

Message of the Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Professor TZ Mthembu, on the occasion of the 2022 staff orientation

I greet you all, colleagues.

With great honour and humility, I take this opportunity to welcome each one of you to Durban University of Technology (DUT). On behalf of our DUT people - Council, management, staff, students and our alumni – let me thank you for your wise choice. You have joined a great university: one that is a rocket to space where very few ever land. Congratulations and welcome!

At the outset, may I request you to take some time out of your busy schedules to either read or listen to the varied messages I have communicated to our community and in particular our new staff members.

In a previous message to new staff, I borrowed from a renowned author and intellectual, Peter Evans, a powerful parable about two lions that escaped from the zoo.

The first lion ran into the forest, was traced within the shortest possible time and returned to the zoo. The second lion ran into a government building and began to maul officials without anyone noticing. Unfortunately for it, one day it mauled the teamaker. Only then did surviving officials realise there had been a problem in the building. Take this parable as constituting part of your learning trajectory during your sojourn at DUT.

As my second referral for your learning, we have also published a series of messages and videos that focus on ENVISION2030, broken into all four Perspectives and their constituent Strategic Objectives.

As part of my third referral, I urge you to read our annual reports and all information and facts we publish in various DUT documents and through channels of communication that highlight our collective and individual efforts towards DUT's trajectory to greatness.

We are a university, after all.

In his book: *The Idea of Higher Education*, Ronald Barnett says something quite precocious and remarkable. Paraphrasing him, he says, higher education is actually not even about just learning. Instead, it's about how what is learned, researched and experienced is embedded deep and then transformed into something new, innovative that never existed before, with regard to our knowledge base, our experiences and our behaviours, amongst others. Higher education is, thus, inimical to passive engagement with texts. Higher education is inimical to intellectually unexplored experiences. Higher education is inimical to unproblematized practices and behaviours.

One of the channels we use for communication at DUT is what we call *Iminingo*, essentially my musings as Vice-Chancellor and Principal. I hope you are, or will soon become, aware of it.

Let me borrow from an edition in which I reflected briefly on what happened in most parts of KwaZulu-Natal and some parts of Gauteng in July 2021:

“We fully understand that DUT and its people are impacted by society positively or negatively, progressively or retrogressively. In our quest to impact society positively and progressively, we have to dig deep in our minds, hearts and souls and guard our behaviours and actions. It is against this background that our very first two strategic objectives are about ‘Lived Values’ and ‘Institutional Culture’. Our collective morality or amorality derives from these, amongst others.

We must all have noted the decline of the moral fibre of our society and the ascendancy of evil over good, irrationality over rationality, amorality over morality. Over the years, this has manifested not only in rising lack of accountability and widespread corruption, but also in how people behave and live their daily lives. Sometimes, in a quest to project amorality on all of us, some may argue that we are a microcosm of our society in terms of the values our staff and students bring. Let us rather be that microcosm of the ‘right’ people who transform our societies and economies rather than helping in their degeneration.”

To make more sense of this quote, let me return to the point I made in the introduction and problematize it for you.

I am proud to say you have joined a great university. Be that as it may, you might have heard the phrase: ‘every positive contains within it the negative and vice-versa’. Simplified, that we are a great university – a point I will return to shortly – does not denote we do not have some elements and pathologies that are repulsive and ugly. There are many.

I am sure you have become aware of some of them. That for 14 years we have had lecturers refusing to read towards Master’s degrees betrays some of these ‘repulsive and ugly’ pathologies. The bare minimum requirement for a lectureship at our universities is a Master’s degree. In fact, so many leading and not so leading universities even already have a doctorate as a minimum. Yet, rather unashamedly, some continue to argue they should be left alone with their diplomas and bachelor’s degrees to teach our students towards their diplomas and bachelor’s degrees.

At the turn of the 20th century, the poet William Butler Yeats authored the poem: *The Second Coming*.

The first stanza concludes with the following four lines:

*“The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst*

Are full of passionate intensity.”

While you have joined a university that is steadily growing and surely on its upward trajectory, we still have elements that drown ‘*the ceremony of innocence*’. When the university faces paralysis because of the ‘repulsive and ugly’ pathologies and because ‘*the worst [among us] are full of passionate intensity*’ about these pathologies, its core business – teaching and learning, research and innovation – tends to suffer. When that happens the future of our students is dimmed. When you dim the future of our students, you deny the country of her deserved growth and prosperity. Some of us shall not lack any conviction on this.

What then makes us believe we are on a trajectory to greatness?

Just recently, we received news that DUT retained its Top 500 global rating in the *Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2022* (THEWUR). In this ranking, DUT remains in the Top 5 of all South African universities for the second consecutive year, the first time being in September 2020. In the Citation category, DUT was ranked 1st in South Africa and 12th in the world. The *Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2022* include more than 1600 universities across 99 countries and territories from across the globe. Trusted worldwide by students, teachers, governments and industry experts, the annual list is highly respected and credible. The ratings are calculated by the standardised performance indicators that measure an institution’s performance across five areas: teaching, research, knowledge transfer, citations and international outlook.

Recently, DUT earned another global ranking when we featured in the Top 100 for Ethical Value and in the Top 300 of all institutions of higher learning, in the *World’s Universities with Real Impact (WURI) 2021 rankings*. A few weeks before the WURI global rankings were released, we were ecstatic to learn that DUT was ranked 2nd in South Africa and 102 in the world by the *Times Higher Education’s Young University Rankings 2021*. We are proud that in just a matter of 12 months we have been recognised internationally on four occasions. There are many other accolades we have earned in our centres of research and engagement, including through a number of our student societies.

Like Ronald Barnett implores us, I need not only share the lessons, but synthesise them into something new and innovative, and more inspiring, hopefully.

Newton’s Third Law of Action and Reaction tells us: *When two bodies interact, they apply forces to one another that are equal in magnitude and opposite in direction*. Somewhat echoing this artistically, Yeats poignantly reminds us that ‘*the best lack all conviction*’ while ‘*the worst are full of passionate intensity*’.

In the two paragraphs I quoted from a recent edition of *Iminingo*, I argue that despite our best intentions at DUT to cultivate ‘*a shared culture of responsibility and accountability*’, our people are not immune from the influences of society’s trajectories that may be ‘*repulsive and ugly*’. Indeed, DUT has the dark history of ‘*the worst being full of passionate intensity*’, thus drowning ‘*the ceremony of innocence*’ because ‘*the best lacked all conviction*’. While we work hard to empower the best so we could accelerate our trajectory to greatness, the remnants of ‘*the worst full of passionate intensity*’ may continue to exert ‘*a force that is equal in magnitude and opposite in direction*’. While we seek to garner our momentum towards greatness, there are those who seek to apply some friction and cause inertia.

What does this mean for you as a new DUT staff member?

DUT is committed to making an impact internally; but, ultimately externally. Part of our *raison d’être* as a university is, ultimately, to contribute towards improving the lives and livelihoods our broader society.

You, therefore, have a plethora of choices.

Like in Peter Evans’ parable, the choice to become that teamaker whose disappearance got noticed almost immediately because of the impact s/he was making on the lives of his or her colleagues, no matter what perceptions others may have had of his or her position within the organisation; or, the choice to become that official whose disappearance would not be noticed since she or he would not have added or created any value to DUT.

Akin to Barnett’s idea of higher education, the choice to limit yourself to just learning passively in a money-see-monkey-do manner; or, the choice to use your learnings creatively to synthesise more that has never existed, never learned and never experienced before.

Learning from Netwon’s 3rd Law, the choice to act or the choice to just react with equal magnitude or Yeats’ intensity; but, in the opposite direction as DUT surges forward to greatness.

Akin to the looters and anarchists we witnessed, the choice to loot and destroy; or, the choice to build, preserve and even grow the little we have.

Akin to Yeats’ lyrical poetry, the choice to be the best person that ‘*does not lack conviction*’; or, the choice to be the worst person who causes suffering and degeneration with ‘*passionate intensity*’.

In accordance with our ENVISION2030, you have the choice to live up to DUT’s values and principles, work hard towards the achievement of DUT’s objectives and propel DUT to greatness; or, the choice to apply friction and inertia and retard DUT’s greatness.

My hope is that you bring the foresight, the creativity, the energy, the determination and the discipline that will propel DUT's trajectory of greatness much farther.

Choose wisely.

Once again, welcome to DUT.