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Welcome by the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town, Dr Max Price, to the President of the United States of America, President Barack Obama

Speech to be live streamed at www.uct.ac.za

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, honoured guests, students and staff, and the global audience of this auspicious event.

I welcome you to the University of Cape Town on behalf of the Chairperson of the UCT Council, Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane, the President of the Students' Representative Council, Mr Lorne Hallendorff, and myself as Vice-Chancellor (or as the Americans would call it, University President).

I bring you particular greetings from our Chancellor, Mrs Graça Machel, who certainly would have been here today were it not for the obvious reason that she is staying close to her husband, Madiba. I'm sure I speak on behalf of all of you when I say to Mrs Machel, "Our thoughts are with you."

This will be a short talk, just to let you know what this moment, in this hall, on this stage means to us at the University, for the first African-American US President to address us, on the same spot where, 47 years ago this month, Senator Robert F Kennedy made one of the greatest speeches of his life – and the most inspiring, at the time, for many of *our* lives.

In 1966, a student leader of this university, Ian Robertson, had invited Kennedy to speak here. The apartheid government, furious at the visit, but scared of the diplomatic fall-out of refusing the possible next president of the United States, did the next best thing – it banned the 21 year old student who'd invited him.

Robertson was banned from any social or political gatherings, seeing more than one person at a time, and, because he was a white student, he was prohibited from going anywhere where black South Africans lived, on pain of imprisonment. (It was not clear if the government thought he would be a bad influence on them, or they on him.) Of course, it became illegal for him to attend the speech he had caused to take place in this venue.

Kennedy correctly identified how alone activists here felt in those dark days of the 1960s. But he reminded them, and the idealistic students and faculty listening to him, that they were not alone, but

part of a global movement that stood for, and fought for, the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It was an inspirational message.

He then used the words that today mark his grave at the Arlington National Cemetery, alongside President John F Kennedy: "Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and, crossing each other from a million different centres of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."

Another South African who was prohibited from attending the talk was only a few miles away, out to sea, on the notorious Robben Island, in prison. (With us today is Colin Eglin, former leader of the opposition Progressive Party, and a UCT alumnus, who was flying with Senator Kennedy in the charter plane that brought him from Johannesburg to Cape Town that day. Eglin recounts how, at Kennedy's request, the plane did a loop around Robben Island and dipped its wing in salute to Nelson Mandela, whom Kennedy was obviously unable to meet.) Mandela lived to return to the mainland 21 years later, turning those ripples of hope into a flood that overwhelmed South African apartheid and inspired the world.

No public event can take place in South Africa today without paying homage to that man, now waging what we expect may be his last struggle, in the hospital bed in Pretoria.

As Nelson Mandela's life rests in the balance, we cannot but remember him with love and hope, inspiration as well as impending loss. Perhaps Mandela's unique quality was his ability to reach out to all of us. And it is testimony to his charismatic leadership, that in a country that had been dangerously on the brink of civil war, so many South Africans, across all the familiar divides of race, gender, religion, and class, returned his embrace - in some cases, tentatively and with residual uncertainty, but in most cases with profound respect and admiration, recognising that his commitment to equality, freedom and non-racialism was a commitment he made to the liberation of each one of us. ...

He did not work alone - far from it. But he had the unique ability to inspire hope. When those on Robben Island were at their lowest ebb in the early 1970s, and felt they had been forgotten by the outside world, when they thought they would never live to see a free SA, it was Rolihlahla Mandela who gave them hope. A man who valorised education, he encouraged them all to study so that they would be prepared, one day, to govern. And that ability to persuade us all to imagine a better future was the essence of his greatness once he was freed. He shares this quality with other great leaders like Martin Luther King jr. who inspired belief in *his* dream. And it was the "Yes we can" campaign of Barack Obama that inspired a nation to elect the first African American president – and that won, too, the admiration of the citizens of Africa for the man we look forward to welcoming this evening.

President Obama's visit to South Africa is rich in symbolism – and this is likely one reason he chose to speak at the University of Cape Town. I suspect his choice of a university platform is also directly related to the more explicit goal of his visit, viz. to promote economic relations between the USA and the African continent, in ways that buoy the trajectory of economic growth. There are many drivers of renewal and growth. Perhaps the most significant are education, innovation, and preparing the next generation of leaders, movers and shakers, teachers, thinkers, entrepreneurs. Universities make an absolutely indispensable contribution to all of this. All our SA universities are committed to producing the next generation's economic leaders, so President Obama's particular emphasis on the power of the youth speaks directly the relevance of a university setting.

On this stage 47 years ago, Senator Robert Kennedy also said (I quote)
"in the world we would like to build, South Africa could play an outstanding role..."

We at UCT – along with our colleagues at many other SA universities - have taken that responsibility to heart. A cornerstone of this university's mission is to educate the next generation of leadership for the African continent. Today, 3,000 students from 39 other African countries are enrolled here – they will become the professionals, public intellectuals, political leaders, captains of industry and development for the continent, and their shared experience here will create networks that will drive collaboration for the next 40 years. Incidentally, we take pleasure in enrolling nearly 900 American semester-abroad students each year, deepening our ties with American universities and, once they graduate, with America's future leaders. Along with other South African universities with similar global networks, we will play an outstanding role not just in Africa, but in the world.

But UCT also represents something more – it is a leading *research* university that offers the prospects for bilateral relations between Africa and the rest of the world that transcends the hierarchies and paternalism in North-South relations in the past. There are precious few on the continent. In the Times Higher Education top 400 global universities (which focuses heavily on research as the basis for ranking), there are only four from Africa, North and South of the Sahara – and all four are in South Africa, with UCT in the top ½% and the others (the Universities of Witwatersrand, Stellenbosch and KwaZulu-Natal) in the top 2% globally. (Rhodes and Pretoria universities are undoubtedly also up there.)

The continent has made progress in expanding access to higher education – but over 15 years, numbers of students have increased three times more than funding – and as a result, the quality of their education is often jeopardised, and - in particular, - the university's research agenda takes a back seat.

The question may be asked – is this a priority in a developing, low or middle income country? My answer is an unequivocal "yes". The need for research expertise, nurtured by research-strong universities is global, and applies equally to developing and developed nations – even if there will be particular challenges of resource allocation in the case of developing nations.

Unless Africa wants to remain the consumers of other people's knowledge and innovation, the recipients of received wisdom with no critical capacity locally to interpret, challenge or advance alternative views of the world; unless we see ourselves as unable to contribute to global knowledge; unless we think all global technologies are locally appropriate and that we do not need the capacity to develop locally relevant solutions; unless these are our views, African countries need to further their own research capacity. That capacity resides first and foremost in research universities. Not every university can or should be a research university – but every country needs at least one, and middle income countries, like South Africa, should support several.

Moreover, we should set our standards high. If we want independent thought and leadership, and a capacity to determine what is best for ourselves, then we not only need researchers and research institutions, but they need to be on a par with our peers in the global North.

Research universities

- are the central element of the national innovation system;
- they link the nation's innovation system to other nations' systems
- they ensure the highest possible standards of performance across a broad range of disciplines and help set national standards of excellence;

- their international standing provides substantial links to overseas organisations and a national credibility not otherwise achievable

Importantly, we also have an opportunity and a duty to advance *global* knowledge in ways that can best be done from the perspective of our local situation – whether that be geographical, cultural, historical or socio-economic. An excellent example is the square Kilometre Array, the largest radio telescope in the world and one of the largest scientific experiments ever – requiring thousands of dishes mostly based in the Northern Cape of South Africa because of its peculiarly well-suited geographical setting, but also with telescope dishes in several other African countries. This investment is being made not because such an understanding is a priority for a developing nation compared to water, housing and sanitation, but because we can and should contribute to the global knowledge about the origin of our universe.

Finally, research universities in developing countries will play a critical role in educating the next generation of academics for the continent at large. If there are too few credible research departments, led by top academics, with a critical mass of researchers, PhD students, post-doctoral fellows, laboratories, etc. then aspiring academics will have little option but to study abroad, and the evidence over decades shows that the rate of return from studies abroad makes this a very expensive and inefficient investment.

The continent is being held back by the absence of research universities - But it can be different – and the evidence of this lies in the calibre of the South African research universities and a handful of flagship universities across the continent – African universities that are punching way above their weight, if one looks at their budgets and teaching workloads.

Growing a research university requires significant additional resources above the average that can be afforded for all other universities in the country. This is generally not something most low income country governments will fund – their priority is to raise the quality of teaching amongst the weakest institutions, to expand access to tertiary education. One of the key contributions that can be made through international partnerships, such as those which form the basis of President Obama’s commitment to economic development in Africa, is to build up research universities across the continent. And SA universities can be partners in this.

A particular role for the University of Cape Town is through the education of the future academic leaders of the continent – with 30% of our masters and PhD students being from outside South Africa – a role we are eager to play given our singular strength as Africa’s number one research university.

The involvement of South African universities with the continent as an engine of human capacity development is complemented by our contribution to new knowledge – about the world, about the continent and surrounding oceans, about climate change, mineral processing, biodiversity, renewable energy, constitution writing and human rights law, comparative African literature and politics, particle physics and nano-technology, infectious disease and mental health. We hope this reflects what Kennedy on this stage called “the outstanding role we could play”. UCT has produced five Nobel Laureates: [Max Theiler](#) (who invented the Yellow Fever vaccine), [Ralph Bunche](#) (peace, 1950), Sir [Aaron Klug](#) (in chemistry, 1982), Professor [Allan McLeod Cormack](#) (whose work resulted in the CT scanner, 1979), and Emeritus Professor [JM Coetzee](#) (for literature, 2003). Perhaps the best known of UCT’s professors was [Chris Barnard](#), who, in 1967, performed the world’s first human-to-human [heart transplant](#) here at Groote Schuur academic hospital. My point is that with appropriate support, we can help build the continent’s research universities.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Democracies create privileged spaces where critical analysis and debate can occur – unfettered by the demands of public policy, strategic or government priorities – one such space is the universities. It was in no small measure through the relative autonomy of this university in 1966 – even as it was being restricted and pressured by the state to implement apartheid policies – but it was the protected space for debate that allowed Senator Kennedy to be invited here at all, by students no less; and that gave him a platform to speak truth to power. It seems particularly fitting that President Obama should choose a university setting to make his principal policy speech on Africa – it is recognition of importance of the independence of universities, and their role in guarding democracy, their focus on the next generation, their contribution to providing human capital, their innovation, and their promoting development in the numerous ways they do.

I invite you to join me in recognising the important role that institutions of higher learning and research play in shaping our future – and to look forward to fertile partnerships with developed nations such as the USA in advancing that role.

ENDS

Editor's Note: Background on UCT

- ❖ The **oldest teaching university in South Africa**, the University of Cape Town was founded in 1829 as the South African College, a high school for boys.
- ❖ It was formally established as a university in 1918, and 10 years later moved to its Groote Schuur campus on the slopes of Devil's Peak -- the **former estate of Cecil Rhodes, who donated the land to UCT.**
- ❖ Today UCT is the **highest ranking university in Africa and among the top 200 universities in the world.** Mrs Graça Machel, the wife of former President Nelson Mandela, is the Chancellor of UCT.
- ❖ UCT has about 26,000 undergraduate and postgraduate students. In 2012, this total included **829 US students and 3225 students from other African countries.**
- ❖ UCT has more than 100,000 alumni, including: the late Professor Christiaan Barnard, the pioneer of the heart transplant; Neville Isdell, WWF Board Chair and former Chair and CEO of The Coca-Cola Company; rising opera sensation Pretty Yende; and **five Nobel Laureates:** Max Theiler, Ralph Bunche, Sir Aaron Klug, Alan MacLeod Cormack and JM Coetzee.
- ❖ It was often referred to as "**Moscow on the Hill**" from 1960 to 1990, for its sustained opposition to apartheid, particularly in higher education.
- ❖ **US Senator Robert Kennedy spoke in Jameson Hall in 1966.** His famous "Day of Affirmation" speech galvanised a powerful coalition of South African and international protest and struggle.

For more information, please visit www.uct.ac.za or email pat.lucas@uct.ac.za.

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