



UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE

19 November 2010

Address on the occasion of the Installation of Dr Khotso Mokhele as Chancellor of the University of the Free State

I have in my life stood at many a podium and made more than a fair share of addresses both in this beloved country of mine and in many other countries in the world. As I stand here before this audience tonight, I feel a specialness that I do not recall ever feeling before.

Mr Chairperson of the Council of the University of the Free State, The Honourable Judge Ian Van der Merwe, let me start by expressing my deepest gratitude to you and your fellow members of the Council of the University, as a corporate body, for seeing in me a person who is fit for the role of Chancellor of the University. Let me also more specifically thank the various constituencies that make up the Council of the University, which include, among others, the Senate, the Student Representative Council, the Staff Associations as well as the Convocation, for believing and trusting that I possess the requisite wisdom and fortitude to fulfill the requirements of Chancellor.

To Professor Jonathan Jansen, the Vice Chancellor of the University, and the members of the Executive and Senior Management, I have already experienced the warmth of your welcome and faith that it conveys that I can add value to the quest of attaining the vision and mission of the University.

To the staff, both Academic and Non-Academic and the Students on both the Bloemfontein and Qwa-Qwa campuses of the University of the Free State, allow me to express how keenly I look forward to doing whatever that can be expected of a Chancellor of a university to make your experiences in this institution live up to, or even exceed your expectations. My time as an undergraduate student at Fort Hare and as a Graduate Student at the University of California, Davis remains a most wonderful part of my life, which the passage of time seems to be completely unable to diminish. In fact, the specialness of the time undoubtedly grows as the realities and challenges of post school life begin to bite. This realization has turned me into a great believer in ensuring that the time spent studying at a university be academically, intellectually, politically, culturally and socially enriching to the fullest, but also be enjoyed. To that end, I hope to do the best that I Chancellor can to make the experiences of both the staff and students of this university both productive and enjoyable.

The special feeling of standing at this podium before this particular audience is a consequence of a multiplicity of emotions and senses that are currently raging through me. I can smell the dust of the streets of Bochabela and Phahameng

Locations where I was born and grew up. I can hear the thunderous summer rain storms on the corrugated iron roofing without the ceiling that inevitably dampens the snooze inducing sounds. I can smell the freshness of cut grass at the Bloemfontein Golf Course where I caddied from the very tender age of 10 years until I went to Moroka High School in Thaba Nchu for matric. I can hear with much greater clarity the voices of Mohlouoa and Ntlabolane Mokhele, my paternal grandparents, and Matshediso and Paulina Lebona, my maternal grandparents from whence they are resting not far from where we are assembled here this evening. Even closer and louder are the voices of Kenosi and Moiponi Mokhele, my parents, dispensing worldly and wise counsel. I can smell the fresh dung from the kraal where Buisit and Lappi spent their nights at 3417 Matlabe Road after their warm unpasteurised milk had past straight from the unsterilized udder into my mouth. I can hear the stern, perfectly punctuated rhetoric of DDM Rametsi, the Principal and Wally Diseko the teacher imploring us to develop strong characters and avoid ending up as “sentimental nonentities”. I can hear the “Boom Boom” from Mevrouw Wessels as she attempted to direct our attention to Skimblehanks: The railway Cat. I can hear the never ending opinions of Ntate James Letuka and Ntate Rantlai Petrus Molemela, whether they were sought or not. I can hear the Friday night chatter and banter of the patrons of my mother’s shebeen at 5464 Motseko Street, which is interrupted by the strong soprano voice of Mme Motsheoa breaking into a rendition of “Moshoeshoe Moshoeshoailane, thesele oa Mokhachane, ntata Basotho”. As I stand here this evening, I can hear a chorus of all these nostalgic voices saying to me: “Welcome Home”. Welcome home to the land of Sejammutla, “Iefatshe la Mangaung le le katisicoeng ke bo-Rra rona mo dinakong tsa lenyora”. Welcome home to the land where the Cheetah may have roamed free but, but where as the Tau that I am, the power and might of my paw and jaw makes me the inevitable “ruler”.

This loud, nostalgic welcome home after traveling to the far corners of the country, of the continent and the world is very sweet indeed. But the sweetness is soured and loudness drowned out by an even louder call from the vital social indicators and vital statistics that show my beloved city and my beloved Province in a state of deeply worrying ill health.

I have had two very unique opportunities in the last ten years to engage quite intimately with the development challenges that confront the Free State Province, its cities and towns. The first opportunity came in 2001 when the then Premier Winkie Direko invited me to serve as Chairperson of the Premier’s Economic Advisory Council (PEAC). The report of the PEAC was finalized in September 2004. My second opportunity came late in 2009 when I was invited by Professor Lochner Marais of the Centre for Development Support, University of the Free State to Chair the Regional Steering Committee for a project inspired by the Paris based Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to review the role of higher education in regional and city development. The Self Evaluation Report from this exercise was only recently completed.

The 2004 PEAC Report shows a Province in a state of decline from the peaks experienced in the 1980’s. More worryingly is the 2010 OECD Self Evaluation Report which reflects continued decline of most major Human Development and Economic Indices. I will not provide any quantitative data in this address but would wish to

assure you that the data speaks loud enough, with such disturbing coherence and with such extremely brutal reality to drown out any nostalgia about what home used to be.

It is within this context of the multiplicity of emotions and senses, against this background of a mixture of nostalgia and brutal reality that I arrived home when I accepted to serve as the Chancellor of the University of the Free State. I have for many years described myself as an eternal optimist without any sense of worry about my ability to live up to the tag. I remain optimistic that as long as all the determinants of the future are in our hands, we remain able to craft a future to our will. All these determinants are indeed in our hands and all we need to do is ensure that we have the will. I am aware that there are many in this country today, many in this auditorium tonight who doubt whether we truly still have the will to craft a future that will negate all the negative social, human development and economic indices that are reflected by the two reports alluded to above.

A modern challenge for a university

I am excited to have been invited by the University of the Free State to join its community at the time when it is attempting to reinvent itself into an institution that will be counted amongst those that will shape the local, regional, national will, and by so doing, contribute to the shaping of an African will.

My understanding of the challenges that face the University of the Free State, like universities the world over, was brought into sharp focus at a conference I recently attended in Berlin, Germany. The conference was convened by Humboldt University in Berlin to celebrate 200 years of its founding based on a principle announced by Willem von Humboldt, who was then a Minister in the Prussian Government that good university teaching has to be inextricably tied to good research. Without good research, Willem von Humboldt argued, you cannot get good university teaching. Today, most universities in the world, and very certainly all universities in South Africa, will invariably describe their mission as encompassing teaching, research and community service. This should make Willem von Humboldt happy you would say. Unfortunately, as you unpack what most universities really do, you find very little research and even less community service. According to the Carnegie classification of universities in the USA, only 200 out of the more than 4500 universities in that country can be classified as research universities. The classification by the US National Science Foundation is even more devastating to the Humboldt Principle in that only 100 universities are research universities.

This is however not seen as tragedy in the US as the model of a good teaching university, without any pretence to doing research in all disciplines, was designed and perfected there. In fact, many in the US explicitly prefer to be educated in those small liberal arts institutions whose focus on high quality undergraduate education has become the bedrock of US education with phenomenal international appeal and thus drawing students from all over the world.

Sadly, South Africa, like most European countries continue to allow for the pretence that all its universities are Humboldtian research universities even when the reality as borne out by irrefutable data suggests that only a few of our universities merit the title of research university. The outcome of this unfortunately pretentious state of our

higher education is a system with most of its universities being neither good teaching nor good research institutions. Professor Kader Asmal, when he was Minister of Education may have argued, rather spuriously I might add, against the pedagogical merits of a differentiated higher education system. His answer unfortunately left us with a higher education system that is pedagogical mess that we will take a long time to recover from.

As I come home in response to a loud nostalgic call and the even louder call from current social and economic indicators and statistics, I wish to come home to a University of the Free State that has taken a decision that the current realities of this country and of this Province leave it with no choice but to accept the challenge that Leadership is badly sought in this country. A Leading institution with leading ideas is being sought. I wish to come home to a University of the Free State that has decided to differentiate itself into one of the leading research universities in the country and in the world where Ideas and Innovation reign supreme; an institution that understands that such leading national and international status can only be truly measured through others in the country and throughout the world wishing to be associated with the university as students, educators, researchers and scholars because of its Leadings Ideas and Innovations.

However, given the political, social and economic realities of the immediate environs in which the university exists, as reflected by the social and economic indicators already alluded to, the only morally legitimate path to such international status has to be through addressing and conquering the most serious challenges in the university's immediate environs. Otherwise, any statement of leading national and international standing would ring hollow. Therefore, a second level of differentiation of the University of the Free State would require the University to acknowledge that while all universities in South Africa are nationally mandated, a unique opportunity is presented by the challenges of the immediate environs. The University would need to find innovative ways of extricating itself from the constrain of the current interpretation of the national mandating of universities. The university would need to lead the way in this country in negotiating new sets of relationships with provincial and local spheres of government within its defined immediate environ.

In negotiating these new sets of relationships, the university would need to take cognizance of the following:

- Firstly, focusing on the challenges of its immediate environ, does not imply that the university has to be reduced into a utilitarian instrument whose role is to narrowly limited to responding to market demands for goods and services.
- Secondly. the huge promise of dynamic governance that we all tasted in the first few years of the post-1994 period, unfortunately quickly gave way to a dictatorship of the State bureaucracy, with the higher education system amazingly acquiescing into a very docile and poodle like posture. The University would need to earn legitimate self confidence to be able to engage robustly, and yet productively, with all spheres of governance.

Teaching, training and Students

The University of the Free State that I would want to come home to would have to answer question of what it believes teaches and trains for. It would also have to

appreciate the fact that good teaching in a modern university requires, or rather demands, empathy. Good teaching demands understanding of where students come from and what challenges confront them. This university will teach the students they have and not the students they wish to have or students they used to have. This issue is particularly acute here in South Africa where the president of SADTU recently lamented the failure of the post-1994 South African government to provide the quality of educational experience that all south Africans, especially poor South Africans deserve. This means that universities, instead of their usual traditional and static nature, should be dynamic.

In understanding the students that it teaches, this university would have to become comfortable with the thought that, contrary to what most adults instinctively think, young people are rational agents within the context of what may be perceived by adults as their rather limited knowledge and experiences. I have heard it argued that in countries with deep internet penetration, young people, in their rationality, no longer utilise the university as the primary source of content information. They can obtain content information from all sorts of sources, most of them electronic. The last thing they need therefore, is a professor standing in front of them giving them content information they already have or can access at will. What the students of today need is to be given tools and methodologies to analyse, organize and integrate content information.

Another feature of young people today as revealed by several longitudinal studies is that they are lot less charitable than similar cohorts in generations past. In the current context of our country, the situation is worsened by the steady messaging that adults send out to them that excellence no longer matters. What matters is who you know and what connections you have. They see ample examples in Provincial and local Government that honesty, hard work and excellence is more likely to get you constructively dismissed, as you are likely to stand in the way of corrupt practices, than promoted. Young people see adults engaging in corruption and criminality and seldom facing the consequences of their actions.

Many of these young people whose rationality is shaped by the kinds of observations and experiences alluded to above will end up as students in the University of the Free State. If they come to a university that is clear about its mission and role, that teaches the student that it has and not the student that it wishes to have, that assists its students to analyse, organize and integrate content information, that is empathetic and bothers to understand where they come from and what challenges confront them, that bothers to understand what informs their rationality, that exposes them to academics, educators, researchers and scholars from all over the country the country and all over the world, drawn here by the excellence and leadership, a university that is internationally acclaimed for finding innovative ways of helping to resolve complex and simple problems in its immediate environment, that is both epistemically and structurally fluid, if they come to such a university chances will be better than good that their experience will be transformative. This is the University of the Free State that I am hoping my call back home is bringing me to.

Tributes to those who paved the path

Mr Chairperson of Council, there are many here this evening who have played various roles, either directly and indirectly, to pave the path that brought me to this podium and shaped the person that I became. I developed spiritually, politically, socially, culturally and academically because of the efforts of many men and women in the audience here today. I will resist the temptation to single out anybody because no role was too big or too small to shape a life. All I will say to all of them is Thank You very much. To those who got scarred while trying to shape me, I trust and hope that the scars have by now healed. To those who may think I did not live up to the potential they believed I had, please know that it was not due to lack of effort and commitment. To those who believe I did not turn out too badly, take all the credit because it belongs to you.

To Bataung ba ha RaMokhele, Makolokotoana a Makobaasia a jang pele meriti e theea and all other members of my extended family, a perfect child, nephew, brother, cousin, uncle you were never promised. If you were promised, it was not by me. It feels Great to be counted among you.

To my Aunt Thibi who could not be here this evening, I know the depth of your pain from not being here. To my Uncle Si, it would have been great to have you here and I know how proud you would have been.

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