Acceptance Speech by Prof Kenneth Matengu on **Election as President of the Association of African Universities**

Rabat, Morocco

25 July 2025

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Honourable Board Members, Distinguished Delegates, Esteemed Colleagues, our strategic partners, Friends in the African and Global Community of Higher Education.

It is not often that a son of a rural subsistence farmers, who themselves spent no more than three years in school, - essentially dropouts, gets to address Africa's highest academic leaders in one assembly. Therefore, in humility, I feel a profound privilege to address you as your newly elected President of the Association of African Universities. I don't think this happens anywhere else but in Africa, where your poor upbringing doesn't determine your future and shouldn't limit your purpose in life. Africa is a land of opportunity and equity! I became a Vice Chancellor at the age of 40, on 1 August 2018, seven years ago. I didn't then and I do not now, take this election for granted. I thank God for the wisdom and grace he grants me. I thank you for your continued prayers. In I salute you for giving young African academics hope. There is a lot I can say about my childhood. I will do so at some point at other platforms.

More so, to be able to address you at this **16th AAU General Conference**, hosted in this radiant and historic city of Rabat where a rich culture and modern technology dance in graceful rhythm to celebrate a new path for AAU at a place of our founding as an association, is a truly moving moment for me. Perhaps for you too.

Today, you chose to make me the 14th President of the AAU. Coincidentally, those of you who know something about biblical numerology would know that the number 14 in the

Bible, symbolizes deliverance, release, and a double measure of spiritual perfection. It is associated with significant events of liberation and is seen as a sign of God's intervention and faithfulness in fulfilling promises.

From the little reading I have done, I note that Rabat has for centuries been a troubled place/city but it stood as a symbol of economic resilience, maritime defence, commercial and political hub. It is no wonder Rabat - meaning the stronghold of victory, or a place where victory always prevails, is where we are declaring together that through higher education, research and enhanced knowledge sovereignty, Africa will achieve its economic liberation! In faithfulness, the promise Africa has to its citizens will be fulfilled. Its natural resources endowment shall be its international competitiveness. To me, it is no coincidence that this year's conference "**Shaping the Future of Higher Education for Innovation and Sustainable Development of Africa" is being held here in Rabat.** This legacy of Rabat reminds us of how **knowledge sovereignty** is key to innovation when anchored in heritage and a unified continental identity. You can see it on the streets of Rabat thanks to the leadership of the Government of Morocco and the hard work of its citizens.

Dear colleagues, distinguished delegates and participants

Nations are poor when they do not dare to invest in the creation of own knowledge. National wealth and prosperity primarily come from the abundance of access to economically viable knowledge and the skills to exploit it. When you know what you don't know, you are better off than the one who don't know that they don't know. For the most part, Africa's resources have been discovered, mined, processed and sold back to us as products - because we didn't know that we don't know what we don't know. Okay, now we know what we have, and we know what we don't know - but it is not enough. We must also have the skills to sustainably exploit what we know and dare to search for what we don't know. In my humble opinion, this is where the AAU advocacy and determination
must come to bear.

As African the lead technical alliance to the AU, We must Create a CONVERSION Capability for Africa.

My main goal during my tenure is to encourage all Universities in the AAU to commit to relevant and responsive higher education. To insist on high-quality education, research and innovation including in basic education because that is our supply base. We must fast-track the continental quality assurance framework and harmonization if our systems. We are most hard-hit by the learning crisis: 7 out of every 10 under 10yr old in schools are functionally illiterate in sub-Saharan Africa. The fact that they are in schools doesn't mean they are learning. We must make it our business. It is our children, and grandchildren after all. I want us to give back to society the best possible outcomes from our universities! It is our shared journey and we boldly walk towards a transformation of this continent through higher education! If we do this, funding will follow us and not us chasing funding.

I can go on and on… now therefore…

I would like to thank you sincerely fellow Vice Chancellors, the AAU membership at large, for placing your confidence and trust in me to serve as your President. I accept this important role of President knowing fully that this is not a position, it is a continental responsibility where work is required. I also truly believe that I am on this occasion only "primus inter paras" first among equals! It is my conviction that the work ahead is shared although I take the lead. I define work as that which we human beings do productively to meet human needs now and in the future.

I thank the outgoing Board for their determination to steer AAU to where it is. A lot has been achieved as you heard from the SG's Report. The board also taught me mentorship by challenging me to take on difficult assignments. They have guided me, supported me and educated me. And most of all I am thankful for all the wonderful friendships I have made in this association. Specially, I would also like to take this opportunity to thank our outgoing President, Prof Bakri Saed and his deputies for successfully steering the AAU to

where it is. The present successes of AAU would not have been possible without their leadership and for all their contributions and the hard work that they put in for the past four years. I think we should give them a standing ovation!

I don't forget the exceedingly exemplary leadership of the Secretary General and his team at

the Secretariat, we love you for what you are and for what you do for the AAU!

And together with the strong support of the new Board we will strive to “Put the Association of African Universities as a Transformative Engine to Africa’s Prosperous Future”. Everyone, no matter who you are or where you’re from, you have the power to do something that improves African lives. You already make a difference every day for those you interact with, continue to do so.

As I said in my pitch to you, I want to see more members join because AAU will bring something unique to its members that other organizations do not – we will incentivize members to share rare research infrastructure, we will provide Leadership Fellowships to train mid-career academics for leadership. We must manage AAU efficiently. Well run universities have a contagious effect on society - good practice goes with the students. We shall promote mobility for African Communities of Practice. These are just few examples.
I hope you are as enthusiastic as I am to see what kind of changes all of us can make together for the next four years. Wherever and at whatever platforms you will find yourself, endeavour to represent your interests, AAU’s mission!

As AAU Board – We are providing the Gateway to the future Africa NEED! Together with you and the Secretariat, we develop, promote and foster higher education for development.

But I want to say to the African youth: never allow your historical past to determine your future. Take charge of your history. Don’t blame, feel obliged to own and change the course of direction. See Africa’s challenges as opportunities for innovation. Use it to

curve a bright future. Consider this: the moon and the stars need darkness to shine. We all have dark times, but we must choose to be the light in those moments of darkness. I too have had many dark times in my life. Be the star, that light for Africa wherever you find yourself. Now I am here. If I can, why not you? Yes, some of you are the future Presidents of the AAU. Believe that it can happen for you to. The key is, find your PURPOSE, everything else will follow with hard work.

Ladies and gentlemen!

It has been a wonderful Conference so meticulously organized and hosted by our member universities here in Rabat. I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to everyone who has worked so tirelessly to make this conference such a massive success! We give you a round of applause Vice Chancellors of Mohammed the V and VI! I wholeheartedly thank the Government of Morocco for graciously hosting us. The hospitality, friendliness and support won't be forgotten. Congratulations to Morocco!!! To all the participants, our dear guests and friends,

Thank you!

Merci!

Muito obrigado!

Shukran!

Asante!

Ndokutenda zvikuru!

Dankie!

Ni itumezi!

Now let's go back to work!

God bless you