

From a Post-Apartheid to a New South Africa: journeys incomplete and destinations not yet reached

Prof RJ Balfour, 2018

Preliminary Remarks

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I am Professor Robert Balfour and on behalf of the Vice-Chancellor of the North-West University, Professor Dan Kgwadi, and Campus DVC Prof Fika Janse van Rensburg, 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, 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:

- **Prof Daryl Balia** who led us in Scripture reading and prayer and who will conclude this ceremony with prayer.
- **Mr Lourens Kruger** on behalf of the Registrar (who will represent the degree hoods).
- **Prof Schutte** who is representing the Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences
- **Mr Jacques Hugo**, Member of the NWU Council, and Chairperson of the Campus Student Council.
- **Representatives of the Faculties.**

Address to Meeting

Today I want to talk about the relationship dismantling the legacy of Apartheid education and the creation of a new South Africa. Dealing with redress and inequality associated with the legacy of apartheid is part of what must be done to create the conditions necessary for a new non-racist, non-sexist and multicultural South Africa. Education institutions (schools, higher education institutions, adult education centres) and national education initiatives (the mass literacy and numeracy campaigns) are perhaps still the only systemic means available to achieve that. The ideals of our new democracy are everywhere evident in policy documentation and have motivated the massive reorganisation of education in the post-apartheid era.

That said, a distinction, as implied previously, does need to be drawn here between the aspirations associated with the ideal of a 'new' South Africa, and the wide-ranging initiatives aimed at dismantling the damaging policies and systems associated with the race hierarchies of the apartheid era. These initiatives include policy reform to allow for mother tongue instruction in schools, the national school feeding scheme, the school quintile system in which government support for schools is determined in

relation to the ability of communities to pay fees; the national student loan scheme to support poor and disadvantaged students to access university education, and the racial integration most of our schools and universities. That said, has all of this been enough? What seems clear 20 years after 1994 is that South Africa is still very much a post-apartheid state; in other words, it is still concerned in its politics and education practices with the consequences and legacies of apartheid systems and values (race separation, separate development, race supremacy, ethnocentricity, sexism, homophobia and xenophobia).

The undoing of old systems and values, while facilitated through changes brought about through policy, strategies and frameworks, needs yet to be undertaken at a much deeper level in education practice. This is very clear when you look at media reports concerning race and language at universities and schools in South Africa in which there is still a need for integration, mutual understanding and acceptance. As much is evident when one considers the divisive politics underpinning the legal challenges, whether brought about by State departments, or school governing bodies, or university Councils in relation to language policies that, on the one hand, work to preserve language rights associated with certain groups, and on the other serve to exclude groups from access to quality education and to undermine race integration (a pillar of the transformation project in South Africa). These disputes are divisive, alienating and have the consequence of polarising groups of people in our country. Thus when we look together at problems school or university underpreparedness, for example, we see that because of rights-based-divisive politics, the problem is not seen to be the problem of the whole nation, but rather the problem of particular races or particular language groups. This consequence impacts on a daily level even in the way we teach where teachers will say typically that the language teacher must deal in high schools, with the language 'problem', failing to see that student-academic literacy whether in school or university, requires that every academic and every teacher be also a competent teacher in the medium of instruction. Unless we thus change our practice (rather than superficially just changing policy), we deepen old divisions and old wounds of the past.

There are dangers in representing the transformation of education simply as a policy or even curriculum project intended to achieve historical redress only. Njabulo Ndebele et al. (2013, 17) argues that: 'Seeing this problem (student underpreparedness or readiness) as an articulation gap (DoE, 1997, 2.34), rather than just as student underpreparedness, opens up possibilities for positive action within higher education, because a gap can be closed from either side', but the social dynamics requiring attention in South African schools and universities or colleges suggest that a commitment to education in its wider sense remains critical, even urgent, if the problems associated with race, gender and language are to be addressed:

Representivity among graduates, in terms of race, gender and social class, is essential for equity, for developing the talent across the population, for setting a balanced development agenda, and for maintaining the public's respect for and faith in ...education (Ndebele et al. 2013, 32).

The will to accommodate a diversity of groups (whether on the basis of gender, linguistic diversity, ethnic identity or religion) sits in uneasy tension with the national imperative to create a new South African citizen who understands why differences are really a cause for celebration in an environment of multilingual and multicultural diversity. That shift, from differences that provide the basis for exclusion, to differences that make for a will to come together (and be inclusive), will take a long period of time to get right in our country. Thus, what characterises the first 20 years of education reform is not so much the creation of the 'new' South Africa as perhaps the immense effort required (and still needed) to be free from the 'old divisions'. Universities are part of that solution and new future to which we all aspire.

Graduates and their parents and loved ones are part of a vibrant academic community at NWU. In terms of staffing the University employs just over 6200 members of staff in the service of contact and distance education programmes through a range of support and specialist services in everything from

residence and catering services, protection, counselling and academic and administrative staff. These staff are committed people and have between them long years of experience, security and happiness at the University, which in many instances because of the long history of our development as University, make for an ethos and spirit that is people-centred and development orientated. NWU is a multilingual institution and we aspire to enable students to have choice concerning which languages to access learning. The point of these choices isn't luxury, but rather enabling students to exercise self-direction in terms of their learning potential, and to devote our energies to student academic support towards success, rather than simply knowledge transmission.

In 2017 the University had just over 70 000 students enrolled for its programmes, and under half of these were enrolled for our ODL programmes. This suggests to us that the future of education when considered in terms of opening further access and being more relevant to society, lies in our ability to bring education opportunities to the student in their home or place of work. We are really passionate about the quality of our teaching and research at the University. In 2017, 5 external programme reviews took place at NWU. The 5 reviews were for the following discipline areas: Chartered Accountancy, Psychology, Graphic Design, Agricultural Sciences, and Law. All 5 commended the University on the quality of its student experience in teaching and learning as well as its evident commitment to quality of programmes offered, but all 5 external programme reviews also commented on the need for more energy around the transformation of the University in terms of race integration, sensitivity for diversity, a reconsideration of the roles that languages play in relation to inclusion and exclusion of students and a better awareness of relationship with, and role in, the community. These issues have been raised in the most recent draft version of the Language in Higher Education Policy in which the development of African languages for teaching and learning is emphasised together with the caution that universities must become multilingual in their languages of teaching and learning, rather than monolingual. How to develop and integrate access to African languages on the one hand and provide continued access to languages like English or Afrikaans with adequate student support, on the other hand, are fine balances to achieve and will require careful thinking at NWU.

In terms of research the NWU also has much to celebrate and be proud of. In 2016 a total of 1356.46 units were published by our academics and when one compares this to the 1223.25 units published in 2015 one can see that the continued appetite for research relevant to an African and global context is increasing in areas of traditional expertise like the Health Sciences and new areas of developing expertise such as in Education. In 2018 we will engage in an Africa-audit of our research and international collaborations to assess for ourselves our continued relevance to the needs of the nation, region and continent, and to better focus our international competitiveness globally also. 2018 brings many reasons, from a University perspective as well as national perspective for optimism.

In graduating today we are mindful of the high levels of hope and expectation that South Africa in general feels about the young people entering the job market as professionals. That hopefulness relates to the idea that graduate professionals can contribute not only the possibilities of employment, but can also create such possibilities for themselves and other people in communities. These are high expectations, but we are a highly regarded University and confident that our commitment to social justice can be experienced by students as part of their development, and then experienced by communities into which our students move to seek and obtain work. Our Constitution guarantees us freedoms and rights. In these terms, effort and imagination can, when looking at the first 20 years of our democracy, be associated with what it has meant to understand what freedom guarantees (in terms of the human rights to education at all levels). In the next 20 years, South Africa will explore what those freedoms and rights enable, rather than simply guarantee. It is for this reason that education and re-education remains the most compelling need going forward. Without each graduate taking on responsibility for the creation of a new South Africa we run a too high risk of repeating the old mistakes of race and gender discrimination for decades to come.

Of course, this does not imply that transformational development is straightforward and uncomplicated. Enacting the rights that guarantee citizens' freedoms and re-thinking what race integration and diversity might really mean in a 'new' South Africa implies contestation as well as

imagination, as both are necessary to develop a consensus regarding what that 'new' might mean. There are questions that require imaginative responses: for example, what does freedom from the various poisons of racism, sexism and homophobias, imply for my practice as accountant? What kind of ethics is needed in accountancy education to avoid the kinds of issues raised in the media about the relationships between KPMG and Eskom, for example? How does this profession become relevant in dealing with the social issues of race difference, gender difference and class difference, towards the creation of the 'new South Africa'? To be sure we hope that our graduates can do make that contribution to helping us address the critical need for transparent and ethical processes in accounting and in business in general. These questions represent challenges to us in this audience today: while graduation implies that we are all ready for new work, or a new promotion, we need to ask are we ready to commit new energy to building the South African dream in which each and everyone can be free?

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 presentation 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 congregation of the North-West University".

END

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