

# **SEFAKO MAKGATHO HEALTH SCIENCES UNIVERSITY**

## **NATIONAL PRESS CLUB: 9 SEPTEMBER 2016**

Master of ceremonies, Chairperson and members of the National Press Club, invited guests of the National Press Club, Chairperson of the University Council, members of the University Council, the CEO of the Dr George Mukhari Academic Hospital, Members of the Interim Management Team, Directors of the Schools and of Support Services, Members of the SMU SRC, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is indeed a privilege to address you this evening.

Allow me, first of all, to thank the Management and Members of the NPC for affording the Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University (SMU), for the second time this year, the opportunity to occupy the space created by the Club for organisations and institutions to present itself to the media.

This occasion is indeed special as the Club will officially announce the Newsmaker of the Year: “The #FeesMustFall Campaign.” The SMU’s association with this event may, for some, come across as inappropriate and insensitive.

After all, this past week, the South African public was informed of the closure of a number of universities, and the torching of valuable university property, in some instances, wiping out irreplaceable research and historical material. All of this is happening, ostensibly, under the banner of the #FeesMustFall and other related campaigns. The damage done to university property is estimated to exceed the R750m mark. The intangible damage including the loss of academic opportunities, the negative impact the disruption of the academic activities of the respective universities will have on the already low success rate of students in the sector, the academic performance of students in general and the academic stature of institutions is priceless!

The full impact of all of this on the international academic stature and rankings of our institutions will only become clear over time. The first signs of our predicament already showed this week. Despite the fact that our leading South African Universities developed and resourced strategies to improve their international stature and impact, it was reported this week that a number of universities have lost their current positions on the 2016/17 QS World University Rankings. Wits, for instance, dropped 28 places, while UP moved into the 551-600 group. The ranking bodies not only use indicators based on hard data, but also take into account the outcomes of major global surveys. The danger is that the current developments in the university sector in South Africa may have a significant negative impact on the academic reputation of our universities and consequently on their international rankings.

It is also important to note that all of this is unfolding against the backdrop of the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Fees at Higher Education and Training and joint efforts by the Department of Higher Education and Training, universities and the private sector to find solutions for the immediate challenges faced by poor students and the “missing middle”. Universities are made over decades and centuries. It requires not only responses to the short-term challenges, but must take a longer planning perspective to ensure the sustainability of society. Societies that thrive are those with a deeply embedded knowledge system, primarily driven by the university sector.

I am abhorred by the incidents of violence and destruction and disapprove strongly of the continued interruptions of academic programmes, especially during critical phases of the academic year.

It is our duty to engage students, and to burn the late night candle in our efforts to meet their legitimate demands, but it seems that the legitimacy of the course of students are seriously being undermined by elements wanting a commitment to the future success and quality of higher education, indulging themselves in criminal behaviour and short sighted pressure tactics. These aberrations from the rationale of the #FeesMustFall Campaign must be dealt with decisively, and more importantly, must not detract from the important contribution the Campaign has made to shape the agenda and priorities for the permanent and long term change of the higher education landscape. Universities are places of reason and we have a responsibility to induct our student body into this culture of academic discourse.

The SMU’s association with this occasion signals its approach of embracing the opportunities presented by the Campaign to secure a sustainable and well-functioning higher education system, offering quality education and producing relevant and high impact research, whilst meeting its obligation to provide in the human resource needs of the country in support of national strategic development goals. In my message to this meeting I alluded to some of the key success outcomes required in the above regard. These are:

- Find a solution to the legitimate expectation of public institutions to be funded realistically in accordance with their mandatory responsibilities and associated cost drivers;
- Develop a focussed programme of action to give effect, as a sector and institutionally, to the higher education transformation imperatives as articulated, *inter alia*, during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Higher Education Transformation Conference in Durban during 2015;
- Remove the financial barriers inhibiting the access of deserving poor and middle class students to higher education and to bring noticeable relief to their already incurred debt burden; and
- Relief the plight of exploited workers employed by certain service providers of outsourced university functions.

Since the #FeesMustFall Campaign started, the tax payer and universities invested substantial amounts of money in an effort to address the immediate consequences of the 0% fee increase agreed for 2016 and to address, albeit on an interim bases, some of the root causes of the Campaign. I must emphasise though, that while we speak of 0% fee increase, the fact is that the State subsidised what would have been a normative increase across the sector, removing this burden from students for this year.

The Minister of Higher Education and Training earlier indicated the additional investment made by government to mitigate the effect of the 2016 0% fee increase on the system and to alleviate the plight of poor students. This additional investment entails a once-off additional earmarked state grant for universities of R300m for 2016/17 for the 0% fee increase introduced in 2016, an additional R2,5bn for the block grant for 2017/18 for the carry-through effect of the 0% fee increase introduced in 2016, additional amounts of R2bn for 2016/17 and R2,9bn for 2017/18 for the NSFAS, and an additional once-off amount of R2,5bn in 2016/17 for the NSFAS for historic debt relief of students.

But, approaching the 2017 academic year, the sector is faced with an even bigger challenge. University Vice-Chancellors indicated that an increase in income of 8%, in accordance with HEPI, would be required to ensure the continued sustainability of institutions and the quality of education. Certain student and associated forces, however, are canvassing for another 0% fee increase, and some even for the immediate implementation of a fee free dispensation.

Announcements will soon be made regarding an interim dispensation for 2017, whilst the findings and recommendations of the Judicial Commission into Higher Education Fees are eagerly awaited. I sincerely hope that the consultative process followed by the authorities and the collective wisdom mobilised to navigate the dynamic and difficult terrain of fee increases will provide the platform for rebuilding the trust in and stability of the university system.

Ladies and gentlemen, the SMU this evening again wishes to optimise the opportunity to establish important media networks and strengthening the SMU Brand. As indicated before, it has become exceedingly important to forcefully articulate the contexts defining the SMU as a newly established institution, and to influence opinions and perspectives about it.

Let it be known to all that the SMU refuses to be defined in terms of the status of other institutions, be they former or current. The SMU also vehemently opposes the notion to apply historical contexts, limitations and perceptions to describe its role, the quality of its enterprise, and the boundaries of its dreams and aspirations.

The SMU is not the former MEDUNSA, or the former MEDUNSA Campus of the University of Limpopo (UL). It must be clearly understood that the SMU, which was established on 16 May 2014, is one of three newly established universities in South

Africa. It was established as a comprehensive health sciences university, and is the only university in South Africa with an exclusive focus on health sciences education.

The focus of the SMU implies that it carries a special responsibility towards the country, to produce highly qualified health personnel with competencies similar to those who have highly effective health care systems in the world. The special focus of the SMU also poses real challenges for the medium and long term sustainability of the institution, which compels the institution to optimise organisational effectiveness and efficiency, access to resources and the development of support and funding networks.

The aforementioned responsibility and challenge define the vision of the SMU to be the benchmark institution providing holistic health sciences education that meets the health needs of the individual, the family, the community and the population. The SMU's mission is to deliver quality interdisciplinary health sciences research and education, an innovative and technology enriched educational approach resulting in evidence based methods for curriculum development and transformation, and the empowerment of students and staff to provide effective transformational leadership.

Establishing the SMU, ladies and gentlemen, was therefore clearly not the endorsement of any previous dispensation and/or a commitment to the continuation thereof. The SMU was 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.

The SMU Community and its support networks are therefore called upon to join forces with a view to articulating and embracing SMU's own vision, mission, strategic objectives and priorities, and to respond with vigour, passion and loyalty to the mandate of the institution.

The public manifestation of the SMU's distinctive positioning is, *inter alia*, highly dependent upon the media's understanding of the character of SMU, and we thank you again in anticipation for assisting.

The SMU therefore shoulders its responsibility with pride and commitment, albeit sometimes against all odds. Despite the odds, we shall be inspired in this call, as we are entering uncharted territory, by the legacy of Sefako Makgatho, a courageous leader, well ahead of his time, who against all odds made a significant contribution towards achieving the freedom and human rights we are enjoying today.

Thank you.

Prof Chris de Beer  
Interim Vice-Chancellor  
9 September 2016