



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA  
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## **INSTALLATION OF VICE-CHANCELLOR AND PRINCIPAL**

### **SPEECH – PROF CHERYL DE LA REY – 16 APRIL 2010**

#### **PREFACE**

I am sincerely honoured by the responsibility that has been bestowed upon me. I wish to thank the Council and the University Community for the trust and confidence that they have placed in me.

Being appointed in the year after the University's Centenary celebrations is a special honour as I now have the unique opportunity to lead the University of Pretoria at the very beginning of its second centenary.

Over the past 100 years the University has developed from humble beginnings in 1908 to being one of the leading universities in South Africa.

At the beginning of this year, 2010, I had the privilege of welcoming about 8 500 first-year students, each one having excelled at school. The University of Pretoria has become the largest residential university in South Africa. We now have just over 60 000 registered students – about 42 000 full-time contact students and another 20 000 registered for distance education programmes.

We also have a strong record of research as measured by the number of publications, NRF ratings and world-wide citations. In terms of international status, the University of Pretoria is one of a few African and South African universities that are listed in various international rankings.

In 2008 the Higher Education Quality Committee noted that the University of Pretoria is a well-managed, well-functioning institution that can be justifiably proud of the quality of its graduates and the recognition earned through its research.

I wish to pay tribute to my predecessors and to former Council members for their role in making this University what it is today. Furthermore, the loyalty and commitment of the Staff, and the will to embrace change has given the University a strong platform on which to build the future.

## **CHANGING CONTEXT**

Resilience and adaptability are features that enable universities to survive through historical changes – through times of conflict and depression and times of peace and prosperity. Other than religious institutions, universities constitute one of the oldest surviving types of social institutions in the world today. What distinguishes those that not only survive, but also thrive and succeed, is the ability to focus firmly on academic excellence while being adaptable and responsive to changing social and economic circumstances.

The international and national context of higher education in 2010 is completely different to the first decade of the twentieth century when the University of Pretoria was established.

Knowledge and innovation have become drivers of economic growth and national competitiveness. Internationally, there has been a significant increase in the number of universities and with this there has been a dramatic increase in the proportion of people enrolled in higher education. By the year 2000, 100 million students were enrolled in higher education globally whereas at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was only 500 000.

The intensity of the competition for educated and skilled people has led to high mobility of people across the globe and in fundamental changes in how graduates view their career prospects in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Technological advances have changed the nature of academic work – both teaching and learning and research. Students and staff now have access almost on a 24/7 basis to vast search engines and digital libraries. Course material and lecture notes can be downloaded from universities across the world and researchers have access to huge computer processing capacities that allow them to work on questions that were previously unimaginable.

South Africa's landmark social-political changes since the first democratic elections in 1994 have meant that we experienced an additional level of change. While reconstructing our society into a democracy, we have had to simultaneously come to terms with being part of a rapidly changing global knowledge economy. In the recent past we have had first-hand experience of how financial decisions made elsewhere in the world can drastically affect our own economic position.

The South Africa of 2010 is a country of sharp and stark contrasts - wealth and poverty; first class, cutting-edge infrastructure alongside squatter camps; and violent crime, yet as a population we display high

religiosity. Furthermore, recent events have brought to our attention the depth of social division and fragmentation still prevalent in our society.

## **UP STRATEGY**

What do these trends mean for an African and South African university like the University of Pretoria?

Firstly, it means that we must adopt a clear understanding of our role as a public university in a developing democracy. Producing graduates to fuel economic growth is, of course, our core contribution to national development. While the production of high quality skills is essential for economic growth, recent experience has shown us that the well-being of a society depends on more than the gross domestic product, inflation rate and material efficiency.

In addition to sound economic policies, which are necessary, a strong, resilient and peaceful democracy depends on a shared sense of civic responsibility, social interconnectedness and social justice. It is our firm intention to embrace a social, developmental perspective to our human capital development role so that we produce graduates who are valued not only for their academic and technical skills but also for their role in bringing about a more harmonious and equitable society.

Secondly, it means that in executing our role as a public university at the local, national level, we must fully recognise that we operate in an interdependent, highly competitive global world. Therefore, it is not a matter of local versus global. Instead, our institutional strategy, whilst being firmly grounded in our commitment to making a local impact, must

explicitly enhance our positioning within a highly competitive international world of higher education.

Some may ask: Can a developing country like South Africa afford to fund internationally renowned universities? After all, we have so many social needs such as housing and basic services.

My answer is that we cannot afford not to!

High quality, internationally competitive universities are essential in driving the social and economic development of developing countries.

We can see from the rest of the world that such institutions are necessary. Brazil, a country that shares many social and economic issues with South Africa is a good example. Brazil has been particularly successful in showing how in developing countries research-intensive universities are engines for development in a knowledge, technology and service-oriented global economy. Today Brazil is identified as a global player in tropical medicine and parasitology, for example. Through focusing on a problem of national concern, namely, health, Brazil has distinguished itself on the global stage of research and innovation.

But, how does a University contribute to national development and at the same time attain greater international stature?

The answer is that there is no blueprint. However, from the experiences of other countries, and particularly middle-income and developing countries, we know what the core ingredients are.

What is absolutely essential is the pursuit of quality at every level, a culture of inquiry, relevance and sustainability.

## **Quality of the Student Experience**

The quality of the student experience at the University of Pretoria will be prioritised in our planning this year. It is my view that through teaching we have the privilege and responsibility of transforming the lives of a generation of students and developing leaders for the future. A university education itself, can be a transformative experience.

Re-examining the 'what and how' of our teaching and learning is part of our ongoing responsibility.

While the quality of teaching and learning will be the focal point of our efforts, our approach will be a holistic one. A university education is much broader than what happens in the lecture halls and laboratories; it includes the total student experience on campus – the social, cultural and sporting activities too.

Research has shown that the extent to which students feel welcome, have a sense of shared community with peers and high quality interactions with staff have a bearing on the likelihood of retention and success. By focussing on the quality of the total student experience, we will enhance our efforts to improve student success and ensure that our graduates are well-prepared for the rapidly changing world of work and economic enterprise.

We have already begun a curriculum mapping project that will give us a basis for assessing whether our current curriculum is sufficiently geared for the changing world that our graduates will enter. Change and variety is a reality of the job market of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Today's graduate must be prepared and equipped to embrace a world of rapid change. Gone is the time when any graduate may expect a future with a steady-state linear career whereby the choice you make upon graduation is the path that you will follow for the rest of your working life. Rather the careers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are more likely to be transitory meaning that over a lifetime of work, the present-day graduate is highly likely to move through a series of occupations and these are unlikely to follow a linear, hierarchical pattern.

### **Diversity and Transformation**

Today's graduates also need to be able to operate in diverse, multicultural and multilingual teams. The social dynamics of the student experience are a critical component in ensuring that graduates are highly employable and that they are well-positioned to succeed in realising their dreams and aspirations.

In this regard, the University's current language policy is a strength. At Tuks (as we are often known) we teach and conduct research in Afrikaans and English. English enables us to be inclusive and to assert ourselves internationally. Afrikaans is a core part of our institutional history. Sepedi as a language of communication is a more recent development at the University. During my term, within our available resources, the University shall continue to promote multilingualism.

However, with respect to diversity and transformation, we need to do much more.

The time has come for us to pay attention to the social dynamics of our academic activities, and to explicitly recognise the University as a social space where individuals from diverse backgrounds come together to work and to learn.

Heterogeneity and diversity become assets only when there is authentic social interaction between people from different groups. We have a responsibility as an educational institution to reduce the social distance between our students so that we do not simply inhabit the same space but we also acknowledge, show empathy to and respect for one another.

A process of dialogue about institutional culture, led by myself and the Executive of this University, will begin next week. At the heart of transformation must be our commitment as people – each of us opening our minds and our hearts to change – to learn from others different from ourselves, a preparedness to rethink our taken-for-granted ideas.

Through interacting and engaging with people from different communities, we expose ourselves to different ways of seeing the world. Our taken-for-granted assumptions and ideas are likely to be challenged, requiring that we reflect on our perspectives and subject our ideas to scrutiny and debate.

The pursuit of ideas, is after all, at the very essence of being a university. Ideas that are debated, investigated, tested and disseminated. High on my agenda is the need for us as a university to support and invest in our people – staff and students. I wish to ensure that we create an environment of support, a culture of openness and inquiry – a place where all our people will feel valued and able to grow and develop intellectually.



In this process we will re-evaluate some of our traditions, continuing those of which all of us are rightly proud, but discontinuing those that do not promote a culture of inclusivity and respect for human rights and, instead crafting new socially inclusive future traditions.

### **Inquiry: Postgraduate Education and Research**

As we focus on improving the quality of the student experience, at the same time we will be undertaking action to intensify our research productivity and impact. To balance these responsibilities, a university needs an academic strategy that reflects a conscious effort to create synergy between teaching and learning, and research.

A high quality curriculum that inspires passion for inquiry in our students will help build a stronger, more vibrant research culture. An inquiry-driven undergraduate curriculum not only facilitates a culture of research, it also promotes the acquisition of skills that are needed in a 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace. Being able to navigate and use knowledge purposefully is a highly valued graduate attribute. Clearly articulated curriculum pathways from undergraduate to postgraduate study, will enable us to grow our postgraduate enrolment, particularly at the doctoral level.

Even though currently the University of Pretoria produces the highest proportion of doctoral students nationally, we recognise that we must make an even bigger contribution as the national output of doctoral graduates is insufficient for an economy that is striving to move from being resource-intensive to knowledge-intensive.

Therefore, even though we are currently one of the largest universities in the country, we will be embarking upon a planned and focussed growth

strategy. At the undergraduate level we remain committed to providing a wide-ranging suite of programmes across disciplines and professional areas. Next year our new Engineering and Plant Sciences facilities will be in operation thus allowing us to increase our capacity in those programmes. Towards improving the quality of schooling nationally, we have identified that we can make a major difference through increasing our output of high quality teachers, particularly in Mathematics and Science.

By selecting focus areas for growth and expansion, we will enhance our contribution to solving pressing environmental, health and social issues via our teaching and learning and our scholarship.

Research has become much more of a collaborative, communitarian pursuit involving teams of scholars and students in networks that cross institutional and national boundaries. Our commitment to strong discipline-based research will remain. What we will be doing differently is creating an enabling environment and incentives to leverage our wide-ranging disciplinary expertise to bring our scholars together across boundaries to tackle the most pressing problems facing us as a country and as an African region. Climate change, food security, conflict mediation, poverty alleviation and other such issues have the best chance of being addressed through multidisciplinary teams of individuals who in addition to scientific expertise, exercise ethical judgement, empathy and a commitment to social justice.

Community engagement is a pillar of our academic mission. Experiential learning, participatory and action research as well as community outreach, all form part of our strategy on community

engagement. Through this strategy we firmly embrace our role in the promotion of good citizenship and sustainable development.

### **Sustainability**

Sustainability and sustainable development are terms often used in today's society. Mostly, it is used to refer to the availability of material and tangible resources. In my view sustainability requires us to take a holistic perspective – to see the connections and interconnections. Of course material resources are critical especially, money. Affordability of our education is our public responsibility. I am conscious that the families of our students and our students themselves are making major sacrifices to gain access at UP. To enhance the affordability of our education, one of our challenges is to grow our resource base and to ensure that we utilise our available resources efficiently and effectively. Forging mutually beneficial partnerships with the business community and public sector organisations will assist us in meeting this goal.

### **Conclusion**

The future is not predictable and there are no certainties. What I am certain of is that our commitment to quality, relevance, a culture of inquiry and sustainability as the principles that will drive our strategy will give us a sound and strong foundation for building the second 100 years of the University of Pretoria so that Tuks will be regarded as a national asset by all the people of South Africa, respected and renowned nationally and internationally for the quality of its graduates, scholarship and impact on society.