



The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor

PROF MS MAKHANYA, PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

FOUNDERS LECTURE CLOSING NOTES/RESPONSE

Educating and Training the 21st Century South African Citizen

ZK MATTHEWS GREAT HALL

31 OCTOBER 2012

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

The Founders Lecture this evening has also focused on the future: how do we participate in the making of responsible citizens in 21st Century South Africa, Africa and the world? It builds on the history of this lecture since its inception, on foundations that go back to the turn of the new century when the full promise of democracy still seemed easily at hand, before we realised how hard it is to practice. The 'social dimension' of this event has therefore been a constant theme and the contextual compass has guided previous speakers, as it has done again this evening. But the lecture is also a call to action for a better future, a better education, better training, and a better citizenship and citizenry. The purpose of the lecture has always been to speak into our public space as a university that has a clear mission and which wants to make a difference. There is no doubt that you have done that on our behalf this evening Dr Ramphela, and for that we thank you very sincerely.

Tonight's address echoes Dr Mamphela Ramphela's message in her collection of essays entitled CONVERSATIONS WITH MY SONS AND DAUGHTERS in which she presents a blunt message to the youth of South Africa: "true liberation is only possible if we liberate our consciousness and start behaving as active citizens, rather than as passive subjects." And I would like to suggest that the link between our consciousness and the notion of active citizenry calls us to some deep introspection, because it goes to the heart of our current

societal malaise. We seem somehow to be brow-beaten and emasculated - pale imitations of those whose passion, integrity and commitment won us our freedom. Clearly that must change.

In responding to such a fine, evocative lecture presented by one of our country's best informed commentators on education and training and a hugely respected public intellectual, I wish first to thank Dr Ramphela for reminding us of the intrinsic values of education in a democracy. Citizenship and education are profoundly connected; the former cannot be properly exercised without access to the latter. It is therefore very instructive that voices such as yours – critical, compassionate and wise – are heard in response. We have heard you very clearly. To quote you from your latest book, we need 'to shift the ground of reason' (p.13). You have done that this evening.

That fundamental link between a critical citizenry and education is articulated very clearly through Dr Ramphela's strong assertion of the importance of educating for democracy as an essential ingredient for change. She stresses the importance of critical and active participation – the need to democratise and transform the mindsets of both leaders and those who are being led.

Constitutionalism, she argues, has to be fiercely defended if our education is to amount to anything; it cannot betray the hard-won achievements of the late 20th century, which chose to sacrifice education on the altar of liberation.

It is appropriate, distinguished guests ladies and gentlemen, to refer to Dr Ramphela's experience as a former vice chancellor, among other careers, because her insights draw higher education into the conversation across generations, as is evidenced in her recently released book. Education and training in the new century have to transact meaningfully with a new generation seeking solutions to the complex issues of our time, using different means, looking through different lenses, and perhaps less impressed than we are by the formulas of the liberation struggle to forge a truly democratic citizenship. Dr Ramphela, as you have rightly pointed out, there is a danger in trying to 'out-source our democratic responsibilities' (p.14) to government or party, or to universities, for that matter.

Somehow, in our current higher education environment this integral purpose of higher education seems to have been lost. Education is essential in equipping 21st Century students and by extension, citizens, with the requisite skills to make informed decisions about the challenging choices they will be faced with every day, at personal, professional and political levels. Dr Ramphela questions whether in fact 21st century South African citizens are indeed equipped to make such decisions, which are paramount for the survival of our fragile democracy. It would seem that they are not.

She points to the failure of the current system of education which appears to be reproducing poverty through the continued lack of quality education – especially for

children of the poor - and that in itself, ladies and gentlemen, constitutes a crime against humanity.

Dr Ramphela presented us with some shameful statistics this evening, and we have to ask ourselves how it is possible that a country that allocates such a generous portion of its budget to education can rank 140th and 143rd respectively, out of 144 in school performance and the quality of mathematics and science. It is quite simply, preposterous. How it is that we are being left behind by poorer African countries, our peers in the Brics club (Brazil, Russia, India and China) and the rest of the world, which is forging ahead in the global knowledge economy?

Those of us in the field of education recognise that the shadow of apartheid continues to haunt present-day education, especially with respect to the inequalities that separate the 20% of well-functioning public schools from the remaining 80% of schools that underperform. However, there can be no doubt that our apathy, and our often ineffectual attempts to make significant and measurable headway speak as much to the futility of disorganised and disparate efforts (no matter how well meaning those may be) as they do to the need for the concerted and collective action that is urged by Dr Ramphela.

Our recent performance in school education is dismal and we continue to cheat future generations. School education is the cornerstone of higher education. The crisis of university education is the crisis of schooling. The link between the performance of our education system and the skills shortage and unemployment of our youth is direct. Poor schooling does not augur well for democratic citizenship because inequality is its chief enemy. An unequal education we should know by now, simply perpetuates an unequal society.

She asks "Can we continue like this some 20 years after our struggle for liberation?" In short - no we can't. Her call for action is intended to invoke active citizenship on the part of the South African nation in transforming education: It is time for radical change in education she argues. It is a time for coming together and finding that compass bearing that will point us in the right direction, towards a genuinely transformed society that is characterised by equity and excellence and most importantly quality education.

Dr Ramphela's wake-up call signals the need for South African's to break free from the complacency that has allowed us as a nation to tolerate a failing education system for more than 18 years. She says, "You and I are sitting in our houses, complaining... and not saying 'This boat belongs to us, and if it sinks, we all sink'." "It is time to end the appallingly poor education system and the shocking conditions under which teaching and learning occur in our society."

As she points out, quality education is a right. It is also the legacy that we will leave our children. She cautions that our choice as a nation is to rise to the challenge to bring about the radical change and improvements required in our education system, or continue the

slide into terminal mediocrity. Neither poverty nor lack of education prevented parents throughout generations from investing time and energy in their children's futures. Why now? There can be no doubt that our teachers and pupils deserve better. Our country deserves better.

Dr Ramphela refers to the current practices which marginalise the African languages. She highlights the benefits of mother tongue primary education not only for the didactic benefits it offers but also as a means of preserving and promoting individual identity. Our multicultural makeup calls us to articulate via our own languages, to take pride in them as pillars of education and training. The reinstatement of African languages is an imperative if citizenship is to have any popular meaning; its marginalisation may seriously diminish popular support for both democratic institutions and the value of education itself. Should it be left to English to speak for us? Or, as you have phrased it elsewhere, Dr Ramphela, 'Post-apartheid South Africa is presiding over the death of indigenous languages' (p.42).

Pertinent for our purposes this evening, Dr Ramphela's book foregrounds the debate about subjects and citizens (pp.147-175), which Mahmood Mamdani tackled years ago. The citizen exercises agency. We change things, we challenge things, we question things. Educating and training for our century means changing subjects into citizens. Universities are sites of activism; higher education is all about giving agency, giving language, giving ideas, giving voice to subjects to make them citizens.

Dr Ramphela eschews the ivory tower syndrome, asserting that academia should be informing the changed system and proposing radical change to both content and process of teaching and learning. Academic research and innovation need to lead to improving the entire system - from pre- to post-school. Academia is challenged to innovate to enable the system to transcend our past and shape our future. We cannot have "more of the same".

In her assertion of the role of the university in transformation and in producing that critical citizenry who can and will shape the future of our country, Dr Mamphela Ramphela has reminded us of the obligation and responsibility that we have to ensure that we create and provide platforms for open conversation about South Africa's painful past, and the agenda for the socio-economic restructuring for the future – an agenda that has education at its centre. Values are at the heart of education and Ubuntu is at the heart of an African university. Social justice and 'cognitive justice' are based on such values - values which have shaped our humanity and which seem to be so lacking in our society today. We need to regain our moral compass.

Distinguished guests ladies and gentlemen, our speaker this evening has dared to vocalise in a very honest and direct manner, many of the concerns that we have been too apathetic - even afraid – to voice - or acknowledge - ourselves. We can no longer be passive recipients of democracy. We need to ask ourselves: "Why are we as South Africans complacent,

passive citizens? Why have we not been absolutely relentless in our demand for quality education?”

In the Founders Lecture tonight you have raised your voice so that we at Unisa can educate for citizenship. The University of South Africa is committed to doing precisely that. As an institution that is firmly rooted in the communities it serves and fundamentally committed to being the African university in the service of humanity, we have undertaken to engage in wide ranging intellectual debate - without fear or favour - and our Founders lecture provides one such opportunity. We thank Dr Ramphela for her stimulating contribution to that agenda and for her unwavering commitment to the wellbeing of this country and its citizens.

I thank you.