

NWU Annual Recognition of Excellence in Teaching and Learning event on 19 April 2018

Address to the guests and staff of the NWU (Snowflake Conference Facility, Potchefstroom)

Embracing Excellence and the Democratisation of Learning at the NWU

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Introduction and acknowledgements

Good evening everyone and welcome to this special event to show-case and celebrate recognition of best practice in teaching and learning at NWU in 2017. On behalf of our Vice-Chancellor, Professor Dan Kgwadi, and NWU management I wish to welcome not only our colleagues from across the NWU, but also a number of special guests:

Prof Linda Du Plessis, DVC Integrated Planning and Campus Operations, Vaal Campus;
Prof Willie van Vollenhoven, Chief Director for the Centre of Teaching and Learning (CTL) at NWU;
Prof Nthi Moekoena, Director for the Focus Area: Student Academic Development and Support;
Dr Gerhard Du Plessis, Director for the Focus Area for Curriculum Development in the CTL;
Dr Esmarie Strydom, Director for the Focus Area for Staff Development in the CTL and
Prof Dawid Gericke, outgoing acting Chief Director of the Centre for Teaching and Learning;
Prof Sonia Swanepoel, Dean of the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences;
Prof Lloyd Conley, Dean of the Faculty of Education;
Prof Mashudu Mashige, Dean of the Faculty of Humanities;
Prof Stephen de la Harpe, Dean of the Faculty of Law;
Prof Helen Drummond, Deputy Dean, Teaching Learning of the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences;
Prof Awie Kotze, Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences;
Prof Liezl van Dyk, Dean of the Faculty of Engineering;
Prof Daryl Balia, Dean, of the Faculty of Theology;
Ms Luzelle van Rensburg and the Chief Director's Office who together with a supportive group of administrators and colleagues, helped to organise this event. Thank you for the energy and work that went into this event.

All our esteemed colleagues who participated in ITEA process in 2017 and who are here tonight in recognition of their contribution to, and excellence in teaching and learning at the NWU.

The Democratisation of the Learning

I want to talk this evening the twin themes of Embracing Excellence and the Democratisation of Learning at the NWU. There are several reasons to celebrate excellence in teaching and learning in a special way in 2018. Over the last two years the Council for Higher Education (CHE) has focussed attention at all universities, on the quality of teaching and learning in relation to important issues such as student support, and how this contributes to student success. The Quality Enhancement Project (QEP) which took the form of two phases, focussed not only on innovation within the sector, but also important issues of curriculum reform and inclusion. Its influence on universities cannot be underestimated and the CHE has made it clear that these data will be used to inform the next round of reviews of programmes to be conducted across all public universities. To my mind this is an indication of a pendulum swing in which we have seen a very strong focus on research not always linked to the development of better quality in teaching and learning, swinging back to a recognition that excellence in teaching and learning is worthy of celebration, is more than simply the bread-and-butter work we do as academics. Swinging back to a focus on excellence in teaching and learning is now recognised as linked to the possibilities of excellence in postgraduate work, research and development. You may have noticed that I have referred this evening midst all these fine words, to the word 'swinging'. Obviously this has many meanings not worth looking too deeply into this evening (!), except to say that the pendulum swing is more real in 2018 at the NWU than it has been since I was appointed here in 2011. For the first time in 2018, and as per our new NWU Academic Promotions Policy and Criteria (as approved by the NWU Council in March 2018) an academic can now be promoted to the rank of professor on the basis of strength in teaching and learning. Let's celebrate this! - and please communicate this fact and the possibility it entails to academics in every Subject Group and School of the University. Such developments speak also to a scholarship of teaching and learning going back to the foundations established by the likes of scholars like Boyer (1996).

This evening I also want to describe how we are, thanks to you academics and Faculties, and our key T-L (Teaching-Learning) related support divisions, already shifting to realise the NWU dream and the NWU

Teaching and Learning Strategy (2016-2020). We have long said that we need to shift to integrate information and communication technologies into the curriculum. We speak of this as necessary, but it is actually already happening. The interpretation of eFundi statistics, as drawn from the Annual Report for the CTL (2017) show a dramatic increase in engagement with T-L facilitation in eFundi which indicates that staff and students in 2017 experienced the virtual T-L environment at the NWU increasingly as “enabling”. A comparison with statistics from previous years are provided to illustrate this in quantitative terms.

Figure 1: Total user logins on eFundi at the NWU¹

Year	Total logins
2013	314 007
2014	695 047
2015	801 825
2016	594 824
2017	12 039 268

Consider the differences in terms of internet activity for learning purposes at the NWU between 2013 and 2017 and then I think we can safely assert that what we witness is part and parcel of what is often referred to as the fourth industrial revolution. During 2017 there was a total of 12 039 268 logins for the year – this is the combined data for students and staff logged into eFundi. Compared to 2016 with 594 924 logins this clearly indicates that staff and students use and experience eFundi as an integral part of their teaching and learning experience. Why might we describe this as a revolution? To my mind the exponential increased in usage over time suggest two things: first that our IT Division has managed to plan for and support the increased capacity at NWU, second that there is recognition of the growing demand for access to the curriculum in ways in which the student is able to exercise more direction in terms of both pace and level of learning in terms of engagement.

The use of e-learning resources is not simply a technology matter. The Centre for Teaching and Learning participates in terms of staff development, curriculum advice and instructional design development to support academics to create resources, or make use of resources in a designed and careful way so as to make that experience of the curriculum meaningful and real to our students. Students would not simply access learning resources on the net as a matter of course: the learning must be purposeful, engaging, and enabling for that appetite for learning to stimulated and encouraged. It is thus appropriate to extend our collective thanks as the management of the University to the IT Division and the Centre for Teaching and Learning through whose combined efforts we see this thrilling acceleration of learning resources use in 2017 as truly phenomenal. We are in teaching and learning terms already beginning to live the NWU dream.

The statistics presented here are based on the number of events that were recorded for each of the listed tools. Events include all actions performed by lecturers as well as students and may include uploads, downloads, reads and submissions. The tools most often used within eFundi in 2017 (in terms of recorded events) are:

- Assignments 452 754
- Messages (e-mail from eFundi) 989 739
- Tests & Quizzes 1 091 921
- Lessons 5 665 747 ;
- Resources 20 876 938

Thus the phenomenal use of e-learning resources matches the increase in activity associated with the logins already described. The increase in eFundi logins may also be contributed to the increase in the use of the lessons tool. Table 2 drawn also from historic data shows that the NWU has accelerated its investment into the development of learning sites on eFundi; again this data correlates with the previous three data sets to which we have access in terms of monitoring how e-learning, and what e-learning resources have been used.

Figure 2: Total number of sites created in eFundi

Year	Number of sites created
2006	10 ¹
2007	155 ²
2008	353

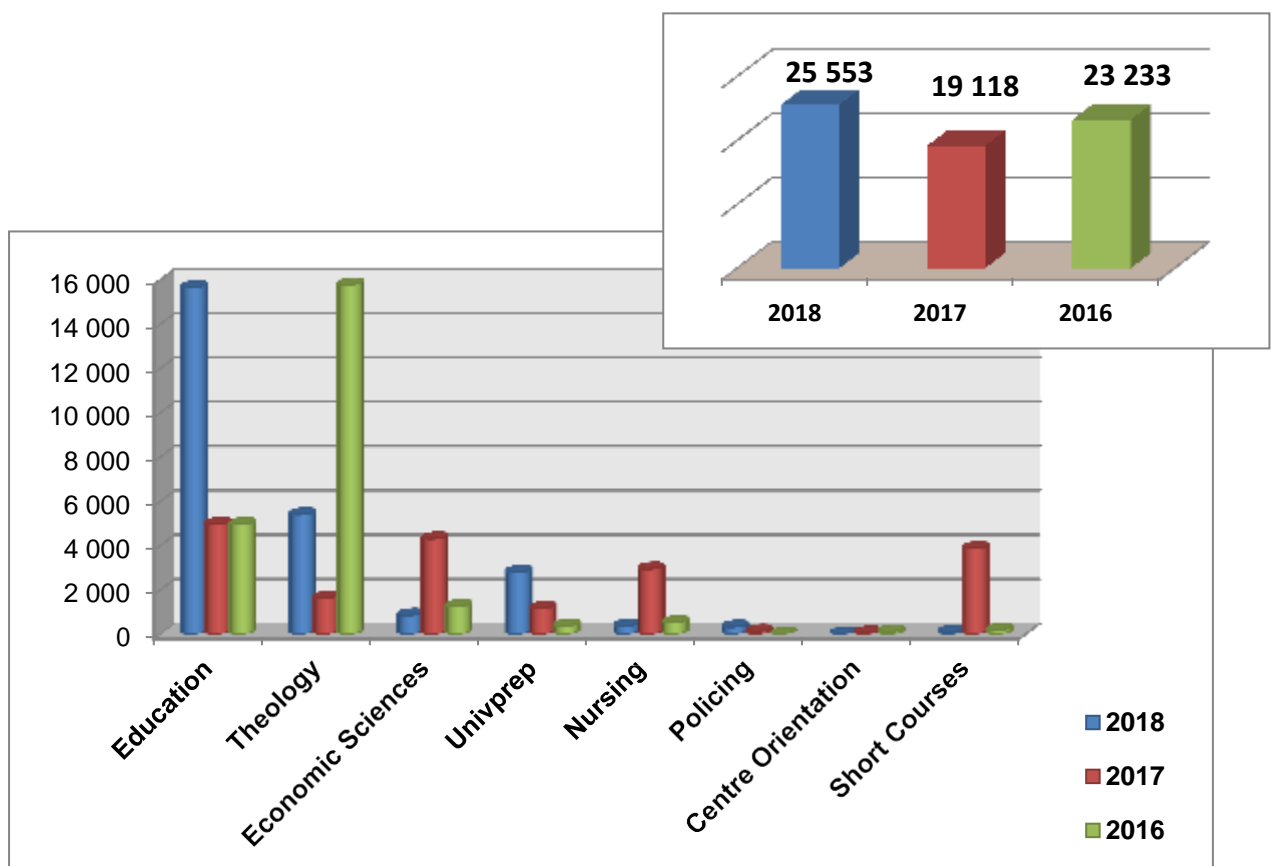
¹ With thanks to Rassie Louw and the CTL who provided this data.

2009	1274
2010	1312
2011	1955
2012	2453
2013	3555
2014	4722
2015	5843
2016	6732
2017	7998 ³

It is important to note that eFundi is increasingly used for non-academic purposes. eFundi has become an important communication channel for many stakeholders such as the SRC, residences and student associations. Support services capacity is also developed to use Fundi project sites as virtual office space increasing the ability of enabling the Teaching Learning environment to include the whole NWU community. This kind of information is not the only source we have that suggests sea-change in the ways in which our students and staff in North-West University are responding to the need for greater self-direction in the curriculum.

And as if that were not all amazing news in itself, we see similar demand and provision occurring in the ODL (Open Distance Learning) of the NWU, similarly we see an appetite for e-learning as a means through which to achieve self-direction. The data drawn from our monitoring systems at the Unit for Open and Distance Learning² over the last three years demonstrates that a planned shift in the use of lecture –capturing and interactive whiteboard broadcasts has yielded twin phenomena of widening access, and deepening learning at the same time. If one compares the number of occasions on which students downloaded the recorded lectures of academics in 2017 (a total of 19118), and compared that to the 25 553 times in 2018 (as of April this year) then I think we can see that the data overwhelmingly supports two features of our NWU Teaching and Learning Strategy’.

Figure 3: Lecture-downloads in the ODL environment overall and per Faculty



² With thanks to Prof Manie Spamer at the UODL who provided this data.

This focus on the integration of ICT into the curriculum, and the migration from contact to open distance learning, as the modality most associated with the further potential of the higher education sector in general, is relevant to the NWU specifically. These two factors leads us to re-think how the role of teachers and students as subjects of particular discourses associated with their disciplines or knowledge domains, has changed.

Embracing excellence in Teaching and Learning and the role of Teacher and Student

Teachers are imbued with an authority that derives from two sources: that accorded by society to its members recognised by virtue of their expertise (depth of knowledge associated with a field and subject), and by virtue of their role as socialisation agents (breadth of knowledge associated with life-experience). The social project that we think of as the “democratisation of learning”, touches on assumptions regarding not only what constitutes knowledge, but also as to what constitutes authority. In other words, when we address issues concerning self-determination and self-direction (as illustrated both with reference to our students and our staff), the problematic concerning authority (who is allowed to speak, and under what conditions, to whom) is as much at issue as is the notion of autonomy: autonomy of the student to determine the direction and pace of the learning, and the autonomy of the academic to select, arrange and design an curriculum that is enabling of self-direction. That autonomy is delimited by social perspectives on freedom, rights and responsibilities in the context of the learning institution.

The notion of the subject (learner and teacher) consequently is the bearer of a dual sense of the individual both as autonomous and as subjected: ‘subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience and self-knowledge’ (Foucault, 1982:212). For Foucault, it is crucial that the individual has a sense of himself as the autonomous subject. This not a concept that is alien to us in this room: often we hear from colleagues in meetings with Faculty Deans or Directors of Schools, invoke the idea of academic freedom. Indeed academic freedom to conduct scientific research is one of the NWU’s key values. Sometimes Deans will speak to DVCs of the autonomy of faculties and in both the individual and the institutional sense there is an assumption that such autonomy is axiomatic to the notion of what it means be an academic. But, we know also that discourses associated with fields operate differentially and precisely on subjects whether the subject is the learning or the teaching participant. Academic knowledge depends on specific techniques of power that regards individuals both as objects and instruments of power (Foucault, 1977:170) operating through both hierarchical power (requiring surveillance) and normalising judgement.

The most pervasive procedure that brings power relations and knowledge relations together through surveillance and normalising judgement is the examination or assessment. A discursive field comprises a range of technologies for managing knowledge and learning and learners and does so in an individualising way. It obscures or masks its own working by focussing on each individual and it simultaneously subjects them to the same normalising procedure of the assessment. In the examination power is rendered visible and the objects of power (those on whom it works) are made to conform to expectations (we these outcomes, key stages, grades etc). This fact of constant visibility is the key to the disciplinary technology of the academic discursive field. Then, through the compilation of records, each individual becomes a case or is individualised. This individuality is recorded in writing. This accumulation of individual documentation makes possible the ‘measurement of overall phenomena, the description of groups, the characterisation of collective facts...’ (Foucault, 1977:190). The modern individual, according to Dreyfus and Rabinow is ‘objectified, analysed, fixed - is a historical achievement’ (1982:159). With this conceptualisation what possibilities exist for the autonomous learner, and within which perimeters? For the learner as she or he progresses through the years of undergraduate studies and migrates, over a period of many assessments from the status of undergraduate to postgraduate, achieves simultaneously the status of the qualification.

Conceived of in this manner, the examination individualises the process of achieving recognition, and thus attaining or qualifying to greater autonomy within a discursive field. In examination settings this is effected physically (seated alone at a precise time, for a precise time span), and with the ritual of official examinations (sealed envelopes, etc.).

Within this typically Foucauldian analysis of the autonomous learner, we seem to focus more upon the limits of autonomy, rather than how that presence is created. Thought of in this manner, we as NWU have inserted important modifiers in terms of creating a teaching and learning environment that is enabling of autonomy, rather than too prescriptive in terms of its limitations: for example, our graduate attributes speak to this idea of the autonomous professional who is a “responsible and engaged member of society”, a “knowledgeable, highly-educated individual and professional”, an “innovative, critical thinker”, a “principled leader, effective communicator and skilled collaborator or team-member” (NWU Strategy, 2015-2025).

The academic, as mentioned earlier, is also a subject made by, and practising within the rules of the discipline. And in our teaching and learning design we have explored over a period of some years more innovative and participatory means where even the technology of the examination, has been further democratised and opened up, as demonstrated for example, in the classroom of Prof Alfred Henrico (the 2016 Distinguished Teaching Excellence Award winner who made a presentation this evening) where peer-assessment and self-regulation features so powerfully in his work. At NWU the Supplemental Instruction Programme, and the Peer Mentoring Programmes as facilitated by the CTL and supported by Faculties, are all designed in recognition that students learn as well, if not better when engaged in learning activities as enabled by peers. The role of peer engagement in group activities, peer-work, peer review is not simply a passing 'fad'. To my mind this hall mark is characteristic of our commitment to develop 21st Century skills in which the skills of collaboration and effective communication are critical parts of students' academic success as described in the NWU Strategy as the graduate attributes mentioned earlier. Thus we can suggest that the combination of expert design, ICT integration, support from IT and CTL, form a partnership enabling of the academic to achieve student success in ways that open access and promote inclusion and self-direction for the student. The academic partner in the learning journey is both the professional in the classroom, as well as the student peer.

In all of the above what we see in the 21st Century is that more opportunities are needed, in fact demanded by the academic subject (that subject being the lecturer and also the student) and that the roles of each blend as the need for autonomy (often described in terms of the growth of a professional identity among academics) and self-regulation increases. In many ways our celebration this evening is a form of recognition of our academics' innovation, capacity and ability to create opportunities in which collaboration and self-direction come together, this in the context of the fourth industrial revolution (Schwab, 2017), the explosion of, and access to knowledge as associated with the internet; making it possible for multiple sources to be shared and a proliferation of knowledge to occur. It is from the available repertoire of systems of ideas that people can constitute themselves, and be constituted in the process to self-direct, self-determine and even self-discipline their thinking, action and imagining. Possible 'imaginings' are enabled through the discourses in circulation: self-direction towards autonomy, and autonomy towards life-long learning, but to what extent can we imagine autonomy beyond the field, and in our own curricula offerings do we allow for disruptions of fields to enable interdisciplinarity? (or autonomous participation across a range of fields)?

To be sure, the subject (student or academic) does not have to be only an authorised participant in learning. Foucault continued to insist on the constitutive nature of knowledge in the construction of social life, and on 'decentering' the subject. His deliberate decentering of the subject (the actor of enlightenment and progress)ⁱ enables investigations of the historical specificity to systems of ideas.

Reflections on university education

Finally, the subject is constituted as plural, as inscribed severally in various discursive spaces at various times. S/he is 'both the site for a range of possible forms of subjectivity and, at any particular moment of thought or speech, a subject, subjected to the regime of meaning of a particular discourse and enabled to act accordingly' (Weedon, 1987:34). Rose (1990) cautions that although anything might have authority at any one place and time, not everything does. Autonomy in learning, although a tenuous and indeed fragile concept, aspires not only to render that which is desired (authorised and sanctioned), but also to sufficient mastery of fields so as to know not only what is articulated within, but also between, them.

As we aspire to democratise learning because we recognise participation and collaboration do indeed make for more meaningful learning as well as teaching experiences, we need to question whether this trajectory sits at odds with our tendency in higher education South Africa to provide for earlier and increasingly discrete areas of academic specialisation of our professional curricula? Examples of curriculum reform the world over seem to suggest that the need at undergraduate level is for a broader and interdisciplinary engagement and provides for skills development not always associated with discrete discipline formations. Tonight's event demonstrates that we as NWU are embracing of academic excellence in teaching and learning as achieved in academic work involving both the commitment to depth of knowledge and the realisation that communication, innovation and development in design and pedagogy are worthy of recognition and indeed reward across the NWU. We are deeply honoured to make these awards and equally grateful to our colleagues for contributing in this way to the University's commitment to excellent and distinguished teaching and learning as hallmarks of our core-business as NWU. Thank you.

Selected References

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ⁱ The assumptions of progress and the individual as agent are argued to be foundational in both liberal and Marxist-Hegelian tradition (see Popkewitz, 1998:6).