

SEFAKO MAKGATHO HEALTH SCIENCES UNIVERSITY

WELCOMING ADDRESS: FIRST YEAR STUDENTS (2016)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am singularly honoured by the opportunity to welcome you at the Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University (SMU) this morning.

This week the focus is on the welcoming and induction of you, our first year students.

It is not only about embracing you as new members of the SMU community, but it is also about preparing you for the challenges associated with your academic journey.

Ladies and gentlemen, first years, it is therefore about welcoming you as part of the SMU community in such a way that the SMU will become your home away from home, and to comfort you that the SMU will do everything within its means to equip you for the road ahead. What is more, we wish to proudly present you as soon as possible to the South African community as well rounded professional people, ready to serve those that are in need of your academic and professional expertise.

The SMU shares your excitement and wishes to live up to your high expectations. But, we are also acutely aware of your fears and uncertainties with regard to your future at the SMU.

Ladies and gentlemen, first years, you belong to a selected group of future leaders and professionals, and therefore, you must be wary of the fact that you are being judged at all times. And by judging you, often a value judgement is made about the quality of your education and, alas, the SMU.

You can't stop people from making judgements, but you can change those judgements and consciously affect them. You will influence those judgements positively by being at your very best at all times, by upholding, from the outset, the ethical principles of your future profession, by vehemently resisting all temptations to cross the line and, importantly, to developing a healthy trust in and loyalty to your *alma mater*, the SMU.

Enrolling at the SMU will be a life changing experience. We sincerely hope that an integral part of your change will be a life-long love for and loyalty toward the SMU, and the conclusion of friendships that will last forever. We wish to make you proud and to empower you with much to boast about among your peers.

But, we should all agree, and do so from the outset, that nothing of the aforementioned will come to fruition without the support of sponsors, parents and families. It is a pity that they are not here this morning. But, nevertheless, I wish to call upon everybody not to disappoint those that are selflessly supporting our ideals and aspirations, amidst telling times.

In their absence the SMU wishes to convey to our parents and families the message that the SMU, as a home away from home, will not succeed, unless the house is characterised by the key constituting elements typifying a homely environment. As this institutional aspiration of the SMU may require certain interventions and sometimes unpopular decisions, we hope to bank on the support and understanding of our parents and guardians.

Ladies and gentlemen, I wish to also mention our staff at this occasion and the pivotal part they play as role models, professionals and educators. I not only welcome them here today, but also wish to record the SMU's gratitude for their commitment, loyalty and inspirational contributions.

I would like to assure you that my colleagues are doing an excellent job, despite the sometimes adverse circumstances and lack of resources. We should applaud the fact that our members of staff are performing their tasks against the backdrop of the widely reported challenges facing the higher education system. Among these are the slow pace of transformation at universities, racism, access to higher education, the need for a decolonised curriculum, serious public financial constraints, the lack of human resources and the total absence of, or the seriously neglected state of existing, infrastructure and equipment.

Notwithstanding the above, it remains apposite for the SMU to commit today to the institutional manifestation of the key elements and aspirations constituting a homely environment, and to expose our students to cutting-

edge, relevant and competitive learning opportunities. However, for our communities and the country, this commitment will remain an echoing sound, soon to disappear across the hills, unless our students commit themselves equally to optimally benefit from the once-off and unique learning and educational opportunities offered by the SMU.

But, ladies and gentlemen, it must be emphasised that the commitment of the SMU is heavily dependent upon its continued ability to identify and understand the challenges it is facing, and a growing strength and preparedness to successfully confront these. There is a critical need for a readiness to institutionally turn on the enabling burners required to ensure the sustained and successful future of this young institution.

No doubt our involvement in the SMU at this moment in time is part of history-making. We all here, and you, as the second generation of first year students, have an important role to play in determining what kind of institution the SMU will be. We are endowed with a unique legacy-making opportunity as we are called upon to emulate the founding achievements of Sefako Makgatho, who played a significant role in the founding of a number of teacher, labour and liberation movements.

The SMU has been established by the government as a new and post-apartheid university with a particular scope and mandate, embodying all the ideals of an inclusive, non-racial, non-sexist, transformed and democratic society. While grappling to finding its own identity and developing a unique institutional culture, the SMU also faced an exciting additional challenge.

The SMU was established both as a new university, as well as by incorporating the MEDUNSA Campus of the University of Limpopo. This incorporation must be embraced by the fledgling institution, as it serves in terms of programme offering, operational capacity, infrastructure and experience as a firm and tested foundation on which the SMU can build its enterprises. This must be done with due recognition of the selfless contributions made by many staff, who despite adverse circumstances, remained committed to the educational mission of the MEDUNSA campus. Equally important, in my view, is the inspirational example set by MEDUNSA students who excelled academically, in

their service delivery and in life in general, competing with the best, despite the multiple disadvantages they had to conquer.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are called to move on and to respond with renewed vigour, passion and loyalty to the mandate of the SMU as a newly established institution.

In this regard I also wish to acknowledge the key role of our student leadership at all levels. We value your commitment to the successful future of the SMU. The institutional manifestation of student governance and leadership has always played a critical role in institutionalising certain key aspects of institutional culture. We rely on your leadership qualities and energy to create and institutionalise new and dynamic dimensions in this regard.

Let's join forces with a view to articulating and embracing SMU's own vision, mission, strategic objectives and priorities. Let's support the quest for quality, not only with regard to the core functions and operations of the institution, but also the student and staff experience.

The task ahead is a challenging one.

Prof Chris de Beer
Interim Vice-Chancellor
Date: 1 February 2016