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KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY MR BUTI MANAMELA MP, MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING AT THE 4th USAF HIGHER EDUCATION CONFERENCE, CSIR CONVENTION CENTRE, 7 OCTOBER 2026

"*Theme: Co-creating a Resilient Future*"

Programme Director, Chairperson of Universities South Africa, Professor Francis Petersen, CEO of USAf, Dr Phethiwe Matutu, Vice-Chancellors and Principals, Academics, researchers and professional staff, Student and labour representatives, Our international guests, Distinguished guests,
Good morning, colleagues.

We gather under the theme "Co-creating a Resilient Future". Before we ask how resilient our universities are, we should ask what we are asking them to sustain.
Are we sustaining institutions as we inherited them? Are we sustaining access to knowledge for those who have historically been denied it? Are we sustaining the capacity of a society to understand itself, solve its problems and imagine a different future?

These questions belong together. A university that cannot pay its bills cannot fulfil its purpose. But a university that balances its books while losing its public purpose has also failed.

Over these three days, you will consider the conditions facing our universities, reimagine their possibilities and work towards a shared future. I want to contribute to that discussion through three moments: the past that produced us, the present that tests us, and the future we must help to create.
Through each moment, I will return to three issues: how we finance the university; how we govern it; and what kind of knowledge and human capability it must develop in a changing world. Public trust connects all three. It depends on the choices we make about resources, power and knowledge.
Let me begin with the university we inherited.

The past and the university we inherite

The argument about the purpose of the university is much older than this conference. John Henry Newman defended the cultivation of the intellect as an educational purpose in its own right. The research university placed the production of knowledge

alongside its transmission. Developmental traditions asked how universities could build the capabilities of a nation.

These traditions have never fitted together without tension. Students want opportunity. Employers want capability. Governments want development. Scholars need the freedom to pursue questions whose value may not yet be apparent. Communities want institutions that take their lives seriously.
Manuel Castells helps us understand these tensions. He describes universities as institutions that form elites, transmit ideas and values, prepare skilled workers and produce scientific knowledge. The balance among these functions changes with history and with struggles over power.

For South Africa, that history is especially important. Our universities did not emerge outside the social order. They developed within colonialism and, later, a system deliberately organised around racial domination.

The University of the Cape of Good Hope, established in 1873 as an examining institution, forms part of that history. So do the colleges that developed into universities, the institutions shaped by missionary education, and the institutions established or reorganised under apartheid.

There was no single South African university experience. There were institutions with different resources, different freedoms and different places in the racial economy. Access to a university education was bound up with who could enter a profession, exercise authority and participate in the production of recognised knowledge.
Funding expressed those choices. Governance protected them. Curricula often gave them intellectual legitimacy.

Yet this history also contains resistance. Students, workers and scholars challenged the purposes imposed on their institutions. Universities became places where apartheid was defended and places from which it was confronted. Some of the most important struggles over the future of our country unfolded within their classrooms, residences and public spaces.

We must hold both histories in view. We should neither romanticise the university as a permanent home of freedom nor reduce it to an instrument of domination. Its contradictions are part of what makes its future worth struggling over.
The democratic breakthrough of 1994 therefore demanded more than a change in who occupied university leadership. It required a different relationship between higher education and society.

The question became how to turn a divided system into a national resource: widening participation, confronting inherited inequalities, building knowledge and supporting democratic life. The 1997 White Paper placed transformation, equity and development alongside academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

That settlement contained an essential insight. A democratic state needs universities capable of serving the public, including by questioning the state itself.
Public ownership alone does not establish public purpose. We know this because institutions sustained by public money once helped to reproduce exclusion. Public purpose must be judged through what an institution does, whose capabilities it develops, whose questions it takes seriously and how freely knowledge can be pursued within it.

The past also leaves us a warning about access. Wally Morrow distinguished admission to an institution from access to the knowledge it offers. A student may be registered and still be excluded from meaningful learning by hunger, inadequate preparation, inaccessible teaching or the absence of academic support.
That distinction brings us directly into the present.

The present and the choices before us

Democratic South Africa has widened university opportunity. That achievement matters. For a family sending its first child to university, access is a concrete change in what life might become.

But the promise of access is tested every day after admission. It is tested when a student needs accommodation, when an allowance is delayed, when a laboratory cannot accommodate a growing class, and when a lecturer has too little time to support students who are struggling.
This is where our first issue, financing, becomes inseparable from the academic project.

Universities are right to ask for predictable resources. Government is right to insist that substantial public investment must produce public value. The difficulty lies in closing the gap between the responsibilities we assign to institutions and the resources available to discharge them.

We must distinguish student finance from institutional finance. They are connected, but they are not interchangeable. Getting NSFAS to work reliably is essential. It does not, on its own, repair a laboratory, renew a library, support a research programme or reverse years of deferred maintenance.
A funded student needs a functioning institution. A functioning institution needs students who can afford to learn. Our financing debate must hold both obligations together.

It must also recognise the differences within the system. Institutions do not begin with equal endowments, infrastructure, research capacity or access to private income. A funding model that ignores these differences can reproduce the inequalities it claims to overcome.

At the same time, transformation cannot be an excuse for waste. Every rand lost through poor procurement, unmanaged projects or decisions taken for private advantage reduces the resources available for teaching and research.

We need an honest account of the full cost of student success. We need to know which costs are necessary for academic quality, which activities can be shared, and which arrangements persist because nobody has been willing to change them.

And we need a fair division of responsibility. The state carries a central obligation. Institutions carry obligations of stewardship. Employers should contribute to developing the capabilities on which they depend. Contributions from students and families must take genuine ability to pay into account.

The measure of success cannot be enrolment alone. We should ask whether students learn, complete their studies and acquire the capacity to contribute to society and build livelihoods.

Our second issue is governance. University autonomy matters because knowledge cannot develop properly under political instruction. A Minister cannot decide the answer to a research question. A donor cannot purchase the right to determine what may be concluded. A council cannot make academic judgement an extension of institutional politics.

As Minister, I must defend the right of universities to produce evidence and arguments that government may find inconvenient. That defence is part of taking public accountability seriously.
Within universities, autonomy must also protect the conditions for academic freedom. Freedom from government interference does not automatically mean freedom for scholars and students if internal authority silences dissent.

Councils must exercise stewardship and oversight. Senates must protect academic standards and the integrity of the academic project. Executives must manage. Students and staff must have meaningful voice. These responsibilities require clear boundaries and working relationships.
When councils drift into daily management, executives evade oversight, or institutional disputes become contests over access to resources, the university loses time, money and credibility. Prolonged leadership instability eventually reaches the classroom, the residence and the research project.
We should examine whether our governance arrangements remain adequate for the institutions we now have. That examination must be based on evidence, with a clear account of where authority lies and how failure is addressed before it becomes an institutional crisis.

Accountability cannot end with the submission of documents. We need to know whether decisions are lawful, whether conflicts of interest are managed, whether concerns are heard and whether consequences follow misconduct.
Nor should we confuse government responsibility with the daily management of universities. The state must act within its mandate, fairly and consistently. Institutions must exercise their authority with the same discipline.

Our third issue concerns knowledge, artificial intelligence and the future of work.
The university has always done more than transmit information. It has taught people to question an argument, test evidence, practise a discipline and take responsibility for what they claim to know. Artificial intelligence makes these functions more urgent.

A system can produce fluent language without establishing that its claims are true. It can generate an answer without understanding the social consequences of acting on it. Its usefulness does not remove our responsibility to judge it.

Klaus Schwab’s recent call for change in universities in the intelligent age invites us to reconsider how institutions teach and organise themselves. We should engage that argument seriously, while retaining the right to decide which changes serve our circumstances and our public purpose.

For South Africa, the question extends beyond whether a student used AI to complete an assignment. It concerns who develops the technology, whose languages and

experiences are represented, who controls the infrastructure and who benefits from the knowledge produced.

We need graduates who can use these tools intelligently and question them competently. We also need researchers capable of helping to build them. African language technologies, appropriate datasets, computing capacity and sound research partnerships are therefore matters of educational and developmental importance.
This work requires the humanities and social sciences alongside engineering and the natural sciences. Questions about bias, power, labour, law and human dignity cannot be settled by computing power alone.

We must prepare graduates for work without reducing every degree to its immediate employment return. A country needs professional competence and productive enterprise. It also needs basic research, historical understanding, artistic imagination and citizens able to reason together.

Across all three issues, public trust is at stake. A student experiences our public purpose through the conditions in which they learn. A community experiences it through the university's presence and conduct. Society experiences it through the quality of our graduates, the integrity of our research and our contribution to public debate.

Rankings can tell us something about an institution. They cannot tell us everything that matters. We must be able to explain what our universities contribute to South African life, including the contributions whose benefits take many years to emerge.

The future and the university we must build

Colleagues, the future is already taking shape in decisions about budgets, appointments, curricula and partnerships. We will not arrive at a different university system simply by describing one.
I would like this conference to help us make choices in each of the three areas I have raised.

On financing, let us work towards a settlement that connects student support with institutional capability. It must recognise the full conditions of learning and the different starting points of our institutions. It must also make clear what government, universities and their partners will each do differently.

We should identify opportunities to share infrastructure and services where this improves provision. We should strengthen partnerships that support research and student development, while protecting academic independence. We should be honest about the resources required and the trade-offs that follow from our choices.
Different institutional missions can strengthen a national system. But differentiation must create room for institutions to develop. It must never become a permanent justification for the privileges and disadvantages inherited from apartheid.

On governance, let us identify the changes that would make responsibility clearer and intervention earlier. Council effectiveness, transparent appointments, conflicts of interest and leadership continuity deserve practical attention.

The test is whether our arrangements help institutions resolve disagreements while protecting their academic work. Disagreement will remain. A university worthy of the

name will contain it. Our task is to ensure that disagreement does not become a licence to destroy the institution in which it takes place.

On knowledge and AI, let us move from general statements to choices about teaching, assessment and research capacity. Each institution should be able to explain what its graduates must understand and demonstrate, how assessment will establish that learning, and what support its staff need to teach well in these conditions.
At system level, we should ask where collaboration can give us capabilities that individual institutions cannot build alone. Shared computing resources, research networks and work on African languages offer possibilities worth examining. These choices must include institutions whose students and researchers already face the greatest resource constraints.

Technological change will also require people to return to learning throughout their working lives. Universities must consider how they can make that possible while maintaining the depth and standards that give their qualifications value.

Across this work, communities must be partners in defining questions and producing knowledge. Industry must help create opportunities for learning and work. Students and labour must have a substantive place in shaping change. Government must listen carefully, make decisions and account for them.
Co-creation becomes meaningful when each participant accepts obligations as well as making demands.

I hope these three days will leave us with a clearer account of the problems we can solve together, the decisions each of us must take, and how we will judge progress. We owe the public more than agreement that the challenges are serious.
The past shows us that universities can reproduce an unjust society and help to change it. The present requires us to confront the distance between the opportunities we promise and the conditions we provide. The future asks whether we have the courage and discipline to close that distance.

We need universities that more South Africans can enter and in which they can succeed. We need institutions strong enough to produce knowledge, and free enough to question those who fund them. We need an academic project that takes the lives and possibilities of this country seriously.

That is the public purpose we must sustain as circumstances change.
I wish you a rigorous and productive conference.

I thank you.