

Address at the conference of the Association of African Universities

Cape Town, 22 February 2005

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Deputy Vice Chancellor of the UCT, Professor Martin West,
Distinguished delegates,
Comrades, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I thank you for the privilege you have given me to address this important gathering of the leaders of Africa's continental academy, representing the African intelligentsia. On behalf of the government and people of South Africa, I extend a very warm and sincere welcome to all the delegates and participants at this important Conference.

You meet in our country at the beginning of the First Century of the Second Millennium. The way the human mind works dictates that we impose on you the obligation to consider yourselves as architects of a new African world that will be different from the African world of the last Century and the greater part of the last Millennium.

On the very eve of the last Century of the first Millennium, the outstanding African American scholar and combatant for African liberation, W.E.B. du Bois, said that the problem of the 20th Century would be the problem of the colour line. History has proved him correct.

If he were still alive, perhaps W.E.B. du Bois would make bold to say that 21st Century would be distinguished by the elimination of the colour line as a defining feature in the ordering of human relations.

The realisation of this objective is the central and historic task that confronts you as the African intelligentsia, acting together with the intelligentsia in the African Diaspora - we whom an earlier and extended historical period, dominated by others than ourselves, had defined us as belonging to the other and despised side of the colour line.

I trust that in your deliberations in the course of this week, you will find ways in which together as institutions of higher education, government and the rest of society, we will improve our collaboration as we implement practical programmes both to define the 21st Century in our interest, and to revive the vibrancy of many of our African universities, which in the past made these institutions some of the best in the world.

I also hope that you will reflect on the challenges facing African universities in the context of the unfolding renaissance on our continent and find ways of strengthening the links between your own programmes and those of the African Union and its development programme, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

This morning I would like to start by reflecting on an important phenomenon that characterises the African continent. We are each one of us consumed by the daily challenges we face. Because of this, we have perhaps not given sufficient attention to and taken the necessary advantage of this phenomenon. This is the phenomenon of change.

I hope that either at this conference or on other occasions, the leadership present here may want to look further at some of these changes that I will briefly talk about. In this context I would seek to answer the

question how African universities could help to consolidate these positive changes, give them more impetus, and help our continent to address everything that has a negative impact on our peoples.

The first of these changes concerns African politics. I am sure that students of history will have already recorded the fact that African politics has undergone fundamental change in the last decade and half, with the majority of African countries abandoning the failed systems of one-party rule and military dictatorship, in favour of more open and inclusive democratic systems of government. As we know, in many of our countries, multi-party elections have become a regular feature of our national politics.

Clearly, we still face many challenges with regard to the task of deepening popular democracy and empowering state and civil society institutions so that they can serve our citizens better, to ensure that all our countries become, in a real sense, more democratic.

This challenge is directly relevant to our universities because we know that over the years, a good number of these universities have not performed well with regard to their vibrancy, efficiency and effectiveness, in part due to autocratic systems of government that characterised many of our countries in the 1970's and 1980's.

Our universities had in the past played an important role in our democratic processes because these are institutions among whose defining features are free debate, as well as open and critical search for solutions. Accordingly, the political changes on the continent could never be complete without the full involvement of African universities.

Two of the key activities of higher education, namely research and teaching, in all their forms and functions, are perhaps the most powerful vehicles that we can and should use to deepen democracy. Research, in particular, engenders the values of inquiry, critical thinking, creativity and open-mindedness, which are fundamental to building a strong democratic ethos in society.

We need research and a curriculum that can contribute to the advancement of all forms of knowledge and scholarship. In particular these must address the diverse challenges and demands of the local, national, regional and African contexts, while simultaneously upholding rigorous standards of academic quality.

The second change affecting Africa concerns the issue of peace and stability. We will remember that in the past, the OAU had a policy of non-interference in the affairs of member-states. Today, the AU firmly asserts our common duty to intervene to prevent such horrors as the 1994 Rwanda genocide, as well as respond to the need to restore political order and maintain peace in our countries, in the interest of the African masses.

As we know, SADC intervened in Lesotho to defend democracy in that country. ECOWAS intervened in Sierra Leone and Liberia to advance the cause of peace and democracy. Furthermore, through the AU or regional bodies, Africa has intervened in the DRC, Burundi, Sudan, Cte d'Ivoire, Somalia, Madagascar, Comoros, Ethiopia and Eritrea, and now Togo, to contribute to the achievement of just and durable peace in all these countries.

African universities must play an important role in ensuring that we achieve and consolidate peace and stability on the continent. The creation of strong conflict resolution and conflict management institutions on our continent would contribute to this.

The starting point could be the development and strengthening of a curriculum around the subjects of peace, stability and conflict resolution and management. We could also explore the possibility of partnerships as we develop institutions dedicated to these important matters.

The third important change is around the socio-economic development of the African continent. Through NEPAD, the continent has adopted an integrated, comprehensive and holistic approach to the challenges of development. It now speaks with one voice about the pressing needs of our countries, individually and collectively.

For the first time we have seen the developed world commit itself to an Africa support programme informed by the commitment to lend support to a vision elaborated by Africans. I refer here specifically to the G8 African Action Plan, which is a detailed programmatic response of the developed countries to the NEPAD programme of action.

In addition, NEPAD continues to engage different sectors on the continent to mobilise internal resources so as to contribute to this programme for the regeneration of our continent.

We will recall that NEPAD was developed and adopted by the AU because among other things, we had to respond to the unacceptable situation whereby the continent continued for decades to sink deeper into poverty and underdevelopment, despite its rich natural resources.

We have continued to export both human and capital resources to the rich countries of the developed north. We have seen a pervasive world phenomenon of globalisation further marginalize Africa, and confine our continent to the periphery of an increasingly integrated and interdependent world.

This process of globalisation is the fourth of the changes that have had a profound impact on our continent, an impact that unfortunately has not, as yet, been entirely positive for the greater part of Africa.

One of the driving factors of this phenomenon of globalisation is the role played by modern information and communication technologies in transforming the global economy and the very lives of the peoples of the world. That we do not fully benefit from these ICT advantages serves both as a cause and an effect of Africa's underdevelopment.

I therefore propose that one of the things we may want to look at is the role of the African universities in a continent whose politics have changed and continue to change for the better; a continent that is becoming more assertive in dealing with those who undermine the peace and stability of our countries; a continent that is implementing a comprehensive development programme in the face of a changed world that continues to marginalize Africa and her people; and a continent which has not accessed modern technology and therefore remains ever poorer and underdeveloped.

In addition to what may be done within universities to help accelerate and consolidate the processes of change on the continent, I think we have two other challenges that face African academics and institutions of higher learning. These are so central to our renaissance that I ask for your indulgence to restate them.

The first is that as our countries are going through a critically important transition phase. South Africa is moving from its racist past to a non-racial, non-sexist and democratic society. The DRC is trying to break away from various forms of autocracy, towards democracy.

Burundi is breaking loose from tribal conflicts to consolidate a unified nation that uses its diversity to strengthen itself. Somalia is emerging from its conditions as a failed state, to reunite all Somalis into a new democratic state. Sudan is working to overcome long-standing racial, tribal, regional and religious conflicts, build a new nation, united in its diversity.

What then is the role of the African intellectuals and universities in all this, not merely in analysing the problems and challenges facing us, but in offering practical solutions and engaging processes that seek to address these various important developments.

The second challenge is that, as we know, the AU through NEPAD has established the Peer-Review Mechanism. Apart from this African initiative, we have very few authentic African institutions that act as barometers for our countries to measure our progress with regard to such important matters as democracy, peace and stability, peoples and human rights, development issues, and the creation of people-centred societies.

Chairperson:

I am happy that this conference will focus on the valuable insights that can be and will be gained from a serious examination of non-Western educational traditions, such as those prevalent in Africa and the African Diaspora.

We know very well the long and rich history of higher education on this continent from the time of the flowering of Nubian civilisation, to the great temples of knowledge in ancient Egypt, to the era of the great centres of learning in Timbuktu in the middle of the second millennium A.D. Those who understood the role of a university in the greater human setting, correctly referred to the scholars of Timbuktu as ambassadors of peace.

As we know, Timbuktu was not only a great intellectual centre of the West African civilizations of Ghana, Mali and Songhai. It was also one of the most splendid scientific centres and contributors to the period described as the European Medieval and Renaissance eras. Its incomplete collection of books and manuscripts leaves us in no doubt as to the magnificence of its intellectual contribution.

Indeed, because of the importance of the manuscripts at Timbuktu, the governments of Mali and South Africa have established a project of restoring and preserving these priceless documents, so that as we look at the challenges facing our continent, we will be able to draw from this invaluable fountain of knowledge.

Undoubtedly, today, as in the past, higher education has an important role to play in the economic, social, cultural and political renaissance of our continent and in the drive for the development of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS).

Accordingly, an African university cannot but be an important and critical part of the African Renaissance. The challenge for an African university should be viewed as a call that insists that all critical and transformative educators in Africa embrace an indigenous African world-view and root their nation's educational paradigms in an indigenous socio-cultural and epistemological framework.

Among others, this implies that all educational curricula in Africa should have Africa as their focus, and as a result, be indigenous "grounded and orientated. Failure to do so may result in education becoming alien and irrelevant, as is seen to be the case with the legacy of colonial and neo" colonial education systems.

As part of our renaissance, we may want to view the African university through a number of features, which could include the following:

- An African identity and vision that provides an overarching education philosophy that is consonant with the cultures of the people;
- An African identity and vision in higher education that represents a critical point of departure from the current colonial-Western identity which is neither suitable nor compatible with this identity;
- An African identity and vision that creates a new paradigm that locates the African condition, knowledge, experiences, values, world-view and mindset at the centre of our scholarship and knowledge-seeking approach.
- A vision that places education at the centre of our development programmes that would ensure that we create a continent that is developed and prosperous.

In this context, African educational thought and practice are characterised not only by their concern with the person, but also by their interweaving of social, economic, political, cultural, and educational threads together into a common tapestry. In this way, education in Africa is distinguished by the importance it attaches to its individual, collective and social nature, and the need to defeat poverty and underdevelopment.

Higher education, then, in the African setting cannot, and indeed, should not be separated from life itself. It is a natural process by which members of the community gradually acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes appropriate to life in their community " a higher education inspired by a spirit of what we call in South Africa, ubuntu " which is to say, I become a better person because of the collective contribution of others and I therefore should always be in the service of the community and the nation.

As we know, the centuries' old subjugation of Africa to foreign exploitation, ranging from slavery, to the colonial system, which was singularly designed to achieve maximum extraction and exploitation of raw materials, wreaked serious damage that continues to impact on contemporary Africa.

With regard to the agenda of this conference, we must mention that this was accomplished through a whole range of arrangements including educational philosophies, curricula and practices whose context corresponds with that of the respective colonial powers.

To address this state of affairs we need a distinctively African knowledge system, which would have as its objective, the goal of recovering the humanistic and ethical principles embedded in African philosophy.

Such an African knowledge system would also constitute an effort to develop both a vision and a practice of education that lays the basis for African people to participate in mastering and directing the course of change and fulfilling the vision of learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together as equals with others.

An educational discourse of this kind in higher education would view knowledge and minds not as commodities, not just human resources to be developed and exploited, and then cast aside, but as treasures to be cultivated to improve the quality of life of both individuals and societies.

In this context, some of the important challenges facing education in Africa are:

- The African heritage - what to retain, modify or replace;
- The colonial heritage; the language problem in schools as well as the cultural and philosophical questions in our education systems;
- The dichotomy between education for self-reliance versus education for technological and industrial advancement; and
- Education for national unity.

These are some of the questions facing education in Africa. Yet, we need to note that universities in Africa, Asia and Latin America were often established according to European models. Graduates from these continents were sent to Europe and the United States for advanced degrees in order to staff faculties with indigenes, to replace expatriate teachers.

Those who studied abroad and were assigned teaching positions after the completion of their studies quite naturally emulated the practices established at the institutions where they concluded their studies.

As a result, curricula at universities in the developing countries have usually been patterned on European or Western models. This "Eurocentric" system of university education has hampered universities in these countries in releasing endogenous creativity and seeking their cultural roots.

Accordingly, it may, at times, appear as if there are tensions between the orientation toward indigenous values and challenges, on the one hand, and addressing global problems, on the other. I personally do not believe that such a tension should exist. I am indeed happy that this conference will reflect on this matter.

The exit of our graduates to other parts of the world, described as the "brain drain", remains a cause for concern. It is difficult to calculate the net loss incurred by the original community as a result of emigration. The net loss certainly amounts to a considerable cost, not counting the general loss of economic and cultural capacities.

Obviously, we cannot ignore the phenomenon of the brain drain. In part this is caused by the fact that our universities have become less competitive as regards the financial rewards they offer our teaching and management staff, and less capable to offer possibilities for original research.

As a result, our universities and the continent struggle to retain the critical mass and necessary interdisciplinary skills that we now find in Western institutions. Clearly, among other things, funding of higher education across the continent, as a means to counter the brain drain, requires our attention.

In conclusion Chairperson, let us not forget that the African continent is immense, not only in terms of its size but, more importantly, with respect to the cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity that characterises the people who live in its various parts. Its biggest challenge is poverty and underdevelopment.

In this regard, higher education in Africa is faced with considerable challenges related to the eradication of poverty. These include the development of our human resources and the promotion of indigenous knowledge systems.

They include the consolidation of democracy, and the consolidation of peace and stability. They relate to the radical improvement of our health infrastructure, so as to deal effectively with such illnesses as Malaria, TB, Aids, and diseases of poverty.

They address the task to create the conditions for our countries to create modern economies, enabling the integrating of Africa into the modern global economy.

It remains the task of intellectuals and organisations such as the Association of African Universities to offer solutions to Africa's problems, as well as make a contribution to the renaissance of an African continent that is united, peaceful, democratic, fully developed, prosperous, and a respected member of the world community of nations.

For all these reasons, I am privileged to wish this Conference of the Association of African Universities success in its important work. What you will decide during this week must contribute to the realisation of the ambitious but achievable objective to transform the 21st into an African Century.

I am certain that you understand the weight of the responsibility that falls on your shoulders in this regard. At the same time, I must also make the solemn statement that as the elected representatives of the people of our Continent, we too understand our responsibility seriously to study the conclusions of your deliberations.

In the end, as Africa's current political leaders, we have to ensure that we act in a manner that truly respects the views of the African intelligentsia with regard to the African Renaissance and the birth of the African Century. The African dream should no longer be a gigantic mirage that shimmers as a false hope on the vast expanses of the Sahara Desert.

Thank you.