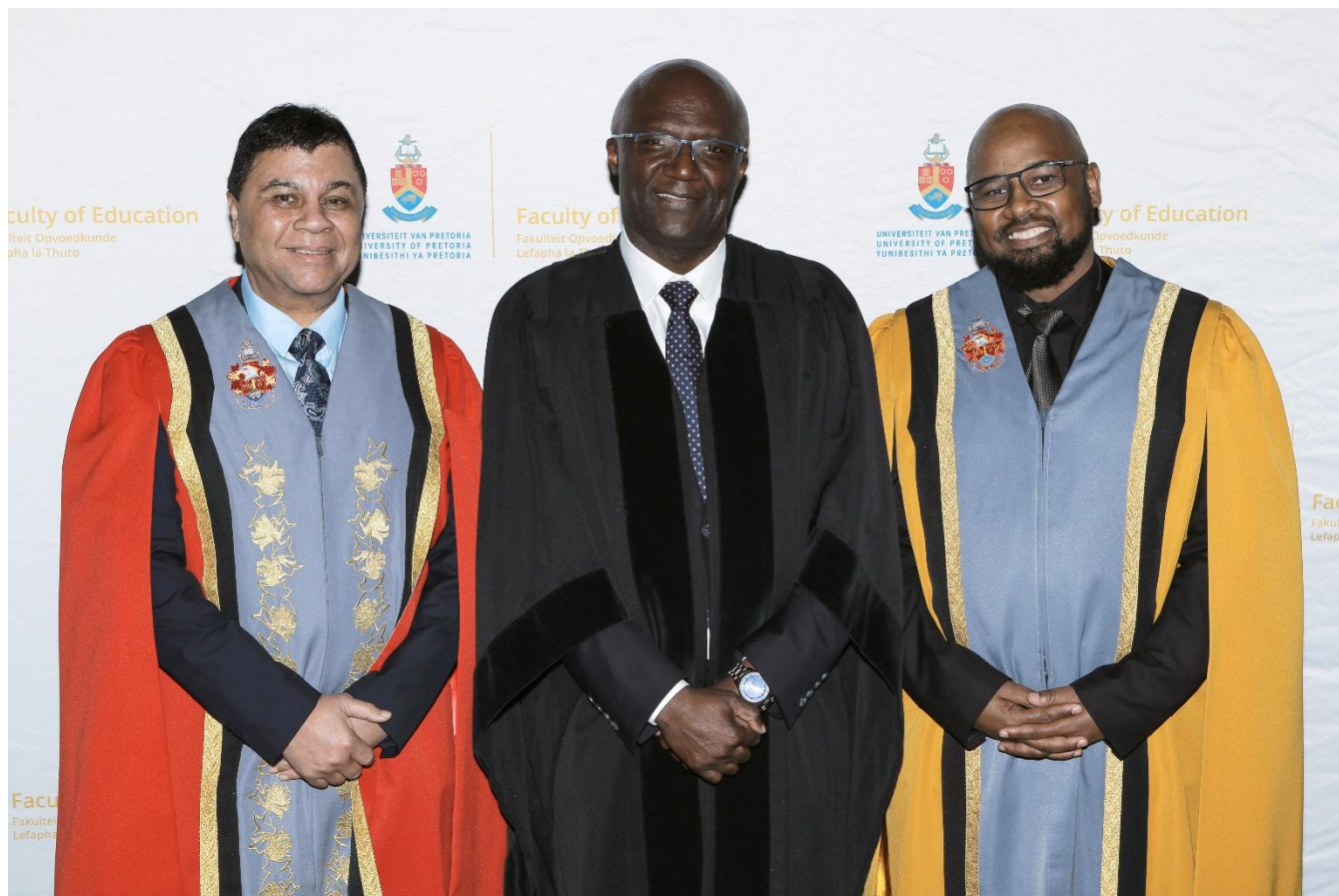


NEWS RELEASE

Inaugural lecture: UP prof addresses spectrum of local and global factors shaping public higher education financing



From left to right: Prof Francis Petersen, UP Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Prof Gerald Wangenge Ouma, and Prof Lindelani Mnguni, Dean of UP's Faculty of Education.

PRETORIA - In his recent inaugural lecture, [Professor Gerald Wangenge Ouma](#) of the University of Pretoria's (UP) [Department of Institutional Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation](#) and the [Faculty of Education](#), addressed the complex, often contentious landscape of funding for higher education in Africa, particularly South Africa.

An inaugural address is a vocational milestone for newly appointed professors or those who have been promoted to full professor. Prof Ouma's lecture, titled "Financing public higher education: balancing unsteady scales", was based on insights gleaned over two decades of research and significant contributions to national policy.

In his address, he argued that public higher education financing is influenced by an interplay of political and economic processes, colonial legacies, post-independence aspirations, economic challenges and global policy shifts.

“Decisions made by policymakers are influenced not only by immediate financial realities but also by broader political agendas and societal demands, such as social justice, equity, skills development and expanding access,” Prof Ouma said.

He has been instrumental in shaping South Africa’s higher education funding systems, having served on more than a dozen national task teams since 2007, including the Ministerial Committee on the Financing of Universities and the Ministerial Task Team on Fee-Free University Education for the Poor. These roles, coupled with his position as Senior Director for Institutional Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation at UP, and his decade-long membership to [Universities South Africa’s Funding Strategy Group](#), have grounded his scholarly work in real-world policy processes and institutional realities.

Prof Ouma’s doctoral research, which compared the response of public universities in South Africa and Kenya to declining government funding, shaped his future research, which explores the crisis of state funding, and reliance on tuition fees and third-stream income.

During the lecture, he highlighted the tension between higher education institutions, the state and society. Prof Ouma cited the 2015/2016 #FeesMustFall student protests as a manifestation of this tension, where universities attributed fee increases to declining state funding, while the state pointed to increased student financial aid being negated by rising tuition. He noted that public universities underappreciated the complexities of financing higher education in South Africa, the country’s history of inequality and rising public sentiment against tuition fee increases.

A key challenge, Prof Ouma said, is the increase in per-student costs at rates that exceed the general economy’s inflation. He also highlighted the compounding effect of accelerating student enrolments on per-student costs.

“Post-apartheid South Africa has seen significant growth in student enrolment, but it has strained resources, compromised quality and led some universities to increase enrolments in low-cost programmes to cross-subsidise more expensive offerings,” he explained.

Prof Ouma also pointed out that public funding hasn’t kept pace with rising costs, leading to increased reliance on tuition fees and shifting a significant financial burden on to students and their families.

“This underfunding is aggravated by funding mechanisms that do not consider the actual cost of higher education provision and governments failing to disburse all approved funds,” he explained. “Student debt, which in South Africa grew from R2.7 billion in 2009 to R17.3 billion in 2022, further compounds these challenges.”

Prof Ouma dedicated a significant portion of the lecture to the historical context of higher education financing in Africa, particularly the “systematic and coercive disinvestment” driven by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund through structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) in the 1980s and 1990s. These programmes compelled African countries to reduce public spending on social services, including higher education, in favour of primary education. This era, he explained, saw higher education framed as a less competitive investment priority, leading to the decline of public funding, the introduction of cost-sharing policies, and student loan schemes.

“The legacy of SAPs underpins many of today’s challenges, catalysing the institutionalisation of cost-sharing and redefining higher education as a private rather than a public good, leading to universities becoming ‘hybrid’ institutions – part public, part market-driven, or public by day and private by night,” he explained.

Prof Ouma then turned to tuition fees, which he described as a “deeply contested, complex and multidimensional issue”. Addressing the legacy of free higher education in many African countries after independence, he stated that while it aimed to promote nation-building and human capital development, it had unintended consequences; among other things, beneficiaries were primarily from middle-class and urban backgrounds due to inequalities in the school system.

“Free higher education was an expensive project that limited expansion and led to a decline in quality as state funding failed to keep pace with growing enrolments,” he said.

Prof Ouma went on to elaborate on cost-sharing, where students and their families contribute to the cost of their studies alongside the state. He made a distinction between “complementary” cost-sharing, where private funding supplements public funding, and “substitutive” cost-sharing, where it replaces it. The post-2008 global financial crisis, he explained, saw a shift towards substitutive cost-sharing, where accelerating tuition fees coincided with a sharp decline in public funding. This substitutive model creates deep tensions, undermining the democratic promise of higher education as a public good and leading to an affordability crisis for families.

“Complementary cost-sharing models with strengthened state funding advance inclusive massification, while substitutive cost-sharing exacerbates inequality,” he said.

Prof Ouma concluded the lecture by outlining several key imperatives: a renewed pact between higher education institutions, the state and society; a long-term perspective in funding decisions; funding models that advance inclusivity and education justice; a broader, holistic framework that considers higher education’s societal contributions beyond economic returns; and an understanding that underfunding undermines a country’s long-term capacity for research, innovation and skills development.

“Financing higher education is not merely about budgets or political calculations, but about the future that society desires,” Prof Ouma said. “This requires models that are financially sustainable, socially just and contextually appropriate.”

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa. Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the [Gordon Institute of Business Science](#) (GIBS). It is the only university in the country with a [Faculty of Veterinary Science](#), which is ranked the best in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 56 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes. It has the most academic staff with PhDs (70%), NRF-rated researchers (613).

The [2025 Times Higher Education \(THE\) Impact Rankings](#) placed UP 7th globally for Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 17: Partnerships for the Goals, recognising the University's leadership in building impactful global collaborations. UP also ranked 41st in the world and 1st in Africa and South Africa for SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, and maintained its position as the second-highest ranked university overall in both Africa and South Africa.

The 2025 Times Higher Education subject rankings placed UP first in South Africa in the fields of [Accounting](#) and [Finance](#); [Architecture](#); [Electrical and Electronic Engineering](#); Law; Sport Science; and Veterinary Science. UP’s

Faculty of Law has been ranked as the top law school in Africa for a remarkable eighth consecutive year.

In the [2025 QS World University Subject Rankings](#), UP is ranked in the top 100 in the world in Mineral & Mining Engineering (41), Veterinary Science (51–60), and Development Studies (51–100). Six UP subjects are ranked No. 1 in South Africa: Mechanical Engineering, Veterinary Science, Mathematics, Accounting & Finance, Business & Management Studies, and Economics & Econometrics.

For more information, please go to www.up.ac.za