



UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE  
UNIVERSITEIT VAN DIE VRYSTAAT  
YUNIVESITHI YA FREISTATA

Office of the Vice-Chancellor and Rector  
Kantoor van die Visekanselier en Rektor

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## **INAUGURATION ADDRESS**

**19 MAY 2017**

*'Academic Excellence through Diversity, Inclusivity, and Innovation'*

**The Chancellor, Dr Khotso Mokhele**

**Her Worship, Olly Mlamleli, the Executive Mayor of Bloemfontein**

**On behalf of the Office of the Premier of the Free State:**

**Director-General Mr Kopung Ralikontsane**

**On behalf of the MEC of Education of the Free State:**

**Acting MEC Mrs Elsabe Rockman**

**The Chair of Council, Mr Willem Louw, and members of Council**

**The Chief Executive Officer of Universities South Africa, Prof Ahmed Bawa**

**Vice-Chancellors of other universities**

**Deputy Vice-Chancellors and Vice-Rectors of the University of the Free State  
and other universities**

**Members of Senate**

**Members of the Institutional Forum**

**Members of the Unions**

**The President of the SRC and UFS students**

**The President and members of the Convocation**

**Donors and Alumni**

**Distinguished guests**

**Ladies and Gentlemen**

## **Thanks for attendance**

I am deeply honoured by the outpouring of support I have experienced since arriving six weeks ago. I also want to thank everyone for welcoming me and my family with such hospitality and open arms. I am deeply grateful to the Senate and Council of the UFS for the confidence you have placed in me by appointing me as the 14<sup>th</sup> Vice-Chancellor and Rector in the 113-year history of the UFS. I can only say that I will devote every fibre of my being over the next five years to this great university and its importance for the city of Bloemfontein, the Free State Province, the country, and the continent.

I want to acknowledge the many vice-chancellors and their nominees from universities across the country, and so many former colleagues (across the academic, science councils, and business and government sectors) who have come to share this occasion.

To the staff and students present – your attendance means a lot to me.

Let me also greet and acknowledge all those friends and family who cannot be here, but are probably following the live streaming of the proceedings.

I would like to acknowledge the presence of my mother, Mary Petersen, and my brothers and sisters and their spouses. My wife and children have always been pillars of strength – thank you Cheslyn, Curtis, and Clayton for your enduring support.

## **Honouring Predecessors**

I wish to pay tribute to my predecessors and to former Council members for their role in making this University what it is today. I acknowledge the former Vice-Chancellors and Rectors here tonight, Prof Francois Retief (10<sup>th</sup>) and Prof Frederick Fourie (12<sup>th</sup>), and then Profs Stef Coetzee and Jonathan Jansen (who cannot be here tonight, but are here in spirit). I also want to acknowledge one of the former Chairs of Council, Justice Faan Hancke, present here tonight.

## **Inaugural address**

Universities serve as the guardians of our culture and traditions. This is obvious when we consider the funny-looking hats, the weird gowns and hoods, the ceremonial and almost sacred adherence to the ways of days gone by.

But they also serve as

- purely practical engines of the economy,
- as the catalysts of social mobility,
- as foundations of our democracy,
- and as the point of departure for our pursuit of truth, knowledge, and independent thought.

Universities straddle the difficult divide between the concrete and the abstract, and between tradition and innovation. Even in pursuit of the new, the modern and the never before considered, we cling to tried and tested scientific methods, to hierarchies we believe serve us well, and to roles that have been in place for centuries. Finding the fine balance between the push and pull of the past, the present and the future, is a daily reality and achieving this balance is neither easy nor guaranteed.

***Mr Chancellor, the University of the Free State will continue honouring its responsibilities. We undertake***

- ***to continue providing intellectual and moral leadership,***
- ***to encourage academic staff to fulfil their roles as public intellectuals at the forefront of innovative thinking,***
- ***and to keep motivating students to question and challenge the old ways of doing things.***

***We will not give in to fear of speaking out when other leadership and governance institutions in society fail us.***

This duty of ours involves ensuring that leaders who are bound to do so, serve the citizens of our country and, in doing so, uphold the constitution. This insistence on accountability stretches further than our own relatively narrow interests – it includes obligations at all levels of society.

We also look inward, towards our own responsibilities and accountabilities. We acknowledge that we, as a university community, have an equally important responsibility to exercise tolerance, to listen, and to engage with strongly divergent views. We must do this in a manner that is always respectful, so that our engagement expands the space for debate, and builds understanding, even if we cannot reach agreement.

*Awareness of perspective makes you less inclined to venture a quick opinion. It imposes the responsibility to listen, weigh, and then decide. An open society thrives from the interaction of perspectives.*

Prof Njabulo Ndebele

(Inaugural address as Chancellor, University of Johannesburg)

2015 and 2016 were watershed years for the South African higher-education system. The Rhodes Must Fall, and subsequent Fees Must Fall student – and staff – protests challenged us, and re-energised a critical engagement around the purpose of the university in an equal society, both as a site of complicity and as a potential agent for social change.

The focus of these social movements has been on demands that seek to redress the inequalities, prejudices, and structural disadvantages that continue to characterise South African society in general, and universities in particular.

- We experienced debates about access to quality and affordable higher education.
- We discussed the decolonisation of the physical campus landscape and the curriculum. This decolonisation process must investigate ways of adapting our teaching to the learning needs of this generation of students; of adapting our offerings to make them relevant for living, here, today – in 2017 and beyond, in Africa and in a globalised world. We must look far beyond the ideas that used to work for us, because it has become clear that they no longer do.
- We reflected on intersectionality, a term that refers to the way our multiple identities, whether of race, gender, social class, religion or age, or any other of our multiple identities, interact in a way to create new social inequalities.

- And we heeded the call to consciously reshape institutional culture in ways that recognise diversity, and acknowledge that the institution has an obligation to adapt to, to embrace, and to incorporate those who have, to date, been marginalised by the ways things have always been. Instead of demanding adaptation to *our* ways of doing, we should also change, and become inclusive of all.

The question is: How do we, as the University of the Free State, respond to the call of these revolutionary movements? Yes, I call them revolutionary, as nothing less than radical change will ensure that we remain relevant. If we ignore the call for introspection, for restructuring and for noticeable and effective change, the way forward will be characterised by obstacles, questions, and doubts about the validity of the contributions we claim to make.

***Mr Chancellor, we call ourselves a student-centred university. As such, we will strengthen our focus on social justice and human rights through scholarship, advocacy, and progressive interventions.***

***In this regard, we have reconfigured and established an executive portfolio of Institutional Change and Student Affairs. This portfolio will coordinate the efforts of the***

- ***Institute for Reconciliation and Social Justice,***
- ***the Free State Centre for Human Rights, which was launched a few weeks ago,***
- ***the Integrated Transformation Framework that was recently adopted by Council***
- ***and our Reflective Thinking and Practices of Otherness and Rights related to gender, sexual orientation, and harassment.***

***We will also pursue the establishment of an Office of the Ombud, which will strive to be independent and fair in dealing with concerns lodged by staff and students.***

***We will adopt a zero-tolerance approach to any form of unfair discrimination, harassment, sexual violence, bullying, and any other behaviour that demeans people and disregard their rights.***

***We will act as champion of those who are on the receiving end of this behaviour, and we will never stop working to educate and, where necessary, impose sanctions on those who seem to think that such behaviour will be tolerated.***

***The inextricable way issues of social justice and social rights are intertwined opens the door to exciting, unique, and ground-breaking opportunities for exploration. These opportunities take the form of***

- ***local, national, and international research collaborations,***
- ***the development of multidisciplinary programmes,***
- ***and the establishment of advocacy projects and other engagements that will translate into a greater realisation of what we are working towards in relation to social justice and human rights for all.***

Furthermore, I wish to ensure that we, at the UFS, succeed in creating an environment that is characterised by empathy and support, and a culture that reflects openness and inquiry. This will be a place where every one of our staff and students will feel valued, and will have opportunities for intellectual growth and development.

In establishing this environment, it will, of course, be necessary for us to re-evaluate some of the elements of our current environment and culture. We will investigate, and talk, and think about our traditions and practices, our attitudes and our objectives. We will reaffirm the value of those that we conclude are meaningful and effective, and which are aligned with the direction we want to move towards.

And we will discontinue those that have outlived their usefulness, that no longer fit in with the society we live in today, or the university we want to be. The values, habits, customs, and practices that will be rejected will be those that do not promote the culture of inclusivity and respect for human rights, and that do not acknowledge the right of people to express and uphold their particular values, views, and heritage.

I am excited about the prospect of using those values and practices that we retain, as a foundation for crafting new, socially inclusive and forward-looking traditions and ways of doing.

***I commit myself to working with staff, students, and other stakeholders, to develop the University of the Free State into an institution that has an even greater impact than it has today or had in the past. This institution I am striving to establish will be one that responds positively to inclusivity, diversity, and transformation, and which can incorporate these values in our curriculum, scholarship, and research in a productive way.***

***In particular, I wish to ensure that these values impact on the lives of our students, and on the way they engage with knowledge – during their time on campus with us, and after graduation.***

***I want us to develop in our students the capacity to learn, and to keep learning.***

***We have to develop our students into adults who have the capacity to act as, and to promote, ethical and critical citizenry, and thereby to play an active role in the development of a vibrant and democratic society.***

***We need to light in them the torch that illuminates the way forward, towards a future that is built on more than an education to gain vocation-specific skills, but, instead acknowledges that a university degree represents merely the foundation of learning that will never stop, exploration that will never cease, and a willingness to listen to new ideas that will enrich and enlighten.***

***And, Mr Chancellor, we will do this while aiming at the highest levels of academic excellence.***

I am sure we all agree that the historical concept of the ivory tower, as home to education and research, a tower that stands alone, isolated and insulated from the rest of society, is no longer relevant or appropriate. The idea of limiting learning and innovation to the walls of this mythical enclave is patently absurd, considering the world we live in.

The rising tide of global collaboration, the expansion of markets and the diversification, on the one hand, and specialisation, on the other, of industries means a university's focus must range from the local to the national, from the continental to the universal.

Development of and access to means of communication, the availability of knowledge sources, and the expansion of collective intelligence, means intellectual challenges are no longer the preserve of the university and its lecturers, researchers, and students.

Universities represent just one element of a dynamic system of diverse and interconnected systems, whose cooperation is essential for propelling technological and economic development.

The partnerships we need to forge with a range of associates must be

- between the university and other educational institutions,
- between the university and government at all its levels,
- between the university and industry and the private sector,
- between the university and science councils,
- and between the university and civil society at various levels.

We, as a university, must avoid the temptation to work in isolation, or to make unilateral decisions about what we think others need. The goal must be to be socially responsive, and to work with others for the betterment of us all.

***Mr Chancellor, these partnerships that the University of the Free State will pursue, will be approached in a strategic, deliberate, and innovative way. We will search out ways of benefiting from what has already been discovered, from the lessons others have learned, and we will utilise these experiences to avoid, in a manner of speaking, reinventing the wheel. I want us to leapfrog over the baseline, straight to the cutting edge, whether in the field of teaching and learning, research and innovation, engaged scholarship or management practices.***

Let me give you an example of how we can do this.

Our institution is located in the province that is called the breadbasket of South Africa. From here, in the centre of South Africa, we can utilise our vantage point and harness our existing facilities, past achievements and the expertise that is available, to pursue collaborations to the north and to the south, to build an intellectual meeting place of which the influence can extend far beyond South Africa's borders, even beyond the African continent.



We can pursue research into socially relevant fields such as agricultural development – to mention just one – encompassing essential foci such as food security, land reform, water management, economics, public health, and social development.

In collaboration with our multiple stakeholders, we can engage in investigating complex and multidimensional scientific, technological, legal, social, and economic challenges, we can share our research findings, and we can test and apply new insights, evidence, and innovations.

Through these associations, we can bring benefits to society at various levels – benefits that stretch far beyond the mere financial.

***Mr Chancellor, the University of the Free State, in pursuit of mutually beneficial alliances, will develop and expand our existing partnerships with, among others,***

- ***government institutions, such as the Offices of the Free State Premier and the Mayor of Mangaung,***
- ***educational institutions, such as the Central University of Technology (CUT) and TVET colleges, including Motheo and other colleges in the Free State,***
- ***and organised business in the city and province.***

***Through these alliances, we will contribute to realising the potential, on various levels, of the city of Bloemfontein and the province as a whole, making it more competitive and improving the lives of our people.***

The University of the Free State is ONE university with three campuses: the Bloemfontein Campus, our South Campus, and the Qwaqwa Campus.

I am committed to bringing the activities of these three campuses into alignment, and to integrate our activities to a greater extent. We will achieve this in several ways.

Naturally, each campus has developed niches for itself, ways in which it strives to achieve excellence and distinguish itself. We will build on the strengths of each campus to help the others to uplift standards, improve operations, and make their mark.

For instance, we have access to technology that can expand the benefits of the distance-learning programmes developed at and implemented by the South Campus even further.

Academics and students at all three campuses can become involved in and benefit from the specialisations that are blooming on the Qwaqwa Campus, which are possible because of its unique location at the foot of the Lesotho mountains, surrounded by vibrant rural communities. I am excited about the opportunities that await staff and students at the Qwaqwa Campus, which I believe has the potential to become a specialised hub for certain course modules and fields of research such as sustainability sciences, and which I know will attract students and researchers from all over the globe, who will come to Qwaqwa to explore its unique offerings.

To achieve the benefits of cooperation, we need to ensure that communication channels are open and operational between the three sites. We must know what is happening at each campus, we must know our colleagues and their respective strengths, and we must respond to our colleagues' needs and requests and should offer to become involved. We must scrutinise and reconsider the offerings of the three campuses to ensure that unnecessary duplications are avoided. Only by frequent contact and cooperative and empathic collegiality, will we reap the benefits that the three campuses offer.

And, most importantly, we must work together to infuse each campus with the values we have identified as essential if we are to make our mark as a united University of the Free State: academic excellence, diversity and inclusivity, and innovation.

### **Thank you.**

In conclusion, Mr Chancellor, the University of the Free State is not a perfect university. However, I know that it is a profoundly important institution, one that has the potential to make an immeasurable, positive contribution to the lives of the people of the province, the country, and beyond.

I pledge to do my utmost on the behalf of this university – in honour of its past, in celebration of the present, and especially, in anticipation of the future.

I do so mindful of Michelangelo's foresight in noting,

*the greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it.*

I challenge us to dream big, and to do big.

It will not always be easy, but it will be rewarding, and it may even be fun.

The University deserves not less than my best effort, and I am willing to give it my utmost.