



**CONGRATULATORY MESSAGE BY THE MINISTER OF HIGHER
EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION, DR BLADE NZIMANDE,
MP, AT THE INSTALLATION OF PROFESSOR ZEBLON VILAKAZI AS
VICE CHANCELLOR OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WITWATERSRAND**

29 April 2021

Programme Director

Chancellor of the University of Witwatersrand, Dr Judy Dlamini

Chair of the Council, Mr Isaac Shongwe

Members of University Council

President of the Convocation, Ms Stacey-Lee Bolon,

Alumni, Staff and students of Wits

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen

Thank you for the invitation to be part of this special event of the inauguration of Professor Zebulon Vilakazi as Vice Chancellor and Principal of the University of the Witwatersrand.

Firstly, let me extend my sincere apologies for not being there in person this evening due to other commitments.

On behalf of the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, we congratulate Professor Zebulon Vilakazi on his appointment as the new Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand, effective from 01 January 2021. Prof, our warmest well-wishes. I am confident that Wits is in safe hands under your leadership.

Professor Vilakazi needs no introduction to the academic community at large and certainly not to the university community. He has been an eminent scholar in his field of Nuclear Physics, and a distinguished leader within the South African higher education landscape, widely recognised by his peers as “the epitome of a world-class researcher who is globally recognised for his scientific work, and for the contribution towards developing higher education in Africa”.

In recent years Professor Vilakazi has played a pivotal leadership role in the sector, both as *Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research and Postgraduate Affairs* here at Wits, and as the Chairperson of the Department of Science and Innovation’s National Working Committee to develop a framework for quantum computing and quantum technology-driven research and innovation in South Africa.

His illustrious academic career and extensive knowledge of higher education as well as the science and innovation landscape both locally and globally augurs well for a prestigious and internationally acclaimed institution such as Wits, and can only take the University to even greater heights going forward.

Professor Vilakazi, your leadership of Wits comes at a time when the world is confronted with the unprecedented challenge of Covid-19 which has impacted all facets of life including our institutions of higher learning.

The world is no longer the same as we knew it about a year ago, and this poses serious challenges and calls on all of us to re-imagine our ways of leading life, and in particular, within the context of higher education; to revisit the manner in which we conduct the university mandate of teaching and learning as well as research.

Comprehensive research into the Covid-19 pandemic, and not just the virus itself, has become a priority the world-over and this impresses upon us to seek creative ways of investing in research and innovation while at the same time not neglecting other intractable challenges that continue to confront our higher education sector.

Challenges of funding constraints and responsiveness of the academic programme to the developmental needs of the country remain persistent and need our creative response.

Wits is a research-intensive university and its research output has been consistently high over the years. Even more impressive is the record of focusing on quality research and disseminating it in quality journals.

The Wits Evolutionary Studies Institute remains not only the largest paleo-anthropological research entity in Africa, but indeed, one of its kind in the world.

Wits' paleo scientists are well respected by their peers internationally and have been involved in some of the ground-breaking research with global impact.

The alumni of this University are, literally, all over the world and I am sure do keep watching the developments taking place at their *alma mater*. I am certain that they will take comfort in you rising to the helm of the institution.

More recently some of Wits scholars have participated in the development of the vaccine for Covid-19 clinical trials, as well as tracking and modelling the spread of the virus.

This is a clear case of social responsiveness and relevance which are some of the core functions of a modern university particularly in a context such as ours where outcomes of scientific research are much needed to guide policy making and the country's developmental objectives.

The outbreak of Covid-19 has left universities with no choice but to resort to remote learning which, in some instances, comprises a hybrid of contact and online learning.

Although this is a positive development in light of our drive towards the Fourth Industrial Revolution whereby the use of new technologies and internet connectivity become the norm, the pandemic has also laid bare the socio-economic inequalities that still beset our society. Not all students had or have access to the internet, and this has had an impact on the quality of their learning during the lockdown period.

In addition to issues of connectivity within a short space of time, universities will have to research and learn lessons from the Covid 19 experience on new learning and teaching methodologies for the future. My Ministry and its two departments is willing to work and partner with universities on this project and task.

I commend Wits and those universities who did their best to provide support to their students to make sure that they had access to virtual learning during this difficult period.

However, the disparities brought about by inequality within the institution and, broadly, in the higher education system require our collective wisdom and not individual claims to success. So, the higher education system awaits your wisdom, Sir.

Despite the above positive developments, you are taking over leadership of Wits University at an extremely challenging times in terms of the transformation of our university system in South Africa, with a lot more still needing to be done!

There are many challenges of transformation, but I would like to highlight what I regard as the three most important:

The most fundamental transformation challenge facing South Africa's university system is that of the necessity and urgency to transform what I call the relations of knowledge production in our university system in particular and society in general.

Knowledge production (and its reproduction) in South Africa still remains largely patriarchal, racialised and with an elitist class bias, including its urban-centric character.

On our side as government we are releasing some of our resources to produce a new generation of primarily black and women academics and researchers through, inter alia the DHET's Staffing South African University Programme and the DSI programme of producing a new generation of researchers.

However, whilst changing the racial and gender character of academia and research communities is absolutely necessary, it is definitely not sufficient. The paradigm of our scholarship needs to be radically refashioned to confront the triple challenges facing South African society - poverty, inequality and unemployment.

This must be the critical content and platform for transforming relations of knowledge production in our country.

It is by forging an intellectual practice that confronts these realities that must be at the heart of transformation. It is not by sidestepping these realities that our university system will become globally competitive, but by seeking excellence and innovation in confronting these triple challenges.

It is also through this lens that we can be able to engage and problematise the current global regime of university ranking systems for a country like South Africa.

This will also help us to understand better that innovation should not only refer to new technologies alone, important as these are, but creative thinking to come up with appropriate solutions to problems facing South African society.

Another key challenge facing our country in higher education is that of protecting and defending the public university system.

Our public university system is the single largest in the whole of the continent, a continent that has, and continues to, experience significant privatisation of university system.

Defending and consolidating a public university primarily has two dimensions:

- a. Maintaining a public university system is in the deepest interests of especially students who come from poor and working-class backgrounds, as private universities tend to be prohibitively expensive thus excluding the poor.

Private universities that accept poor students tend to be of very poor or dubious quality. Either way, poor and working-class students tend to be the main losers with private higher education.

- b. The second, and often neglected dimension, of transforming our university system is that of strengthen it to support the rest of the post-school education and training system, especially the TVET and Community Education and Training colleges.

Universities are subjected to a lot of pressure for access mainly because of the absence of other paths towards post school education options. For example, in a country like Germany, only about one third of school leavers go to university in the first instance, but are absorbed through its TVET and apprenticeship system.

Therefore, it can be argued that the future of our university system lies building a much larger TVET and colleges system, with universities as strategic and highly articulated partners.

c. A third and crucial component of university transformation is that of building a student-centric university system. This has three crucial dimensions:

- A comprehensive student funding model, that incorporates poor and working-class students, an affordable system to support missing middle students; and an expanded post-graduate funding system, also geared towards supporting our science, technology and innovation system.

This is the task I have been asked to deal with by Cabinet, and I intend involving the university sector in developing such a model, including involvement of the private sector as well.

- Building student friendly administrative systems, underpinned by a firm institutional framework for student support. These must be accessible, responsive, holistic and caring student administration and support systems.

As universities we must admit that sometimes students become victims of poor and uncaring administrative systems and lack of empathy and communication.

- Finding alternative, sustainable and inclusive conflict-resolution mechanisms, including working towards elimination of violent confrontation, intimidation and destruction of property during protests. This also places a heavy responsibility on student leadership to better manage and lead protests.

It is in this re-imagining of education and higher education, specifically, Prof Vilakazi, which I think your insight and extensive knowledge of the sector is much needed.

I believe that Wits, under your leadership, will stay attuned to these and many other challenges confronting our university system and communities, and lead the way in demonstrating that you can participate and excel in global cutting-edge research, while remaining locally relevant.

Once again, congratulations to both yourself and Wits on a new Vice-Chancellor. You can count on our support, albeit through critical, but co-operative, engagements as well

Best wishes.

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