



**UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN**  
IYUNIVESITHI YASEKAPA • UNIVERSITEIT VAN KAAPSTAD

## **PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS**

### **UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN CONVOCATION**

Vice-Chancellor;

Registrar and Secretary of Convocation;

The Executive Management of the University;

Chairperson of the Board of the UCT Alumni Advisory Board; Members of the Board;

Members of UCT Convocation:

It has been an honour to serve the UCT Community and the university in the capacity of President of the UCT Convocation for the past two years. As it happens, this period was perhaps the most tumultuous in the history of this august institution. 2015 began rather inauspiciously with the #RhodesMustFall protests, later developed into #FeesMustFall and all the related causes of protests. As I have often said, this has been an experience that will forever remain etched in the collective memory of this generation of UCT students. It may well be that it is a life-changing experience, intellectually challenging, and it shapes the life of both staff and students.

I can only imagine that for those whose daily lives are tied up with the university, both staff and students, academic and non-academic and their families and loved ones, it has been a traumatic experience. The visuals of students burning irreplaceable works of art that are as much part of the memory archive of this university, or to have sight of the Jamie Shuttle on fire, or to behold all the efforts, negotiations that have been conducted, or the campus under security and police guard, or UCT students under arrest or in police custody, or appearing in court on

criminal charges – all of this is enough to have one's heart sink. The visuals of a student aiming a physical assault on the Vice-Chancellor following his presentation on behalf of the university to the Heher Commission is a wholly unacceptable and intolerable extent of student protest.

And yet, we know that in the midst of the tumult and chaos UCT remains an institution devoted to academic pursuits. Academics in particular have sought to teach and guide students in the most difficult circumstances. Researchers continued to be engaged in their endeavours, especially research students continued with their research projects. At times the administration of the university was put under tremendous stress, but the devotion and diligence of the Vice-Chancellor and the executive team, of the Registrar and the administration staff, of the finance management teams, and of Council, must be acknowledged. Even more, it must be noted that UCT academic staff and students have been engaged in vibrant debate about the character, merits, and in a critical debates on the strategies adopted by those students who were active in the protest movement.

Many of us fall into the trap of homogenizing events of this nature. We are responsive to the 'noise' that some especially the protesters are capable of. We respond to the latest challenge and pressure, we concede ground where we need not have done. More dangerously we ignore the pleas of the less vocal students who experience protest as intolerance, whose views are never sought, who are shut down, and who are unable to air their alternative narrative. We listen less to them, even more as we may even be in danger of creating out of them too a culture of conformism, going with the crowd without thought, or who live in fear and are traumatised. Their politics may not be in conformity with the political idiom in fashion on campus at the time, but they are just as valid. Their story may well be a story about a future they could see shattered right in front of their eyes, and who are without the options others might have, and who may be anxious about their parents, family and siblings. They too need our care and support at a time like this. We must guard against the danger of creating out of our university campuses a theatre of intolerance of diverse ideas and contesting viewpoints. The possibilities

for continuous learning, for being inquisitive, curious and challenging inside and outside the classroom; of being assertive about one's chosen course of action, is an option that lends itself to a learning environment. It is quintessentially the culture of the university.

The university is more than an initiation school for right-thinking, for critical thought. It is also a home for character formation at a stage in one's life. It is about being decent, loving, caring, and about civility – about being a man or a woman. It is to learn the art of being human.

Our interest, as Convocation, however, is not about governing or managing the university. Our preoccupation and sense of pride is to support the university as we seek ways and means whereby we could plough back to the institution – our experience, expertise, resources, that which we also received from the university. Part of what we received, and that has in the meantime marked our intellectual maturity is the capacity we have to leverage goodwill for the university. The continuing prestige and eminence of this university continuously enhances the value of our certificates and qualifications. When the university slumps there is the danger that such a circumstance will de-value our qualifications. We cannot be indifferent to what is happening at our alma mater.

There is another reason that we must remain engaged on matters affecting our university. I mention only two. First, the Vice-Chancellor of Wits University, Prof Adam Habib, in a recent article published in Daily Maverick reflected on two phenomena that marked the student protests. One, was the role of academics, especially those who considered themselves to be sympathetic to the cause of the students. They go by various names either a progressive or Left-leaning scholars. They have a very important role of guiding, correcting, standing with, educating students whose activism is a form of social experimentation. He states that some of these have been preoccupied with obstructing the efforts, unpleasant they might be, of the university management in a difficult environment. In the process they have also failed to critically guide the student activities into an intelligent engagement with the issues that confront them. The result has been that students

have been unable to engage critically, or to be self-critical when they needed to be. It also meant that students were blind to available options for advancing their cause, or to recognize the allies they have in the Management about the substantive issues the struggle is about. It creates the danger that in life there will be a generation of intellectuals (presumably) who believe that all one has to do in life is just to demand and it happens according to one's dictat. Life is never like that. What arises from that for me is a concern about the caliber of graduates universities are producing, or are likely to produce. What is the character of the professionals and intelligentsia that universities produce in terms of strategy, problem-solving and social skills like listening, processing argument, and articulating ideas.

Two, he decried the "absence" of parents and family in the entire debacle. His interactions with parents, many of whom were themselves first generation graduates in their homes, or even former students of Wits, he sensed an ambivalence and a duplicity that was worrying. I do not think that his use of the word "duplicity" was meant to be morally reprehensible in the negative sense. They were clearly caught between the parental urge to support their children, and the feeling that it was a responsible thing to do to keep the university going for the sake of the children. Of course, we must recognize that we are not talking about "children" here. This applied not just to the immediate family, but also to political leaders, church and other sectors that influence and shape social mores. In other words, there is a sense that students (and universities) are left on their own. There is no guiding hand at home, in the community, or at university.

The second, and bigger issue that I believe we should flag is whether we, South Africans, have thought deeply about the nature and purpose of a university. I shall be brief. There is a sense that students are forcing us to think more clearly and more deeply about what exactly do we mean by the university. In other words, is the university as we have it likely to advance the kind of society envisaged in our constitution, or does it truly reflect our ideas of a free, fair, just and egalitarian society?

As we know we had the Commission on Higher Education that reported in 1995, and on the basis of which the Higher Education Act, 1997 was designed. The reality, we must know, is that as much of the vision for the university at that time was an instrument for the dismantling of the apartheid design in higher education. However, its societal organization, architecture and design and its nature were intrinsically never dismantled. That is the reason that the higher education landscape in our country to this day remains unequal, and that is the reason we have barely scratched the surface of the possibly of what can be done to re-imagine the university for a new South Africa. Part of that exciting possibility is to build a truly non-racial university, African and universal reflective of the aspirations of our Constitution. That is a social experiment that we can achieve, but that which we have hardly tried hitherto.

Of course, that is not a once-off, but an ongoing, dynamic effort. My point is that we have hardly begun. In other words, the idea of transformation needs to be re-articulated a little beyond the mundane matters of race, gender equity compliance, however important those are for an equal society. My challenge is that we must not linger because the road ahead is beckoning. In my opinion, the positive thing I take out of the events at our campuses in recent years is that that this generation must re-think the idea of the university for our times.

N Barney Pitsoana GCOB

PRESIDENT

Convocation of the University of Cape Town

Cape Town, 15 December 2016.