

FULL SPEECH

LAUNCH OF THE WISEMAN NKUHLU CENTRE FOR INNOVATION, THOUGHT LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE (WNCIG)

Country Club Johannesburg

5 February 2026

Salutations

Chancellor of the University of Johannesburg,

Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of Johannesburg,

Dean of the Faculty and leadership of the College of Business and
Economics,

Executive management of the School of Accounting,

Distinguished guests, colleagues from academia and the professions,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is with deep humility and profound gratitude that I stand before you this morning.

Opening Remarks

Allow me at the outset to convey my sincere appreciation to the University of Johannesburg for the extraordinary honour of naming this Centre after me. I receive this recognition not as a personal accolade, but as a responsibility, a responsibility to continue serving the public interest, to uphold the highest ethical standards, and to contribute meaningfully to the intellectual and developmental agenda of our country.

This moment is deeply moving for me and my family. To be recognised by a public institution of higher learning, an institution entrusted with shaping minds, advancing knowledge and nurturing future leaders, is an honour of the highest order.

I wish to assure the leadership of the University of Johannesburg and all its stakeholders that I accept this honour with a solemn commitment to act in full alignment with the mission, vision and values of the university. I undertake to conduct myself in a manner that enhances the prestige of this institution and safeguards its reputation as a centre of excellence, integrity and independent thought.

It is my sincere hope that the Wiseman Nkuhlu Centre of Innovation, Thought Leadership and Governance will serve as a credible platform for rigorous research, courageous dialogue and the crafting of world-class solutions to the complex challenges confronting South Africa.

Central to this commitment is the principle that the work of the Centre shall at all times be guided by independence, objectivity, professionalism and an unwavering dedication to the public interest.

Significance of the Establishment of the Centre

The establishment of this Centre is particularly significant as it comes shortly after our nation commemorated 30 years of freedom and democracy in 2024.

That milestone provided us with an opportunity to reflect honestly, to celebrate what we have achieved, while also confronting the realities that continue to confront our society.

In the early years of democracy, South Africa recorded achievements of historic magnitude.

We dismantled the apartheid system and its oppressive institutions. We restored dignity to millions of South Africans who had endured centuries of dispossession, exclusion and humiliation.

Within a remarkably short period, essential services such as electricity, clean water, health care and telecommunications were extended to communities that had previously been deliberately neglected. Infrastructure reached deep into rural and peri-urban areas that had been written off for generations.

We made unprecedented progress in education and health. Access to basic education expanded rapidly, moving the country closer to universal participation within two decades of democracy. Higher education was democratised, with university enrolments increasing dramatically since 1994, opening doors that had been firmly closed to the majority of our people.

We also built new democratic institutions and entrenched a vibrant culture of human rights, achievements that earned South Africa admiration across the world in the early years of our democracy.

These accomplishments were a powerful affirmation of the aspirations of the liberation generation, a generation determined to disprove the deeply entrenched myths about the incapacity of Africans to govern themselves with integrity, competence and vision.

Acknowledging Socio-Economic Stagnation Since 2008

However, an honest reflection requires that we also acknowledge that since around 2008 our country has experienced a prolonged period of socio-economic stagnation.

This period has been characterised by the entrenchment of institutionalised corruption, the phenomenon of state capture, and the progressive erosion and decapacitation of key state institutions.

The global financial crisis of 2008 and 2009 undoubtedly exacerbated economic pressures. Yet many developing countries that were affected by

the same crisis managed to recover and return to their pre-crisis growth trajectories within three to five years.

South Africa did not.

Our failure to recover was not inevitable. It was largely the consequence of corruption, state capture, weak governance, and misguided economic and institutional choices.

The combined effect of persistent low growth, deepening corruption, institutional decay and economic mismanagement has been devastating. It has resulted in exceptionally high levels of poverty, unemployment and inequality.

Perhaps even more damaging has been the erosion of societal confidence, the weakening of self-belief, determination and agency among individuals and communities. Too many South Africans have lost confidence in institutions, and in their own ability to shape their future.

I would not be doing justice to this discussion without acknowledging the profound and enduring impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the South African economy, further exacerbating an already weak economic performance in 2019. Much as commendable steps were taken to save lives and to alleviate hardship on vulnerable groups, not enough was done to tackle the underlying structural and systemic challenges that hinder the ability of the country to achieve and sustain higher levels of growth, poverty reduction and employment creation. Yes, the partnership with the private sector finally brought “load shedding” to an end which is commendable but the real constraints which include the quality of human capital, political and economic leadership as well as a weak culture of trust, entrepreneurship and innovation remain under-appreciated and not featuring clearly on the national agenda.

Today, the economy finds itself in a prolonged downturn, struggling to attain and sustain the levels of growth last experienced during the 2004 to 2007 period.

It is within this sobering national context that the establishment of this Centre assumes profound importance.

The University of Johannesburg and its Vision

Last year, the University of Johannesburg celebrated its 20-year anniversary, a milestone that reflected impressive institutional progress.

In just two decades, UJ has established itself as a dynamic, research-oriented institution with a strong commitment to innovation, transformation and societal relevance.

As the university now looks ahead to the next 20 years, its ambition is clear, not merely to maintain its achievements, but to fly even higher.

The Wiseman Nkuhlu Centre of Innovation, Thought Leadership and Governance is a strategic initiative that directly supports this ambition.

Mandate of the Centre

The Centre is uniquely positioned to contribute to addressing the deep structural challenges facing our country.

It will do so by working independently and professionally, guided by evidence, integrity and global best practice.

Its mandate is to conduct rigorous research, convene meaningful engagements with relevant stakeholders, and use the outcomes of these processes to craft practical, implementable and world-class solutions.

The Centre will not pursue research for symbolism or academic vanity. Its work will be purposeful, anchored in real problems and directed at real impact.

Priority Areas of Focus

In its first phase, the Centre will prioritise four key areas.

Strengthening the Auditing Profession

First, enhancing the role and capacity of the auditing profession.

The auditing profession remains a critical pillar in strengthening trust and confidence in both public and private institutions. Technical excellence, while essential, is not sufficient on its own. Public trust depends on the unwavering commitment of professionals to place the public interest above personal or sectional interests and to uphold ethical standards of the highest order.

Education and Training for Development

Second, improving education and training so that they become powerful instruments for driving economic growth and reducing poverty, unemployment and inequality.

Education must also cultivate value, ubuntu, benevolence, honesty, self-reliance and responsible citizenship, guided by the timeless principle: *“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”*

Leadership for the 21st Century

Third, preparing leaders for the complexities of the 21st century.

The Centre will draw lessons from the leadership failures of the recent past and contribute to cultivating leaders who understand that they are stewards of institutional assets and reputations; leaders who govern with purpose, integrity and a deep appreciation of their impact on society, the environment and the planet.

Artificial Intelligence and Emerging Technologies

Fourth, examining the impact of artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies.

These technologies present immense opportunities for value creation, but also serious risks. The Centre will focus on ensuring that technological advancement contributes meaningfully to inclusive development while managing associated ethical, governance and institutional risks.

Launch of the First Research Programme

I am pleased to announce that today marks the formal launch of the Centre's first research programme, focusing on enhancing the role and capacity of the auditing profession.

Engagements with key role players will commence immediately to inform this work.

Research on the other priority themes will begin later in the year.

Approach and Collaboration

The Centre will consult widely and engage constructively with stakeholders. At the same time, it will be courageous in identifying weaknesses and practices that must be discontinued.

It will not shy away from uncomfortable truths.

Our findings and recommendations will be guided solely by what is in the best interest of South Africa. Conflicted stakeholders will not be allowed to unduly influence our work.

We will be led by evidence and informed by relevant international experience, while remaining firmly grounded in local realities.

Strong collaboration will be pursued with other faculties and departments at the University of Johannesburg, with professional bodies, the private sector, and with organisations working on similar issues across Africa and globally.

Expanded Reflection on National Renewal and Responsibility

Ladies and gentlemen,

As we reflect on the journey of our democracy, we must recognise that nations, much like individuals, experience moments of promise, moments of progress, and moments of profound testing. South Africa today stands at such a moment.

The challenges we confront are not merely economic or institutional. At their core, they are challenges of values, leadership, accountability and collective responsibility. No nation can sustainably prosper when trust in its

institutions is weakened, when ethical lapses become normalised, or when public resources are diverted from the common good.

Yet history teaches us that periods of difficulty also create the greatest opportunities for renewal. They compel societies to re-examine their assumptions, to strengthen their moral foundations, and to rediscover the principles that once guided them forward.

It is precisely at such a time that institutions of higher learning assume an elevated responsibility. Universities are not only centres of knowledge production; they are custodians of critical thinking, ethical reasoning and evidence-based public discourse. They must help society distinguish between rhetoric and reality, between expedient solutions and sustainable ones.

The Wiseman Nkuhlu Centre is therefore not established to compete with existing institutions, nor to substitute the role of government or the private sector. Rather, it is intended to complement them by providing independent, credible and intellectually rigorous insights that can inform better decision-making.

Deepening the Purpose of Thought Leadership

Thought leadership is often misunderstood as commentary or opinion. In its truest sense, thought leadership requires discipline, humility and courage. It requires discipline to ground arguments in evidence rather than ideology. It requires humility to acknowledge complexity and uncertainty. And it requires courage to speak truth, even when that truth may be inconvenient or unpopular.

The Centre will seek to cultivate this form of thought leadership. It will not chase headlines. It will not align itself with transient political or commercial interests. Its credibility will rest on the quality of its scholarship, the integrity of its processes and the consistency of its ethical posture.

In doing so, the Centre aims to contribute to rebuilding a culture of accountability and professionalism, particularly in areas where public trust has been severely strained.

This includes reaffirming the principle that leadership is not a privilege, but a duty; not a pathway to enrichment, but a call to stewardship; not a platform for power, but an obligation to serve.

Reclaiming Confidence in the Future

One of the most serious consequences of prolonged socio-economic difficulty is the quiet erosion of hope, especially among young people. When education does not translate into opportunity, when institutions appear indifferent, and when ethical failures go unpunished, cynicism takes root. Over time, this undermines innovation, entrepreneurship and civic responsibility.

Reversing this trend requires more than policy reform. It requires restoring confidence that effort matters, that integrity is rewarded, and that institutions can once again be trusted to act in the public interest.

The work of this Centre will therefore consciously engage the next generation. Through research, dialogue and public engagement, it will seek to inspire young professionals, scholars and leaders to believe once again in the possibility of ethical, competent and purposeful leadership.

A Collective Endeavour

Finally, ladies and gentlemen, I wish to emphasise that the success of this Centre will not depend on one individual or office.

It will depend on collaboration across disciplines, across sectors and across generations. It will depend on the willingness of scholars to cross traditional academic boundaries, of professionals to engage honestly, and of institutions to listen with openness.

If we succeed, this Centre can become a living example of how universities can serve society not only through teaching and research, but through moral leadership and national stewardship.

It is my earnest hope that future generations will look back and say that at a moment of uncertainty, the University of Johannesburg chose courage over comfort, substance over symbolism, and service over self-interest.

Closing Remarks

Ladies and gentlemen,

The launch of the Wiseman Nkuhlu Centre of Innovation, Thought Leadership and Governance is more than a ceremonial occasion.

It is a call to renewed seriousness, seriousness about ethics, about capability, about leadership, about education, and about the future we wish to build.

I am deeply grateful to the University of Johannesburg for this honour and for the confidence it has placed in this Centre.

May this Centre contribute meaningfully to rebuilding trust, restoring confidence, strengthening institutions and advancing the collective wellbeing of our country.

I thank you all for your presence, your support and your commitment.

May God bless you all.