

# SEFAKO MAKGATHO HEALTH SCIENCES UNIVERSITY

## INAUGURAL LECTURE OF THE VICE-CHANCELLOR

### *Introduction*

Ladies and gentlemen, all protocol observed.

Thank you, Chancellor, for affording me the opportunity to address this assembly of the Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University (SMU) this evening.

Allow me, first of all, to thank the Council and the relevant Committee of the Council for appointing me as the first Vice-Chancellor of the SMU. Despite the fact that I functioned in this position, in an interim capacity, for the past two years, I remain deeply honoured by the opportunity to lead this institution. Notwithstanding my aforementioned involvement, I am still acutely aware of the daunting responsibilities associated with the position of the Vice-Chancellor, especially at this moment in time in the history of the SMU and higher education in South Africa.

I couldn't agree more with Jairam Reddy (M&G 22 September 2017), that it should be the intrinsic desire that motivates individuals to leave the comfort of a full professorship for that of a Vice-Chancellorship, and not the status, or financial benefits.

### *Global and local higher education challenges*

Chancellor, the challenges facing higher education in South Africa, and elsewhere, are well reported and debated. In South Africa we are furthermore acutely aware of the volatility associated with these challenges, the imperatives for change and the importance of current political dimensions in this regard.

In a recent publication of the Council for Higher Education (South African Higher Education Reviewed: Two Decades of Democracy, 2016), the higher education challenges, globally and locally, are appositely captured as follows:

- The ever-growing demand for access to higher education, with the affordability of higher education being a major obstacle;
- Expanding knowledge production in an era of mass communication;

- Rise of accountability regimes, which have tended to increase managerial oriented institutional cultures;
- Increasing demands for responsiveness to the needs of particular external contexts; and
- The persisting systemic fault lines, such as underfunding, and the combination of limited financial assistance, poor throughput rates and the pressure to increase participation in the system, constantly threatening to undermine the quality of provision.

Chancellor, the higher education and related environments have always been dynamic and subject to change inspired by the positions taken by international organisations, global trends in education, national imperatives, private investment in education, and reports on various pressing education, socio-economic and politically related matters.

In my capacity as Vice-Chancellor, I shall ensure that from a strategic planning and implementation point of view, the SMU will be able to determine, and revise, its positioning, strategies and priorities from time-to-time, with due account of the national and international contexts.

Chancellor, as stated in my Declaration of Intent, I wish to again record my commitment to invest all my time, energy, knowledge and experience in the role of the Vice-Chancellor, to give effect to the vision, mission and strategic objectives of the institution. I also wish to confirm my commitment to deliver on the specific outcomes contained therein.

I, furthermore, fully subscribe to the Value Framework of the SMU and commit to passionately protect and further expand, within a safe and stable environment conducive to education and the successful execution of the core functions of the institution, the learning and development opportunities associated with this Campus over a long period of time, and which manifested in significant contributions towards the human resource and leadership needs of the country.

In his recent narrative, Prof Jonathan Jansen (former Vice-Chancellor of the UFS) in his book: *As by Fire: The End of the South African University* (2017), is at pains to describe the continuous demands on university leadership and the factors contributing to a leader's effectiveness, especially in crisis management. According to Jansen, these factors are:

personality, experience, institutional readiness, organisational ideology, a good dose of strategic knowledge about where the political minefields lie, and the leader's academic speciality. Chancellor, I shall always be aware of the factors listed by Jansen and be reminded constantly of the opportunities and constraints embedded therein.

Although much progress has been made since the establishment of the SMU in May 2014, I have to admit, upfront, that the institution faces a number of fundamental challenges that have, on occasion, impeded our efforts to deliver on our commitments and ambition to constantly maintain a high level of service delivery, and to forcefully and dynamically develop and position the organisation in quality and relevance.

*Approach, collective responsibility and positioning*

Delivering on our mandate, in particular as a health sciences university, and responding appropriately to the expectations of our stakeholders and the daunting needs of the country with regard to health care and service delivery, requires a full comprehension of our institutional challenges.

Chancellor, we must invest all our time and effort in developing plans and strategies to fully meet them.

I was, however, recently reminded by way of a bill board sign of the fact that all of our plans and strategies will come to naught, unless one's approach fully accounts for the timeless truth that "*systems don't do it, people do it*".

You may replace the word "systems" with many things, and I will be joining you to say that our strategy must entail contemporary and innovative trends and technologies, even those never tried before. But the stark reality remains, only people (staff, students, alumni and supporters) will make it happen. I therefore wish to call upon the SMU community to mobilise and to focus all efforts on the achievement of the goals and objectives of the institution.

This is not a simple matter though, and assumptions in this regard may result in a misalignment and tension between our plans and strategies, and our ability to implement such.

Chancellor, with regard to the future of the SMU, I have to be clear from the onset about the role, involvement and buy-in of all constituencies and stakeholders as a precondition for progress and success. We aspire to achieve such through iterative, transparent and inclusive institutional processes aimed at developing a common goal and a commitment at all levels in the organisation to participate, enable, lead and account.

In our quest to develop and stabilise the SMU as a newly established university, we should learn from some of the views of Andre Spicer (writing about the financial woes of UK universities and the misalignment of their priorities), articulated in his, otherwise over-the-top, article with the title: Universities are Broke: So Let's Cut the Pointless Admin and Get Back to Teaching (published in the Guardian recently).

Underlying all this bad news, says Spicer, is an often overlooked fact. Universities have been growing, but most of the resources fuelling that growth have gone into expanding university administration and not faculty (academic staff). This, according to him and education policy experts, led to the birth of the "all-administrative university" and the "stark expansion of empty activities."

Chancellor, empty administration comes at a significant cost and often diverts universities from their core tasks. Instead of educating students, doing research and contributing to the broader society, universities end up developing policies, ticking boxes and trying to climb up rankings, says Spicer. At the SMU, we shall always remain focused on our core tasks and remain acutely aware of the fact that academic staff are always under pressure to show that they are producing world-class research, outstanding teaching and are having an impact on wider society. The Vice-Chancellor and senior management must constantly be reminded of this imperative, as they aspire to rebrand the institution, comply with demanding planning, reporting and regulating prescripts, and attend to many other important operational and institutional related challenges.

This evening is not exclusively about the inauguration of the Vice-Chancellor, but also about the strengthening of the SMU Brand.

It has become exceedingly important to forcefully articulate the contexts defining the SMU as a newly established institution, and to influence opinions and perspectives about it. Let it be known to all that the SMU

refuses to be defined in terms of the status of other institutions, be they former or current. The SMU also vehemently opposes the notion to apply historical contexts, limitations and perceptions to describe its role, the quality of its enterprise, and the boundaries of its dreams and aspirations.

Chancellor, it must be clearly understood that the SMU, which was established on 16 May 2014, is one of three newly established universities in South Africa. It was established as a comprehensive health sciences university, and is the only university in South Africa with an exclusive focus on health sciences education.

The focus of the SMU implies that it carries a special responsibility towards the country to produce highly qualified health personnel with competencies similar to those who have highly effective health care systems in the world. The special focus of the SMU also poses real challenges for the medium and long term sustainability of the institution, which compels the institution to optimise organisational effectiveness and efficiency, access to resources and the development of support and funding networks.

Chancellor, the establishment of the SMU may not be interpreted as the endorsement of any previous dispensation and/or a commitment to the continuation thereof. The SMU was established by the government as a new and post-apartheid university with a particular scope and mandate, embodying all the ideals of an inclusive, non-racial, non-sexist, transformed and democratic society.

The SMU Community and its support networks are therefore called upon to join forces with a view to articulating and embracing SMU's own vision, mission, strategic objectives and priorities, and to respond with vigour, passion and loyalty to the mandate of the institution.

#### *Institutional role, transformation and institutional culture*

After more than two decades of democracy and freedom, the SMU and other institutions of higher learning in South Africa, still remain challenged, as aptly described in White Paper 3, "to redress past inequalities and to transform the higher education system to serve a new social order, to meet pressing national needs, and to respond to new realities and opportunities. Higher education must lay the foundations for the

development of a learning society which can stimulate, direct and mobilise the creative and intellectual energies of all the people towards meeting the challenge of reconstruction and development”.

Chancellor, higher education institutions must be liberated from the notion to allow a replication of the inequalities of society and the demeaning legacies of the past in programme and curriculum development, research, community engagement and institutional practices and traditions.

The SMU aspires to position itself to play an important role in meeting the reconstruction and development imperatives of our country, and to join the higher education sector in its quest to respond comprehensively and effectively to new challenges.

It is common knowledge that institutions of higher learning have been called upon to pay renewed attention to transformation and to report on progress made in this regard. This is evident from the White Paper on Post-School Education and Training, recent amendments to the Higher Education Act, 1997, as amended, and reporting directives from the Minister of Higher Education and Training.

Suffice to say, Chancellor, that the transformation framework of the SMU shall permeate the entire organisation, and that its approach shall be marked by inclusive and iterative processes. However, the SMU will remain true to the core values and functions of a university as a place in which the pursuit of knowledge, truth and understanding are given special attention and protection, albeit continually contextualised and refocused. The SMU will strive to yield outcomes changing the positioning and functioning of the institution fundamentally, and directing it towards the achievement of goals and targets developed in response to contextual priorities and needs.

It is, however, important to note that fundamental institutional transformation require a revised and realigned institutional culture. Institutional culture is often described as “the ‘way things are done’ within an organisation, specifically the traditions, customs, values, and shared understandings that underpin the decisions taken, the practices engaged in and those practices that are rewarded and supported” (Rhodes University 2004). It is also typified as a fairly broad and nebulous concept and its organisational impact difficult to pin down.

Despite the nebulosness and broadness of the concept of institutional culture it is clear that our aspiration to build/transform/mould an institutional culture conducive to achieving deep and meaningful transformation, must be founded upon the fundamental values enshrined in the South African Constitution. This will be supplemented with contextual institutional values conforming to constitutional value frameworks and related legal prescripts.

Chancellor, I firmly believe that such an institutional culture will not only support transformational efforts, but will also create institutional room for the development of an environment within the University that is inclusive, transparent, innovative and transformational, and one which attracts, develops and empowers people of outstanding talent.

This outcome is, however, subject to the University demonstrating, as and when opportune, its commitment through process and procedure as prescribed in the constitution, related legislation or institutional rules, to protect the constitutional and institutional values of people. It is indeed an important responsibility of the SMU governance structures and the SMU community to uphold and protect the distinctive university platform as an intersection of creative ideas and innovation, allowing the sharing of ideas and robust debate in a tolerant environment, whilst meeting the challenges constantly confronting a service organisation.

The SMU institutional culture must, for instance, promote compliance with PAJA and PAIA legislation in its decision-making processes and shall have no tolerance for any form of racism, regardless of the individuals or groups involved, or the institutional structures or programmes harbouring such, or any other form of discrimination made illegal by the South African Constitution. It shall vehemently oppose and speak out against any form of violence, especially gender based violence; corruption; intimidation; abuse of position and authority; and the exploitation of the vulnerable in our SMU society, especially our students. The SMU community shall commit to voice its opposition against systematic and deliberate erosion of the value of ethical principles and its application in society, and shall insist on accountability, regardless of the individuals or groups involved, and shall never be guilty of silence as an answer to injustice.

The SMU must, furthermore, ensure that policies and procedures are in place to effectively and decisively respond to any of the aforementioned manifestations.

It must also be clear from the onset that, unless the institution through approach and process, allow the substantive impact of aforementioned to manifest noticeably, it will not be blessed with people of outstanding talent and creativity. On the contrary, indulging itself in superficiality will saddle the institution with mediocrity and insipidness.

Achieving this hinges firmly on a number of institutional factors, and the perceptions pertaining thereto, such as the quality of the programme offering, the provision and quality of facilities and infrastructure, student and staff development and support programmes, the work environment and benefits of staff, the quality of student life, and many more.

Chancellor, it will serve the University well to also embark on a programme to assess its performance in the above regard, to up its game in many respects and to forcefully oppose unfounded perceptions.

#### *Standing and reputation as a leading comprehensive university*

Chancellor, I need to indicate that institutional standing and reputation only develop over time, and represent an externally developed view of the institution based on credible and contextually agreed performance and quality indicators, covering almost all of the functions of the institution.

A self-defined and proclaimed standing and reputation carry little weight. It is also true that hard earned positioning and recognition can be wiped out by one single incident or event, especially those casting doubt on the academic quality and integrity of the institution.

Looking at the vision and mission of the institution, the SMU has real and ambitious aspirations in this regard.

It is, however, important to articulate our aspiration to lead and to be the benchmark institution, and the associated timeframes, with due recognition of the different world ranking systems and the relevant criteria.

It is common cause that university ranking systems are imperfect measurements of excellence, as most of them do not take into account



the unique contexts within which universities have to operate, especially in developing countries. It can, however, not be relegated to mere “ego boosters for Vice-Chancellors”, a “marketing tool” or a “feel-good” treatment.

It has become an exceedingly important drawing card for students and staff, an important consideration for third stream funding and strategic partnerships, etc.

To receive a ranking in a credible system is of great importance to the SMU and will enhance the stature of the institution instantly. It will, however, require a comprehensive, consistent, exceptional and diverse performance, as is evident from a recent Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) announcement, indicating that only five South African universities were among the top 500 in the world, and three among the top 800.

Chancellor, my expectation is that our newly appointed academic leadership will, as soon as possible, provide us with a comprehensive analysis of the criteria applied by the various ranking systems, and propose strategies and realistic timeframes for the SMU to develop its focus and targets in this regard. The SMU shall adopt an approach to play towards those determinants which are realistically and innovatively attainable. Our strategy will also be pertinently aligned with the unique focus of the SMU, and our positioning as an institution situated in and embracing Africa, whilst aspiring to be a true African university.

What is not negotiable, in this regard, is our aspiration to expand our international footprint, especially in Africa, and to do so with the support and guidance of our strategic partners. Furthermore, the SMU aspires to be recognised by its peers in South Africa, not by way of reference to historical factors or the unique focus of the institution, but by the application of recognised and credible objective quality criteria.

But, to enhance its standing and reputation and to receive the recognition from peers, the SMU will have to contemplate the aspirations contained in its vision, mission, goals and objectives, not only in terms of quantity, but also in terms of objectively determined quality and impact norms and benchmarks.

Chancellor, it should be emphasised again that the standing and reputation of the institution are externally assessed, and it may be difficult for the SMU to initially meet externally determined benchmarks. But the institution should ultimately strive to meet its targets, which must be determined by institutional planning processes and performance agreements, and must always be ambitiously adjusted upwards.

#### *A robust financial position*

Chancellor, against the backdrop of the current funding model and mechanisms for universities, the SMU is not financially sustainable. The SMU's operating deficit will, for the foreseeable future, remain, despite the special and development grants currently forthcoming from the DHET and the continuing efforts of the government to improve student financial aid, assisting institutions with historical student debt and fee increases, and the conclusion of partnerships with the private sector to assist the "missing middle" (ISFAP). It is clear that a special funding dispensation for the SMU must be secured as a matter of priority.

Over time effective changes will result from a multipronged approach, including the sensitising and directing of the organisation towards diverse business oriented strategies of resource mobilisation, without corporatizing the institution unnecessarily.

Chancellor, I shall in the interest of time not elaborate on the key drivers and the associated strategies of the SMU in its quest to advance the financial sustainability of the SMU.

#### *Facilities and infrastructure*

Key to our strategy for the next three to four years is the provision and maintenance of appropriate facilities and infrastructure.

This will be done with specific emphasis on the urgent need to address the maintenance backlog with regard to existing facilities, to provide adequate on-campus student accommodation meeting the prescribed norms and standards as published by the DHET, to provide adequate and cutting-edge ICT and telephony infrastructure and support, to optimise the use of existing facilities and infrastructure in accordance with institutional strategic imperatives and priorities, to perform visionary planning of future campus developments, and to ensure adequate institutional capacity,

skills and protocol to execute major infrastructure development projects in accordance with the approved supply chain management policies and procedures of the SMU and approved timeframes.

The ultimate aim would be to establish an environmental friendly campus precinct, integrated with the broader Ga-Rankuwa infrastructure and business development plan, characterised by a safe, multi-service and technology intensive neighbourhood, enhancing the quality of student life and facilitating diverse learning, living and employment opportunities.

Chancellor, the SMU received a significant amount from the DHET for the development of new infrastructure and should use the grant to leverage sufficient additional funding with the view to building, within the next two to four years, the required student accommodation on campus, urgently needed academic and administrative support facilities, and a multi-functional student centre.

It is apposite to record the gratitude of the Council to the Minister for the infrastructure and efficiency grant awarded to the SMU for the next four years. The SMU is committed to unlock the value of the grant optimally.

#### *Strategy development and key elements*

Chancellor, an iterative and inclusive process to draft a Strategic Plan for the SMU covering my term of office has already commenced and will be completed soon.

The main focus of this evening is not to discuss any detail, but to assure the Council and stakeholders that our plan, consisting of various components, will be forcefully supported by an implementation plan.

Key to our strategy, *in addition* to the matters raised above, will be:

- A quality and focused academic enterprise, aligned with the comprehensive nature of the University, responsive to national imperatives and appreciative of the unique challenges associated with health science education and the related resource provision, characterised by cutting-edge and customised delivery models;
- Constructive engagement of and service delivery to the community by means of the clinical, practical and in service training components of the programme offering of the institution, the

community service programmes of staff and students, and the empowerment (economic and otherwise) opportunities associated with the functioning and development of the University;

- The delivery of knowledgeable, competitive, well-rounded and sought after alumni emulating the graduate attributes as determined by the Senate, with due observance of the competency framework for science graduates in general and health professionals in particular, inclusive of appropriate cross-field outcomes;
- Achieving the growth targets of the institution as determined by the DHET in accordance with its planning parameters by means of an expanded PQM, the optimal use of current capacities and facilities, and the provision of appropriate new academic infrastructure;
- A human resource development and provision plan and strategy, with specific emphasis on attracting (from other countries if necessary) and retaining quality academic staff, revising the conditions of service and improving the work environment of staff, revising and developing staff support and development programmes, and maintaining sound and professional labour relations;
- Partnerships with institutions, government, state agencies, business and alumni to, *inter alia*, strengthen the core functions of the University and to broaden its support and resource base;
- Creating capacity and enhancing skill levels in the institution in accordance with the approved and uniquely developed institutional functions and structures, in particular, within the support functions with a view to upgrading and repositioning these functions from the level of being a constituent part of an institution, to the level of support functions required within an autonomous institution;
- A life changing experience for students characterised by the elements typifying a homely environment, where they are exposed to cutting-edge, relevant and competitive learning opportunities resulting in a life-long love for and loyalty toward the SMU, and the conclusion of ever lasting friendships;
- A student support, development and services strategy underpinned by a cutting-edge student services model, the provision of quality student centred facilities, a transformed and value driven student life

and a legitimate and customised student governance dispensation at all levels;

- New and dynamic dimensions added to the institutional culture resulting from the institutional manifestation of student governance and leadership recognised for its commitment to the successful future of the SMU;
- The ability of the University to maintain constructive relations with the student body and its constituent parts by means of open, transparent and diverse communication channels;
- The ability to provide adequate, quality and cutting-edge student academic administrative systems, student support programmes and campus services, student governance models, student life and development programmes, and student centred training and recreational facilities; and
- The fundamental revision and change of the business model of the University regarding application, admission, registration and residence placement, as the current approach and practices seriously hamper the competitive position of the institution and pose a real reputational risk.

### *Concluding remarks*

South Africa is constantly losing its competitive position in the world. The last survey in this regard indicated that the country dropped 14 places from 47 to 61, with a noticeable comparable underperformance of higher education, and health and primary health care provision.

Chancellor, it is evident that pressure will be mounting on the SMU to fulfil its mandate with distinction within the shortest possible space of time. Most notably the increased provision of highly qualified health personnel with competencies relevant to the needs and context of our communities, unlocking and optimising the full value of government support, and to position itself as a forceful agent of knowledge generation and service delivery in support of economic growth and the eradication of the severe socio economic challenges and associated inequalities prevailing in our country.

Since the establishment of the SMU three years ago significant investments were made in good institutional governance at all levels,

policy and organisational development, the processes to identify and fill key positions, institutional planning and quality assurance, improved service delivery, and many more, with a view to stabilising the institution and to providing a solid launch pad from where to lift off and soar as a self-standing institution with its own identity and ambitious strategic intent.

The SMU is now, more than ever before, positioned to fly as a self-standing institution with its own identity and ambitious strategic intent. The SMU aspires to lead, even beyond the borders of our country, as the benchmark health sciences institution, and is furthermore committed to redressing the shortage of health care professionals in the academic and health care sectors in the country.

The SMU shoulders its responsibility with pride and commitment, albeit sometimes against all odds. Despite the odds, we shall be inspired in this call, as we are entering uncharted territory, by the legacy of Sefako Makgatho, a courageous leader, well ahead of his time, who against all odds made a significant contribution towards achieving the freedom and human rights we are enjoying today.

I am not privy to the emotion and chemistry associated with the establishment and launch of the SMU during 2014/15, but informed by my experience as the Interim Vice-Chancellor over the past two years, it must have been one of joy, of long awaited home coming, of relief surging through the veins of those who successfully fought a seemingly impossible liberation struggle.

Chancellor, I am deeply touched by these definitive moments and acutely aware of the concomitant responsibilities flowing from this for those who lead the SMU.

Prof Chris de Beer  
Vice-Chancellor  
6 October 2017