

Inaugural Speech

Professor Tyrone Brian Pretorius as the Rector and Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Western Cape – 16 February 2015

INAUGURATION

Chancellor, Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
Former President of the Republic of South Africa, Kgalema Motlanthe,
Deputy Minister of Higher Education, Mduzuzi Manana
Chairperson of Council, Mthunzi Mdwaba and Members of Council
Ambassadors, High Commissioners and other members of the diplomatic Corps
Chancellor of CPUT, Trevor Manuel,
Vice Chancellors and leadership from sister Universities
Members of the national and provincial legislature
Representatives of the City of Cape Town
Members of the Executive and Deans
Director-Generals of various government departments,
Colleagues from the Academic, Professional and support sectors
The Student Representative Council, Students, family and friends,
Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you for this honour and thank you for considering this event worthy of your time and presence.

Phew! This is quite overwhelming, Chancellor, and a deeply humbling and moving moment to be installed as the seventh Rector and Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Western Cape. I was a bit sceptical when told that the Main Hall would be filled to capacity today and find myself quite overwhelmed that so many people turned up to share in this moment. I think it speaks to the nature of this institution and the special place it has in the hearts of so many South Africans.

Chancellor, I dedicate this evening and this special moment to my late friend, and colleague Charmaine Johnson – a friend, a mother, a sister. For 10 years she believed and taunted me about coming back to UWC. I so much wish that she could have been here tonight to see her belief fulfilled. I am, however, grateful that her family can be here tonight. Patrick, Tasha and Vijay, Carla and Ricky, thank you for being here and thank you for sharing this moment with me.

Chancellor, it is really wonderful to see so many former colleagues and dear friends who have come to share this occasion. Let me also greet and acknowledge all those friends and family who cannot be here but are probably following the live streaming of the proceedings.

In particular, Chancellor, I would like to acknowledge the presence of my mother, Jean Pretorius and her sister Ruth Smith – the two matriarchs of our family. I am also delighted that my family, Doris, Tracy and Tammy as well as my siblings, Ann, Bennie, Graham and Wesley and other members of the extended family thought that this was important enough for them to travel from far and wide.

Chancellor, I also wish to acknowledge the presence of the former President of the Republic of South Africa, the Honourable Kgalema Motlanthe and his wife Mrs Gugu Motlanthe. Mkuluwa, Gugu, you

friendship and support over the years has meant a lot and thank you for honouring me with your presence.

Chancellor, this University has been blessed with extraordinary leadership. Former Chancellor, Emeritus Archbishop Desmond Tutu's contribution to UWC over more than 25 years was seminal.

UWC is also justifiably proud of the intellectual role that the late Prof Jakes Gerwel played in helping to bring about a just and equitable dispensation. I am pleased that my mentor and friend is represented here tonight by his wife, Phoebe Gerwel. It is also a deep pleasure to welcome two of the rectors I served under, Professors van der Ross and O'Connell.

All four of these people are remarkable leaders and great South Africans. And I now ask you to please join me in saluting and honouring them.

Today I truly stand on the shoulders of giants and I feel somewhat daunted by the prospect of having to follow in the footsteps of these extraordinary people.

Chancellor, I am a psychologist with a keen interest in the study of the origins of strength associated with not only the overcoming of adversity but flourishing and growing despite adversity. As humans we are inclined to be concerned with the weak, the vulnerable and the infirm. While psychologists always had this pathological interest in "what can go wrong", there have been ongoing attempts in the last decade to discover "what can go right".

This shift away from pathology to a strength-oriented paradigm does not imply a callous disregard for the distress, pain, trauma and adversity of others.

Instead it implies a rejection of the social construction that those who suffer or are hurt, abused and victimised will inevitably become lesser human beings, more vulnerable and maladjusted. Hellen Keller sums it up as follows:

"Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it"

UWC has a proud intellectual tradition of overcoming adversity, which is metaphorically the subtext of my message that "one's origin does not define your destiny".

Chancellor, the question that I am grappling with today is both simple in its formulation and complex in its deliberation:

"HOW DO WE BUILD ON OUR STRENGTHS TO DEVELOP UWC'S INTELLECTUAL PROJECT AND THE STRATEGIC VISION NECESSARY FOR US TO PLAY OUR ROLE WITH DISTINCTION AS A PUBLIC SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY IN THE CURRENT NATIONAL AND GLOBAL CONTEXTS?"

Thus, rather than being tempted by this occasion to make bold statements about radical changes to mark a transition I choose instead to reflect and ponder on the genesis of organisational strength and vitality.

I have just returned to UWC after an absence of almost ten years. The UWC I knew before I left and the UWC I have returned to are significantly different.

During my absence I had the privilege of serving as Pro Vice-Chancellor of an Australian university. I am delighted that the Vice-President of the Monash University system, David Pitt travelled all the

way from Melbourne to be here tonight. I also gained key leadership insights at the University of Pretoria during this time. Allow me to use these insider-outsider experiences to explore the origins of our strengths and to ponder on the central questions about the intellectual project and strategic choices that we ought to consider.

Universities are dynamic in so far as they are engaged with their context in time and space and responsive to it. UWC's context has changed regularly and at times dramatically over the past 40 years.

The ideological origins of UWC are to be found in the 1959 Extension of University Education Act which made it a criminal offence to register at a university designated for any "racial group" other than one's own without ministerial permission.

Dissent over the mission and purpose of South African universities as an instrument of apartheid remained a source of conflict and a focus for resistance at UWC, as at other HDIs. But it took a different form at UWC, where the resistance was not only vigorously political but also very consciously intellectual.

Change in UWC's character began with the appointment of Dr Richard van der Ross as Rector in 1975. Student leadership in resisting the then university administration unintentionally provided the new Rector with the leverage to bring about some significant changes.

In 1978 the University Council rejected the ideological basis upon which the university had been founded, providing the basis for the development of a university-wide partnership of staff and students, which gradually (and at times painfully) found its form over the next 15 years.

Memories of staff and students protesting together during this time are a reminder, both of the viciousness of the time and of the growing political and intellectual solidarity on campus. UWC was actively and critically exploring alternatives to the apartheid order and positing new kinds of knowledge and ways of understanding the world.

When Professor Gerwel took over as Vice-Chancellor in 1987, he made UWC's commitments explicit as a site within the South African university system which provided privileged space for the development of rigorous thinking from a "left" perspective: "an intellectual home of the left". In his inauguration speech (1987) he described this daring move as UWC's [and I quote]

"emancipation from the academic and intellectual depravedness of its origins as an ethnic college to being today intellectually one of the most exciting and charged institutions of higher learning in the country" [End quote]

I recall that, in this period of violent repression, students and staff constructively debated tough issues and offered and contested a range of options, all connected to a democratic discourse.

I mention these things, Chancellor, not out of nostalgia, but as a heritage we can draw on for the strength and intellectual vitality of the university. The academics attracted to UWC at the time were pioneers, ahead of their time and able to bring academic knowledge to bear on cultural realities. Professor Gerwel was

"convinced that without that perceived and experienced nexus with a real and shared-in social world, a university is emasculated and intellectually anaemic"

The post-1994 environment did not stimulate the same intellectual vibrancy as there had been during struggle. UWC was caught off guard by the inherent tensions of the time and lost significant numbers of its best academics to politics and public administration. With normalisation, student numbers dwindled, with many going to institutions closer to home and these factors tainted UWC's reputation. And, perhaps most immediately threatening, the institution faced financial bankruptcy and the leadership resorted to extreme measures such as downsizing. Through its handling of such steps, they lost the confidence of the university community.

UWC faced its darkest moments and reflected a depressed and inward-looking culture, with leadership strategies inflexibly anchored in the assumptions of the previous era. Clearly, past models of success may be inappropriate, even disastrous, if adopted uncritically. What was good for yesterday may not be good for today. We have to adapt or go under in a very dynamic environment.

When Brian O'Connell became Vice-Chancellor in 2001, UWC was financially bankrupt, public confidence in it was at an all-time low, and the National Working Group had recommended that it merge with the Peninsula Technikon on the grounds that UWC was not financially viable and that, having lost so many fine academics, its academic standing was likely to fall.

I served as DVC during the first five years of Professor O'Connell's tenure. This was truly a challenging period. I do recall that the threat of merger became a rallying call and I have vivid memories of a campus coming together as a community to discuss the risks and contradictions of the senselessness of the recommendation.

Fortunately the merger recommendation was not accepted and we could retain our autonomy and build strength by incorporating Stellenbosch University's Dentistry and taking on the entire regional undergraduate Nursing mandate.

UWC was recapitalized and in its plan for recapitalization it dismissed the notions both of the market-driven university and of the historically disadvantaged institution (HDI) with its deficit discourse. Both concepts were seen as threatening the intellectual project in insidious ways in a society in transformation.

I left UWC after it was recapitalised. Since then, under Brian O'Connell's inspiring leadership, it has forged ahead to become one of the nation's acknowledged research-intensive universities and a formidable intellectual powerhouse. UWC's research impact in fields from genetics and biotechnology to nanoscience, from renewable energy to space science, places it in the leading position or among the leaders in South Africa.

Science and technology are vital drivers of human progress, but it is also vital to think critically and imaginatively about the challenges of our time and place, with a view to make moral, intellectual and spiritual sense of the past, make sense of the present and bring clarity to the future. For this reason we are also proud of the achievements in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Arts and science are complementary and I will continue to implore colleagues and students to commit to enriching the perspective of their disciplines by making connections with other areas of knowledge.

And so from finding its soul under Richard Van Der Ross, defining its intellectual tradition under Jakes Gerwel to the final transformation of UWC into a mature academic project crystallized under Brian O'Connell – who has done sterling work, leading the university from a very weak position to its current prominence as a first-rate institution. Professor O'Connell's cardinal role in securing state of

the art buildings and facilities has depended on the acknowledged importance and quality of the academic work being done.

That is wonderful. But I need to tell you that Professor O'Connell has also created an awkward dilemma. Many Historically Advantaged Institutions feel entitled to the best and view high-end resources spent on HDIs as wasted. Conversely most HDIs tend to argue that it is now their turn for redress and that universities which have "arrived", like UWC should receive less state funding which should rather be spend on boosting their capacity. We cannot afford futile ideological squabbles about resources to cloud issues of access.

To get where we need to be as a nation, we have to deal appropriately with the question of access [to higher education]. However, for access to be real, there can be no compromise on the aspiration to excellence. We need to tone up our whole higher education system so that no student or academic is left feeling that second rate is good enough.

South Africa needs the best from all its universities and UWC remains committed to working with ALL its sister institutions towards realising the full potential of our people and building a sustained academic network in Africa and globally.

Regrettably, Chancellor an all too familiar theme emerged over the past two years. Pre-1994, under Prof Gerwel and in 2004-2005 under Prof O'Connell the university was able to find its common purpose and sense of community only in response to an external threat. When we define ourselves oppositionally only it may mean that in the absence of an external challenge we become too inward-looking and tend to turn on ourselves, as indeed happened in the late 90s and as has happened again over much of the past two years, with UWC gaining publicity for all the wrong reasons. And clearly it cannot be desirable nor sustainable to build an intellectual community through an ingroup-outgroup or us-versus-them polarization of the world.

It is a mark of failure not to take imaginative hold of the large opportunities which our standing as a research-based institution presents. We need to focus on the big picture before us and direct our energies accordingly.

Chancellor, before I outline key elements of this big picture for us at UWC, that we will attempt to energize the university community around, allow me to briefly sketch some elements of the context and prevailing challenges which we have to consider in shaping and refining UWC's intellectual project.

I start, then Chancellor, with a South African challenge with global dimensions. While the world was in awe at South Africa's political transformation in 1994, the world continues to change at an alarming rate, which presents immense opportunities and risks. We would be failing as universities if we do not adapt to, engage with and think deeply about these changes with a view to graduating citizens for the world.

Three areas of rapid change stand out as demanding our engagement across disciplines. Global warming and climate change is likely to result in increased shortages of food and drinking water and health challenges. Secondly, in a world that is deeply scarred by abject poverty increased proportions of the world's population - and indeed of South Africa's population - is living a precarious, undignified existence at the periphery of society.

And thirdly, the world is experiencing a growing culture of consumerism, immediacy and extreme individualism without responsibility. These insistent areas of change need to be researched rigorously. But it is also incumbent on the university to create an environment which heightens awareness of them. A university also has to be an unapologetically intellectual community with an ongoing interest in the significance of knowledge for our country and world. Inevitably, it has to deal with what is often presented as conflicting and inherent tensions between mandates, priorities or foci.

Our world, however, does not exist as a set of binary opposites. Things are seldom simply black or white. Brian O'Connell has often presented a slide image of Cape Town's affluent CBD alongside the city's underdeveloped townships, not to illustrate these states of living as fixed opposites, but rather as the inherent, complex tensions of our world. Unfortunately we tend to oversimplify these in binary terms. Closer to home, these actions have recently resulted in embarrassing attacks based on racial and xenophobic grounds. We cannot afford to turn a blind eye to issues such as these that are threatening and unraveling our rainbow project.

In the face of that complexity, this university has opted to position itself as an "engaged university", seeking to use the dynamics of these tensions to drive intellectual work. The avoidance of binary thinking means that an emphasis on research does not exclude a focus on epistemological access. Neither does an emphasis on teaching inherently exclude learning or scholarly research.

Another distortion arises when the tensions between institutional autonomy and audit demands for accountability, are not recognised. The minefield of complex choices in an increasingly regulated environment has to be faced. In addition, because of overt regulation, universities face a constant struggle to maintain their legitimacy and intellectual integrity as the critical insider-outsiders necessary for the society's health.

In a lecture presented at UWC in 2009, Manuel Castells argued that this legitimacy and integrity "depends on the capacity of the university to keep its autonomy." [and I quote]

Universities [he says] are the last space of freedom, relatively, in society and it is essential to preserve [that space] not only for scientific reasons, but for social and political reasons. At the same time we have to earn this autonomy and this freedom every day and use it in the public interest, not in defence of our privileges. [If we cannot do that] the pressures of the society will destroy the university as a space of reflection and innovation. [End of quote]

What are some the implications of this challenging context which I have outlined for South African universities and more specifically for UWC?

First, as a higher education sector we have a joint responsibility for the whole system, and need to keep assessing our roles in it. That is no simple matter. Universities are complex, multifaceted institutions, required to fulfill multiple roles. Roles, which as pointed out, are often presented as binary opposites. Universities are deeply embedded in the global knowledge economy which requires high levels of knowledge production and innovation.

They need to develop in their students the capacity to learn and re-learn. And they need to produce a critical and ethical citizenry able to advance the development of a democratic society. The list is endless and complex. In this complex system the nexus between research, teaching and learning is vital, and ignoring it has the potential to do enormous damage. When UWC set out to emphasise both meaningful access and research excellence, we were advised by many that it was an impossible

path. However, we continue to believe that for research, teaching and learning to be functionally interdependent we have to undertake them in the context of engagement.

Chancellor, in the context of these interdependencies I would want to tentatively advance a few notions about UWC. The first is that of a research-led learning-focused university - a university where the research enterprise is the focus of both staff and students and is embedded in our curriculum from undergraduate to postgraduate level.

A university where learning rather than teaching is the focus which acknowledges that learning takes place in very holistic ways with flexible modes inside and outside the classrooms.

A university that recognises that our graduates should be T-shaped. That Chancellor I am sure got your attention but I wish to immediately point out that it has nothing to do with the fact that my first name starts with a T.

T-shaped people have both sufficient depth in their discipline and extensive breadth in deploying the range of skills that 21st century society demands. In effect we are not speaking of skills, but of skillfulness. Today it is about 'learning to learn' where students develop the capacity to employ a range of resources and to change and re-learn in response to the constantly changing nature of the society around them. We owe it to our students to let them experience spaces conducive to T-shaped learning opportunities.

Secondly Chancellor, I want to advance the potential of UWC as anchor institution in this region. Historically UWC has been placed at a hostile remove from central Bellville and it has isolated generations of students from the city and the world of work.

Transforming the apartheid landscape by appropriately developing the buffer between the main campus and the city has remarkable potential. It would revitalise the Bellville CBD, bring three universities and TVET Colleges within walking distance of one another, vastly improve the educational experience of 60 000 students, and, through stimulating innovation, build the regional economy and improve the lot of surrounding communities.

UWC is making significant progress to become fully connected to the city and surrounding communities and industries, and the imminent relocation of major Health Sciences departments to the Bellville CBD is an indication of UWC's intent.

This should afford students more T-shaped learning opportunities while bringing health services and training within easier reach of communities. I trust that, as an anchor institution, we will see more productive partnerships and working relationships with the regional authorities and businesses from which UWC has historically been separated. After all, Chancellor, it should be no coincidence that a whole province is named after the UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE.

Thirdly, Chancellor, we intend to strengthen our international partnerships and alliances. As such we plan to accelerate and sharpen our international strategy and focus on the strategic development of key north-south, east-west academic alliances. Although we are anchored in our geographical place and deeply cognizant of our obligations to our "place", we are also very conscious that the research and innovation landscape is increasingly being shaped by large networks of scientists working together to address the grand challenges of our time. The Hadron Collider in Switzerland and closer to home the Square Kilometre Array are good examples of this.

That kind of focus is necessary for the partnerships we must build locally and internationally. UWC has a strong base to build on. We have major international partners and some of our research teams are leading the country in research impact. An ongoing and pressing challenge is to attend to the scale and quality of our research and educational environment so that it supports deeper national and international collaboration and is conducive to attracting the scale of investment needed.

A fourth area, Chancellor, is our sense of community. As I think about UWC's past which I outlined, the context in which Universities have to operate, as I reflected on, and the key elements of a UWC future which I have sketched, I cannot help but think about the old Chinese curse "may you live in interesting times". Over the past months when caring friends and colleagues enquired about my well-being and how I am coping my standard response has been – I am having fun. This is an exciting space where we draw our inspiration from the exceptional people: our staff, students, alumni, the surrounding communities and external networks.

And finally Chancellor, collective leadership matters. When I think of my new leadership role I cannot but help consider the words of a former colleague and once DVC at UWC, Njabulo Ndebele who refers to a kind of leadership approach which is counter-intuitive. Through such approaches leaders do not settle for easy or obvious solutions but they should rather be willing to anticipate outcomes which may appear improbable. He says [and I quote]

Somehow it is in the apparent improbability of the unlikely outcome that its power lies ...
A leader then has to sell the unexpected outcome because he has to overcome intuitive (and understandable) doubts and suspicions In this act of salesmanship, truth and the absolute integrity of the leader are decisive attributes. [End of quote]
(Ndebele 2007, p 237)

At the start of my tenure as Vice-Chancellor, I therefore stand duly warned. I am grateful to have an excellent team of Executive Directors and seasoned Faculty Deans. They will be joined by Ms Nita Lawton-Misra the newly appointed Registrar, and Professors Vivienne Lawack and Frans Swanepoel who will take up the positions of DVC Academic and DVC Research, respectively. I welcome these three new executive members to UWC.

Together this collective leadership will help me find those counter-intuitive solutions.

Chancellor, in conclusion

This university has an amazingly positive disposition. We have to celebrate our real achievements. On the other hand, as we face the future together, we know there will be difficult periods and complex dilemmas. But we also know that tough times never last; resilient people and resilient organisations do. There is a saying that the greatest use of life is to spend it on something that will outlast it. Society has entrusted us, you and me, with a special university. It is our duty to future generations to pass on the gift we have received in an even better state than it was in when we received it.

Finally, thank you to the University community for your confidence in me. Thank you sincerely, for giving me the opportunity to express with abundant joy and emotion "I am home". I pledge to be a true servant of the University of the Western Cape, its people and its aspirations.

God bless