

Reaching out to the World

New identities on the horizon?

2000

The workings of history are remarkably unpredictable. But when events come to pass, they seem the result of a great plan. Certainly, I am the first vice chancellor of this great university to be installed by Mrs Graça Machel since she became its chancellor in December last year. Seven years earlier, in September 1993, I was the last vice chancellor of the University of the North [now the University of Limpopo] to be installed by a very close relative of hers, who was then chancellor of the University of the North, Mr Nelson Mandela. Today, of all days, I cannot be denied the right to say, truly, I am a member of the family.

Could I, in only one sentence, highlight the meaning of this family whose membership I have just claimed. It represents the convergence of personal and public histories journeying across vast distances in time and space. It is the quintessential experience of millions of southern Africans. A small number of us have traversed these great distances of history and have come to this one spot, to engage in a brief moment of celebration and reflection. I have travelled my own journey for twenty-nine years of a fifty-two-year life, with my lifelong friend, lover, partner, and mother of our children, Mpho. I can think of few other blessings greater than this.

There have been other blessings, such as having been the child of my mother and father, Makhosazana and Nimrod, both ancestors now, who taught me compassion, the love of learning and the life of the imagination. It has been a blessing to have been the pupil of numerous dedicated teachers who inspired me to persevere. My journey with them began from the crèches of Western Native Township and Charterston Location, through the lower and higher primary schools of Charterston to St Christopher's Anglican High School in Swaziland, where I and many of my peers began a long life of exile.

Other blessings were a triumph over adversity. They include many years living in Lesotho, an island of freedom in the dark days of the total onslaught, a country that gave many of us the unforgettable experience of being students at the University of Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland, where lecturers and professors from all over the world taught freely an equally international student body. Above all, Lesotho was a place to call a home from home, and a base from which to see the rest of the world. It was from there that I became a citizen of the world.

I am at this moment also aware of another vast distance of time and space, one heavy with meaning and responsibility. It is the distance between me, the eighth vice chancellor of the University of Cape Town, and the first. I am conscious of having been asked to play a role that others in between, all remarkable and distinguished individuals, have played in the history of this university. I am awed by the continuum of immense significance, which links the present to the past in ways that South Africans are only beginning to learn to accept and appreciate as something inseparable from the definition of who we are. President Mbeki captured this complex definition in his famous "I am an African" speech to the Constitutional Assembly on 8 May 1996.

Indeed, as we meet one another across vast distances of time and space, we cannot but come to realise that each one of us brings a high store of value, up until now unknown in the public domain, because we have come from a past that did not allow us to share our value. Now, after some hesitance, flickers of recognition are occurring. That is why those moments and places where we can meet, in our schools, in our universities, in our churches, are so important as sites of mutual discovery.

This mutual discovery I am talking about is not a sentimental process. Rather, it is an historic phenomenon that comes in the wake of initial assertiveness of South Africa's black, newly enfranchised citizens, and the anxious withdrawal from centre stage of its white citizens. But the assertiveness and confidence was later to be tempered by an increasing sense of vulnerability in the face of the enormous task of having to confront not only national and regional challenges, but global ones as well.

Concomitantly, the anxiety and loss of power among white fellow citizens is compensated for by an increasing confidence that may come from the sense of being needed. These subtle shifts in interdependence can often be misinterpreted as powerlessness, on the one hand, and racist arrogance, on the other. They actually represent a process of mutual discovery that presents us with a unique opportunity to explore an interdependency that has immense cultural implications.

We are pushed towards diversity, no longer by a political imperative but by felt social necessity. Demographic diversity in the workplace, in our schools and on university campuses becomes a principle of survival rather than a mere political objective. It ought to be a central, energising feature of the factory floor, the corporate boardroom, church service, and of schools and universities, shaping their curricula.

The recent 'shape and size' report of the Council for Higher Education recognises the need for a fundamental attitudinal change in the manner in which South Africans look at the higher education sector. It makes a very significant statement:

The 36 public higher education institutions inherited from the past are all South African institutions. They must be embraced as such, must be transformed where necessary and must be put to work for and on behalf of all South Africans.

This statement recognises that a new South African identity expresses itself through an inclusive possessiveness of the human and physical landscapes we have inherited. It addresses a major concern I have had over many years that the higher education sector has been one of the most conservative institutional sectors in our new democracy. Embracing the racial and cultural divide even more vociferously after 1994, it has been difficult to change. For this reason, this sector is crying out to be freed from the psychic prison of inherited divisions, vigorously defended, among other things, through the discourse of redress and institutional autonomy.

It is all tied up, of course, with the politics of race. While the concept of institutional autonomy has been counterbalanced with that of 'accountability,' that of 'redress' remains locked in with 'entitlement'. I have always argued, even from the perspectives of the disadvantages I have experienced that institutions should not receive special attention because of their positions within a system of colour coding, but because they have been identified to play defined functional roles with

the broader perspective of national development. The abandonment of colour coding ought to promise greater, unexplored freedom. But enjoying this freedom comes at the price of embracing vulnerability and demanding hard work.

It is increasingly problematic that institutions compete on the basis that one institution has more black students than another. The potential abuse of 'blackness' through high-enrolment and programmes of inferior quality that yet generate subsidy income may become a dangerous trend. Having black students should also mean providing the programmes of the highest possible quality. Diversity should become a quality-assurance issue at a fundamental level rather than a posture signifying deracialisation. Deracialisation is about more than numbers; it is about bringing to bear new influences on inherited institutional cultures.

It needs to be stated that black students who qualify should have the freedom to walk into any institution of higher learning in this country and feel at home. We cannot limit the field of possibility for any student. But, by the same token, the responsibility on all institutions to offer quality learning environments is one that should be shouldered in partnership with government and the funding agencies willing to assist. What is unacceptable is for black South Africans to limit their options through a reflex resort to an outmoded system of colour coding, by turning their backs on any of the thirty-six institutions of higher learning they have inherited. To do so would amount to no less than a surrender of historic rights achieved through sacrifice.

All South African institutions of higher learning have a responsibility to build on some inherited strengths. But as they do so, they should strive to remain true to the values of democracy, equality, nonracialism, and academic freedom. These inherited strengths should be supported by policy positions that are able to recognise inherited value even while subjecting that value to a necessary critique of its origins. Such a critique is an essential condition for holding any particular institution accountable to the broad democratic and humanistic goals of our country. This perspective should go a long way towards rendering our institutions of higher learning refreshingly normal. Then we can focus on the pressing issues.

All our institutions of higher learning face similar problems: declining enrolments; global competition from private higher education providers; an economy that is not growing fast enough; a government subsidy that will not significantly grow in the short to medium term; the unfolding impact, as yet not fully grasped, of the HIV/AIDS pandemic; the phenomenal growth of knowledge economies; the formation and increasing power of regional demand for high-level skills in management, science and technology, arts and humanities, media and communications.

In this situation, every institution is called upon to assess its possibilities. This means any number of things: focusing closely on the core functions and roles of higher education institutions; accurately identifying competitive strengths and channelling scarce resources towards strategic choices; forming complementary institutional relationships through regional partnerships; enhancing institutional ability to expand resource bases; and achieving high levels of relevance.

In the context of this picture, I look at my new university, my home for the next few years, and feel excited by the fact that our students, members of the next generation of South Africans, have an opportunity to extend the wings of their minds and characters in an intellectually stimulating and culturally diverse environment. They learn in an environment with students from more than seventy

different countries. It is wonderful; that they do not have to travel far and wide in order for them to acquire membership of the new network, which will effectively replace the old white schoolboy networks that have run this country for so long. The networks of the future will be culturally diverse and global.

I am excited by the prospect that the University of Cape Town, located in a city decidedly multicultural and increasingly identified as an international city, the destination of many around the world, is well positioned to be our country's international university. Already locked into world-class research in several fields, we have an obligation to consolidate our position in this regard. It is a competitive advantage we have a responsibility to maintain.

With our strong research base, we are positioned to build new sustainable partnerships providing high-level expertise to local, provincial, and national governments. We also have the capacity to be world players through similar partnerships with international and global institutions in Africa and beyond. We are committed to establishing strong partnerships with the private sector through innovative joint ventures with the potential to yield considerable mutual benefit. This trend is not only desirable, it is mandatory.

It is important for us to remember, though, that universality always arises out of local experience. Our strong research base would be even more valuable if it did not forget the community within which the university is located.

The concentration of highly talented people, highly dedicated to the university, although the pool of talent is not yet sufficiently diverse, has to be maintained and broadened, motivated to stay, urged and rewarded to innovate. But we do have to make strategic choices about where we want to be most effective in the short to medium term. For example, we have to be more adventurous and less complacent about being a traditional, medium-sized, residential university.

If it is correct that education in the Western Cape is the second revenue earner after tourism, then further investment in our solid regional education infrastructure is guaranteed to yield immense, long-term benefit. The Western Cape as South Africa's and Africa's knowledge centre is not only a possibility, it is an emergent reality.

The opportunities for regional partnerships among education institutions in the Western Cape are enormous. For example, institutions of higher learning in the Western Cape will have failed the people of this region and the country if they do not, in partnership with the national and regional governments, rescue our ailing provincial health sector from the clash of institutional missions. Inventive collaborations must be the new norm. But such collaborations will not yield their full benefit without a partnering of strong individual institutions.

I have become intensely aware of the consistent support that the University of Cape Town has received from its diverse alumni in this country and all over the world. Equally so, there are donors and foundations who, in their various ways, have believed in the future of this university and the special role it can play. We invite them to continue to take the journey with us. It is of tremendous significance that in the massive fundraising exercise that resulted in our new and magnificent library and other upper campus developments, the bulk of our funding came from South African sources.

This immense asset, as it reaches out to the world, will be put to the service of the people of this country and our continent. It is a special privilege, for which am eternally grateful, to have been given the opportunity to take the University of Cape Town towards higher levels of commitment and engagement with its diverse communities. This is a project that has to succeed.