

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Introduction

One of the challenges of leading a large, complex institution such as the University of Pretoria is communication. Good communication is critical, especially when there is a change in leadership. I see this as an opportunity for me to share my ideas with you about the future strategy and plans for our University.

Therefore, I wish to thank you for taking time to attend this event to mark the opening of the academic year.

As you know, I took up my position at the beginning of November, a time when many of you were focussed on ending the year and preparing for a well-deserved break. While I have met many staff and students, given that this is a very large, multi-campus university I still have many people to meet. In the short time since I started my new role, I have met warm, dedicated and talented staff members. Thank you for welcoming me to the University. I look forward to working with you to build our future.

As we begin this 2010 academic year, I believe that we have a unique opportunity to build a great university for the future; a university that will be held in high esteem as a national asset embraced by all South Africans. By working together we can achieve this.

From small beginnings in 1908, the University of Pretoria has become the largest residential university in South Africa. In terms of international

status, the University of Pretoria is one of a few African and South African universities that included in various international rankings.

The University of Pretoria is unique in the South African higher education landscape in that we offer the widest range of programmes across a full range of disciplines.

The University of Pretoria also has a strong record of research. UP has retained its position as the top ranking university in terms of the number of accredited publication units. Also pleasing is that the number of UP researchers with NRF ratings increased from 223 to 251.

We have also shown considerable progress with regard to community engagement. The Mamelodi campus has been at the forefront of our strategy on community engagement. In keeping with the University's decision to develop the Mamelodi Campus as a hub of the University's community engagement activities in the past few years, a number of facilities were developed on this Campus to support this vision and this year an expansion of these facilities is underway, including the offering of a four-year BSc degree.

UP has grown significantly over the past few years, mainly to accommodate students who prefer English as medium of instruction. This year the University received more than 32 000 applications from prospective first-year students – an increase of almost 20% compared to the number of applications received in 2009. Although the University would like to accommodate all prospective students, space and capacity constraints only allow for about 8 500 first-year places. This number of first-year places also conforms to the agreed-upon student enrolment plan concluded between the Department of Higher Education and Training and the University.

Those amongst us who are directly involved in the current admissions and registrations process are aware that one of our key challenges is managing our numbers so that we do not exceed our capacity. We are not looking for students. Rather our main challenge is how to select from the many who are seeking admission.

Although the current positioning is pleasing, our current status should not instill in us a sense of complacency. On the contrary, for many reasons we should be reviewing and then ramping up our performance quite significantly.

Context

The international and national context of higher education in 2010 is completely different to the end of the first decade of the last century when TUKS was established and as a public University, it is imperative that we execute our academic mission – our teaching and research – in ways that are responsive to our changing global and local circumstances.

Although from its inception the University of Pretoria has been cogniscent of its public, social role, a number of external and internal factors compel us to consider a revision of our strategy and its implementation.

Factors for Change

Firstly, the advances in technological and other areas of innovation have lead to the emergence of new centres of emerging economic power, increased competition for resources and skills and new ways of living and working. Until the most recent global economic recession, there had been many years of average economic growth.

Despite the emergence of what is commonly called the knowledge and technology era and the changing economic cycles, what has been pervasive through both economic growth cycles and recessions, is that poverty, marginalization and environmental degradation have not diminished significantly. Food security, poverty eradication, climate change and peaceful co-existence are among the most urgent of global and local challenges and there is evidence indicating that the gap between rich and poor is growing rather than diminishing.

These contrasts and challenges of the 21st century compel us as a society and indeed, the University of Pretoria, as a major public institution, to reflect deeply upon our paradigms and values. To ask ourselves, what difference are we making in the world today, are we making a positive impact as best as we can?

With the increasing importance of knowledge and innovation as determinants of economic growth and national competitiveness, governments across the world have shown an interest in investing more funds in higher education systems in order to increase participation

rates, this being necessary for national economic development in an increasingly competitive global economy. As governments increase expenditure on higher education, there is generally a concomitant rise in the call for universities to demonstrate accountability more visibly and more concretely. Furthermore, we can observe that as societies change, the objectives government may wish to achieve through its public funding of universities are also likely to change.

As a major social institution, we as a University will be tested in terms of our responsiveness to the educational, scientific, economic, social and environmental needs of our changing society.

But it is not just the demands of government that propel us to change. Universities themselves have recognized that traditional ways of teaching and learning and of conducting research also have to change as the numbers of students increase and the general environment becomes more competitive and challenging. For example, the growing demand for admission that we at UP are experiencing, is a sufficient factor suggesting that one of the big issues we need to tackle sooner rather than later is our growth strategy.

This year, in 2010, we are likely to register above 40 000 full-time students. The demand for university education is growing worldwide due to changes in the world of work. One of the key features of this change has been a marked increase in remuneration to employees with higher levels of education and the increase in the demand for university graduates in the labour force.

Although the Ministry of Higher Education and Training via its new framework for post-school education and training, has made a

commitment to expanding the college sector and thereby expanding the career options for school leavers, this implementation will take time.

Thus, the future growth strategy is of paramount and urgent importance. Over the past decades we have grown incrementally each time responding to the demand of the moment – the short-term issue. This time we must commit ourselves to planning the long-term strategy – therefore, under the able leadership of Prof Melck, this year we will begin planning UP 2025.

University of Pretoria 2010 and beyond

Quality, relevance, diversity and sustainability are the four principles that I believe should drive our strategy and plans for the future.

As we plan the long-term future of UP, what is absolutely essential is the pursuit of quality at every level, a culture of inquiry and relevance in all activities and especially in the core functions of teaching, research and community engagement.

In this highly competitive and demanding context, one of our biggest challenges is to ensure that we attract the best talent to enrol as students and to recruit as staff members.

Regarding quality, it is important to note that there are many wealthy institutions that have not distinguished themselves in teaching, or research. Money is necessary, but money itself is not the sole guarantee of quality.

But, how does a University, like Tukkies, contribute to national development and at the same time attain world class status? The answer is that there is no blueprint but from the experiences of other countries, and particularly middle-income and developing countries, we know what the core ingredients are. There are no absolutes in planning our future. What we do know is that we will need to be adaptable, flexible and responsive.

Relevance is another essential ingredient.

The global economic recession that we are still experiencing has brought this to our attention. The market collapses and the demise of several well-known financial institutions and businesses were due to decisions made by graduates from some of the highest ranking universities of the world. Short-term gain, self-interest and unbridled individualism prevailed. Hence, as UP we must ask ourselves the fundamental question, what are the values we wish to subscribe to in our teaching and learning, research and community engagement? What contribution can we make to correct the imbalances in our country, continent and in the world at large.

The impact of climate change, the growing gap between rich and poor, protests, conflict and violence associated with rising poverty and general awareness of the threat of corruption have brought to the fore the need to rethink curricula – to go beyond the technical in order to contribute to the development of responsible citizenship.

Responding to the changing economic context of the not merely a matter of more of the same, but also about a new set of human skills.

Changes in career patterns mean that the key factors that differentiate success from non-success have also changed. In keeping with the rapid changes in knowledge and technology, understanding one's professional development in terms of a set of static skills is risky. Instead, the demand is for high- level portable skills such as the ability to think, communicate, to focus and an ability to be adaptable. This requires a change in the traditional mindset – we need to embrace change, variety and complexity and very importantly, the ability to compete but at the same time, work in diverse teams.

Therefore, re-examining the what and how of our teaching and learning is part of our ongoing responsibility. Prof Ogude, Vice-Principal for teaching and learning will be giving concerted focus to this area.

A key aspect of our curriculum must be a commitment to inquiry-based teaching and learning from entry level. A concerted focus on teaching and a student life is vital not only for the success of the individual student but also for the research endeavours of the University.

A high quality curriculum that inspires passion for inquiry in our students will help build a stronger, more vibrant research culture.

This is at the foundation of what it means to be a research intensive university. Unless we build a strong foundation or tap root to renew, grow and expand the pool from which the next generation of academics will be selected, we will not succeed in our aspiration to be a great university.

University reputations and prestige are dependent on people – the numbers, the citations and rankings – are an outcome of hardworking, talented people being in an enabling environment where they can ask questions, pursue answers and push the boundaries of knowledge thereby contributing to the development of humanity. In the 21st century an added requirement is that each of us embraces diversity – diversity of thought that is derived through the ability to work in teams of diverse people.

Although staff and student demographics are a critical element, transformation is not merely about numbers. At the heart of transformation must be our commitment as people – each of us opening our minds and our hearts to change – to learn from others different from ourselves, a preparedness to rethink our taken-for-granted ideas. Through interacting and engaging with people from different communities, we expose ourselves to different ways of seeing the world. Our taken-for-granted assumptions and ideas are likely to be challenged, requiring that we reflect on our perspectives and subject our ideas to scrutiny and debate. At the heart of being a university is the pursuit of ideas. Ideas that are debated, investigated, tested and disseminated. High on my agenda is the need for us as a university to support and invest in our people – staff and students. I wish to ensure that we create an environment of support, a culture of openness and inquiry – a place where all our people will feel valued and able to grow and develop intellectually.

I believe that the role of the leadership is to create an enabling environment where students and staff will feel free to express ideas, to

debate, reflect and to be creative. There is also a concomitant responsibility for staff and students – to engage with one another from a people-centred approach.

This is the transformation that I seek for the University of Pretoria – a transformation that is in keeping with our academic mission to be a centre of intellectual creativity and innovation.

If we are serious about moving to the next level of research and academic excellence – then we must create opportunities for staff professional development. In developing a framework for staff development, one of our priorities will be the next generation of scholars. We must increase the proportion of postgraduate students and postdoctoral fellows to enhance the vigour of the culture of inquiry and research. To do so there must be clear pathways from the undergraduate curriculum into postgraduate study so that all postgraduate research programmes have strong tap-roots to ensure well-prepared postgraduate students and to allow those who need more exposure to specific courses to do so.

Our growth in postgraduate students will need to be focussed and planned and centred on ensuring the future employment and careers of the postgraduates. All developments in research point to the growing need for postgraduate training in multidisciplinary teams. By selecting focus areas for growth and expansion in postgraduate education and research, we will enhance our contribution to solving pressing environmental, health and social issues via our scholarship.

A major challenge for the leadership, though, is how to ensure quality and relevance in each of its functions without neglecting any one area. Many universities are known for their world-class cutting-edge research, but in some cases this comes at the cost of top quality teaching and community engagement.

It is often claimed that good research and good teaching go together. But we know that this is not always true – ask any academic who has a full teaching load (I am sure that there are many in this audience) and the answer will be that it is extremely difficult to manage all the responsibilities of being a top class academic. To balance these responsibilities, a university needs an academic strategy that reflects a conscious effort to create synergy between teaching, research and community engagement

My vision is based on creating clear linkages among the core functions of teaching, research and community engagement. To value each of these roles and to avoid a one size fits all approach at the department level.

Linkages among our varied functions and responsibilities is essential for us to grow in a sustainable manner.

Sustainability is a word that is often used in today's society. Mostly, it is used to refer to finances and specifically to the availability of material resources. Increasingly sustainability is invoked to refer to matters related to the environment and climate change.

In my view the simplest meaning is that sustainability requires us to take a holistic perspective – to see the connections and interconnections. Therefore, this year we must commit ourselves to a process of planning that moves out of silos towards drawing connections.

Of course, money is critical. Affordability of our education is our public responsibility. The families of our students and our students themselves are making major sacrifices to gain access and to succeed at UP. To enhance the affordability of our education one of our challenges is to sustain and grow the resource base. Once we see the connections and linkages in our strategy and planning, choices will need to be made.

In making such choices, our primary reason for existence must be at the forefront of our decision-making. And this is education. The most fundamental contribution we can make to national development is through enhancing access and success so that we produce high numbers of quality graduates to fill the skills gaps and thereby improve service delivery.

Higher education is a major driver in bringing about economic and social development. Economic analyses have shown that higher education provides an array of private and public benefits and this is true for developing countries too.

Educational attainment has been shown to be a significant effective lever for societies to increase social capital and social cohesion. Various cross-country studies have revealed that individuals with higher levels of

education also have higher levels of entrepreneurial activity and that entrepreneurs who are more educated are more likely to create a greater number of jobs. Research comparing several countries has also found a positive and statistically significant correlation between tertiary education enrolment rates and indices such as the absence of corruption, rule of law and public administration quality.

All of this points to the need for enhancing access and success. As a public university, this is our main responsibility – to make a positive and direct impact on our national social and economic development.

UP's primary aim must be to produce graduates who are sought after by potential employers and who can make a meaningful contribution to society. It means that the university must seriously invest further in teaching and learning and the quality of student life. The quality of student life is more than what happens in the classroom. A UP graduate should leave the University not only with a valuable qualification but also with good, happy memories of the student experience - residence life, orientation, sport and cultural activities all contribute to later success and life satisfaction.

Continuity and Change

You will observe that UP is already doing some of what I have suggested. My vision as the VC over the next five years builds on the existing strengths. But at the same time, you will note that I am also suggesting changes. As we chart our way into the future, our continued and unwavering commitment to quality, relevance and sustainability will keep us firmly on course to further heights of excellence and impact.

