Campus will become a beacon of scientific excellence on our continent and part of the vanguard of Africa's achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, producing African solutions for African and global challenges.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, as stated earlier, if we as a country and continent are to respond creatively and effectively to a rapidly changing world, we will need partners like the University of Pretoria to continue providing leadership by producing socially relevant research, on a sustainable basis.

We have no doubt that under its new vice chancellor and principal, the University of Pretoria will continue to produce relevant, world-class and innovative research.

On behalf of the Minister of Science and Technology, I would like to convey our hearty congratulations to Prof. Tawana Kupe. We wish you well in your new role and look forward to strengthening our relationship with UP.

Thank you for your attention.