

## **The Role of Education in an Economic Revolution (Acceptance and Key Note Speech by Dr Don D B Mkhwanazi)**

### **The Role of education in an economic revolution**

- Mr Chancellor, Honourable Justice Vuka Shabalala
- Mr Vice Chancellor and Rector, Prof Ahmed Bawa
- Eminent members of Council and Senate
- Distinguished Academics and seasoned professionals
- Industry leaders, alumni and friends of the University
- Distinguished members of the Diplomatic corps
- Dear Graduates, graduands and lastly but especially and most importantly parents of the graduands.

This is your day. You must be very proud of yourselves. This special day is the result of your toil and selfless sacrifice, total dedication and investment to a better future not only for your children but South Africa. Sons and daughters of Mother Africa!

Let me start by thanking the Council of the Durban University of Technology for the singular and prestigious honour to me and my family. I am so glad that both Xoliswa and Zodwa, my wives, could join me together with my last born child Onobuntu and my second son, Nkululeko.

I would like to thank the Chancellor and the Vice-Chancellor for recognising home-grown contribution towards the attainment of our freedom. The honour and recognition is a significant part of the system with a supreme purpose to inspire good citizens to great work, appreciate and honour one's body of knowledge that has been accumulated over the years. I am truly humbled.

It is therefore a privilege for me to stand here and address you. I sincerely hope that this piece of history that is made today may enable me to join the legion of great minds affectionately known as intellectuals, rounded practitioners and professionals of high order and equal to taste. I admire greatly the work of higher learning institutions in their mission to quench intellectual thirst. Higher learning institutions have a mammoth task to teach relevant skills and produce graduates that are relevant and ready for the world of work. In the end it is an extended duty of the institutions of higher learning to make society work.

It is for a reason that these institutions are custodians of intellectual human capital development. As a consequence of this assertion allow me to share my thoughts on the role of education in our economic revolution.

For South Africa to realise her full potential an economic revolution must take place. Economic revolution means fundamental change in economic power relations. It means the redefinition of economic power relations between the haves and the have-nots. It means your race, religion, status, where you were born must not determine your ultimate station in life. It means equal and equitable chance of success in any endeavour of your choice in life. Economic function, nor success must not correspond to trace. It means fundamental deracialisation of the economy. Simply put it does not mean rearranging of chairs in the Titanic ship, but rebuilding of the ship (SA Economy).

Economic revolution must be a rapid but structured change in the economic system of a society. From a South African viewpoint, I repeat, the intention is to make every citizen share equitably in the social and economic wealth of the country. Few would challenge the proposition that human capital is fundamental to economic growth. However, we all know the crucial role that institutions of higher learning play in the development and unleashing the full force of human capital. What we also know is the jobless growth we have experienced in recent years. In a South Africa with jobless growth, no economic growth and highest Gini coefficient-(It is a measure of statistical dispersion intended to represent the income distribution of a nation's residents) in the world, we need more than higher economic growth but an economic revolution. Steve Biko once said; **“you are either alive and proud or you are dead and when you are dead you can’t care anyway”**. Are our higher learning institutions transformed beyond just demographics in order to respond to the challenges of the new global world? Can our graduates for example compete effectively with graduates from Vancouver, in Canada, or anywhere in the world?

One of the leading African scholars Dr Philip Emeagwali, the African recipient of the 1989 Gordon Bell Prize: the Nobel Prize of super computing says; **“Africa’s choice is clear, produce or perish. It is imperative that Africa regain the technological prominence which will enable it to produce what the world can consume. When we do that Africa will be finally eating the fruits of its labour”**. President Bill Clinton extolled Dr Emeagwali not only as an eminent African scientist but one of the great minds of the information age. The good scientist said again, **“to alleviate poverty, Africa needs to cultivate creative and intellectual abilities that allow it to increase the value of its raw materials and break the continents vicious cycle of poverty”**. **We all know that poverty is a barrier to education**

Wangari Maathai one of our finest African scholars said **“it is important to nurture any new ideas and initiatives which can make the difference”**. Are our tertiary institutions ready to meet the challenges of our time and future? How are our innovative thinking, research and development being managed and planned for? Our institutions of higher learning need to

make conscious and deliberate decisions to occupy this particular space and also seek funding that shall promote innovative ideas from beneficiation to integration of traditional knowledge and solutions to solve persistent problems of the day.

Successful countries, the world over have one thing at the heart of their achievements; education, quality education. Numerous examples exist whereby the fortunes of a country were turned around by how education is structured and managed. It is also important to state upfront that when education is viewed as an investment there is a huge difference from it being viewed as an expense. Alongside this also, it depends on whether the country is located in a first world or emerging economy. These are important features for any government that seeks to perform at a high level, improve its economic fortunes and achieve a sustainable economic trajectory.

In the case of South Africa, a plethora of scenarios abound; a unique economy with a history so fantastically bizarre it beggars belief that we are where we are in the first place. The structure of our economy remains queer at best. Queer because the haves are bent on extracting the maximum the country can produce with the sole intention of siphoning it out of the borders. There exists as a result the now prevalent thinking that the only way to stimulate our economy is through foreign investment. This is laughable when as a country we have the largest reserves of mineral wealth in the world. It is the very infatuation with nice, sophisticated, free market principles that do not have a strategic fit with the development stage of our own economy.

Are we in a position to define and articulate the stage of development of our economy? This is a critical question for all of us who are very serious and concerned about the future of our country. This is a question that requires more attention and vigorous engagement. My assertion is that the first steps towards responding to this national question will begin to address the realities of our country; effectively and perhaps honestly.

It is about educating ourselves all over again; asking, probing, checking, researching, talking, thinking and doing all the things educated people MUST do and THOROUGHLY so. How are we funding our future? This is the fundamental question. How are we planning for our future? What kind of investment are we making to secure the ever elusive “sustained economic growth”?

At our disposal is the public purse and this is where it begins; working with what we have. If the objective is to turn things around then indeed our efforts should be radical enough and be sustained in order to get to the finish line. Take the issue of students who drop out. A percent of our kids at tertiary institutions are unable to pay at the end of their first year of study for example. Their results are withheld and then they cannot continue with their studies and eventually drop out. These are students who mental construct to prosper and make a success of their lives through hard work; they are driven and capable. But the system fails them. We are not even talking about the percentage that never makes it at all to university or any place of higher learning. Let's focus on the ones failed by our own

system simply because they are poor in spite and despite of the commendable efforts of National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). Let's face it NSFAS is hardly scratching the surface.

We explain it away and cite issues of budget deficit. This has become the great lie behind which men and women of lazy minds hide while the young minds are left to fend for themselves in the wilderness of no education. (I am ashamed that today in my country) it is anathema and travesty that there is no free education in SA. I want to challenge the "budget deficit status quo" and offer a radical view. **What are the odds of providing free university/tertiary education via the deficit and produce highly skilled young people juxtaposed with a balanced budget with an unskilled populace and high unemployment? Which one will take us to where we really need to be?**

We must begin to look beyond the adopted sophisticated economic policies and mechanisms that do not suit nor designed to respond to our unique challenges. For a country that was able to deliver the 2010 FIFA World Cup we are very clear about producing results when we want to with what we have. Why should we stumble and lower the standards when we talk about educating our children? We suddenly become our own worst critics and sworn enemies notwithstanding the media onslaught that religiously paint a picture of a country that are imploding. **Today, Mr Chancellor, I'm calling for free education up to tertiary institutions. Let us finance our students for their diplomas and first degrees.**

**Brazil regards 50% as fail in its grading system.** While the universities there are free to determine their respective grading regimes, **50% is generally regarded the worst performance. We on the other hand have 30% as the benchmark.** How on earth are we going to produce winners in any field if this is what we expect from our kids? Is this planning for our future? Is this the preparation for a high performance government? **With over 2600 universities, the best education in Brazil is free.** South Korea has shown the world what is possible when radical solutions are implemented consciously and with genuine commitment. South Korean products have become world leaders through extensive investment in technology. With a population that is a little over 52 million it has 420 universities. Japan on the other hand has more than 160 public universities. The private sector there has invested in over 560 universities alone. There is no doubt that when there is innovation in education planning results are there to speak for themselves. The significant aspect about these examples is that these countries I am citing responded uniquely to their own circumstances. Organic solutions will always be sustainable. Only then can we too tell a better story than we have now.

Exhaustive and painstaking analysis of Brazil, South Korea, China (2300 universities), India (600) and more than 33 000 affiliate colleges shows that besides accessibility and quality, relevant education impacts positively on sustainable economic development and growth. The respective economies of these countries are performing well under current circumstances. (I expect Brazil to come out of its latest distress and get back to where it

belongs because they have worked hard for it). The point is that it has also been proven beyond a shadow of doubt that it is the tertiary institutions that drive economic revolution. It therefore becomes imperative that we increase the number of graduates with relevant skills for the South African economy. This cannot come at a compromise of quality: The India – China examples very clearly demonstrates that. Then it becomes critical that we seriously look at increasing the number of tertiary institutions and spend a higher percentage of our GDP on tertiary education. However, this does not mean the lowering of entrance standards into tertiary institutions. This we have done at our own peril.

As South Africans, we are sitting on a massive pool of potential graduates that are between the ages of 35-55 and are in various management and technical positions. For various reasons, they didn't attend tertiary institutions but attended various courses and gained practical experience on their job experiences. Except for the recognition of prior learning, very little is done to convert these people into graduates. They are a thousand times more productive than a 21 year old coming fresh out of University.

We need to look at the American model that assists mature students and adult learners obtain an associate or graduate degree. An University like Thomas Edison State College based in New Jersey will give a student 100% recognition for credits arising out of College Level Examination Program (CLEP) or transfers from other universities. A CLEP exam is recognised as the equivalent of a university exam. Here again, quality is not compromised. You must really know your stuff for you to pass the CLEP exam. However, this examination can be taken without having to attend lectures as it is assumed that as an adult learner you would have gained sufficient knowledge (in addition to the study guide provided) to pass this exam. This route to obtain a degree should only be made available to mature students with a minimum duration of relevant work experience. This is worth a huge consideration.

Mr Chancellor, I have deliberately shied away from the critical role that other stakeholders can play in our economic revolution. I am talking about students themselves. I am also thinking about graduates, the private sector and the business fraternity as a whole. Today I have just placed tertiary education at the centre of economic revolution. Even I can pronounce that this delivery is neither exhaustive nor final. I am simply proud to acknowledge that I was inspired by the words of the first president of Kenya, Honourable Jomo Kenyata, who said, **"Our children may learn about the heroes of the past. Our task is to make ourselves the architects of the future"**.

Each one of us has a critical role to play in advancing the cause of economic revolution. Each one of us has a crucial role in creating a better future for all. The future belongs to those who shape it. The future belongs to those who plan and describe it. The future belongs to those who define it. Our future is in our hands.

Once again Mr Chancellor, let me express my sincerest gratitude for this honour. I accept this Honorary Doctorate with great pride, gratitude and humility.

Congratulations to all those graduating today. I wish you well now and into the future. In 20 years we have told a good story. Together with you going forward if we choose challenging, constructive, credible and courageous options leading us to the high road, we would be able to tell not only a better story but the best story yet. Thanks to all of you for listening.