

Remarks of the Vice-Chancellor and Principal

Professor Thandwa Mthembu

on the occasion of

the SRC 2021/2022 Inauguration

5 November 2021

Programme Director

Registrar

Acting Dean of Students

Members of staff in Student Governance

Outgoing SRC members

New SRC President and new Members of the SRC

The Student Parliament and the entire student body

Ladies and gentlemen.

I must first acknowledge and appreciate the outgoing SRC for its contributions to the university during the height of Covid-19. Indeed, you led during a period of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) when the world battled, and still continues to battle, this debilitating global pandemic. During these challenging times, you exercised your role and function in a collaborative manner with other stakeholders of the University. You presented yourselves as co-creators of sustainable solutions for DUT and its people.

We acknowledge you might have demanded this and that during the course of your term. Inevitably, demands that are not predicated on a shared vision for the University, our region and our country, not predicated on unity of purpose, not predicated on facts and evidence, are bound not to lead to progressive and sustainable solutions. Many of such solutions became possible during your term because of all the points of convergence we were able to reach.

We also acknowledge you may have sometimes felt *'gatvol'* with the University management. You may also have felt this University is not worth it and may even have to close its doors. DUT and its predecessors have had their doors open continuously long before our current student body was born. As mere sojourners on this earth, and even more fleetingly on DUT grounds, you must ensure you bequeath a great and a sustainable university to your children, your grand-children and your great-grand-children. It is, thus, not about just us who happen to be at the University over the next 3, 4 or 5 years to only think about what we need and want; but, what future generations will need in many years to come. We all need an innovative, generative and future-oriented state of mind to be co-creators of sustainable solutions and a sustainable future for DUT and its people.

While we were still battling the pandemic, we then experienced the unrest that claimed many lives mainly in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng. The outgoing SRC took initiative to rebuild not only the communities around us, but the university, too. You demonstrated great innovative and adaptive skills that leaders need to possess to inspire, to influence, to respond to and initiate, change in our challenging environment. You demonstrated the new DUT WAY of shared responsibility and accountability, commitment and compassion amongst other values and principles we hold dear and act intentionally to embed in our lives.

I would like to congratulate you all on your collective achievements.

This is our second year of online voting. We continue to deepen our student democracy in this manner. Management would not have transitioned to digitalized elections without the active support and ownership of students as the end-users of the system. It is through your buy-in that elections have been successfully conducted electronically. Moving from 6 436 voters in 2018 to 13 388 in 2021 – more than a 100% increase - after online voting had been introduced, tells a good story about deepening student democracy. Your legitimacy as a leader derives from a combination of factors, most significant of which is voter turnout.

Each time the university inaugurates a new SRC, it does so not only fulfilling its duty, but does so with the hope that the incoming SRC will take the university to greater heights. May you be that SRC that will leave an indelible mark; that SRC that will make DUT **D**ifferent, **U**pended and **T**ransformed.

As you assume this role, you need to think about the legacy you wish to leave. How do you want to contribute to, inspire, influence, respond to or initiate the change the student leadership culture requires so urgently; both as a structure and as individuals?

As noted above, the demand and protest culture with its attendant violence has become part of our national culture as South Africans. These have not necessarily made lives better. In fact, looking at what happened in July here in KZN, this national culture has led to more unemployment and much worse infrastructure as shopping centres disappeared overnight from around where black people live. Many have to pay more to buy just a few items from pricier shopping centres and after travelling at great cost from many kilometres away. *Hawu, saze sazigwaza ngowethu, bakwethu! [how we turned our spears on ourselves].*

In light of this despicable national culture and the destruction it unleashed, you must ask yourselves a series of questions:

- As a university student, will you be part of that progressive, generative and exemplary microcosm of our society that fights against self-destruction, anarchy and mayhem?
- Will you be that progressive, generative and exemplary microcosm of our society that will leave a legacy of a **D**ifferent, **U**pended and **T**ransformed DUT, KZN and country?
- Will you be that progressive, generative and exemplary microcosm of our society that changed South Africa from a violently degenerating country to a progressive, prosperous and a successful one like many other countries that were not so successful only a generation ago made themselves successful?
- Will you NOT be that microcosm of our society that assimilates the worst there is and unleashes it on DUT and the rest of the country?
- Will you be that progressive, generative and exemplary microcosm of our society that helped to change the lives of our students through ideation and innovation, reason and debate; through persuasion, and through facts and evidence?

As incoming leaders, you have been voted for by students who believe in your leadership. Some may have voted more for the t-shirt you were wearing and what it represents politically than your leadership. Whatever the reason you have been voted for, you must lead them with respect, honesty, transparency, fairness, professionalism, accountability, integrity and with excellence; just to mention some of DUT's values and principles.

May I advise further? Examine all of the manifestos presented to the student body. Take the best ideas, innovate and translate them into tangible projects. However, given that the University budget was approved on 2 October, find out more about many projects already in that budget. Don't do what many SRCs before you often do: present unachievable and unfundable dreams to the student body that make them failures when those dreams are not realised.

Stand for truth even if it hurts and does not benefit you. Reject lies and obfuscation even if they are convenient and would serve you well. We understand that the same old knee-jerk and hackneyed techniques of doing things are not going to help the university. It's Einstein who is reputed to have described insanity as doing one and the same thing over and over and expecting different results. Instead of recoiling to the same old techniques, songs and dances that no longer fit in the 21st century you live in, you must be part of programmes, innovations and initiatives that bring generative and not degenerative change at DUT that will sustain all of us in the 21st century and beyond.

While on the subject of old knee-jerk and hackneyed techniques, we are now living in the digital age where social media and other digital platforms have proven to be very powerful tools. But, when used incorrectly, they have the potential to hurt everyone, not less the user. Remember, the digital space does not lose its memory easily. Whatever you say or do remains to be your personal history. The smear campaigns may perhaps briefly hurt those targeted and for a brief moment attract applause from the crowds. In the long term all that cannot be unsaid. It will live to hurt the smearer even more than the targeted person.

You may be aware of the premium a number of companies now pay on social media conduct in deciding whether or not to employ candidates. When companies treat you like a leper, don't complain as tell us there are no jobs. By your own behaviour and actions, you stopped them from employing you long time ago.

On this remarkable day as you pledge to become part of the DUT leadership, let me remind you about the DUT Strategy, ENVISION2030.

DUT has values and principles you must not just espouse, but must live. They are the cornerstone of our operations and institutional culture. In my 2020 State of the University Address, I explained that our values and principles must be the glue that binds us all. They are, in fact, the glue that binds our two DNA strands, namely '*innovative and entrepreneurial*' and '*people-centred and engaged*'. Our new DUT Way is predicated on our values and principles, specifically, and on our DNA, generally.

The DUT Way tells us who belongs here and who does not in terms of their character as persons and also in terms of the character of their expertise and their leadership. It tells us right from wrong. It embeds our moral code and entrenches ethical engagement and leadership. Living these values and principles and demonstrating that DUT's DNA runs in your veins must be your daily mental exercise. Self-talk is powerful and could make you be what you wish to be. All our staff and students must see and experience these values and principles when they meet and/or engage with you. *Ukwethuka abantu abadala ngezigede zenhlamba; ukwedlula phela lokho* [swearing at your elders suggests an irredeemable character].

I have done a series of videos that explain what ENVISION2030 entails. As leaders, you must familiarise yourselves with what DUT stands for so that you could contribute to this significant and revolutionary growth trajectory DUT is on. The DUT Way is also about you being creative, innovative, entrepreneurial and adaptive leaders ready to inspire, influence, respond to and initiate, change in your challenging environment, your locality, your community and your country. ENVISION2030 commits all of us to contribute towards improving the lives and livelihoods of our people. The incoming SRC needs to think hard about their contribution to this call.

Together, we have taken the university to where it is in worldwide university rankings. As DUT, we have crawled slowly but determinedly to greater heights and are still crawling searching for the top. Remember, it's much easier to fall from the top than to crawl to the top. Remember, too, that the many strategies you may decide to employ and the many things you may decide to do will either help us up to crawl confidently to the top or cause us all to fall from the top.

As I come towards the end of my remarks, I would like to emphasize the point I have been making ever since I joined the university.

A University is about the pursuit of truth. It is a place of ideation and innovation, reason and debate, facts and evidence. Thuggery, hooliganism, destructive behaviour, violence, criminality - all under the name of student leadership – do not belong here. This is not a place for political gymnastics, political point-scoring and political games. Rather, it's a place for mental gymnastics, academic scores and scientific experimentation that are integral part of our academic games as University.

Some leaders have a tendency to view their input to their organisations as hyperbolic grand gestures they pretend would resolve big problems when they actually know they create more problems. So invested they are in these that they sometimes create artificial problems so that they may be seen to be the solution to these 'problems'.

We are aware of what student leaders do with security companies to cause mayhem. We are aware of engineered protests for financial gain. I encourage you to eschew this style of leadership. Consider contributing to quanta – no matter how small - of improvements that keep your university on an upward trajectory of development and greatness. The dividends you will earn will be in the attractiveness you will earn from potential employers. The dividends will be earned from venture capitalists who will trust you with their monies as you launch your entrepreneurial career. Guard jealously what we already have. Contribute positively towards a better future for all of us.

- Remember, as you may have read from some of my communiques, that DUT is about “*the right people in the right seats, performing their roles right*”. This may appear to apply only to employees of the university. No. It applies to the SRC, too.
- Remember that today's occasion is the start of how you want us to remember you as the university and as the broader society. Your legacy depends on whether you contribute positively or negatively to our great university.
- Remember that your leadership is not based on whether you affiliate with yellow or blue or red. But, you lead all the students who voted for you and those who did not vote for you. You remain the voice of the entire student body.
- Remember that you are the link between the university and the broader society. You need to think of how you not only impact the university but the broader society, too. Universities remain crucial in solving societal ills. You need to demonstrate commitment to extending knowledge beyond the existing boundaries of the university and providing solutions to the pressing problems of society.
- Remember that the university has approximately 33 000 students. We will not allow a situation where a small group of students who claim to be representing students holds the university to ransom when they fail to present valid reason and debate, incontrovertible facts and evidence. Shameless and boundless exploitation of your positions and resources of the university will not be tolerated.

- Remember as I said right at the beginning, to be that SRC that will leave an indelible mark for future generations to marvel at; an SRC that will make DUT **D**ifferent, **U**performed and **T**ransformed.
- Remember, you are that microcosm of society that brings light and generates prosperity. *Ningabi ke yilentsha ethanda ukuzigwaza ngeyawo imikhonto; bese igcine izibulele isaphila* [don't be the youth that turns its spears on itself and thus become the walking dead].

I wish you all the best in your tenure.

Thank you.