

NWU Official Academic Opening in February 2018

Address to the guests and staff of the NWU on the three Campuses

NWU: a vision for excellence and social justice in teaching, learning and research transformation in 2018

Prof RJ Balfour, DVC Teaching and Learning

Introduction and acknowledgements

Good morning and welcome to this special opening of the academic year in which we share some information about the NWU in terms of core business for the new year. Thank you also to members of the management team and the Vice Chancellor for making time to be with us in welcoming academic and administrative staff at the official Opening of the University. In these past few weeks we have seen three First Year Reception events at which hopeful students and their equally excited parents have been honoured as guests of the University. Certainly we want 2018 to be the year of learning, both as we grow into our new structure and indeed as we grow as a unitary institution. Today I am addressing you as part of a unitary NWU and so my focus is both on teaching-learning and research and community engagement, in Prof Phaswana-Mafuya's absence. Kindly allow me to begin by also thanking members of the student leadership of the University, for your presence this morning.

Our Strategy Statement is "To transform and position the NWU as a unitary institution of superior academic excellence with a commitment to social justice". Please learn this words by heart in this year so that if at any moment it seems to you that you are feeling lost, or have lost your way, or cannot recall the purpose for being here, that these words become your maps to the stars for 2018. What are we doing? We are transforming the University. How are we doing it? We are positioning ourselves as unitary institution. Why are we doing this? We are committed to academic excellence and social justice in our academic project. Excellence and social justice are integrated concepts.

NWU ranks among South Africa's best institutions, with a history that goes back almost one hundred and fifty years. It is an institution characterised by a commitment to quality education provision as well as an openness to change and development as seen in its embracing a new vision and mission, and engaging with various structural changes and reconfigurations in the form of incorporations, mergers and restructuring in the most recent decades. In many ways NWU has been regarded nationally as the most successful example of a merged institution, and its spirit of innovation is well acknowledged by the fact that it has long been recognised nationally as South Africa's most innovative University with the highest number of patents registered, as well as the consecutive awards by PanSALB for its integration of African languages as languages of access in teaching and learning. In 2017 5 external programme reviews took place at NWU. The 5 reviews were for the following discipline areas: Chartered Accountancy, Psychology, Graphic Design, Agricultural Sciences, and Law. All 5 commended the University on aspects of the quality of its student experience in teaching and learning as well as its evident commitment to quality of programmes offered, but all 5 external programme reviews also commented on the need for more energy around the transformation of the University in terms of race integration, sensitivity for diversity and a better awareness of relationship with, and role in, the community. The most critical of these reviews was the one received for the LLB at NWU in language and inclusion as well as equity of resources, were raised as key challenges. In this year the Faculty will need to place all its energy in realising the provisions of the LLB Improvement Plan so that our accreditation status moves from beyond its conditional accreditation status, to one of full approval.

Notwithstanding the above, we all have challenges concerning the focus that must come to the entire curriculum in terms of a shift to multimodality, away from the conventional contact and distances modes of provision, to the focus on more meaningful student experience in the classroom, which goes to the issue of experience of online and virtual learning on the one hand, and better integration of race and gender groups as was highlighted in the Council for Higher Education Review of the LLB, on the other hand. NWU if judged purely in terms of its robust approach to social and academic change, is ready for these challenges. The commitment to social justice entails a readiness to embrace change for the better in teaching-learning and student life, and also to make clear the values to which the University aspires in how it plans for, and also responds to the need for change.

At the beginning of this year as registrations have been finalised in these last two weeks for contact as well as distance students alike, it seems as though we will easily reach our targets for new and returning students. In 2017 NWU had just over 70000 students enrolled on this three main campuses, Vaal Triangle, Mafeking and Potchefstroom with the latter campus account for just under 50000 students (bearing mind that 27000 of these students are enrolled with our distance education programmes). In 2018 our overall target for enrolments as University is 9214 students of which we have already enrolled more than we anticipated. The following information is worth bearing in mind as we start the academic year.

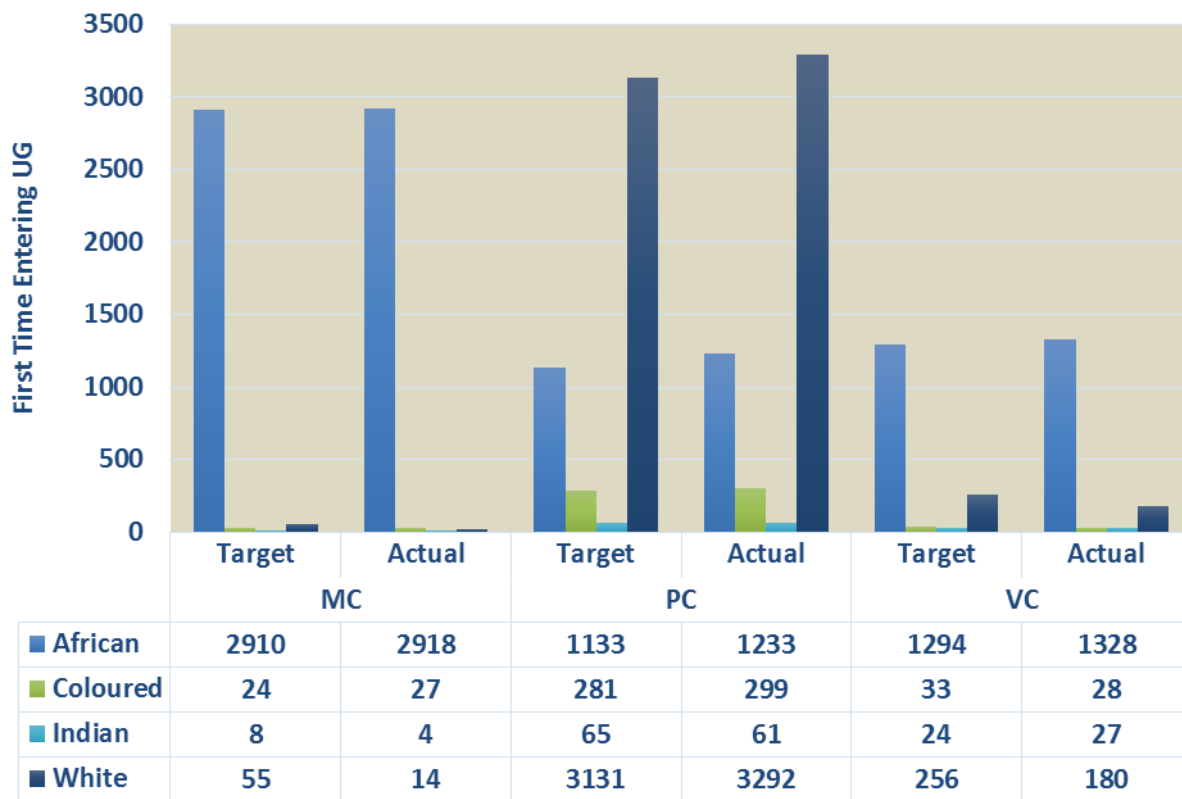


Table 1: Enrolments as at 14/02/2018

We note over-enrolments in the Faculties of Education, Humanities, and Theology. Enrolments are more or less on target in the Faculty of Health Sciences and the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, whilst in the Faculties of Law, Natural and Agricultural Sciences and Engineering we have slightly fewer. What bears noting here is that the academic-emphasis in our enrolments is still overwhelmingly in the Humanities and Social Sciences which is not yet aligned with the University Strategy of emphasising the SET skills associated with the Faculties of Natural and Agricultural Sciences, Economics and Management Sciences, Health Sciences and Engineering.

There are other challenges to which the Finance Division and management in faculties must give attention in this year. We know that 23% of our students are here on NFSAS grants, and that when one adds to this those students that are here on Educational Fundza Lushaka and other grants that that % increased to 53%. This means that funding is not the only proposition that attracts a student to come to this University. With those grants students could reasonably wish to go elsewhere as well. All three of our campuses are situated in towns and town life for a student does not offer the complexity or wealthy of opportunities that comes with living in metropolitan centres. It is thus important that Campus life needs to be organised, rich in developmental opportunities, and a value add to the academic project. You will have seen the press and media reactions to the University's stance on residence activities and the emphasis we seek to bring to the academic value and role of these activities. Universities are not places where students need to be initiated into anything other than the academic project, and purpose of socialisation must be to promote the values we aspire to in the academic project: These values are: ethics in all endeavours, academic integrity, academic freedom and freedom of scientific work, responsibility and transparency and embracing diversity. Diversity is linked directly to how we recruit students not only to our campuses, but also to our programmes. Last week I attended a function of the South African National Association of Agricultural Teach; an organisation which is keen to see developed the BSc in Agricultural Sciences at the NWUs Potchefstroom Campus as well as Education qualification (BEd and PGCE) in these same areas. Two English speaking teachers came up afterwards to me to ask why it was that we had not visited their schools to recruit students to this wonderful University? An obvious answer is that we do not offer the qualifications they desire yet, but more than this is that we should not seem as though we were recruiting particular language groupings to particular campuses. The Potchefstroom Campus is a campus not only for Afrikaans speaking students, who account for 72% of its students. And Mafeking is home to international students as much as it is home to Setswana speaking students who account for 74% of its student population. Simply put, if we seek a diverse student experience, we must seek to recruit a diverse range of students who meet the requirements on the one hand, but who have a reasonable chance of academic success through the languages of their choices, on the other hand, which brings me to enrolment and the NWU Curriculum Transformation Project.

The Curriculum Project at NWU and selected Research Developments: some new plans and challenges

In 2018 management shall embark on a preparation plan with Deans and Faculties concerning the development of a new University Enrolment Plan to be submitted in 2019 for approval so that it can commence from 2020. And because of the historic non-alignment of the enrolment plan to University priorities, we have also asked that all Faculties develop 5 year plans known as their Integrated Teaching-Learning Plans in which the migration of from Contact to Open Distance

Learning, the transition from contact to online learning and ICT integration, and the development of proposed new programmes over the next 5 years are described in one document. This enables us to properly align enrolments on the one hand, with strategic directions, and then also align academic support services (CTL support), with these Faculty plans. I describe this as a Project because I acknowledge that faculties are the academic homes that generate the bright new ideas about curriculum and also how curriculum responds to society and its needs. Faculty Plans, properly aligned to the NWU Strategy, the NWU Teaching-Learning Strategy form the basis of the NWU Curriculum Project. This project is characterised by two dimensions: the rapid transition to ODL provision and the integration of ICT into the curriculum. Please note that I am indicating the two priorities for which the NWU leadership needs to plan, rather than simply indicating that these two transitions should occur quickly or in a haphazard way. The 5 year plan must align to enrolment and Finance planning and similarly align to staffing and staff development planning.

In terms of staffing the University employs just over 6200 members of staff in the service of contact and distance education programmes through a range of support and specialist services in everything from residence and catering services, protection, counselling and academic and administrative staff. These staff are committed people and have between them long years of experience, security and happiness at the University, which in many instances because of the long history of our development as University, make for an ethos and spirit that is people-centred and development orientated. It is a multilingual institution and we aspire to enable students to have choice concerning which languages in which they would like to access learning. The point of these choices isn't luxury, but rather enabling students to exercise self-direction in terms of their learning potential, and to devote our energies to student academic support towards success, rather than simply knowledge transmission.

Curriculum change is also linked to social justice. I began by suggesting that the NWU's national reputation as an innovative institution arises from our readiness for change which I argue arises from its commitment to social justice. Social justice, for example, is what motivates us to open access to our programmes through the provision of extended and preparatory programmes in specialist degrees like the BEd, the BSc, Engineering and the BCom. Social justice is what motivates us to enable a greater diversity of student choice in terms of modality of provision: for example, many of our degrees are offered through open and distance learning. Degrees in Health Sciences, Governance, Education and even IT are offered through our ODL by our Faculties. And, as if this was not sufficient, the University has invested in 53 study centres across South Africa and the SADC region with precisely the purpose of enriching and enabling better student support for young people and older adults already in professions and work, who chose to study through open and distance learning at the NWU, rather than through competitor providers such as UP and UNISA. So too then is the commitment to the Curriculum Plan for NWU, a commitment which is underpinned by a focus on improving academic success rates, enabling students who might not otherwise have accessed the University, to do so, and ensuring that teaching-learning is innovation-based and enabling of self-direction.

Keeping with this theme I mentioned that the 5 external reviews suggest that students experience academics as caring people, and indeed the Culture and Climate Survey confirms that students overwhelmingly regard their academics as responsive and helpful. That ethic of care extends also to our ODL programmes which we need to develop in the next 5 years. The CHE is not concerned so much with how many students we have in these programmes, not so much with how many programmes we offer, but very much about the student experience of support in the ODL environment: support from academics as well as administrative staff. In 2018 as faculties engage with the Integrated Teaching-Learning Plans, be sure you place the attention where it should be: ensuring excellence of standards and quality of student care.

In 2018 the NWU is positioning itself, through an increased focus on multimodality (in the form of online or virtual learning) as well as expanding our commitment to distance education provision, and enabling greater self-direction for students in their studies in the curriculum. Of course this is a long term commitment and I anticipate that we shall only really begin to see the effects and impact of this by the end of 2022. Colleagues I speak to an audience of experienced academics and administrators today: be kind to students, be patient with colleagues: no one will benefit from impatience or indifference to need. All our problems in this world are social ones, and in that sense that are both created by and perpetuated by individuals and groups. It is no wonder that when we explore the roots of both poverty and joblessness, we find ourselves inevitably coming to a point where we must question the structural relations of reproductive labour. South Africa in the period of liberation struggled for a better and more equitable education system than it currently has. Today this remains our most pressing challenge: to provide an education that leads to self and other employment and build institutions that are strong, corruption free, caring and transparent. Transparency is part of an ethic of care as well as a value of integrity. Thus in 2018 we shall be consulting with our students and more deeply with our staff as regards the development of a new language policy for NWU: one in which choice of language becomes possible even if the medium of instruction is not a home language; this with a view to the development of higher level literacy skills in Setswana, SeSotho, Afrikaans and English. Because language is connected to transformation, and transformation to the curriculum we have developed for consultation two Declarations to be approved by the NWU in 2018: the one on Decolonisation and the Transformation of the Curriculum at NWU, and the other on the development of OER resources as part our future commitment to develop open source and education content that enables access to our students to programmes of quality and opportunities to succeed in languages of the NWU.

You will agree that we are now in a time wherein higher education is undergoing rapid and dramatic transformation. NWU is not excluded from that. We live in an era where knowledge is growing in importance in addressing the world's most pressing problems - both in Humanities, Commerce and Sciences, we live in an eras where technology promises both

wondrous possibilities and profound dislocations, when global forces increasingly shape our lives and work, where traditional intellectual fields are shifting and converging, and public expectations and demands of higher education are intensifying. We are now entering an era where funding will follow the student, putting more pressure on universities to be relevant. But Colleagues in this there are so many unprecedented opportunities in these developments—opportunities for our teaching, for our research, for networking, for multi-disciplinary research – in 2018 we thus commit ourselves to stream line our research ethics committee structures, to investigate how to reward as well as recognise cross faculty supervision and research collaboration, how to take research to a higher level without losing sight of the damaging impact of predatory journals and plagiarism.

The University is proud to host 5 research centres of excellence in the form of the Centre of Excellence for Nutrition, for Space Research, for Pharmaceutical Sciences, and Hypertension in Africa. There are a further 10 research units, and 12 dedicated focus areas and yet another 12 niche areas. When looking at the 2016 research output, 41% of the academics at NWU were responsible for the all the publications produced. In numbers, it means that 642 academics published in 2016 a total of 1356.46 units. In 2015 we published 1223.25 units. The 2016 achievement by 642 academics is amazing; it's a wonderful achievement, but what about the 893 academics that did not publish? Here is a challenge for 2018. If every single academic staff member that did not publish last year can contribute one accredited output in 2018 – do you know what that will do to NWU? It will make us the most productive university in South Africa. Often we hear from academics that reasons for not publishing including being busy with own qualifications, high teaching-learning workloads, and insufficient skills development. In 2018 we ask that Faculties put together mentoring programmes, as part of the performance management of academics whom have yet to publish in which younger and less experienced academics are afforded the opportunity to develop key research skills in tandem with a dedicated mentor, for whom the mentoring is also part of the task agreement. You will pick up colleagues that I am a great believer in planning for the future: whatever goal we agree to set for ourselves, if we plan well enough, ensure that our units of analysis are accurate and agreed upon, and we have agreed on what resources will be needed to realise the plan, we can make that NWU dream come true: what is the NWU dream? To be an internationally recognised University in Africa, distinguished for engaged scholarship and an ethic of care. Now of course it is not a simple task to make a dream come true, but imagine the impact that co-publishing, learning communities, inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary projects and mentorship programmes can contribute to this dream.

I want to touch briefly on an ethic of care in relation to research, because it links to one of our other values is academic integrity: in 2016 over 70 articles were published in predatory journals by members of the NWU; this amounts to 63.18 units. We gain nothing from not exercising care about where you publish your work. The ethic of care and the value of academic integrity applies thus to a state of carefulness and its rewards, and carelessness and its consequences. The University has lost much by not being able to count those 63 units, both in terms of reputation and income and I would thus together with Prof Phashwana-Mafuya, urge you to check and double check with the Research Support Office, the credibility of journals. What is tragic about the research published in these journals is not that the research itself is of low standard, but that even were all that research to be excellent, the reputation of these journals makes it impossible for you as academics to include reference to such articles in your CVs. They count for nothing towards your promotion and they count for nothing in terms of income or credit for the University. In truth it is a sad and horrible waste of time and effort.

To our administrative and academic staff, it is important in your work going forward that you protect the University by observing its processes concerning research ethics, ethics in the classroom and that you alert authorities to the abuse of authority or the display of behaviour that suggests a lack of care. Values become part of our lives when the bricks and the mortar around us seem to seep with them. The gift of academic autonomy from the State is premised on an understanding that the University possesses the means and the capacity, the will and the spirit to express its self-regulation as a form of accountability to the public and in ways which are responsible and in the best interests of all its members: staff and students alike so that the freedoms we so value: academic freedom and the freedom of scientific research remain what they are, and where they are.

Concluding remarks

We look forward in coming months to settle the new structure, finalise those many management appointments to which we have committed. I understand that several colleagues have asked us why these appointments seem to take so much time. Bear in mind we are an institution governed by our Statute and thus respecting our own rules and processes as determined in that document must be followed. The University has not, in the period of transition, left the academic structure leaderless: capable colleagues have been properly mandated in their acting positions to take leadership and guide the academic project in the period of the transition. Finally, the University is the place where the leaders of today as well as tomorrow grow and meet in intellectual and social interaction and I hope you will make the most of the opportunity provided at NWU to come together in 2018, welcome our new and returning students and staff to this great University we call NWU.

Thank you.

References:

- NWU Strategy. 2015
- NWU Teaching and Learning Strategy, 2016.
- NWU Learning Interfaces Frameworks, 2017 (draft)
- NWU Framework for Continuing Education, 2017 (draft)