

Degrees, diplomas and certificates graduation ceremony: 30 July 2018

Address to the graduands, guests and staff of North-West University (Potchefstroom)

The role of education in South Africa's economic crisis: sustainability or survival?

Prof RJ Balfour, 2013

Preliminary remarks

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I am Professor Robert Balfour and on behalf of the Vice-Chancellor of the North-West University, Prof Dan Kgwadi, I am delighted to convey both our congratulations to the graduands present today, and our appreciation to the families, loved ones and friends honoured as guests of the university and our students.

Goeie more dames en here. Ek is Professor Robert Balfour, en namens Prof Dan Kgwadi ons Visekanselier van die Noordwes Universiteit, is ek baie bly om u as graduandi ons gelukwense te gee vandag. Ek wil ook ons waardering vir die ondersteuning van families, geliefdes en vriende, vir ons graduandi, uitspreek.

While this is a formal occasion in which we honour the achievement of graduating students, please feel most welcome to celebrate the occasion and the graduates as they cross the stage. We would be grateful if graduates and guests do not leave the hall until the last student has had the opportunity to cross the stage, as a gesture of respect and appreciation of their achievements. I would also like to welcome our guests present on the stage today:

- the pastor, Prof George Lotter, who led us in scripture and prayer and who will conclude this ceremony with prayer;
- Prof Herman van der Merwe, member of the Council of the NWU and Deputy Dean in the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences;
- Dr Bertus Roux, Acting on behalf of the Registrar, who will present the degree hoods;
- Prof Sonia Swanepoel, Dean of the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences;
- Prof Liezl van Dyk, Dean of the Faculty of Engineering;
- Prof Awie Kotze, Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences;
- Prof Stephen de la Harpe, Dean of the Faculty of Law;
- Prof Eno Ebenso, Dean of the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences;
- Prof Daryl Balia, Dean of the Faculty of Theology;
- Deputy Deans, Directors and members of the academic staff present today. All are most heartily welcomed.

Address to meeting

Today I want to talk about the role of education within the context of the continuing crisis in the global economy. When it started in 2007, analysts predicted recovery within 18 months. Instead within the first year of the crisis the US banking sector woke up to the mis-pricing of risk associated with over-inflated mortgage values. In South Africa, the banking sector congratulated itself on the success of its conservative monetary controls which prevented banks from acting like investment companies. Less obvious between 2008-2009 were the longer term consequences of the financial down turn. Few economists in 2018 would claim that the world has indeed recovered from what occurred in 2007. Unemployment in South grew steadily after 2007.

As professionals here we come from communities in which those consequences are still felt. The loss of 14 thousand possible jobs in the mining sector in Rustenburg alone, together with the loss of a further 6 thousand jobs associated with Harmony Gold in 2013 was devastating news in that year, following as it did on crises in education in 2012: you may remember the Limpopo and East Cape textbook scandals in 2012. Education and its role in the expansion of the economy cannot be separated. We should perhaps be buoyed by the gradual improve since 2007 improvement in Grade

12 results (73,9% in 2012, and 70.2% in 2011), and so would expect in general that a more educated group of young adults would be able to access higher education and the job market with a degree of relative success. And given that education has for many years formed the single largest component of government spending (17.95%) (Jones, 30) these signs ought to be hopeful. Except that the job market has shrunk rather than expanded in the ten years since 2007 making the welfare state in South Africa all the more difficult to sustain. Even in 2018 performance indicators in the mining sector predict further job losses to be experienced in the sector arising from international market trends, a weakened rand, and also the rising costs of production (Seccombe, 2018,). Even in the global North weakened economies have all but caused the collapse of welfare state systems designed to sustain the most vulnerable of the population (the unemployed, the youth, mothers and the elderly).

If Greece is an example of an expensive welfare state that cannot sustain its own welfare policies then, we recognize that the ability to sustain state pensions for the elderly, mother and child support grants, unemployment support for those recently retrenched; all these depend on the labour of productive people. How do we define what a productive person is? In industrialized countries, productivity is associated with the mechanization and technology in what is termed the knowledge economy. Far from exporting resources, Europe exports mostly skills and technological innovation. We see popular examples of this everywhere in the media. If a machine can do the work better than I can, then replace me with a machine, or replace the labour I might otherwise have done. As technology advances so too does the level of skill. A history of economic development shows that agricultural and mining work, the main employment of most in the early 19th Century, came to be diminished in not only in role in the economy, but also in status in the Northern hemisphere. A glance at industrial revolutions shows that the response to technology growth led to rural depopulation and urban concentration. Arising from that example, if mechanization is the means to improve production, then an ability to innovate in industry, is the most highly prized of skills today. Unsurprising then, is the focus of modern education policy in South Africa on science, technology and mathematics (and the literacy to make this possible).

You do not have to be an economist to know that without work on the farmlands or in our mines, migrancy to cities accelerates, the cost of labour in the cities is driven downwards, and the more vulnerable people become to working for wages which cannot sustain daily life. Quick relief obtained through credit (as occurred in Greece) serves in most cases to extend hardship, rather than end it (Steyn, 2013, 6). What is seldom commented upon in the Greek example referred to earlier, are the poor levels of education quality and low participation levels of Greek people in higher education. In this way Greece is similar to South Africa in terms of high levels of under-qualified or non-qualified labourers. Labour-intensive economies cannot be easily sustained in the longer term unless there is a commitment to raise the skills and education levels of the population – this with a view not simply to secure employment, but rather to create employment opportunities. The comparisons to South Africa are obvious, except that Greece is a so-called developed country.

‘Levels of education’ is thus a more recent measure of what a productive person can be, and it is the focus on that potential, that ‘can be’, to which we as professionals devote our lives. The more a person understands about the limitations of a context or environment, whether physical or economic, the more likely that person ‘can be’ able to find or create the means for over-coming those limitations. As P.K. Rao (2000) argues, education rather than being a cure to unemployment, is the means by which highly skilled people work more intelligently to overcome the challenges of diminishing resources to sustain ourselves better. Sustainability, far from simply about protecting the environment, is concerned with sustaining the future of humanity, and key to that future is the protection of our world so that it remains a source for life for our people.

In South Africa the wages earned by manual labour (of the farmers and the mineworkers) provide what is minimally possible for a dignified man or woman to live when education has not been accessible. And, in the context of rising costs and unemployment even such wages have become been insufficient. How then to address parity of wage, with parity of skill? We do not say that working with your strength and hands is unimportant; rather we say that work without education is no investment in

the future and evidently no protection against adversity. Nelson Mandela saw as much in 1964 in a statement taken at his trial: "There are two ways to break out of poverty. The first is by formal education, and the second is by the worker acquiring a great skill at his work and thus higher wages" (Lowne, 133, 2011 from Mandela, 1995). To obtain a great skill in work we need professionals, themselves highly skilled, to educate our labour to those levels which can sustain efficiency of production, competition, and wage-level. And, at the same time, and rather than repeat mistakes of the past in which production at the expense of the environment was a key characteristic, we need people with skills and the emotional and academic intelligence to know how make the most of what they know in the context of a prerogative to sustain life, diminishing resources, and the environment itself.

Today is a special and historic graduation for the NWU. It is the first Masters Degree Ceremony in which students from all three of our campuses are gathered in one place to receive their degrees. These high levels of education achievement celebrated today come with a clear message to us fortunate to here: as you re-enter the workplace help us as South Africans to create rather than simply secure employment; to make our economy more productive and more competitive so that the connections to social justice are not lost and that we can still afford to care for the poor and the weak in our society. The levels of specialisation and expertise obtained through your studies testify to your achievement today is a celebration of the fact that by attaining these qualifications you know not only more about your work, but more about knowing how to make better use of what you know (the greater skills described earlier, and the better capacity to sustain and create employment). North-West University is committed to realizing these aspirations with you, and thus to help you make not only your dreams, but the dreams of those for whom potentially you are able to create work, come true. I thank you.

Concluding remarks

Ladies and gentlemen, we come now to that part of our celebration today where we confirm the degrees, diplomas and certificates awarded to our students present and so I would like to announce the following: **"I hereby confirm the following degrees, diplomas and certificates on the candidates whose names appear in the programme"**.

Presentation of graduates

Vote of thanks

Following such a tremendous recognition of the achievement of our graduates today, let us remember the dedication of our students to their studies, the long nights and weekends spent studying and preparing to improve their qualifications and lives. Let us offer one round of applause again to our students here.

Let us also remember the parents, families and loved ones, friends and support teams of our graduates and without whom the achievement celebrated here today would not have been possible, and so let us offer to them a special round of applause.

Finally, to the staff of the faculties and schools of the North-West University who worked with the students, guiding and enriching their lives through the sharing of wisdom and knowledge, let us offer to them too a special round of applause. Enjoy your day and may you travel home safely after this ceremony.

Before closing, I call on the Pastor to conclude this graduation ceremony with a prayer and then we shall stand to sing the National Anthem of South Africa.

Prayer

Please stand for the singing of the South African National Anthem

“By the power vested in me, I hereby dissolve this meeting of the North-West University”.
End

References

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