

SPEECH OF THE TMF PATRON, THABO MBEKI, ON THE OCCASION OF HIS INSTALLATION AS CHANCELLOR OF THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA: UNISA CAMPUS, TSHWANE - 27 FEBRUARY, 2017.

Programme Director,
Honourable Blade Nzimande, Minister of Higher Education,
Chairperson of Council and Members of Council,
Vice-Chancellor and Principal and Members of Management,
Chairperson of Senate and the Academic Staff,
President of the SRC and students,
Staff and workers,
Distinguished guests,
Comrades, friends, ladies and gentlemen:

I am privileged to take this opportunity to convey my humble appreciation of the honour extended to me by the community of the University of South Africa, led by its Council, as it elected me to serve as the Chancellor of this eminent centre of learning, teaching and research.

In this context I would like to salute my immediate predecessor, Judge President Bernard Ngoepe, whom I have been honoured personally to observe over a number of years as he served with rare distinction and dignity as Chancellor of UNISA.

~~Throughout these years I have been conscious of the fortune UNISA has had~~ that it had him as its Chancellor, given his standing as one of our outstanding lawyers and jurists, a co-architect of our critically important post-apartheid constitutional order, and a senior member of both the South African and African Continental judiciary.

I take this opportunity to pledge that I will do my best to honour the tradition of Chancellorship he has pioneered, always mindful to rely on his tutorship to do the right thing correctly to serve this University and our system of higher education as a whole.

In this regard, among others, I will keep in mind the advice he gave that:

"Be interested in the affairs of the University, obviously within limits as the mere titular head. UNISA is a big institution and has many activities, so it is always rewarding to attend as many as possible. In this way you will be part of the university community, understand its objectives, hopes and even fears or concerns...When I came in I asked that Chancellor's addresses not be too long at graduations. I hope this remains because our graduates' minds are on the conferment of their degrees and they want to go home and celebrate."

On June 18, 2003 when I addressed the National Assembly as it considered the Budget Vote of the Presidency I said:

"We are pleased that we have now established the Higher Education (Presidential) Working Group that brings together the Vice-Chancellors of Universities and Technicons (and Members of Cabinet, chaired by the President). The critical challenge for this Working Group is to contribute to the development of a shared agenda for the transformation of the system of Higher Education and to re-position the institutions in this sector to play a more meaningful role in the transformation of our society."

Accordingly the agenda of the Working Group included the very challenges which have more recently resulted in open political struggles about such very relevant matters as:

- the financing of the Universities;
- providing for the higher intakes of students, with special reference to black students from poor families and disadvantaged schools;

- the expansion of the pool of University teaching staffs, bearing in mind the need to address the challenges of non-racism and non-sexism in this context;
- curriculum development thus to 'Africanise' teaching in our Universities;
- improving research and the production of new knowledge in our Universities focused on the imperative to expand the intellectual cadre and knowledge which would help our country and Continent more effectively to address our multi-disciplinary challenges; and,
- streamlining the interaction between Government and Academia.

I recall that after a number of meetings of the Working Group, a Ministerial sub-committee, which included the President, prepared and circulated a Discussion Document entitled '*The Challenges Facing Higher Education in South Africa, Final Draft*', dated 1 June 2005.

Naturally this provoked a response from our leaders in higher education some of which contested our Government views.

Writing of this report in an article published in 2007, under the title '*Developing Contradictions: Diversity and the Future of the South African University*', Ms Piyushi Kotecha, then CEO of the Southern African Regional Universities Association (SARUA), said:

"(The) sense of urgency for higher education is clearly conveyed in a remarkable discussion paper released by President Mbeki in June 2005. The document raises a sustained critique of the sector, accusing its leadership of being 'too close to the coalface' to understand the critical role that the university needs to play in society...The gist of the critique offered on our universities is that we are collectively and individually under-performing, that we may well not be focussing on the right areas and that the sector lacks self-confidence. It is, in the words of the document, 'timid', and (the document criticises) the role of academics as (being) too much of trainers rather than that of innovators."

Ms Kotecha then posed the question – "are we getting a message from (Government) that higher education needs to reconfigure itself once more in order to meet global challenges for excellence in higher education?"

I am certain that many of our distinguished participants at this occasion today will recall that in the context of the potted history I have sought to convey, the then Vice Chancellor and Principal of UNISA, the esteemed Prof Dr Nyameko Barney Pityana, wrote an Open Letter to then President, Thabo Mbeki.

In this detailed and still relevant April 6, 2005 'Open Letter to the President', Dr Pityana said, among others:

"You were right to raise three critical questions about higher education policy in South Africa during your Presidential Working Group meeting the other day. You asked the questions as to whether society was clear enough in its expectations of higher education; whether we know what resources are necessary to produce such outcomes as we shall determine, and finally, whether we are providing resources sufficient to enable higher education to produce the expected outcomes. All of these are critical questions. But higher education can never function in isolation from the challenges society faces. Higher education must be sustained by the goodwill of the society it seeks to serve. That society must express confidence in its capacity to produce public good, and to dream its future. Government has a vital role in creating that environment, by its public investment in higher education, by seeking and drawing together partners from the private sector, and by generating the

confidence of the society. Unless we do that, we should never be surprised that Africa does not feature among the 200 best universities of the world. Whatever we may make of the methodology and criteria for so determining this ranking, we cannot but recognise that we are some way from the league of world-class universities.”

I was very fortunate to have found Dr Pityana’s 2005 ‘Open Letter to the President’ and therefore his comments which I have just quoted.

Taking advantage of what he reported then, twelve (12) years ago, I ask the questions once again today:

- is our society, that is South Africa in all its echelons, clear enough in its expectations of higher education;
- does it know what resources are necessary to produce such outcomes as it shall determine; and,
- is our society providing resources sufficient to enable higher education to produce the expected outcomes?

I suspect that you, dear friends, believe that I have posed these important questions concerning the critical matter of higher education in part because I have a view about how we should answer them.

I would like to confirm that if I am right in this regard you are correct in your belief. I do indeed have a view about what the objective and truthful response to these questions should be.

However I would like to plead for your indulgence that you allow me the space to delay this response.

This is because, as you know, currently sitting is the Commission of Inquiry into Higher Education and Training, chaired by the Honourable Judge Jonathan Heher, mandated among others:

“to (make) recommendations on...

1. The feasibility of making higher education and training (higher education) fee-free in South Africa, having regard to:

1.1. the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, all relevant higher and basic education legislation, all findings and recommendations of the various Presidential and Ministerial Task Teams, as well as all relevant educational policies, reports and guidelines;

1.2. the multiple facets of financial stability, analysing and assessing the role of government together with its agencies, students, institutions, business sector and employers in funding higher education and training; and,

1.3. the institutional independence and autonomy which should occur vis-à-vis the financial funding model.”

I believe that it is correct that we await the Report of the Commission of Inquiry which may very well make recommendations which would address the challenges of Higher Education many of which were identified by Dr Barney Pitso in the 'Open Letter to the President' I have cited.

I trust that you will agree with me in this regard, relating only to the issue of the timing of our response to the important questions we posed in 2005.

That said, I trust that the Report of the Commission will also alert us to the imperative to engage the whole nation in a serious discussion about the larger challenge of how we should structure our public expenditures over the medium-term.

This arises from the hard reality that our democratic State continues to be faced with the task to address the very many and detailed challenges centred on what our Constitution demands with regard to correcting the injustices of the past and building the new South Africa.

Each of these demands the spending of public revenues in a situation in which, objectively, the State has finite resources whose quantum is principally determined by the possibility of our economy to produce the new wealth from which these public revenues would be drawn.

Accordingly, this means that what is spent to address one social or economic challenge constitutes resources which become unavailable to meet another or other challenges.

Necessarily, therefore, the national budgeting process entails making choices or, in other words, ranking the needs which must be addressed with regard both to timing and the volume of resources to be allocated.

In this context I would like to believe that all of us share the profound hope that the Heher Commission will indeed succeed to provide the practical answers to the urgent matter of the sustainable funding of higher education.

In this regard I was pleased that the Terms of Reference of the Commission refer to “all relevant higher and basic education legislation”, given the

objective and critically important inter-dependence of these two stages of the educational process.

In this context I would again like to underline that it would be important to understand that inevitably such higher expenditures on education as the Commission might recommend would necessarily mean the relative sacrifice of expenditure on some other social or economic need or needs, relating to the matter of public expenditures.

It will therefore fall on our society as a whole fully to accept both outcomes, consistent with the important observation made by Dr Barney Pitso Moseneke twelve years ago that – “Higher education must be sustained by the goodwill of the society it seeks to serve.”

As all of us will understand, this brings to the fore the matter that was raised as long ago as 2005 – namely, “is our society, that is South Africa in all its echelons, clear enough in its expectations of higher education?”

However I must also mention the absolute imperative our society faces of successfully combatting the serious malaise of the illegal and immoral diversion of significantly large quantities of public funds into private pockets, through what is clearly wide-spread corruption.

Speaking as the Chancellor of the then University of East Africa, 54 years ago, in 1963, our late leader, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, said:

“For let us be quite clear; the University has not been established purely for prestige purposes. It has a very definite role to play in development in this area, and to do this effectively it must be in, and of, the community it has been established to serve. The University of East Africa has to draw upon experience and ideas from East Africa as well as from the rest of the world. And it must direct its energies particularly towards the needs of East Africa...

“It must work against prejudice of all kinds, searching always for that elusive thing – truth...

“Yet it [...] must be realised that we are in a hurry. We cannot just think, and debate endlessly the pros and cons of any decision. We have to act; we have to tackle (our) problems now.”

Only two years ago, in 2015, more than half-a-century after these comments by Julius Nyerere, the Dakar, Senegal *1st African Higher Education Summit on Revitalising Higher Education for Africa’s Future*, said:

"African higher education institutions shall commit themselves to the pursuit of excellence in teaching and learning, research and scholarship, public service and provision of solutions to the development challenges and opportunities facing African people across the Continent."

For its part, our National Development Plan says:

"Higher education is the major driver of information and knowledge systems that contribute to economic development. However, higher education is also important for good citizenship and for enriching and diversifying people's lives..."

"Universities are key to developing a nation. They play three main functions in society:

"Firstly, they educate and train people with high level skills for the employment needs of the public and private sectors.

"Secondly, universities are the dominant producers of new knowledge, and they critique information and find new local and global applications for existing knowledge. South Africa needs knowledge that equips people for a changing society and economy.

"Thirdly, given the country's apartheid history, higher education provides opportunities for social mobility. It can strengthen equity, social justice and democracy. In today's knowledge society, higher education is increasingly important for opening up people's opportunities."

I have cited these comments about the vital role of higher education in the effort to achieve Africa's development imperatives to emphasise the point with which I agree that everything should indeed be done in our country to ensure that this sector discharges its responsibilities in a sustainable manner.

It is in this context that we must express our appreciation and understanding of the actions taken by our university students in the context of their #Rhodes Must Fall and #Fees Must Fall campaigns, without approving the completely unnecessary and counter-productive violence and destruction of university property which occurred during these campaigns.

Needless to say, the student movement and our society as a whole must decisively turn its back on forms of protest rooted in the logic of "cutting off one's nose to spite one's face" as illustrated by a plethora of incidents in which we burn down clinics to demand better health care, or destroy lecture rooms because we want free education, or lay whole schools to ruin because we do not like a proposed municipal or provincial boundary.

However, before I conclude I will return to this matter of student activism in the context of our national historic tasks.

I would now like to advance some general propositions.

One of these is that I hold firmly to the view that as Africans we have a shared responsibility to strive continuously, whatever the challenges, to achieve the renaissance of Africa.

As all of us know, literally the word 'renaissance' means 'rebirth'.

For us as citizens of Africa, of which South Africans are a component part, that renaissance means eradicating the legacy of centuries, and perhaps a millennium, of a demeaning European perception of Africa and Africans, as well as the stubborn material and subjective consequences of slavery, imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism.

The eradication of that legacy necessarily means the corollary possibility to construct something new, such that as Africans we define ourselves according to our image of ourselves, exercising our inalienable right to self-determination.

Thus would we, among others, visualise our Continent as one at peace within itself and with the rest of the world, free to determine its destiny, internally empowered to allow the people to govern, to put in place programmes to eradicate the scourges of poverty and underdevelopment, to define the African identity through respect for our history, languages, cultures and arts, and to secure Africa's place as an equal among the nations and Continents.

It is the achievement of all this and more which would contribute to Africa's renaissance.

In the context of everything I have said, I must express my grave concern at events which took place in this city last week in the context of was reported as "an anti-immigrant march".

As South Africans we should never forget the enormous sacrifices that were made by the sister peoples of Africa to help us achieve our liberation and cannot now behave in a manner with treats other fellow Africans who are now resident in our country as enemies or unwelcome guests.

Neither should we commit the offence of viewing or characterising the African migrants in our country as criminals.

When our communities discover or suspect criminal activity in the areas, regardless of the nationality of the alleged criminal or criminals, they must report this to the Police Service. The Police Service itself has an absolute obligation to follow up on these community reports thus to avoid the people taking the law into their hands.

All of us know that our country faces many socio-economic challenges such as poverty and unemployment. Not even one of these problems can or will be solved by attacking the fellow Africans who have joined us as migrants.

Those who organise and participate in these attacks, which must stop, should know that there is absolutely nothing revolutionary, progressive, patriotic, acceptable or of service to the people in what are in fact criminal activities.

Earlier I detailed some objectives we must pursue to achieve Africa's renaissance. I believe that it is obvious that none of these can be achieved without the determined, sustained and committed input of an African intelligentsia.

Put simply, this means that the African Universities, including UNISA, have a special responsibility to strive to occupy the front trenches in terms of producing the ideas and knowledge, cadres and activists who will drive Africa's effort to realise that renaissance.

It is exactly in this context that the UNISA Vision – *Towards the African University in the Service of Humanity* - assumes particular importance.

I am certain that many of us present here today will recall the important statements made by our Vice-Chancellor and Principal Prof Mandla Makhanya during his investiture in 2011 concerning this important matter of being an African University, that:

“When it comes to Africanisation, the development of globally relevant education is particularly important, because the negation and discounting of one's humanity, contexts, peoples, creativity, inventions, technologies, languages, sciences, achievements and struggles, is antithetical to development and denudes lives of their dignity and existence. Africanisation is about engendering education that is completely relevant within the context in which UNISA exists and in which it provides education. This implies that whilst UNISA will remain committed to the diversity of knowledge systems evolving and deriving from the global context and global communities of knowledge, Africanisation will foreground its ethos, work and praxis. Africanisation thus constitutes one of the key ontological expressions of UNISA's culture...”

As all of us would know, or at least guess, there has of course been much discussion among the educationists about what exactly this Africanisation means and therefore what would constitute an African University.

For instance in his instructive 2010 paper, *'Some Reflections on the Africanisation of Higher Education Curricula: A South African Case Study'*, UNISA's own Prof Paul Prinsloo cites Joseph Mensah as having said, among others, that:

"The African curriculum should in the first place arise from, and contribute to African canons of knowledge and praxis, not as exclusionary and opposing Western canons, but as equally worthy and scientifically rigorous and valid..., and,

"An African curriculum has to do with the manner in which the curriculum encourages students to apply their learning to the unique challenges they face in their local communities impacted by global changes. How does an African curriculum allow students to use a language of possibilities (Freire 1989); growing out of cultures of blaming and dependencies to become active participants in pedagogies of rage and hope, critique and possibility? (Hoppers 2001; Giroux 2002)."

For his part, in his 2004 paper on *"African Academics and African Universities in the Twenty-First Century: Needs and Responsibilities"*, Emeritus Professor Eldred Durosimi Jones of the University of Sierra Leone said:

"(The) division between the privileged and the under-privileged (in Africa) has resulted in social and political instability which is bound to continue as long as a significant section of society is left out of the full participation for and enjoyment of the benefits of development.

"What then are some of these challenges that our academics must face if they are to fulfil their role in the surrounding society? They are to produce men and women who in addition to their particular skills as scientists, engineers, teachers, social workers, priests, artists etc., must be sufficiently aware and committed to eradicating this social scourge...

"Our aim in teaching should be to produce men and women who are both critical and creative. Our students should be encouraged to be thinkers and doers rather than accumulators of facts and received knowledge. This must be so if they are to be instruments of change, working towards the realisation of a just and consequently, stable society."

I believe that the point made by Prof Jones that the African University should encourage students "to be thinkers and doers rather than accumulators of facts and received knowledge" is very important because it speaks to the challenge for our universities to educate the change agents, the producers of new knowledge which Africa needs.

As the educators among us know, the very concept – to be educated – as it applies to University graduates, surely means the acquisition of the vital capacity rationally to question established truths, rather than being merely "accumulators of facts and received knowledge".

If I may, in this regard, I would like to cite the eminent scientists, Albert Einstein and Niels Bohr, outstanding creators of new knowledge in the 20th century and winners of the Nobel Prize in the sciences.

Einstein said: "The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvellous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery every day. Never lose a holy curiosity."

He also said: "Whoever undertakes to set himself up as judge in the field of truth and knowledge is shipwrecked by the laughter of the Gods...Education is what remains after one has forgotten everything he learned in school."

Bohr advised that "The opposite of a correct statement is a false statement. But the opposite of a profound truth may well be another profound truth."

In his 2011 Investiture Address Vice-Chancellor Makhanya cited comments that had been made by Prof Paul Zeleza in which he said:

"I dream of truly decolonised, democratised, and decentralised African universities that are autonomous yet accountable, committed to the pursuit of intellectual excellence yet rooted in their communities, effectively managed internally yet working closely with all stakeholders; universities that are Africanised in their staffing, values, pedagogy, epistemologies, and instructional languages, yet are capable of competing globally, contributing to the global pool of knowledge, and responding quickly and effectively to global changes and emerging local needs; universities that attract students and faculty from across the continent and the diasporas, and that participate in extensive academic exchanges with universities in other parts of the world; universities that provide inclusive education..."

In 2010 I was privileged to address a Summit Meeting of African Student Leaders who had asked me to speak on the topic - *"The role of Africa's student leaders in developing the African Continent."*

On this occasion I referred to the comments made by the Ghanaian novelist and thinker, Ayi Kwei Armah, who had said during the same year, 2010, that:

"To wake up from (the) spell (of Eurocentrism) and remake our society and our continent, Africans will have to retrieve our suppressed ability to conceive of our wholeness in both spatial and temporal terms;...we can begin doing this by rearticulating our dismembered society and remembering our suppressed history, philosophy, culture, science and arts;...for this awakening, all necessary intellectual information exists here and now, though in scattered form;...it requires the work of groups of determined researchers to bring it together, to process it, and to make it widely available in forms accessible to all - these being the requisite preparations for Africa's intellectual awakening." (New African: February 1, 2010.)

I then went on to say to the African student leaders and I repeat this today addressing more than the students:

"The regenerated African university must be the principal driver of that intellectual awakening, which awakening will empower the peoples of Africa to remake our societies and our Continent. You, our student leaders and the students you lead, must, through your actions, place yourselves among the principal architects of the new African university.

"Were you to succeed in this historic task of the renewal of the African university, with the benefits that would flow from this, all of us would rise and sound an ovation that would reverberate across the oceans, proclaiming that you, our student leaders, had succeeded to lay the foundations for Africa at last to rebuild Carthage, more than two millennia after the Roman Senator, Cato the Elder, declared that it must be destroyed and with its destruction, that Africa should be attached to the rest of the world as a hapless appendage."

Thus it is that the historic and therefore strategic task we face as a University community is to join hands as the Council, Management, Professors, Lecturers and Researchers, students and workers together to respond to the call made by Ayi Kwei Armah "To wake up from (the) spell (of Eurocentrism) and remake our society and our continent..."

I thank you for your attention.