

Transcription: Official opening for 2014

Good morning, everyone! Goeiemore, dames en here! I am glad that so many of you showed up today. I know there are others who will show up in time for the braai after this. Maar baie welkom, almal – studente, kollegas, vriende van die universiteit, ons mentors, ons alumni, raadslede, my senior span. Baie welkom aan almal van julle by hierdie amptelike opening van die universiteit.

I always look forward to this event because it is an opportunity to just set course for the new year and to say what is important to us. But, about half past one this morning, as I sat up, trying to think what to say and what to share with you, I said to myself – you know, the last thing you want to hear, is another report on our achievements. The last thing you want to know, is what the strategic plan is and how it will unroll.

Ek is doodseker, u stel nie belang om weer te luister na die missie en die visie van die universiteit nie. Normally when I see mission and vision statements in companies and so on, I just know it is a lie. So I just don't think you want to hear about performance benchmarks en al hierdie mooi dinge nie. So, I thought to myself, you know what – you have now been here for four years and seven months and eight days. I really did count that. And eleven hours.

I want to tell you a little bit about what I have discovered about you. Because you know – I was new to the Free State. Like many of you I only came here recently. And a lot of people say to me – across the country, all nine provinces and indeed outside the country – what is it about that place? You know, when I came here, people used to make jokes about the Free State. Ha, ha, ha. Ons ry net hier deur, dan stop ons by die Shell garage om vol te maak, dan ry ons maar aan Johannesburg toe of Kaapstad toe. They no longer make those jokes. And the reason they no longer make those jokes, is because of the past few years. People like Theuns Verschoor, my predecessor and this team over here, have done some amazing things that has the world sitting up and asking – wat op aarde gaan daar aan?

So if you look beyond where you grew up, beyond your language community, beyond your religious community, I am telling you now, you will be surprised at our people. So I am not going to talk to you about the fact that we have more rated researchers than ever before. I am going to tell you that yesterday we looked at data showing that we have half a billion rand in reserves accumulated for specific projects that we can use if the deans allow us. I am not going to tell you that our through-put rates are up after a long time and that it will go up again in the next academic year. I am not going to tell you about the enormous growth in our research outputs and that this year we will probably get some of the top-rated researchers in the next cycle of the national research foundation. I am not going to tell you that, because you know that, because you have been part of meetings where we shared this. So I don't want to talk to you about that.

Now, I want to take you back to the first day when I came onto this beautiful campus, when I came for an interview. The place was extremely divided and extremely angry. I tried to make a joke in my presentation as a candidate – some of you might remember. It didn't go down well. It was something about Pres Zuma. People were angry. You couldn't make a joke, you couldn't laugh. You saw it in the faces of the students that people were very, very unhappy – and the reason of course was the immediate aftermath of Reitz. If you walk on this campus today, you will find something very different. I still have to stop my car when I drive on campus and just sort of say – is that really what I saw? But I see the amazing way in which our students and our staff have come together and enjoy each other's company as friends.

En so – dit is vir my 'n groot, groot voorreg om oor hierdie vier en 'n half jaar met u so gedagtes te mag deel oor wat ek dink eintlik die rede is vir hierdie ongelooflike nuwe gees op ons kampus. Waar mense nie meer kwaad is vir mekaar nie, en eintlik met mekaar praat.

One of the senior council members asked me the other day – why is this campus not up in arms? Why are the students not fighting like at DUT or MUT or Kaput or UJ or you know, all these other universities. Why is it? And I said to them – it is very simple. In this place students know that they are deeply loved and respected. And because of that, we don't have this kind of violent reactions in the NUSWA crisis. But that didn't happen by accident, it happened because of people like Theuns Verschoor. It happened because of people like Andre Keet. It happened because of the unbelievable staff members of this university who made it possible for us and students to be together in a way that we were not before. And so, let me tell you about yourself. I want to share two things with you that is true – which I say wherever I go around our country and abroad. The staff of this university – u as personeel – het die unieke kapasiteit om te verander. Now, let me tell you what that means. You see – when you think of a university, it is not an organisation like a company, like a business. It can come and it can go. Some businesses show up one day, the next – the university is an institution, so it is like a church or a mosque or a synagogue. It doesn't come and go. It stays. And we have stayed around for over a hundred years. We have lived through two world wars. We have lived through the horrors of apartheid. And we have lived through the troubles of the new democracy. And so we stand. That is because it is an institution and not simply a company or an NGO. The problem with institutions is, they have deep, deep values embedded in them. So anybody who thinks they can change an institution like the Catholic Church and come in and say – hey pope, as of tomorrow women can be priests. It doesn't happen like that because institutions change with great difficulty and that is also true of universities. Universities, the old English liberal universities – you can't change them, they don't want to change. They don't see the problem. But a place like Kopsies has changed quite dramatically and I want to give you three examples of that.

When I came here – first of all – the first koshuis I went to, was a koshuis called Welwitchia. It was an all-black women's koshuis at that time. When I came in to address them in my annual rotations of 23 koshuise at that time – when I came in to address those young women, I didn't know whether I was in a university residence or a

shebeen. They looked angry, they were lying on their chairs, tannie Elize looked scared of them – hulle het net daar gesit. They didn't want to talk to the rector. They looked like they showed up and landed up in the wrong place. And I remember looking – and I said – in all my years in universities across the world, I have never before seen such an angry, despondent bunch of young women. Go to Wel-wel now – it is a new place. It is an unbelievable place of young South Africans – black and white – and I went in there the other day at nine o'clock to greet the first-years. I was shocked by the way in which they have come together as the future leaders of our country. That is now. Now why did this happen? Why is it that people here don't fight over stupid things the way we used to before and the way most of the country still fights. It is because of you. Dit is as gevolg van die gees van hierdie ongelooflike mense in die Vrystaat, in Suid-Afrika – hierdie deel van Suid-Afrika – die Noord-Kaap. Noordwes, wat hier konsentreer in die Universiteit van die Vrystaat.

So, I want to give you three stories quickly. A few days ago – and I am not going to give you too much details for obvious reasons – something horrible happened at one of our rag floats as they were building it on campus. It is the first time this happened in a very long time, and the women students who were confronted by this group of men – young men, two of them – went on Twitter immediately to talk about the bad treatment they had experienced. I asked Mr Khuthane to investigate and I asked the young women to come and see me so that we could track these thugs. And when they came to see me and they told their story, I said to them – you know what, this no longer happens at Kovies. This is odd. So what I am going to do, is – as soon as we identify these young men, they will be suspended and I will duly expel them, because I will not have this kind of bad behavior on this campus. And then these three women looked at me – and I will never forget this as long as I live! They said – no, no Prof, that is not what we want. What we want is – we want to forgive them. We want them to stay here. We want them to be part of Kovies. That didn't happen automatically. That happened because of you. Omdat u die atmosfeer geskep het waarbinne ons studente verstaan dat die maklikste roete is om terug te baklei. Die maklike roete is om mense uit te gooi. Die moeilike roete is om lief te hê. Om te vergewe. Om daarop aan te dring dat daardie

persoon om verskoning vra. Dit is die soort universiteit wat ons nou het, en die rede daarvoor is uself.

Our seniors have learnt that we are about inclusion, not exclusion. And when I went to the koshuis that was responsible and I spoke to the first-years the other night, I called the prime and I said – staan hier langs my. And I put my arm around him and I said – I want to thank you – for when this happened, you were there. Not only did he apologise to the women who were offended, but he also went and made sure that the men involved – one of whom who was not from here – were immediately dealt with. You see, we have a new consensus. And in the new consensus, sexism is wrong. Before, people used to split two ways by tribe. In the new consensus, racism is wrong. In the new consensus on this campus, if not in our country, xenophobia is wrong. In the new consensus among our students, homophobia is wrong. In the new consensus black and white students on this campus come together to speak with one voice against what is wrong. I can't tell you how much pride and how much joy that evokes in me.

My second story to you this morning is about the changes that have happened on this campus in academics. The other day, Prof Lucius Botes and his team invited me to a seminar with Prof Annie van den Oever of the Netherlands. We watched one of the best movies ever made – if not the best – a German movie called, The Lives of Others. And, as I sat there and I listened to the deep progressive – not outyds en konserwatief – progressive debates on the future of countries that have come through division, like East Germany, I was astounded that nowadays, on this campus, I can go in any day – whether it is at institute in sociology or in zoology – I can go to a place where we have some of the best intellectual debates that we have at any university in the world. I am very proud of our prestige scholars headed up by Prof Jackie du Toit and others. We have now developed a new generation of scientists, many of whom will become A- and P-rated scientists in the next few years. That is not an accident. You have made us good. It takes a while. You don't just do this with an institution. Remember, you build it carefully and then you push it over the edge. Watch Kovies in the next five years. You

will be amazed at how we will reap the benefits of the unbelievable efforts of our young scholars and our older scholars in making this a great university.

My third story to you has to do with the shift in the academic culture of our campus with respect to students. You know that a year ago at this time – on the Qwaqwa Campus – we were forced to send home approximately 600 students because they fell foul of what is called in the books, a real A19. Rule A19. Rule A19 means that he didn't do well enough academically; he didn't accumulate enough credits to be able to stay on for the next academic year. Last year we had to, sadly, turn away 600 students because of academic weakness of the Qwaqwa students. This year, beginning of the year, we only turned away 20 students. And next year, I would hope that it is zero students. And our Qwaqwa Campus is one of the most beautiful campuses you will find anywhere. I am so grateful to the staff. I am so grateful to Prof Naidoo and Doctor Elsa Krause for giving us a campus we can be proud of. And those of you who were there for the opening – we opened up last week at Qwaqwa Campus – you would agree with me. The astounding quality of those students! The new academics joining us in departments like Sociology and Physics. Unbelievable young people! And I am so glad that we will drive that campus over the next few years – it too is, like the Bloemfontein Campus, a non-racial campus where students from Voortrekker and Witteberg and Harrismith Hoërskole also decide that they will go there, because it is a campus of choice. That is our goal. But the second reason – and I only have two big reasons why this university has changed – is because of the capacity of people here to care. I had a long chat at the robot this morning with my boemelaar friend who was a guest lecturer in the Faculty of Education – elke nou en dan raak hy so weg, soos die Kapenaars sê, as die wyn so begin trek, trek en trek en trek, dan staan hy nie meer so lekker teen die lamppaal vas nie – but you know, all of you care for him. Johnny Hay and colleagues in Education were amazing in the way they cared for him as our guest lecturer. But there is something about this place. This morning one of our lecturers from Public Management came to see me. This is the Free State. This is why I love this place so much. And I had to see her about some urgent issue with regard to a student. And she had a little bag. There is – I can tell you now, this will not happen in the other 22 universities –

public universities. And she left the bag on the table and I was wondering why she was leaving this bag? She says, “Prof, ek het so grootgeword. Jy kom nie mense sien sonder om iets agter te laat nie.” Isn’t that beautiful? Most of us would go to a place, dan vat jy iets saam. Warm kat of wat noem hulle die goed? Jy vat iets saam huis toe. Hier mag jy nie loop as jy nie iets saamgebring het nie. That is an unbelievable generosity that I can tell you now, you will only find in middle South Africa. And so, I want to say to you with my fourth story – baie dankie, dames en here en kollegas, vir die manier hoe julle die personeelfonds – ons het so ‘n klein personeelfonds gestig. Het u geweet dat ons studente hierdie jaar kon help net met daardie geldjies wat hy kort om te kan registreer by ons universiteit? Dit is nie die geld van ryk mense nie. Dit is die geld van ‘n sekretaresse wat alreeds min verdien. Dit is die geld van ‘n outjie wat daar by Russels se afdeling werk wat gesê het – ek gaan net R20 insit – maar as almal R20 insit, of ‘n ietsie insit – is dit vir ons moontlik om arm studente met sterk akademiese rekords, te laat registreer. Baie dankie daarvoor. Baie dankie vir die gees. Die groot harte. Baie dankie vir u toewyding, want u verstaan die groter projek van menswees op ons kampus, veral in die konteks van die krisis waarin ons was. And so I want to thank you, all of you who work as volunteers on the No Student Hungry campaign. Because of you, we now have over a million rand that we have been able to get to feed hungry students on both the Qwaqwa Campus and this campus and we are also extending it to the South Campus – because of you. Not because of these important people, not because of me – because of you, we are able to feed hungry students. I don’t need to tell you that I make absolutely no distinction in my leadership between white and black – I only make distinctions between privileged and poor. If you are poor, I don’t care whether you are white or black. You can stay at this university. You will be on the No Student Hungry campaign, you will get a bursary. This is the one university that I am very proud of – and our Medical School – most people have the misconception that if their children don’t get in, they think it is because of what they look like. Gert runs a very tight ship. Our commitment, whether it is the Medical School or in Actuarial Science, or in our spogprogram with Henry in Financial Accounting – we always look for the best students and we always provide those in need with the support they need to give us the kind of diversity we have been able to achieve. So, thank you to Vishuis for

saying we want to be part of the No Student Hungry campaign. Vishuis now takes students – because they have a dining room there, and on their own we have other problems with Vishuis, like a tiekie – but in other respects – Vishuis, baie dankie vir julle leierskap om ook honger studente sonder enige koste by julle te voed. Dit is die gees van hierdie kampus. Dit is wat ons noem die Mensweesprojek. Die Human Project. And I can give you so many examples of that, and finally, with this I wish to close.

Have you ever wondered how the Free State became the number one province in South Africa with regards to the Grade 12 results? I was, sort of half under water trying to snorkel, when my cellphone rang. Okay, not quite in that order. And there is a call from Mr Paul Colditz and we were both very excited because of the Free State doing so well in the National Senior Certificate results. I will never forget what he told me. Because we were trying to explain it in terms of a whole lot of other things and he said to me – dit sê iets van ons mense. And I agree with that. So I want to introduce you to someone of ons mense that made that possible today – so I want the colleagues there. First of all, Dr Peet Venter, staan gou op, asseblief. Dok Peet, mnr Hercules Dreyer en Saretjie, waar is jy? Now, when I came here, I said to Peet, dokter Peet, hier moet ons 'n plan maak. Ons moet ons skole hier help om top uit te kom. And we took the worst schools in the province – really weak schools – and Peet, Carol Bunne, Pat Lamusse and others went around the country to raise money, and we raised millions to be able to change the schools at the lower end of the performance spectrum. And I will never forget, Dr Peet one day said to me in front of other people – because you see, as South Africans we always try to divide the world and we always assume, particularly those of us who are black South Africans who tend to talk about people with a narrative that is quite destructive, which is, white is evil and black is good. That is of course nonsense. But Dr Peet, I will never forget what you told me that day – dankie dat ons wat voorheen bevoordeel was, ons skills kan gebruik om 'n verskil te maak in daardie gebiede waar mense nood het. And I always will respect this man for as long as I live. That is Peet Venter. Hercules joined us, he is a physics teacher, but he teaches everything including maths and decency, and Saretjie who heads up her IC programme. I can tell you now and I think we have been told this by both the premier and the MEC, there is no way this

province would have gotten so far without the leadership of Dr Peet. Sal u my help om hulle te bedank, asseblief.

En dan, laastens wil ek ook net sê, Peet en die span kan eintlik baie min doen sonder van die beste mentors, want ons program, ons intervensie is eintlik gebaseer op die mentorskapmodel – met ander woorde, ons vat die beste wiskunde-, rekeningkunde- en natskei-onderwysers wat onlangs afgetree het en ons vra vir hulle om direk met die skole en die onderwysers in die klaskamer te werk. For those of you who are interested in my line of research – teacher training at a centre somewhere, is a waste of money. It doesn't work. I know that. What works, is working with people where they actually teach. And so, we have unbelievable mentors. One of them I met when he was still in die 'tuig' soos hulle sê – in Boshof, a place called Boshof. The other is my good friend, Mr Jan Volsteedt, who is the principal and Charlotte Steyn who is the most unbelievable math mentor this country – ek wil net vir julle sê, ons mentors moet asseblief nooit op dieselfde vliegtuig klim nie, want as iets gebeur met daai vliegtuig, is dit oor en verby met die Vrystaat se onderwys. Kan ek net vir die mentors vra om te staan and would you mind also thanking our mentors, please, for their role in changing our schools. Asseblief.

And so, we are on what they call in the finance world, the J curve. Things are starting to take off. And everything that has been done – as I say behind your backs wherever I go – is because of the staff, die personeel van hierdie universiteit – and from Elliott, the guy who sits at that door – if you want a lowdown on this university, talk to Elliott. He will confess. Because he has seen the good, the bad and the ugliest. So, vanaf Elliott daar by die hoofhek tot by die ongelooflike mense – Nico Janse van Rensburg, Anita Lombaard – ek kan hier aangaan oor mense. But all of these people – I know, when I ask them to do something, they go beyond the call of duty. They adopt children to fund and feed. Nico has been working with us at a school that has broken down and I don't know where he got the help and the money, but, hierdie is ons mense wat nie net doen wat in die kontrak uitgestippel word nie, maar wat doen uit die hart uit om hierdie land, hierdie provinsie en hierdie universiteit so mooi te maak. Ek is vol optimisme vir die

toekoms net as gevolg van julle wat in hierdie saal sit. To all of you as we start this new year – let's do even better. Let's continue to show the country – as an old white Jewish woman said to me at UCT the other day in a packed hall – could you please tell us, she says, what was the secret of the University of the Free State? I said two words: the people. Vir julle, the people –.baie dankie en voorspoed vir 2014.