
Short communication

Facing the future: between altruism and self-interest

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Distinguished Guests, Colleagues, Graduands and Students, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I have been honoured with the task of offering a Keynote Address for this year's Graduation Ceremony (University of Zululand). I accepted the assignment with humility and mindfulness concerning the gravity of the occasion; the need to say something meaningful for the graduands, the principal constituency in this gathering for whom this occasion is a supremely momentous rite of passage in life's journey. I am persuaded by experience to believe that your friends and relatives who are here to rejoice in celebratory happiness with you have great expectations for your futures.

Many of you have spent three or four years of your young lives at this university and been put through the rigours of the disciplines of science, humanities and social studies. Through these processes you have acquired the skills of organized and disciplined thought, writing and the ability to discuss and hold forth with logically organized arguments. Hopefully, many of you will carry on and build on the skills that you have learnt as academics and other types of scholars, but most of you will be deployed into all areas of the society to serve purposes for which your studies have given you facilities of mind and action which will enable you to carry out your tasks and duties to good effect. There are also some who may go off in directions which are totally different from what you have been taught and acquired in the past few years. But, if the efforts of the university have been effectual, then by and large, whatever you have learnt should place you on better footing to deal with the myriad challenges you will face and the demands that society makes on you.

Those of you who in your turn become academics and who then carry forward in the same line of learning and activities that your lecturers and professors have taught you will be a small minority, who will hopefully be incessantly and obsessively challenged to produce work of keen scholarship in the service of society. The numbers who move in this direction will be small, but crucial to the maintenance, consolidation and development of scholarship and tertiary education in the region and beyond.

We currently as academics in Africa face new challenges defined in the voices and clamour of our students for decolonized education in our times. The issues that these matters throw up need to be pursued by the new generation of scholars and academics represented in you, the graduands of today and tomorrow. Every society in every generation defines its outstanding and nascent problems afresh and the new generation is supposed to conceive and craft better solutions and novel answers to the old and new problems.

Those of you who move into responsibilities in wider society will also need to be fired by inspiration and imagination to produce answers which will serve to ameliorate the existential conditions of society at large. It is a well-known fact that youth in general are always more idealistic, earnest, challenging and willing to confront issues which the older generations have given up on or are perceptively too ready to acquiesce in. Indeed, we can say that we expect the youth to champion and advance new causes for the benefit of all. Youth must be altruistic, generous, hopeful and expectant that the society of tomorrow will

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be better than today; that the provisions and welfare of all should not be left unattended to. It is our hope that you the young of today, the intellectuals of today and tomorrow, will see that it is your task to take care of those who have no voice and little sustenance. They need to be provided with the means to keep body and soul together in society. In other words, your “hearts should be in the right place.” You should be as it were, in conscience, your sisters’ and brothers’ keepers. In order to do this, you will need to be methodologically dispassionate, analytically cold and impartial in your approach to the organization and dispensation of social justice. You will need to be able to speak without fear and if necessary confront authority when you think fairness, justice, equity and social provisions are not evenly distributed to all and sundry. You need to maintain clear conscience and treat matters of public concern with honesty and perspicacious candour.

Socially and universally, in pursuit of the material needs of life there are two directions; two contradictions that are permanently at play and in contestation. The first is the direction of altruism; caring, sharing, the allocation of goods and services on principles of equality and egalitarianism. This direction for its execution requires public spirit, interest, generosity and concern for your brother, sister and neighbour. It is an ethos which places the common good above all else. The second direction, is narrower in substance and is pointed towards the fulfilment of individual needs and concerns of the person. It is in origins and psychological derivations close to primal instincts. It is true that to survive, a person must have enough self-centredness and self-respect to deal with the challenges of everyday life. But, it is without doubt inadequate and societally unrewarding if one lives a life of dogged self-centredness, the unbridled pursuit of self-interest, the drive towards single-minded greed and the lack of concern for the interests of others. What I can confidently say is that a life which is lived for the benefit of oneself alone is a meaningless and empty life of narcissistic self-aggrandizement. It does not take a person beyond him/herself. On the other hand, a life which is lived in the service of others is an enlarged, forward-looking and ennobling existence which makes one strong in mind and disposition and fearless in action. The choice is yours.

You must not allow yourselves to forget that much as you have achieved your present stations through your individual hard-work and self-application, your families and indeed society at large has heavily invested in you. South African society has put in tax-payer’s money and other resources to get you where you are and you are duty-bound to reciprocate in service to society, for the benefit of all.

This occasion and event will remain marked in your minds and memories for the rest of your lives. Of course, you will forget many things, and as you get older your memories will play fast and loose, hide and seek, with you; that is “the way of all flesh.” But, what is happening to you today is something which will stay with you, stored up in the recesses of your minds, but readily available at beck and call. You must savour it and make it a positive milestone in your life’s journey. You have been through your educational experience here been bestowed with enhanced human capital which no one can take away from you.

The object of education is to inculcate in us habits of mind and action which enable us to act on the basis of skills and attitudes in an intelligent fashion and in agreement with understood societal precepts. Education equips us to fit into the general purposes of society and act on the basis of our applied knowledge and skills in different slots which go towards the maintenance of the social order and its collective prosperity. What we educationally learn is acknowledged and also, most importantly, societally rewarded. Our educational equipment comes with acknowledgement by society with status and social positions which our qualifications allow us, in the social order. If education socializes us and fits us into an existent order, it is also important to point out that education in its refinements must enable us to question, challenge and oppose ideas, views and practices, which revolt our conscience or are clearly opposed to the larger good and ethical order of society. We must not selfishly cling to the established order and abominate change in order to preserve privilege and narrowly based social benefits.

In all societies, theft, lies and misappropriation are not uncommon but are regarded as contrary to the common good of the society. Some societies may agree that the accumulation of capital, organized and

legalized greed is acceptable, and not only acceptable, but instrumentally desirable in the organization of social life. Whatever the case may be, the ultimate value of our education is that we have a voice and are able therefore to question the tenets which underlie our social order; that we are able to interrogate assumptions that are issued by authorities and the powers that be; that indeed the ability and the trained quality of our interrogation is a gift of education. In other words, we owe society the need to maintain voices of tolerance, rationality, civilization and even-handedness. If we respect the heritage and the benefits of the order that we live in, if we value the achievements of the past, then we must add an educated and enlightened voice to all the laws, practices and precepts which underlie the maintenance of the social order. In matters of integrity please remain inflexible and resolute. The cheap and easy discounting of character and integrity, and the markdown of one's moral compass is the surest road to ethical perversion. Honesty and incorruptibility are time-tested universal values. This would be an invaluable contribution not only in the first instance to ourselves, but also to society at large and the sustained betterment of the existential circumstances of subsequent generations.

In the course of your education here and in our times, some issues of relevance to education and society in general have assumed prominence in public and private discussions. Whether you remain in education or not and at whatever level of education you operate, some of these issues will continue to deserve your attention because of their long term societal relevance and their importance to the formation of succeeding generations.

Currently, a significant point of discussion and public debate in education is about the need to decolonize education and move decisively beyond the inhibiting legacy of colonialism. Most people agree about the need to rid our education of the heritage of the culturally dismissive, anti-African and oppressive baggage of colonial intent and purpose, which continues to affect the educational process in form and substance, and hence the product of the educational system. But, what does decolonizing education really mean? What should it mean? What will be required for us to be able to achieve this end? Answers to these issues have so far tended to be superficial and emotive. Often, the articulation of the issue and attendant matters do not seem to go beyond simplistic one-liners, a few slogans and superficial observations. I have had occasion to point out that: the decolonization of knowledge and the overhaul of the structural edifice of the education system does not and should not mean the facile rejection of Western-derived epistemologies and their modes of construction. It means stripping and replacing Western specificities from our modes of knowledge construction, and the production of knowledge to suit and speak to our cultural/linguistic particularities. It means in short cultural consistency and societal relevance. It means in practice shifts in the class basis of knowledge production and deposition.²

It seems to me important to point out that a leading issue in the whole discussion is the question of language of instruction. We need to appreciate that all societies which make progress in the world today make progress on the basis of their own languages, not the colonially inherited languages. We need to go forward with confidence in the attitude and belief that without the full usage of our languages in education, media and the rest of our social lives, progress for Africans will be impossible. In my estimation, based on an experience of teaching and researching at the tertiary level in nine African countries, I am convinced that the most constricting problem African students' face in their studies derive from having to learn in these colonial languages. Too many, indeed the majority of African learners at all levels of education first and foremost battle with the problem of learning in languages which are not their home-language or mother-tongue. There is an important relationship between language facility and school success. Students who write well are also generally above average in speaking and reading.

In the course of the last two years, we have witnessed clamorous student protests and stormy proceedings emerging out of the "Rhodes must fall" campaign at the University of Cape Town. In the country as a whole, these initial events triggered in their wake sympathetic student reactions. Down the

2. K.K. Prah. Has Rhodes Fallen? Decolonizing the Humanities in Africa and Constructing Intellectual Sovereignty. The Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAF) Inaugural Humanities Lecture. HSRC, Pretoria. 9th March 2017.

road, at Stellenbosch University, the students also raised their voices and took to the streets. The Stellenbosch protests, however, had a linguistic pivot. African students in the university were demonstrating in advocacy for a bi-lingual language of instruction policy in the institution, which would create space for the instatement of English in supplement to Afrikaans. Most ironically, African languages as languages of instruction did not feature in the ardently expressed entreaties of the students.

The experience and historical profile of post-colonial Asia in particular may offer us a great deal that we can learn from. Nowhere in former colonial Asia was the language of the colonizer elevated in the post-independence order to the status of a national language. This reality contrasts fairly sharply with the records of the large majority of the former colonies in Africa. What Asian countries have succeeded in doing is that they have replaced the superior role of the colonial languages in education and development in their societies with the languages and cultures native to themselves; the languages spoken by the overwhelming majorities. It is this shift from working under Western linguistic and colonial tutelage to the use of an autonomous indigenous language or languages of education and societal communication, which has enabled the development and transformation of Asian societies towards modernity that we see today. Certainly, in countries like Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia and Korea, the indigenization of the language of education has opened the door towards development and emancipation. These countries have really broken through the neocolonial cultural barrier regarding language policy and its implementation, in favour of the interests of mass society.

Another area of interest which preoccupies the minds of many African academics in South Africa today is the question of indigenous knowledge systems; the fate of the autonomously derived knowledge which has been inherited and handed down in changing fashion from generation to generation in our societies. What is the status and what are the prospects for this heritage? What is happening to it? Again, although there is often extravagant expenditure of testy emotion on this matter, few draw attention to the fact that when we point to indigenous knowledge, we are indeed pointing to knowledge in African languages, not in English. It is not possible to access indigenous knowledge in colonial languages. Knowledge ultimately belongs to the cultural world of the language in which it is held. What is possible and is the practice and experience of the rest of the world is that through translations of scientific work and knowledge into the indigenous language, new and important knowledge becomes part of indigenous knowledge. The moment externally derived knowledge is translated into the indigenous language it becomes part of the constituency who own the language.

Language is the most crucial element in culture and education. It is that which enabled the emergence of *homo sapiens sapiens* from its antecedents and it is in language that everything we have and know is captured and socially transacted. Nothing exists which is not defined in language. The history, the collective memory of people and societies are all represented in language. We therefore cannot learn well or skilfully create in somebody else's language.

By way of summation, I want to draw attention to the fact that education in the final analysis is not only the prosaic acquisition of facts and knowledge; it is not only passing examinations and the learning of factual compendia which are handed down in books and articulated in lectures. Furthermore, it is also not the simple acquirement of techniques and how to make, handle or manage techniques. Education must qualitatively affect the character of the product of the system. Education civilizes, it refines the tastes, attitudes and sensibilities of the educated. It must make us better people, more cultured and refined; with greater ability and sensitivity to art, music, philosophy, thought and the other aesthetic areas of social life. There is undoubtedly a sense in which an educated person, whatever the societal and historical base of his formation may be, assimilates a degree of refinement and character which is universally recognizable. In other words, at the highest qualitative level a well-educated person is a universal type.

I counsel you to go forth from here in clear and good conscience; the good life is the life which is devoted to the commonweal, this requires that at all times and at all stages we maintain a heightened concern for the common good of humanity.