

**Statement by the Minister of Education,  
Professor Kader Asmal, at the Inauguration  
Ceremony of Dr. Franklin Sonn as Chancellor  
and Professor Frederick Fourie as Vice  
Chancellor of the University of Free State.**

**Bloemfontein, 7 February 2003**

Director of Ceremonies,  
Chancellor Sonn,  
Vice-Chancellor Fourie,  
Distinguished Guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am delighted to have been invited to this occasion of celebration at the University of the Free State.

As you may know, this institution was founded nearly 100 years ago, in January 1904, and was then known as the Grey University College. The name later changed to the University College of the Orange Free State, then to the University of the Orange Free State and most recently, to the University of the Free State. The changes in names over the decades, indeed spanning a century, suggest an institution that has been subjected to the travails and turbulent history of South Africa. The University of the Free State has seen the transition from colonial rule, to apartheid rule and finally to the birth of a democratic, non-racial and non-sexist South Africa filled with hope and promise.

It is in this context of change, of reconciliation with our past coupled with transformation of the present, that we meet here today to welcome into our midst both a new Chancellor and a new Vice-Chancellor.

Your tasks at this institution are many and complex in this age of great change, characterised by the pursuit of justice in our country, through programmes of social redress and reconstruction, of cultural coalescence, of economic development and of lessening the poverty of so many of our people. In our efforts to bring about a new country unfettered by the apartheid legacy, the education system itself has had to undergo vast and sweeping changes to meet the needs of a new reality and of the African child eager to be fully-equipped to participate in the wider knowledge-driven world.

In our Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (1997), we identified the importance of human resource development, needed to contribute to the social, economic and cultural life of our rapidly changing society. We emphasised the importance of high-level skills training to contribute to national development efforts and social transformation. Government's response was to take radical steps and to set out goals for the transformation of higher education so that the system would be able to play a pivotal role in responding to the many challenges that our country faces. You may also be aware that Cabinet decisions, taken in December 2002, have brought finality to many years of discussion in the sector about the restructuring of the landscape of higher education.

Our dream, which we wish to turn into reality, is of a higher education system where there is an increase in the both the overall quantity and quality of graduate throughputs and research outputs, where there is efficient and effective leadership and governance, where staff profiles are representative of our broader population and where new institutional cultures emerge that reflect the values of a non-racial society.

Certainly, the implementation of the transformation and restructuring agenda poses enormous challenges to the higher education system and to the Ministry, but I believe that through our collective efforts in firm and committed partnerships, we can work together to ensure an equitable, sustainable and productive higher education system of high quality.

I am confident that with both Dr. Franklin Sonn and Professor Frederick Fourie in your midst, men of great character and of high calibre, the University of the Free State will have at its helm leaders and managers who will indeed be able to take this institution to greater heights, to make history, to grow and not be merely subjected to change. Both Dr. Sonn and Professor Fourie are the kind of people who can enrich and deepen the experience of transformation, who can create a prospect that is worth working towards and who can harness the energies of all at this institution.

Dr. Franklin Sonn has played his part in the struggle for change as an ardent supporter of democracy and freedom. In our new era, he has made his mark as a diplomat, who has excelled in projecting

the voice of South Africa and the face of our country in the United States during his time as South African Ambassador. His years in the education sector as principal of Spes Bona Secondary School in Cape Town, as Rector of the Peninsula Technikon for an impressive sixteen years during heightened student and national struggles will stand him in good stead as he takes on the chancellorship of the University of the Free State. Dr. Sonn is currently Executive Chairman of the Africa Group Corporation and also serves on numerous corporate boards; I am convinced that his business acumen will be of great assistance to the University.

Professor Frederick Fourie is no stranger to you. As Vice-Rector he has contributed to the development of the University in different ways. He has, in particular, contributing to the academic restructuring of the University and has worked towards ensuring its financial sustainability. Frederick has also played a major role in enabling the incorporation of the Qwa-Qwa campus of the University of the North into the University of the Free State.

The incorporation already puts this institution onto a new road. It provides for enhanced access to higher education for students from rural communities. As you know, the Government is firmly committed to the growth of the system and in this regard, continues to make major investment in the National Student Financial Aid Scheme. In this year alone, the order of R 800 million will be available in loans and bursaries to qualifying students.

The formal incorporation of the Qwa-Qwa campus took place on 1 January 2003. However, you will agree that much work still needs to be done to ensure that the campus is truly a part of the fabric of the University of the Free State.

The issue of transforming institutional cultures is close to my heart. Genuinely South African institutions must reflect the values and ethos of our Constitution. This requires that we pay attention to all aspects of the life of the institution, including the academic, cultural, sporting and social spheres.

Residence life is an important area of the University, which can nurture new traditions and values. But this cannot happen without the political will and commitment to new ways of working. I hope that the University will build on its efforts to ensure that the residences are transformed into places that are genuinely welcoming and embracing to students from diverse backgrounds and experiences.

I would be amiss if I did not take this opportunity to salute the role played by your recently retired Vice-Chancellor, Professor Stef Coetzee, in driving transformation at the University of the Free State. His leadership and foresight has ensured that the University has been set on the path of becoming a truly South African institution.

I wish both Chancellor Sonn and Vice-Chancellor Fourie all the best in their endeavours to lead the University of the Free State

and, in this way, to play their part to contribute to the renewal of higher education in South Africa and indeed the Continent.

Some years ago, our great leader, Nelson Mandela, said that the:

“The time has come for Africa to take full responsibility for her woes; to use the immense collective wisdom she possesses to make a reality of the ideal of the African renaissance whose time has come.”

It is up to Dr. Sonn and Professor Fourie to use the “immense collective wisdom” that this institution possesses to make a reality of African change, of a renewed higher education system that can and must meet the needs of our country.

The time has come for them to demonstrate that great ideas and bright thoughts are first born right here in Bloemfontein, and are then nurtured and developed, and go on to change the lives of our people.

I thank you