

## KEYNOTE ADDRESS AT A GRADUATION CEREMONY

### University of Limpopo

**Date:** 30 May 2008  
**Time:** 09:30  
**Venue:** Medunsa Sports Complex

The honourable Chancellor, Dr. RJ Khoza  
Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Prof. Mahlo Mokgalong  
Deputy Vice Chancellor, Prof R. Golele  
Deputy Vice Chancellor and Campus Principal, Dr Andile Moffat Dyasi  
Chairman of Council, Members of Council  
Registrar,  
Executive Deans of Health Sciences, Sciences and Agriculture,  
Directors of the various Schools  
Members of Senate, members of Academic staff,  
Distinguished Guests, Parents, Ladies and gentlemen, and of course –  
today's Graduates.  
“All protocol observed”.

I wish to thank the organizers, of this year's Winter Graduation ceremony, for inviting me to deliver the keynote address at the University that has made me achieve my dreams and the institution that means so much to me. I feel honoured and privileged to share with you my vision and good practice on how your contribution can assist in the development of our country and continent.

Graduation ceremonies are momentous milestones in every graduate's life. The event marks their dedication and success as effective learners, but it is also a rite of passage – the coming into being of a new person. Today, is not just a day for the graduates and their families, but also one on which we celebrate the achievements of the University of Limpopo.

Exactly four years ago (May 2004), I was like all the granduands, waiting for my turn to be capped by the Chancellor, as the first candidate to receive the Doctor of Public Health (DrPH) degree, not only at this university but at all universities in South Africa. I was filled with excitement and anxiety and had prayed to God, that morning, that everything should go well and that I would walk away from the stage as Dr Geoffrey Setswe *DrPH* – I liked the ring to this title. I was quietly singing the chorus of the song by Tshepo Tshola:

*“You're waiting for your name to be called; Your body is shaking with disbelief; 'Cause you never, ever went for it, before...Wo hu wowo...”*

I had wanted the title of Doctor badly since my high school days. I was accepted to do the MBChB in 1981 but could not take up my seat in the MBChB class of 1981 as there was no financial support at home. My dad had 17 kids and my

mother was a domestic servant. I was also not “assertive” enough to insist on taking my seat in that class – without paying. I returned home to Rustenburg and trained as a nurse at a Mine Hospital and later completed a degree in nursing with UNISA and as they say – the rest is history.

Fast forward to my graduation day: Well, everything went well with the graduation and the following year I came back to this University as Professor and Head of Department at the School of Public Health. This was a dream come true for me and I hope your dreams will come true through this graduation. University of Limpopo has over the years produced awesome fruits. You are part of the awesome fruit from this amazing tree.

### **University qualification opens doors of opportunities**

What my career story above indicates is that university qualifications in the health, sciences and agricultural sector create great career and work opportunities – they open many doors. The degrees I had obtained from or through the University of Limpopo, elevated me from being a mere “*male nurse in the mines*”, which is what I was called in the 1980’s, to being a university lecturer, a Professor of Public health and now a Research Director on the social aspects of HIV/AIDS at one of the foremost research organizations in this continent.

I wish the degree you obtain today will elevate some of you from being mere “*Mr or Miss so and so*” or “*a mere scientist or mere farmer*” to either “*Doctor so and so*” or “*top scientist/agriculturist*” or even later to “*Professor or Minister so and so*”.

Your family and community expect a lot from you through this qualification. They are right in having greater expectations for you to succeed in life as they had invested in you financially, emotionally and otherwise. They put in money and other forms of support for your studies and now expect returns. Today you are obtaining what the Receiver of Revenue calls “*Due to You*”- a degree in the health sciences, sciences and agriculture. From tomorrow, go and get a job (if you don’t have one, yet) and contribute what is “*Due by You*” to your family, the South African society or to our continent.

### **Social challenges awaiting you**

There are undoubtedly great social challenges facing you, as a health, sciences or agricultural graduate, out there in the field. You are graduating in a country and at a time when we have the *largest number of people living with HIV/AIDS in the world*. We also are in the top ten countries with *high-burden of Tuberculosis (TB) in the world*. Some newspaper commentators describe us as the “*Crime capital of the world*” and sometimes “*the Rape capital of the world*”.

Although the last two accolades are questionable, it is however, a serious indictment of our country's ability to deal with the social challenges posed by crime and rape, while we still need solutions for dealing with TB and HIV/AIDS.

As if these challenges are not enough, we are gripped by Xenophobic violence that pits some South Africans against their fellow Africans. While we condemn these acts of xenophobic violence, we, as new graduates, are now elevated to positions of importance in communities where we come from, and our negative utterances could fuel the fires of hatred, while our messages of love and tolerance for fellow brothers and sisters could decolonize some minds to value love and peace. Martin Luther King Jr once said:

*“We must learn to live together as brothers and sisters. Otherwise we will die as fools”*

The initial response in any society faced with these serious social challenges is to produce graduates who will develop innovative, relevant and appropriate interventions to deal with these challenges. You are graduating today and we expect you to bring a fresh approach to the way we deal with these social challenges. Maybe our current approach of “business as usual” is not succeeding so we need your innovative and urgent approach.

### **HIV prevention should not be business as usual for you**

Let me share with you what our generation of graduates were faced with, with respect to HIV/AIDS and how we responded.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic is undeniably the major social challenge that threatens to undermine socio-economic development in our country today. According to the population-based survey conducted by my organization – the HSRC in 2005, the number of people living with HIV is estimated to be more than 5,5 million and over 1 600 people become infected daily in our country. The impact of the epidemic on the economy is already being felt in the mining, agricultural and education sectors.

The accompanying social impacts are even more devastating. Life expectancy has been significantly reduced down to approximately 40 years, because many people in the 15 to 49-year age group are now dying of AIDS. The plight of AIDS orphans and the caring values of our society should not just grip our hearts, our minds should be stimulated to address this situation.

What our generation (including researchers and academics) have attempted to do was to develop *prevention technologies* to stop the HIV/AIDS epidemic in its tracks. We have tried to:

- Develop a *vaccine* against the HI virus. These efforts have not yielded a solution as we speak;
- Develop *microbicides* to block entry of the HI virus. These efforts have also not yielded a solution as we speak;

- Develop female controlled, user-friendly *female condoms* to prevent infection. Femidoms are criticized more than they are used.
- Scale up the use of *male condoms*. They available and effective, if used, but they are not extensively used for various reasons.
- Scale up the use of *antiretroviral drugs* for treating people living with HIV/AIDS. The waiting lists are still there – we are not able to meet the need.

*Prevention interventions* to address HIV/AIDS rely heavily on the responsibility of society to dispel denial and stigmatisation, promote abstinence from sex before marriage, encourage faithfulness in relationships, adopt other preventive habits and implement moral regeneration.

We have implemented preventive interventions to overcome the negative legacy of male domination in sexual relationships, stop women and child abuse and destroy the ghastly myth associated with raping infants and innocent young women.

As “*new kids on the block*” you have a special responsibility to inform yourselves and your communities on all the relevant dimensions of this epidemic and its medical, social and societal consequences. Urgent solutions are needed if we are to reverse this scenario. You also need to bring innovative, creative solutions to this epidemic. AIDS prevention cannot be “business as usual”.

### **Remember the oath you have taken**

Those of you who are graduating as doctors today took a Hippocratic Oath where you read a sworn statement in the presence of God and before your family, teachers and peers. You said:

*“I will follow that method of treatment which according to my ability and judgment, I consider for the benefit of my patient and abstain from whatever is harmful or mischievous”.*

In fact the nurses simplify it in their part of the Oath. They say: “I solemnly pledge before God and in the presence of this community, to pass my live in purity.... *The total welfare of my patient will be my first consideration*”

Do what you have sworn to do, to God. In fact, the book of **Ecclesiastes 5:4** says “*When you make a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay.*”

## **Does getting more educated bring benefits?**

The escalating cost of higher education is causing many to question the value of continuing education beyond high school. Many wonder whether the high cost of tuition, the opportunity cost of choosing university over full-time employment, and the accumulation of thousands of Rands of debt is, in the long run, worth the investment. The risk is especially large for low-income families who have a difficult time making ends meet without the additional burden of university fees.

In order to determine whether higher education is worth the investment, it is useful to examine what is known about the value of higher education and the rates of return on investment to both the individual and to society.

A 1998 report published by the Institute for Higher Education Policy in the UK found that university graduates enjoy increased income, higher levels of saving, increased personal and professional mobility, improved quality of life for their offspring, better consumer decision making, and more hobbies and leisure activities (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1998).

According to a report published by the Carnegie Foundation, non-monetary individual benefits of higher education include the tendency for university graduates to become more open-minded, more cultured, more rational, more consistent and less authoritarian; these benefits are also passed along to succeeding generations (Rowley and Hurtado, 2002). Additionally, university attendance has been shown to "decrease prejudice, enhance knowledge of world affairs and enhance social status" while increasing economic and job security for those who earn bachelor's degrees (Ibid.)

Research has also consistently shown a positive correlation between completion of higher education and good health, not only for oneself, but also for one's children.

A number of studies have shown a high correlation between higher education and cultural and family values, and economic growth. According to Cohn and Geske (1992), there is the tendency for more highly educated women to spend more time with their children; these women tend to use this time to better prepare their children for the future. Cohn and Geske (1992) report that "university graduates appear to have a more optimistic view of their past and future personal progress."

## **Closing**

In closing, Mr Chancellor, I wish to extend my congratulations to all our who are attaining their degree qualifications today. Your degree brings with it several benefits. Don't forget to share the benefits that come with this degree with the people who helped you attain it.

Graduating as health professionals, scientists and agricultural professionals – means you have scarce skills - please stay in South Africa, don't emigrate, so you can make a difference to the lives of your fellow brothers and sisters who need your special skills in producing food, researching challenging scientific phenomena and taking care of the indigent in this continent.

I have been involved in interviews for the prestigious Fulbright Scholarship in the last 2 days. I am disappointed that out of 30 candidates short-listed only one came from the University of Limpopo. I am challenging many of you to “*take the bulls by its horns*” and apply for these prestigious scholarships.

Mr Chancellor, I am aware that some graduands are anxiously “*waiting for their names to be called...*” by the Deans. *Some are shaking with disbelief; Not because they never went for it, but because this is a dream come true.*

I wish to remind our graduates today, we have serious social challenges that cannot be treated with an attitude of “business as usual”. We have invested financially, socially and otherwise in our graduates - as families, the university and the society - and are therefore not unreasonable to expect them to go out and serve our people with pride and dignity. We also are not unreasonable in expecting them to develop more innovative, feasible and appropriate solutions to the social challenges facing our society.

I congratulate each one graduating today on your achievement and wish you every success and fulfillment in the future. Remember the part of the oath where you promised that “*...the total welfare of my patient will be my first consideration*”. Do not forget your duty to serve the weak and marginalized of our continent, in particular.

Thank you.

## **REFERENCES**

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