

## NEWS RELEASE

### A new chapter for UP as Professor Francis Petersen takes the helm as the 14th Vice-Chancellor



*Prof Francis Petersen delivering his inaugural address.*

PRETORIA – The inauguration of a Vice-Chancellor is more than a ceremonial event; it is a moment charged with reflection, vision, and the promise of what lies ahead. This sense of anticipation and renewal filled the auditorium as a 200-strong University of Pretoria (UP) symphony orchestra, youth choir and cultural ensemble graced the stage at the inauguration ceremony of UP’s Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Professor Francis Petersen.

“I am honoured to stand before you today as the 14th Vice-Chancellor in the 117-year history of the University of Pretoria,” said Prof Petersen, who joined the University on 1 October 2024, after serving as the Rector and Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Free State.

“An inauguration is a moment of meaningful reflection, a time to consider the institution’s past, to take stock of the present, and to envision the future.” He paid tribute to the former Vice-Chancellors, the Chancellor and Chairs of Council “for everything they have done to foster the strength, the spirit, and the potential of this esteemed

institution, established on a foundation of excellence and change.”

Universities are dynamic because they are engaged with their context in time and space – and are responsive to it – with knowledge as the driving force, he explained. “Knowledge is the single most powerful force for understanding life – and it should impact our everyday lives in an equally powerful way,” the VC said.

UP’s Chancellor, [Justice Sisi Khampepe](#), led the inauguration and welcome, while the Chairperson of Council, Ben Kruger, highlighted Prof Petersen’s distinguished academic and professional career. He noted that Prof Petersen holds a Bachelor’s, Master’s, and PhD in Engineering and has served in several leadership roles, including his current position as Chairperson of [Universities South Africa \(USAf\)](#), the umbrella body representing all 26 public universities in South Africa.

Mr Kruger said: “Council is proud to have appointed the right person in Professor Petersen who will lead UP in forging new paths in research, teaching and learning and societal engagements.”

### **Universities as drivers of economic and social progress**

At a time when higher education and the pursuit of knowledge is faced with significant challenges, Prof Petersen’s message was one of hope, purpose and possibility.

“We are living in a time with great divisions within societies,” he said. “We are contending with geopolitical instability, a rise in nationalism, disinformation, climate change, threats toward democracy, and soaring mental health challenges.

“More than ever, universities have a crucial role to play as engines of the economy, catalysts of social mobility, the preservation of democracy, and the pursuit of truth and independent thought.”

Higher education, he explained, needs to actively and courageously “embrace its civic and democratic purpose ... to exercise tolerance; to listen; to engage with strongly divergent views; and to do so in a respectful manner. In so doing we expand the space for debate and freedom of inquiry; we aim to build understanding, even if we cannot reach agreement.”

At the same time, universities need to effectively respond to the pressing global challenges society faces, as expressed in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the African Union’s Agenda 2063.

“UP’s standing as a global leader among the top 1.9% of universities worldwide is one of the core pillars on which I see the vision for the future University being built,” Prof Petersen said, adding that innovative research and strong partnerships are essential to achieve this.

“These include university-to-university, university-to-industry and private sector, university-to-government, university-to-science council, and university-to-society linkages.”

He has committed to strategically leading the University in expanding its partnerships and raising UP’s research profile locally and globally to position the University as the global intellectual meeting point in Africa, for Africa and the world.

To achieve this, UP will grow its transdisciplinary platforms such as [Future Africa](#), Innovation Africa, [Engineering 4.0](#), [Javett-UP Art Centre](#), and the [World Economic Forum Centre for the Fourth Industrial Revolution](#) (C4IR South Africa) hosted at UP.

## **UP's commitment to producing adaptable, work-ready graduates**

UP is also strategically and deliberately paying attention to the feedback from the job market to make sure that the skills and graduates the University is producing are aligned with current and future workplace requirements. Prof Petersen's approach is that "we need to regard our graduates as global citizens where skills and qualifications in this connected world need to be interchangeable with those required on the continent and globally."

Earlier this year, Prof Petersen [welcomed 9,000 first-year students](#) who are now part of UP's community of over 54,000 students – future graduates who are being nurtured to make a positive impact on society. "I have been astounded by the commitment to social responsibility among the staff and students at the University of Pretoria," he said.

UP students participate in curricular [community engagement](#) activities with over 1,000 community partners in the Pretoria region. These projects range from establishing food gardens to tutoring high school learners in maths, science, computer literacy, and creative writing to assist them in achieving the marks they need to access university.

"Knowledge and engagement," Prof Petersen explained, "are essential to the cross-pollination between learning and doing, between soaking up knowledge, art, beauty, and living a life of purpose in the world. Knowledge is what draws us back into love and practical action, and if it isn't doing that, we need to ask: Are we receiving it responsibly?"

In answering this question, Prof Petersen said the university community is compelled to self-examine and "do the next right thing." This includes ensuring that every student, regardless of their background, has the opportunity to access university.

## **UP's strategic direction for the next decade**

Part of this responsibility is to find funding for the "missing middle" – students whose family income is just above the threshold for government financial aid, but who cannot afford the full cost of university education. Late last year, Prof Petersen announced the launch of the Vice-Chancellor and Principal's Scholarship Fund to meet the needs of these students.

In closing, Prof Petersen outlined five key commitments he is making that will guide the future direction of UP and the development of its new strategic plan from 2025 for the next decade:

1. Enhancing a human-centred approach, based on inclusive excellence and enthusiastic diversity, where everyone feels they matter and they belong.
2. Actively working to elevate the University's global standing and impact, mainly driven by research.
3. Positioning UP as a global intellectual leader for Africa and the world.
4. Leveraging technology through UP's Digitalisation Roadmap in all aspects of the university's work.
5. Increasing UP's contributions to societal development and community engagement.

"We have our eyes firmly set on the far horizon," the VC concluded, "to ensure that we bestow an institution on the next generation that is not only different from the past but equally impressive: a university whose very essence is found in perpetual renewal."

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>> [Watch a recording of the event here](#)

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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, with its administration offices located on its Hatfield Campus in Pretoria. This 115-year-old institution is also one of the largest producers of research 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 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.

Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) ranked the University among the top five in Africa, as part of their [2024 World University Rankings \(WUR\)](#). UP was the only South African university featured in the [2023 World University Rankings for Innovation \(WURI\)](#), falling within in the 101-200 range of innovative universities.

For more information, please go to [www.up.ac.za](http://www.up.ac.za)