

ADDRESS AT INAUGURAL CEREMONY

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We are in a new uncertain epoch in the history of the university as a social institution. Bill Readings' interesting, controversial book "The University in Ruins" produced just after his tragic death in a plane crash, is but one example of a genre of writing that contends that the big idea of the university based on the model of the great universities of the 19th and 20th centuries – Oxford, Cambridge, the quintessential research universities of the USA and so on – is dead.

This obviously generates passionate debate since these universities continue to be vibrant places of learning and research, producing new knowledge at unprecedented rates. So what is the argument? Well, there are two key arguments.

The first is we are at the end of a powerful imagination that universities exist for the performance of unfettered research in the quest for new knowledge – knowledge about the origins and mechanics of the universe, the origins of life, the creation of physical and non-physical artifacts, and so on – speaking only to truth. Readings and many others argue that this has been destroyed by unbridled march of the market.

The second argument is that universities are key social institutions at which the production and maintenance of the nation take place. They argued that globalization and the globalization of identities eradicate the need for a nation-building project.

So why is this important to take up in an inaugural speech – notwithstanding the fact that Brenda Gourley once said to me that this is theatre. The reason is simple. If I believed the Readings' argument then I would have to justify my salary. If I did not believe the Readings' argument then I would have to lay out how I, together with 25,000 students and 1,500 staff members can make DUT an exciting, challenging university.

So let me build an argument that says: for South African universities we are still at the start of an exciting epoch – not at the death of one.

Our universities are a part of the global village of universities – a reflection of the deep unity of knowledge; produced, disseminated and placed in repositories by human beings – no matter where and by whom that knowledge is produced.

I am a physicist so bear with me as I draw on the use of an example from the history of Physics. In last week's edition of Nature an editorial reminisces on the brilliant work of James Clerk Maxwell done 150 years ago in which he produced a theory that unified electricity and magnetism – 4 short equations. I quote from this article.

What is it that makes physicists proud to be physicists? One answer lies in James Clerk Maxwell's equations. Physicists can rejoice in a historical

moment of great insight, can share in the expressions of that insight that only they can understand in any depth, can bond over surviving the didactic stress that many students experience in learning to apply them and, above all, can roam freely in deploying the power thus provided for understanding the world and on occasion, changing it. End of quote

This is universal knowledge. Every physicist that has ever lived since Maxwell has had to study them, to understand them, to apply them. It is simple. You cannot be a physicist if you do not know and cannot use Maxwell's equations. Moreover, all human beings are somehow or the other influenced by these equations – whether we actively engage with Maxwell's equations or not. The effective functioning of our power supply system depends on a proper application of Maxwell's equations.

More importantly, physicists know just how beautiful Maxwell's equations are in their simplicity. I do use 'beautiful' here in an aesthetic sense. These equations are an example of the curious desire of the community of physicists to find unifying theories to explain the universe and its machinations.

Universities, irrespective of where they are, must engage with such universal knowledge and they must bear the responsibility of bringing to their students a sense of this aesthetic beauty of such theories.

And our universities must perform research that adds in a step-by-step fashion to such beautiful theories – whether in the physical world or in the world of culture.

Global knowledge belongs to all of us because we all contribute to its development.

The scientific method belongs to us because we use it – and shape it as we use it.

However, universities are not constructed in global space. They are constructed in local space from which they reach out into global spaces. They exist because they have students. And students are born and bred in a local context and when they are at university they live and study in a physical location. Universities have a home. Let me explore this a little further.

Dr Paul Mokoena of the Department of Biotechnology and Food Technology and his students investigate the way in which the Qadi Community in Inanda uses fermentation as a way of enhancing the nutritional status of the community. This project is an attempt to rigorously study knowledge and technology that is embedded in the community. The traditional leader of the community, Inkosi Ngcobo insisted on a memorandum of understanding between the University and the Community. I was invited by the chief to visit the community to sign the document making it clear he would sign the MoU only if the principal pitched up.

We arrived at the community centre at about 09.00 on a Monday morning. The chief had invited community members, school principals, the Elangeni Further Education and Training College and others – about 50 in all. The chief greeted us warmly. He made it clear that he would sign the MoU only if the others at the meeting agreed to it and cosigned. After three hours of discussion we signed the MoU with the understanding that it would allow the research to continue, that the community

would be kept informed of the various research projects and that there would be a deepening of the relationship between the University and the community.

There is a specific responsibility that rests with our universities to produce knowledge that is contextually defined, in this case knowledge embedded in our communities. If this were not a responsibility to be borne by South African universities then whose responsibility would it be?

Between Maxwell's equations and the Qadi community's fermentation is a vast array of engagement involving DUT and government, DUT and industry, DUT and the not-for-profit sector and so on. DUT will be an institution embedded in its context but able to reach beyond it.

Dr Mokoena is not with us today. He is in China meeting with like-minded scientists from many parts of the world, discussing exactly this issue – how might scientists engage with indigenous knowledge or contextual knowledge. What form should the research enterprises take, what responsibilities must these scientists bear and what would the key issues be in terms of the role of the community in such projects. This is a deeply transformative adventure – and it is an adventure.

This leads me to the next point. South Africa's universities are a high volume bridge connecting our knowledge system with that of other nations. They allow for traffic flows of high-level expertise across the oceans and national boundaries – *academie*

sans frontieres, fundamental to the academic process. We have a tiny research system – this makes the bridge all the more important.

The project of unearthing knowledge about our local context is important. But as important is the embedding of that knowledge into the global system. This is important for three reasons – the first is to ensure that the South African research system can enter the global one on its own terms as a producer of new knowledge about the context in which it finds itself; the second is to ensure that the quality of the work done by individuals working in this terrain is of the highest order and comparable to the best in the world; and third and perhaps most important is the need to provide South Africans with the assurance that the knowledge embedded in our society may be subjected to scientific enquiry and may contribute to global knowledge. In want of a more suitable phrase, this is an important element in the creation of a post-colonial future. It is a way to define the South African University.

Adam Ashforth's empathic study of witchcraft in Soweto is a rendition of one slice of the complexity of South Africa – a society with a number of knowledge systems coexisting with each other. Individuals and communities navigate between them. And so it is extremely important that we develop a science system with the empathy, passion and the capabilities to recognize this complexity, to explore these multiple knowledge systems and the fascinating interfaces between them.

For these three reasons alone, the role of universities as inter- and intra-continental bridges has to be built and preserved. It is not simply about having good research

projects, having good ways of international benchmarking what goes on in these universities – it is way of connecting our national knowledge system with the global one. And to constantly remind us of the ultimate unity of knowledge!

Let's return to the original theme. Why is it so exciting to be in a university in South Africa now? Nation building remains one of South Africa's key challenges. Universities are places where societies reproduce themselves – as places of social, scientific and cultural repository, as places where the philosophical and ethical pillars of a society are entrenched in young people, as places where new knowledge is produced to give vibrancy to heritage. They are also places that reproduce political and economic elites.

As we re-think, re-imagine, re-engineer, re-design the South African university we are forced to think of these things. For us the universities are central to the creation of the nation – and so to the creation of those social, cultural and scientific underpinnings that will define us as a nation; hence the importance of research.

This has a number of rather serious implications for universities. We must consider the future of the humanities and social sciences as fundamental to the project of the nation building, the need for curricula to produce the opportunity for students to engage dispassionately and intellectually with the history of southern Africa, for every student in our system to have the opportunity to learn to converse in at least one South African language besides the one that they grew up with. And so on.

The multiple technikon roots of DUT drive the history of this University. The creation – in a step-by-step fashion – of a liberal arts and science base to the curriculum without damaging the mission of the university to produce highly employable students ready for the workplace is a deeply transformative project. Our challenge is not simply to produce employable young people – instruments for the economy – but to produce intellectually rounded young citizens, lifelong learners who are also active members of the economy.

Our universities are central to the project of nation building, to produce new elites that are committed to the creation of a just, free, egalitarian South Africa. They must represent in their essence their South African-ness. Perhaps more importantly South Africans must see these universities as their universities and see their lives and their realities represented in their core activities.

Coming to DUT has forced me to rethink the university. I am very committed to the notion of an institution that is globally and locally connected. A DUT that is deeply embedded in its local environment as a university must do research and there is but a single way in which research can be done. It has to be unfettered and it must be excellent so as to stand up to the highest levels of peer review – that is the minimum requirement. Simply stated research must speak to truth. Needless to say the institution must commit itself to the highest levels of teaching and to constantly work towards improving the employability of its graduates.

However, DUT is not the University of Cape Town or Witwatersrand University or the University of Stellenbosch. The vast majority of its students are the first in their families to gain access to higher education. More than 60% are from rural backgrounds. And so it must serve these young people and their communities well.

A very wise person who has committed her life to the construction of public libraries once said to me that the impulse of government planners is to provide second-rate facilities for poor communities and that this has to be fought. She argued that if we thought of the public library as a socially transformative institution then we had to provide the best possible facilities to these communities – they needed this most.

The same applies to the DUT. Students that come to it must get a first rate education. The project on the differentiation of higher education must address the issue of small-class, intensive, integrated learning at institutions like DUT. This is the only way to overcome the devastating impact of an ineffective schooling system on so many millions of young South Africans. There are wonderful examples at this institution.

This also provides the opportunity for the creation of interaction spaces for young South Africans of different hues to engage with each other over an extended period. How else can we build the basis of a new SA?

So what am I saying? While globally there may be concerns about the way in which higher education sees itself, there is still great opportunity in South Africa to build a

transformative agenda that is linked to the challenges of economic growth, improving the quality of life of people, providing the opportunity for young South Africans to be active citizens of a society in transition and generating the basis for a sustainable nation and nationhood.

AND now it is time for me to reminisce a little. This Sports Centre is on a road that used to be called Leathern Road. And just across the street from here and some 30-40 metres away is a mango tree. Under the mango tree and just to the right of it, there once stood a house. My maternal grandmother and her clan lived there. I grew up in a village called Seven Oaks in the Midlands of KZN but we came to Durban from time to time. I played in the shadow of that mango tree.

I was six years old when my mother and aunts took two of us – my cousin Faizel and I – to a doctor close by who performed circumcisions on the two of us – without any anesthetic. All I can remember is the excruciating pain and the blood. I recuperated here in that house – a recuperation that took 2 weeks – or so I recall.

It was also a time to learn a little about gender and sexuality. I have an older girl cousin, Nazira, and I blithely asked her before my ordeal if she had had her circumcision!! She laughed and I was left trying to fathom the hilarity she expressed.

With the onset of the Group Areas Act this very mixed area was emptied of its people and incorporated into what was then the whites only Natal Technikon.

My family is here today – both my immediate family and the extended one. Rookaya arrived from New York yesterday and will leave tomorrow. And our daughters Nadya and Mishal who have taught me so much about life and about myself. And Nadya's husband Bipin. My mother and brother Shaheen couldn't be with us and I am sad that my father is no longer with us to be able to share this moment. My sister, Rizwana and her family are here and she easily represents my immediate family. But otherwise we are all here and I am deeply grateful for the effort made by all to share this moment with me. My family gave me love, the love of cricket and the love of books.

I am biased though. I have a favourite at the function this morning. That is Zen – our grandson – who must be wondering what this is all about.

But I am also deeply moved by the presence of Mr Bikram Roopai, a schoolteacher who reaches back into my life at a time when I was 11 years old. And Mr and Mrs Ahmed Lakhi – who are like a second set of parents to me. And Rookaya's parents who are a third set of parents.

I must acknowledge the staff at DUT. I am only able to be as effective as you will allow me to be. I wish to thank you all for the support that you have given me and for the dedication and commitment and passion that you show. Together, we must take this institution to the next stage of its development and our legacy will be a lasting one – of that I am very sure.

And finally to the students who are here, to you I say that this function is mostly about you, about trying to understand what kind of higher education best meets your needs so that you may become powerful defenders of our constitution, active participants in the economy, citizens who are critical yet constructive – and understanding the importance of being members of a progressive elite and the responsibilities that you must bear for being in that elite. Your success comes at cost – that you understand the responsibility of compassionate, ethical leadership.

For my part, I must thank the DUT community for constantly reminding me that learning never stops – that I must always listen, always try to come to grips about what it means to be a professor, a student, an expert, a worker in South Africa at a time when our nation still scrambles towards being a properly functioning multilayered democracy.

On behalf of the University I wish to thank all of you for being here today. I am deeply moved by your presence. Thank you.