



UNIVERSITY OF VENDA INAUGURATION ACCEPTANCE SPEECH BY THE
CHANCELLOR: ADVOCATE MOJANKU GUMBI: 18 FEBRUARY 2022:
THOHOYANDOU

Compatriots, we are the generation chosen to bear a calamity that we never thought possible, the Covid pandemic. May we take a moment to remember all those whom we lost to it.

Chairperson of Council, thank you for acknowledging all those who need to be acknowledged, in the correct protocol order. I would never have done as good a job as you did. Accordingly, please allow me to say only; I concur with you in acknowledging all the dignitaries you mentioned. This gives me an opportunity to turn the usual protocol around and take the time allocated to formal salutations to acknowledge my family and friends, present and online.

Comrades and compatriots

Ndi matsheloni

Chairperson of Council, allow me to thank the community that makes up the University of Venda, led by the University Council, for the distinctive honour extended to me to be elected as the Chancellor of this outstanding centre of learning. It is an honour that I accept with humility, in particular because I follow in the hallowed footsteps of one of the outstanding sons of our country, Ntate Walter Sisulu, as well as those of Presidents Matamela Cyril Ramaphosa

and Kgalema Motlanthe. I do not want to get into trouble by stating that I do not intend to step into their shoes, like the enigmatic one once said about his predecessor; whose shoes I also do not want to step into. I do hope, however, that I will have the privilege of drawing on the wise counsel of those of my predecessor who are still with us.

This role has given me the distinct honour of being part of a ground-breaking initiative started by one of our Chancellors, Dr Precious Moloi-Motsepe, who is here with us today. The initiative brings together current and former Chancellors of Universities to harness their collective wisdom in the interest of higher education. It is an initiative which, while recognising the status of Chancellors as titular heads of Universities, seeks to bring them into a common forum in aid of universities. We are encouraged by the support that this initiative has received from Vice-Chancellors, and we will be working with them and Chairpersons of Council to refine its work.

This year we are celebrating the 40th anniversary of the founding of the University of Venda. This University started off as a branch of the University of the North, both established to give effect to the dehumanising apartheid project of providing inferior education to black students such that, on qualification, they serve the needs of the Bantustan system. However, both institutions went on to defy the shameful circumstances of their birth to become the loci of our struggle and part of the midwives of our new society.

Vice Chancellor, a number of the former students of this university reached out to me when they learnt about this event. I am accompanied today by one of your former students, Mrs Basetsana Khumalo, who in her time went on to represent the young people of this country globally in proudly embracing African beauty. She felt compelled to be with us today to lend her presence in celebrating this university that made a huge impact in shaping who she is today. I bring greetings from many other of your former students, such as the Director General of Home Affairs. Another one whom I told I am going to mention is Ms Shirley Machaba, the Price Waterhouse Coopers Southern Africa Chief Executive Officer. Yet another of your outstanding alumni, who left us too soon, Mr Lutendo Sigogo led us with distinction as the President of the Black Lawyers Association. I mention but a few of the many alumni of this

University who defied the circumstances of its birth to become outstanding members of society. The former Statistician General, Mr Pali Lehohla, tells me that this university was his hunting ground for excellent mathematicians and scientists. Congratulations to all those involved in shaping these young minds. and to the students who have maintained the very high standards set by the alumni of this university.

Vice Chancellor, I thought we should spend the little time we have together to talk about the role that institutions of higher learning play, or should play, in society.

There are differing views about the role that institutions of higher learning should play in society. In trying to answer this question, I have borrowed a bit from the work done in 2000 by the UK Open University's Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI), which initiated "a research project whose overarching aim was to increase understanding of the various ways in which universities and other higher education institutions generate, contribute or inhibit social, economic and political change.

The project attempted to distinguish between the economic, the political, the social and the cultural aspects of transformation. In general, and certainly in the short term, the role of universities in stimulating economic change appears to have been relatively weak, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. In their economic role, universities were generally responding to external pressures rather than initiating or driving transformation.

The role of universities in political change appears to be both complex and contradictory. It is necessary to distinguish between the stages of 'removing the old' and 'building the new' in political change. In connection with the former, universities could both be important supporters of old regimes as well as providers of 'protected space' in which critique and opposition could ferment. Alongside the explicitly political contributions of some of their members to regime change, universities could also play important roles in

providing personnel for institution-building in the new civil societies under construction after the more dramatic moments of transformation had passed.

As far as a social role is concerned, universities probably contribute quite as much to social reproduction as they do to social transformation.

The cultural role appeared to have been important in many places, with universities providing both a route for the entry of external ideas and experiences into otherwise closed societies and a repository for national sentiments that could come out of 'storage' when time and circumstance permitted".

African Minds Higher Education Dynamics Series, Volume 1, edited by Nico Cloete, Peter Maassen and Tracey Bailey, traces the role of African universities as follows:

"Soon after independence, a 'development' discourse emerged and 1960 was heralded as the 'Year of Africa' and the beginning of the so-called 'development decade'. In September 1962, UNESCO hosted a conference on the 'Development of Higher Education in Africa'. A decade later, in July 1972, the Association of African Universities held a workshop in Accra which focused on the role of the university in development (Yesufu 1973). The importance of the university in newly-independent African countries was underscored by the now-famous 'Accra declaration' that all universities must be 'development universities' (ibid.). Controversially, workshop participants agreed that this was such an important task that the university could not be left to academics alone; it was also the responsibility of governments to steer universities in the development direction.

Despite the rhetoric about the 'development university', African governments did little to promote the development role of these institutions. In part this was because many of these governments had not developed a coherent development model, with notions of what the role of the universities would be. Instead, many had become increasingly embroiled in internal power struggles, as well as the external politics of the Cold War and the politics of

funding agencies such as the World Bank. Instead, 'not leaving the universities alone' became interference by government, rather than steering (Moja et al. 1996). Furthermore, universities became sites of contestation – partially around the development model of the new state, and partially around the lack of delivery which included inadequate funding for the institutions. The result was that many governments, other stakeholders and academics became sceptical, if not suspicious, of the university's role in national development. It was during this period that the World Bank in particular – in part based on the infamous 'rate of return to investments in education' study (Psacharopoulos et al. 1986) – concluded that development efforts in Africa should be refocused to concentrate on primary education.

The gloomy analyses of higher education in Africa presented above were largely based on the four decades from 1960 to the end of the 1990s. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, some influential voices started calling for the 'revitalisation' of the African university and for linking higher education to development (Sawyer 2004). This raises questions as to what has to have new life breathed into it or to be restored or resurrected. (Mahmood) Mamdani provided an evocative reflection during the 1990 symposium on academic freedom held in Kampala and organised by the Council for the Development of Social Research in Africa, which suggests that the revitalisation needed had to do with 'relevance' (Mamdani 1993: 11):

"We discovered local communities, communities which we had hitherto viewed simply as so many natural settings. Forced to address these communities, we were compelled to look at ourselves from the stand-point of these communities. We came to realise that universities have little relevance to the communities around us. To them, we must appear like potted plants in greenhouses – of questionable aesthetic value – or more anthropological oddities with curious habits and strange dresses, practitioners of some modern witchcraft. To academics accustomed to seeing ourselves as leaders-in-waiting or students accustomed to be cajoled as the leaders of tomorrow, these were indeed harsh realities. We were forced to understand the question of relevance, not simply narrowly from the point of view of the development logic of the state, or even narrower market logic of the IMF and the World Bank, but broadly from the point of view of the needs of surrounding communities. But we had always resisted any demand for a broad relevance in

the name of maintaining quality. Faced with popular pressures for democracy in education, universities and independent states were determined, not only to preserve intact those universities inherited from colonial mentors but also to reproduce replicas several times over to maintain standards”.

Let me add to Mamdani’s scathing attack the caution from Amilcar Cabral, that when waging a struggle, “the people are not fighting for ideas, for the things in anyone’s head. They are fighting to win material benefits, to live better and in peace, to see their lives go forward, to guarantee the future of their children...”

Historically, South African universities have mostly not shied away from assuming their role as an integral part of the forces waging the struggle for the defeat of apartheid. In the late 60’s the South African Students Organisation made its mark within universities, finding support not only among students, but also staff and workers alike. SASO eventually gave birth to the 1976 Soweto riots which breathed life into the broader liberation movement at a time when some were almost on their knees.

Recently, the Fees Must Fall Movement, which, just like the 1976 riots were not only about the use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction, were not only about students fees, but also the rights of workers, again reminded us that universities can still act as incubators of strong social movements.

If, in the words of Mamdani, universities should not be “potted plants in greenhouses ... of questionable aesthetic value, with curious habits and strange dresses, practitioners of some modern witchcraft”, what should they say or do to help resolve the very glaring challenges our country is facing?

Writing in the Daily Maverick of 21 September 2021, the Vice Chancellor of the University of Free State, Professor Francis Peterson states:

“South Africa is in trouble. No matter what your political or ethical persuasion – this much is abundantly clear. And if some of the opinions expressed lately by

prominent economists are anything to go by, many are losing faith in whether we can still turn around a downward economic trajectory.

But before we make up our minds either way, it is important to first face a truth that lies at the core of it all: It is impossible to build a *thriving economy* on the back of a *divided society*. This makes societal reform a logical departure point for any economic relief efforts.

And here the higher education sector has a definite and vital role to play.

On the battlefield of unexpected calamities, the South African economy can be compared to a soldier who has taken too many hits. First, the devastating impact on so many sectors of our society caused by Covid-19 lockdowns and restrictions; followed by the question over misspent or missing pandemic support funds; and then the final agonising blow – the looting and destruction in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal in July, leaving a gaping hole of around R50-billion in damages.

Equally heart-breaking and disconcerting as the physical damages and loss of life, is the damage caused to our nation's psyche, with racist and classist fault lines reappearing, fuelled by the divisive rhetoric of unscrupulous leaders.

Looming ominously over this crowded battlefield are the murky clouds of corruption at the highest level and of the most disturbing kind, which have been systematically and painfully laid bare by the Zondo Commission over the past three years.

We truly find ourselves at a very low point as a nation. Financially, morally and mentally.

And, like all other sectors of society, higher education needs to ask itself what it can do – if anything – to help fix what is broken.

Changing role of universities

Universities used to have a rather narrow focus on education and the creation of new knowledge. This role has, however, evolved considerably over the past decade or two. Their function nowadays is very much a societal one, where the focus is on using skills and knowledge to make a real difference in the societies they serve and from which they draw their students – the engaged university.

Let's be clear: higher education cannot *solve* poverty and inequality. That is the domain of the government, which needs to ensure that appropriate policies

are in place that will constructively stimulate investment and assistance from the private sector and industry.

The higher education sector needs to focus on its strengths. And that is to do research; to offer advice and come up with possible solutions; to educate and to provide skills that will help uplift individuals, families and communities”.

The country has been brought to its knees, and universities can offer advice and come up with possible solutions, says the eminent Professor. I listened to a parliamentary debate held recently and the term cognitive dissonance came to mind. Even as we go through the rituals of our parliamentary system, recent history must teach us to employ a modicum of believability.

The truth is that we are faced with a complete erosion of the moral fibre of our society. In a country where close to 300 000 people died from Covid-19, political leaders saw it fit to steal funds aimed at procuring life saving equipment for their citizens; the very people they swore to protect and provide for.

Millions go to bed hungry. On 6 August 2021, applications for the Covid-19 social relief grant of R350 reopened. Less than two weeks after the reopening, 11 237 724 applications for the grant were received.

The South African government has been living far beyond its means since 2009. The result has been that annual deficits have led to debt that is now estimated to exceed R4.4 trillion in the current financial year. The interest that this debt incurs (debt service costs) will exceed R300 billion annually from 2022/23 onwards. This is the fastest growing item of spending, bigger than spending on Education, Health, Social grants and Policing.

The fiscal envelope is just over R4.9 trillion over the next 3 years, that is between R1.6 and R1.7 trillion annually. If this is breached, government will

either have to introduce painful tax increases or may experience a debt crisis, leading to massive capital outflows and currency depreciation.

We have a stagnant economy, with tight fiscal constraints, poor infrastructure, energy supply issues. Add a weakened State to all these challenges.

However dark the clouds may seem, it is possible to slowly claw back from this state of affairs, but we're going to need nerves of steel to do so.

First, we need to acknowledge that our politics are central to the challenges we face. Yes, we need to fix the economy, but the partners that we need to work with do not trust the government. If we follow the numbers closely, we will notice that most of the country's savings are outside our borders. Politics, therefore, affect our ability to grow the economy. If the economy does not grow you can have the best explosion of skills programme, but there will be no economy to absorb those skills. The government can also not give grants to these trained people to support entrepreneurship, because of the tight fiscal space. We are fast approaching dangerous debt to GDP levels. Bigger economies can afford this, we cannot. It is a vicious circle, which all revolves around us getting the politics right.

The leader of society says please continue to give us a chance, we know we have brought you here, but we will lead you to the promised land. To which the author Sisonke Msimang responds:

"Your role in the revolution will not save you. Your history of speech-making and sleeping in a cold detention cell will not save you. Not even back-breaking labour on Robben Island will spare you the scepticism of today's champions of freedom. Gramsci tells us "the old is dying and the new cannot be born." But in my country the young ones have been born. They have been born and they are just now beginning to walk. So this is an interregnum, one in which the new is emerging and there is bitter-sweet hope.

These young ones who have just been born do not respect authority simply because the rules say they should. The young ones simply have no fucks left to give. They do not care about preserving the credibility of those who assert themselves on the basis of what they have done in the past or who they once were. Only today matters because what has gone before has been so bitterly disappointing.

This is the price that must be paid for revolutions betrayed and for forgiveness squandered.

Radical departures from the status quo are never easy. They are always simultaneously symbolic and visceral. But they open up new possibilities for questioning what was once unquestioned and unquestionable. Something new and clean and wondrous is taking flight. It doesn't need permission: it is its own authority."

(The old is dying and the young ones have just been born; May 15, 2015)

Another one of our young scholars, Dr Sithembile Mbetse writes:

"Nearly three decades after the watershed 1994 elections, democratisation has not brought about the significant improvement in economic wellbeing that many desired and expected. With a nearly 40% unemployment rate and one of the highest levels of inequality in the world, the majority of South Africans have not yet fully celebrated the fruits of freedom from apartheid". (ETHICS POLITICS INEQUALITY: NEW DIRECTIONS. State of the Nation. HSRC Publication edited by BOHLER-MULLER - SOUDEN - REDDY: 2021)

We know that the unemployment rate remains on an upward trajectory.

I suppose, as Bantu Biko taught us that in times of doubt, go to the sources. One of the sources is the book of Jeremiah Chapter 29, verse 11, which states that "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope". Shall we continue to live in hope? Have we reached the tipping point? Well, that is what an engaged university should be able to tell us.

The disintegration of Luthuli's party did not happen overnight. The Pan Africanists left it in the late 1950's. The group of eight was expelled in 1975. More recently, the United Democratic Movement (UDM), Congress of the People (COPE) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) branched off. Currently, what is left of it is slowly eating itself up.

Sobukwe's party disintegrated right in front of our eyes.

Biko's party is a shadow of what it was at its birth, with it at some stage having three political organisations all claiming to be the genuine custodians of the black consciousness ideology.

Luthuli's party is dead.

Sobukwe's party is dead.

Biko's party is dead/

We all accept that our country needs a strong government which enjoys the confidence and support of the people. We have to ask what the response of true patriots should be to the mammoth challenges facing us. Those of us sitting in this congregation should not allow ourselves to be what Fanon said, that post liberation, "the national bourgeoisie steps into the shoes of the former European settlement: doctors, barristers, traders From now on it will insist that all the big foreign companies should pass through its hands ... The national middle class discovers its historic mission: that of intermediary. Seen through its eyes, its mission has nothing to do with transforming the nation; it consists, prosaically, of being the transmission line between the nation and a capitalism, rampant though camouflaged, which today puts on the masque of neo-colonialism". (The Wretched of the Earth: Frantz Fanon)

The mission must remain that of transforming the nation.

By its own admission, Luthuli's organisation does not seem to be fit for purpose. In 1997, its leader expressed grave concern about what the party was becoming. In 2002 its leader expressed the same concerns. In 2007 the concerns were laid bare for all to see. So too, in 2012, 2017. 27 years later, after its own leaders have consistently told us it is going in the wrong direction, it now wants us to believe that it can miraculously change course.

Chairperson of Council, let me flag a few suggestions about how we may respond to Lenin's age old question; what is to be done.

First, we need a capable State. We cannot even begin to think we can implement even the best policies without a capable state. Thus far we are not seeing encouraging signs, with the leader of government, my eminent predecessor exhibiting some will to build this state, at least from his pronouncements, but with the petticoat of party controls showing.

Another young scholar, Professor Adebayo Olukoshi says that:

"There is no policy system that can be properly effective, no matter the political will you have, no matter the investment you make in capacity, if there is not a robust and coherent civil service as the embodiment of policy, planning, policy vision, and policy implementation". He laments "the absence of a meeting of minds between a community of knowledge producers and a community of policy implementers on our continent It is easier for our finance ministers to take ideas from the World Bank and come home to implement them than to take ideas from, say, the Department of Economics of a state university. In some instances, there is actually even outright hostility between the two communities.

And so those of us who work in the field of policy as knowledge producers find ourselves in a situation where we are constantly critiquing our governments for wrong policies, and the governments constantly on the defensive, saying those policies come from experts, and experts by definition cannot be found locally, they are international and external". (Quoted in the ACBF report on the 6th Africa Think Tank Summit held in Nairobi in 2019)

In a country such as South Africa, with the levels of inequality we have, we have to aggressively lift those at the bottom and ensure those at the top support them. Many ideas have been put on the table, including a wealth tax. Also, how we allocate the budget is a matter of political choice. There is a sense in which the democratic government that was ushered in in 1994 merely stepped into the shoes of a budgeting system that was not meant to cater for the majority of the citizens. If we examine the last apartheid budget we find that, by percentage, and excluding anomalies such as the allocations to Bantustans, we have retained similar patterns of allocations.

There are countries in the world that have established co-payment systems for certain public goods. Co-payment for public goods refers to the system where the provision of services is paid for in part by the government and the other part by the consumer. Prior to 1994, the apartheid government had stopped building what was called four-roomed houses in the townships. Many citizens were able to make means to find accommodation. Nothing stops the current government from shifting housing onto a co-payment basis. So too education, or health. It is a matter of determining what proportion of the payment will be carried by the state and what part by the consumer. This approach will free up resources to invest in sustainable economic growth projects, not short-term interventions that we see come up lately.

Chairperson of Council, understanding the meaning behind Mao's age old call to let a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend, which challenge he put primarily to the Chinese intelligentsia, I posit that perhaps a true renewal of our country might require the following, among others:

- A genuine cleaning out of the corrupt elements in the State, including at Ministerial level. This is the first step towards rebuilding trust with the people of this country, and is a step without which a real compact cannot be built
- Ensuring that we persuade the best talent that this country has to offer to enter the public sector, at all levels

- Once that is achieved, engage in unmediated interaction with the people, through their organised formations, with a view to getting their input on what it would take to re-set the clock. We have to accept that we need to start again on a better footing this time. It takes courage to accept that.
- Living within our means. Despite what has been drilled into our heads, it is possible to have a balanced budget in South Africa. We collect approximately R1.6 trillion per annum in taxes. The deficit for the year ending 2022 is R479.7 billion and allocations to provinces for the same period is R544.8 billion; this includes provincial legislatures that can never pass laws that are inconsistent with national ones. Why have these legislatures? Why have this layer of government, instead of strong government at municipal level? While it is correct that provinces carry some public sector salaries, taking away part of the provincial allocations, together with one or two other re-prioritising may make a big dent on the necessity of a budget deficit. I know this will be viewed as a simplistic approach to a complex problem, but, at the core of it, there is nothing complex about budgeting. We just need a root and branch examination of our budget in South Africa. Fresh eyes may also help.
- There are lots of smaller amounts sitting throughout government. For example, a big part of the mandate of the entity that I am currently chairing, on an interim basis, overlaps with the mandate of two other entities in government. The announcement was made that a rationalisation of entities will be initiated, but like many other intended projects, nothing has come of it. A closer examination of other big items on the budget will show that at times the problem does not lie with lack of money, but lack of the skills to manage the budget effectively. A case in point is the recent revelation that the public order police have not spent their allocated budget.
- Develop a realist economic recovery plan. There is no one size fits all for economic development. We need to go city by city, town by town and village by village to ensure that the plans for each locality are sustainable. For example, you can mine particular natural resources only where they are available. Tourism is the one sector that lends itself to universal practice. You can put up a biking or walking trail almost

anywhere, or an Air B n B, with very little resources. This is where strong local government structures become critical.

- Effective regional integration. Our sister country Zimbabwe is just across the fence. That means we can have a number of major dry ports in this area, so that our Zimbabwean neighbours and other African countries can easily access goods. Removing impediments to the implementation of the Africa Continental Free Trade Area will also help.
- Fix our broken social structures. Friends and compatriots, I can assure you none of you want to be at the mercy of the public health system, or turn up at a police station in the middle of the night with a rape victim. First of all you would be fortunate to get in. The advice given by police is that if you are followed at night drive straight to a police station. However, the police station in the area where I live has a high fence around it and a huge gate that gets closed. Even during the day we are not allowed to drive in. How then do I drive in there to escape criminals?

I could go on to give specific proposals of what to do, but we do not have the time.

I am proud to say that this University is, among many other initiatives, involved in efforts to support the Southern Africa region, using leading technology. The University recently signed a smart city partnership in that regard. As we celebrate our 40th anniversary, we will continue to reach out to all of you to support our initiatives, and to join some of our activities.

Chairperson of Council, this is our country. More grease to our elbows as we bring all hands on deck!

Allow me to end this acceptance speech with a poem taken from Volume VII of the Sol Plaatjie EU poetry anthology, selected by Goodenough Mashego, Koleka Putuma, Pieter Odendaal and our esteemed poet laureate Mongane Wally Serote. The poem is written by Jim Pascual Augustin, titled “The Octopus Cannot Help Living Like Most Politicians”

“An octopus knows it is alien
to its surroundings. Survival
depends on learning to blend in.

Its skin can take on textures
and patterns to mimic what presses
against it. Its tentacles can curl

inward, a membrane away
from its two-hearted core.

Or it can undulate those same

boneless limbs like bait or seaweed.

This creature becomes rock,
coral, debris from a sunken ship

when needed. Once uncovered,
it bursts with a flourish of ink.

Like so many words flushed out

but void of meaning. Until
it gropes into a new existence,
takes hold of the role of the hunter

again instead of prey.

There are far too many
advantages to being spineless”.

Let those who are not as spineless as the octopus stand up to save our country.

I thank you