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on

Integrity in Academic Life

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When I first returned to Durban in 1990, after over three decades of exile, I found the higher education institutions deeply divided by race and ethnicity, reflecting the cruel separation of a vindictive system. Also, in the racial logic of apartheid there were two separate universities, side-by-side, called technicons.

I am therefore delighted to be here with you at an institution which has a new status and description. As the minister of education, I had never understood what was meant by the word 'technicon', although its role was ostensibly understood by the bureaucrats. So name change was a historic necessity. It was therefore done.

It is customary at these graduation ceremonies to lean back at the podium, and refer to one's student days – of beer, sport and a little bit of frolicking – and earnestly to look at the students in the eyes and say that you are here because of the sacrifices of your parents and because of your very hard work. This may have been true for you but was not for me as I did not arrive at a university as an 18-year old. My family was too poor. Instead, I became a school teacher. Working and studying and relating to people, different in age, race, class and religion (and within religions), gave a young impressionable country bumpkin quite a different view of people. This has stood me in good stead ever since.

But, as a famous writer once said, 'yesterday was a different country'.

So having made the necessary acknowledgments, I would like to thank the University who, through the Director of Library Services and on behalf of the Executive, invited me to speak at this Spring Graduation.

Not only did Mr Raju issue the invitation but with his usual strength of purpose he also invited me to speak on the topic of academic integrity.

I accepted his further invitation because of the absolute need for any university deeply committed to scholarship and learning, as it must be, to canvass at all times the meaning the Concise Oxford Dictionary ascribes to 'integrity': the quality of having strong moral principles. The second definition has an undertone of strength of character: the state of being whole.

The library in this university is the pace-setter in one aspect of the values and principles we must support. I have carefully read your University's Policy on plagiarism which I, strongly approve. It identifies for staff and students the reasons for the policy as well as its scope and applicability, and the penalties for infringement.

I realise that some of us may have difficulties in understanding the topic set by the lecturer. For many of us, English is neither our home nor our native language. So, instead of buckling down or reading more widely in order to understand better, we cheat.

All of us should know that there is a shorter and sharper word for plagiarism: please substitute 'cheat' for plagiarist and you get the full impact of the practice. To cheat the writer, scientist, or researcher of what is due to her intellectual property is to steal the value she has created. You go to prison for stealing

material possession; for a plagiarist, you lose your marks or, in continuous assessment, you fail the examination. Your penalties at DUT are modest by international standards.

But this practice of cheating does not stop here at the college level. Dishonour has a tendency to repeat itself in later life. Why else would adults copy whole theories for a book from another, or invent stories about a war? Why would supervisors and students steal somebody's work for their thesis? When you rely on somebody else's nkondo, cheating may become a habit.

Integrity is not limited to teaching and learning in the university. Moral principles should pervade all aspects of our lives. Poverty is a blot on our body politic – the university must take into account the effect of lack of food, clothing and books on the educational performance of students. You have a right to protest at poor conditions. However, distress or frustration does not give you the right to be violent and destructive. There must be respect for public property and zero tolerance for anyone who destroys such property or interferes with learning, ostensibly for some high purpose of political protest.

Too often, one hears of public property being abused and used for private ends. It is not unknown for millions to be diverted from research and other collegiate activities into private pockets at universities and other institutions for learning – places where I feel probity, honesty and trust are the essence of the academic life. Universities are not a microcosm of society at large. They are supposed to be different.

And this difference is reflected in the way our Constitution trusts and protects what is referred to as academic freedom.

All of us, says Article 16, have the right to freedom of expression but 'academic freedom and freedom of scientific research' are highlighted. It is wrong to vilify, as a senior politician has done, this important right because, this politician alleged, it is being abused by counter-revolutionaries, whatever this may mean. This right is open to all academics, not only those we approve of.

It is vital that we respect academics, who lecture and write on what is their version of the truth. This is what integrity demands of them. But the trouble is that academics do not use their insights to assist the public in the enormous challenges we face.

To my knowledge it is only the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town who has used his authority recently to say that academics and other university personnel should engage with public matters. Such engagement may if necessary including participating in demonstrations on national issues, especially when poverty and homelessness are not dealt with seriously.

Most important of all, the university must be a citadel of virtue in its total opposition to racism, ethnicity and tribalism. These violate the most profound feelings of solidarity which drove our participants in the struggle for freedom. Exclusion and differentiation on such arbitrary grounds as race and tribe violate the most elementary principles of decency and integrity. You must count yourselves privileged to be enjoying the fruits of freedom, and to have benefited from an education which only a small percentage of our young people enjoy. As such, you can afford to be generous in your attitude to those who are different to you, in whatever ways. You should be leading the way in opposing discrimination and xenophobia.

Ours is a multi-cultural society where rights relating to language, culture and religion are not only protected in the Constitution, but are celebrated. Diversity is

the strength of our democratic society. If you are a Zulu speaker, you are entitled to be proud of your history and your culture – but do not let that make you feel that you are in any way superior to someone of a different background, or that you have a greater claim to be a South African. If your parents or grandparents were of Indian origin, as mine were, you are entitled to celebrate that culture too – but again not to the exclusion or detriment of others.

Diversity must not be confused with separate development or ethnic rights. Such an approach will impede our path towards a common national identity. Only bigots will gain in this way.

We can talk about integrity not only in relation to each of us personally, but also in relation to the institution where we work, and the country in which we live. Our South Africa has been forged in the struggle to throw off oppression and to abolish racism. Our integrity today demands that, as our Constitution says, we respect the dignity of others and that we afford them the same rights as we demand for ourselves.

I end with a poem. Bertolt Brecht wrote at the end of the second world war:

‘When the battle of the mountains
Is over
Then, you will see that the real battle
Of the plains will begin’.

You have reached the mountain of endeavour. Join us, therefore in the continued battle of the plains, to make South Africa ‘the state of being whole’, in the words of the Concise Oxford Dictionary.
