

ADDRESS BY THE MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION, DR BLADE NZIMANDE, ON THE OCCASION OF THE INAUGURATION OF VICE CHANCELLOR AND PRINCIPAL OF THE WALTER SISULU UNIVERSITY, PROFESSOR RUSHIELLA NOLUNDI SONGCA

The Chancellor of Walter Sisulu University, Dr Sheila Sisulu

Chair of the University Council, Advocate Tembeka Ngcukaitobi

Vice Chancellor Prof Rushiella Songca

Members of the University Council

Members of the senior management team of the university

Vice Chancellors and representatives from other public universities

Members of the WSU Convocation

Staff and students of Walter Sisulu University

Honoured guests,

Molweni

It is a great honour for me to be addressing you today on this auspicious occasion of the inauguration of the Walter Sisulu University Principal and Vice Chancellor, Prof Rushiella Songca.

I would have loved to be with you in person to celebrate this exciting moment, however, due to some unforeseen developments I am unfortunately not able to join you.

This is indeed a historic moment for the university to install its first female Vice Chancellor.

I am pleased that we are seeing more women take up Vice Chancellor positions at our public universities. This is a sign of significant progress in our higher education system although we still have a long way to go.

It is however an indictment on us as a society that since the establishment of WSU, it is only now that WSU has its first female head.

This is a clear indication that perhaps we are not moving as fast as we should in ensuring gender equality and representation in key leadership positions in various institutions across the country.

This is something that we need to pay close attention to as we march forward with our transformation agenda and efforts to make our institutions fully inclusive and accommodative to all the people of South Africa, irrespective of race, gender and class.

Madam Chancellor, allow me to take this opportunity to congratulate Professor Songca on her appointment as Vice Chancellor and Principal of WSU.

Prof is a renowned scholar of law and respected children's rights activist. She brings significant experience in the higher education sector as an academic and leader, having served in leadership positions in other universities, including being the Deputy Vice Chancellor of the Walter Sisulu University.

I believe that the WSU Council has made the right decision in appointing a person of your calibre as Vice Chancellor to lead and steer this institution in the right direction especially during these challenging times in the life of our universities.

Increasingly our universities have to grapple with the impact of limited funding as the state tries to balance national budget to respond to a myriad of needs affecting our people.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has not helped the situation as the repurposing and reprioritisation of funds has become an absolute necessity.

WSU's new strategic plan captures the vision of the University as "An impactful, technology-infused African University".

This is indeed a worthy vision and one that, with your leadership Prof Songca, I look forward to it to being realised.

Prof Songca, if you were to ask me, what advice I could humbly offer to you today as you embark on this journey, it is that of mobilising and leading everyone in this institution to prioritise and focus on the academic project to ensure that WSU becomes the very best in its distinctive path of development. And that is how my Ministry will seek to engage and support this great university.

I would like to see WSU promoting goals of an equal, inclusive society, by being equal and inclusive itself.

Key to this is the challenge of transforming the dominant relations of knowledge production within WSU – in order to ensure that your graduates and scholars have a transformative impact on every single sphere of economic, social, cultural and political life they will be occupying.

I also wish to state upfront that I strongly support your push that academics at WSU must improve their academic qualifications. Our university capacity development programme emphasise the need to increase PhDs in South

African academia. Ideally all university academic should ideally have a PhD, and this is the goal we must work towards!

It is again a fact that the South African PSET sector is in transition and grappling with major challenges arising from the global economic crisis and local development imperatives.

WSU also need to figure out how it can create new and scaled-up RDI networks and to plug into innovative spaces created by the Department of Science and Innovation and its entities such as the CSIR, HSRC, ARC to tackle national economic innovation challenges identified in the Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Programme (ERRP) around food security, industrialization, pandemics.

This can only happen if there is more effective cross-system networking and collaboration in deploying scarce resources.

WSU should further explore more systematic alliance with other parts of the PSET system – specifically, with TVET, CET Colleges and SETAs within the Eastern Cape province. It is in the self interest of universities to support and strengthen these other sectors of PSET. It is also a fact that these sectors are crucial in responding to the realist that less than 10 of every 100 learners who start Grade 1 actually reach university. We have a bigger challenge in providing education and training opportunities for the 90 plus of our youth and adults who are outside the university system. One area of contribution by WSU would be to train TVET and CET college educators, just as one example.

Again, in this regard, the District Development Model (DDM) provides a perfect opportunity for WSU to further collaborate with these institutions for development of local skills and talents.

It is in this context that my Ministry initiated the concept of district-level Education and Innovation Precincts to bring together otherwise disparate universities, TVET's, CET's, Setas, schools and other innovation players in particular parts of the country to focus and align resources and energies around socio-economic development issues.

It remains my plea to you Prof Songca, that such initiatives be taken urgently.

Another threat facing our PSET is the growing corruption characterising some, though not all, of our universities.

I therefore urge you Prof and your management to intensify the campaign against corruption and state capture tendencies, to ensure that this scourge does not define what WSU is about.

You will need to work very closely with our law enforcement agencies to expose and take drastic action against those individuals within our system who continue to work with corrupt business individuals and networks. I am also concerned by what I see as targeting of universities by some corrupt elements especially to try and capture university councils, supply chain management, student accommodation infrastructure projects, and registrars offices so as to loot our institutions. In the course of this the academic project suffers. You will have all my support in the fight against corruption.

We must always remember that our institutions are places for education and intellectual empowerment of our youth, not places for tenders and self-enrichment.

I cannot even begin to stress the necessity for us to turn our institutions into safe havens for all the women who work and study at our institutions.

Again Prof, I would like to urge you to wage a war against gender-based violence and patriarchy.

WSU must adopt deliberate and guided programmes to ensure that it transforms itself to reflect the social and intellectual diversity of our society by ensuring the representativity of women and blacks in the management and academic echelons and emergence of new and creative ideas capable of challenging the dominant ones.

I am delighted that the Sibusiso Bhengu Development Programme framework was developed in consultation with our eight historically disadvantaged institutions, of which Walter Sisulu University is one. This programme represents the single largest capacity-development intervention by Government that is wholly dedicated to the future development and empowerment of our historically-disadvantaged universities.

I am grateful to the University for its support in the development of this framework and look forward to its implementation including at this University.

We are committed to the goals of this important programme and in leveraging support from other funding from the Department to support the development of Walter Sisulu University through its strongly articulated vision and mission.

Recently, I was pleased to address you as part of the 35th birthday celebrations of the WSU health sciences faculty. I want to indicate that my department will continue to support the School of Health Sciences in its pursuit of excellence and meeting the country's health needs.

Walter Sisulu, a great leader of the South African people, believed that "The people are our strength" and it is right that a University named after him recognizes the importance of higher education for the empowerment of its students, and the development of the country.

Indeed, universities have a critical role to play in the achievement of our vision of a democratic, non-sexist and non-racist higher education system and the vision of a country where all South Africans are able to achieve freedom and dignity.

In Walter Sisulu's words:

"It is the job, the task of all democrats, wherever we are located, to advance this idea: that nothing short of full freedom will satisfy us."

Prof Songca, I wish you all the strength, wisdom and good wishes for your term as Vice Chancellor of this University and look forward to your leadership of the WSU management team to continue strengthening this important institution and implementing the University's vision for the future.