

Professor Ahmed Bawa

(00:03)

Thank you Andre and true to begin by that little interjection was really to get the cricket score. It is 269/6. Sorry, Chair. First of all, I would like to thank Dr Mabizela for inviting me to be here to share this time with you. It is always nice to be at Rhodes and Grahamstown, although I haven't spent a lot of time here, but in particular it is great to be at this particular meeting. It is as the Vice Chancellor said earlier, a historic meeting. I also want to agree with Professor Keet that it isn't something that is being done across the university sector so in fact I wish that we, I said to the Vice Chancellor earlier that it would have been a good thing to have had people from other universities join me so that they could see how the process is unfolding. I also just want to make some comments about the student activism of 2015 and 2017, a couple of thoughts. Some of us grew up in the sixties, seventies and eighties and before 2015, we were all, well I in particular, but others as well, complaining where are the new activists. Of course when the new activists came, not all of us were happy. But I think that however you cut it, the important thing is that this event, sorry, the events between 2015 and now, have really posed big questions. And the fact of the matter is that we would not be sitting here, had it not been for them. And I think it is critically important to engage the ideas that have been put on the table and to understand that for example, in a democracy like ours, it is not a viable option to have a university system that is not affordable to most South Africans. You can't have that. So let's have that as a starting point and then work from there. Then I just want to say, if you are looking for a silver bullet from me, sorry you aint gonna get it. I don't have a silver bullet. All I am going to be saying today, is that I see the process of change as a process, that I do not have any single thing to put on the table.

(02:50)

The Higher Education sector is a highly contested sector and there are reasons for that. Why is it highly contested? It is contested because, you know, it is critical to the creation of a society that is more equal. It is critical to building an economy. It is critical to saving our earth from destruction. These are all hugely important issues and therefore we should not be surprised that the universities and the Higher Education sector generally, is a terrain for struggle. Because

it is such an important social structure. So, I think that meetings of this kind can only help us to begin to shape the kind of social compacts, if you like, about the way in which we should be thinking about the higher education system. So that we can think about the higher education system as kinda playing particular kinds of roles over the next twenty or thirty years or whatever the case may be. Unless we arrive at some sort of social compact, I don't necessarily mean at this meeting, but as a nation. If we don't arrive at building social compacts around the higher education system, then I think we will be in trouble because I think we will be facing the catastrophic possibility that we might lose our higher education system. So it is important to us to engage and to arrive at some kind of social compact. I don't at all mean that this is going to be an easy thing to do, but you know the National Commission of Higher Education in 1995, 1996, 1997, which produced a Higher Education Act and so on, to some extent played that role and it did actually give us some kind of framework from which we could draw on as we thought about higher education. That has run out. By the way, the issues that have been raised by students, the issue of fee free education and the issues around the curriculum and decolonisation, were on the agenda, in 1995, 1996, but we ducked them for very particular reasons. And of course they are back on the agenda, which we shouldn't be surprised by.

(05:26)

Okay, right, so, um, the Chair of Council has covered almost everything I wanted to say. I really enjoyed your speech Chairman, it really captured some of the big issues. So let me just say that, you know, as he said, this is probably amongst the most uncertain times in history and I think it was Winston Churchill or somebody who said something like, never let a good crisis go to waste. So this is the opportunity for us, this is a time of opportunity, a time of re-imagination and a time of recreation. And I think that you are setting a fantastic precedent by engaging the big issues, if you like.

(06:27)

So the topic I was given to me was "Institutional transformation in the current context of South African public higher education system" and I have taken the liberty to change it, without permission. What I am going to be talking about is the identity, role and function of the South African university. Now, you might wonder why it's not an African university, the real reason for that, is that even though I have worked on the African continent with the Ford Foundation in higher education, I do not know what an African university is yet. So I am going to constrain the discussion to the South African university. And what I want to say is that it is all about the knowledge question and about the design and building of caring institutions. That is the summary of my topic.

(07:19)

So what do we see around this. We see unprecedented global challenges. I mean we just have to pay attention to the idea that actually, by the time, a hundred years from now, there may not be a human race. Let's just digest that for a moment. There are huge global challenges facing us and by the way, it's not just climate change, it's a range of different pressures that have been brought to bed by human intervention on the earth. We see violent poverty and growing inequality across the world, it doesn't matter where you look; that is what you see. Of course, more so in some places than other places. But there is growing inequality in vast parts of the globe. There is the illusion of democracy – all you have to do is look at the USA, you just watch TV and you laugh at Trump, but it's much more serious, of course, there is an indication there that one of the most kind of sophisticated system with huge cheques and balances and so on, is completely rattled by this mad man. I mean what else can you call him? You know, he just has this ability as an individual to kind of rattle that system. But it is not just there, look what is happening in Europe, look what's happening in other parts of the world. Democracy is under threat. Liberal democracy is under threat and course, the question is, what is going to emerge? And, of course, alongside that, again I refer to Trump, there is a slide to anti-intellectualism. You know, as people will say to you, there is a tradition in many parts of the world of anti-intellectualism and we have a responsibility as universities, we have a responsibility to put a stop to that, because that could be the disaster that turns the tide. We see the violent degradation of an ethical society – for that, don't look at Trump, look at here. You know it is everywhere we look, we see this, kind of fantastic degradation of ethical society. There is an escalation of political violence. I don't know how many of you listened to Professor **** Zulu yesterday, speaking about political violence in KZN. We should pay attention to what is going on, but political violence is everywhere. When you think about the violence, the terrorism and the violence, you know it's all political violence and its driving violence. And how easily we construct the other. You now you can only perpetrate those kinds of violence, if you perpetrate, if you can construct this notion of the other and we do it so easily, you know. All of us do it. And we have to be careful; we have to just pay attention to them.

10:40

And then there are these massive global migrations in all directions and rapid changes in the world of work. I mean, I, let's just remind ourselves twenty years from now it's unlikely that there will be cars without drivers right? And like that, that is just one example of the massive changes that are coming at us in terms of the world of work. On the right hand side, I've got this little tag called 'freezing border lands'. And what I mean by that, is that, you know, usually it's at border lands, you know, the borders between different kind of thoughts and ideas and so on that we look at, look for interesting developments and I think the one thing that we have to be

worried about in terms of the whole anti-intellectualism challenges we face, that actually we are getting a freezing of those border lands. People are not talking to each other; people are not engaging each other, that we are resorting to violence and war much more readily than we used to as a human race. Universities can't solve these problems, we are, we are just an entity in the society, but we cannot sit on the sidelines either. We can't just simply say that this is not, you know, "we don't deal with this", you know, "this is not our, this is not our terrain'. We can't do that. We have to engage. And the reason we have to engage is because universities are social institutions. **** created by society. And we have a specific purpose and the specific purpose is that we have to produce, we have to apply, we have to disseminate knowledge. And we underline the word disseminate, because you know we have a particular, particular role, right. You know, I worked at **** in Geneva for a while and you know that is a knowledge intensive institution, but its main purpose is not dissemination. Its main purpose is kind of... so you get knowledge intensive institutions that are not involved with dissemination, but our main purpose is students; that is our job. Our job is students. Of course we create knowledge, we... in fact we create knowledge because we have students. It's not the other way around, right; it's not the other way around. So I will come back to that.

(13:09)

Universities exist as the Chair of Council, that is perfectly correct, that universities exist in context which are simultaneously intensely local and intensely global. You really cannot think of a university except in terms of the fact that they are both local and global at the same time. And of course it has to be like that because the local is a part of the globe. There's no such thing as the local here and the global there. We are linked with each other. We are usually complex social spaces for many reasons, and probably more so in South Africa because of our history, than in other parts of the world. But we are hugely complex social spaces. And of course a part of that reason is because academics are so fucking frustrating. I am one of them so... but we have our own kind of, our own way of thinking things and you know we think we, you know, er I'll stop there... And of course they intersect with other social spaces. They, you know, and of course that makes them even more complex. They are not just complex internally, but they are complex as social institutions. I put this in specifically for your Vice Chancellor. So there is this book called Infinitesimals written by Amir Alexander, it was a historian, a historian at UCLA. I'm going to read this, so it says: Of August 10, 1632, which is about 380 years** ago I think, 385 years ago, five men in flowing black robes, convened in a sombre Roman palazzo, to pass judgement on a simple proposition, that a continuous line is composed of distinct and infinitely tiny parts. With the stroke of a pen, the Jesuit fathers banned the doctrine of Infinitesimals, announcing that it would never be taught, or even mentioned. The concept was deemed dangerous and subversive and a threat to the belief that the world was an orderly place, governed by a strict and unchanging set of rules. If Infinitesimals were ever accepted, the

Jesuits feared the entire world would be plunged into chaos. So, I mean the reason I have is, of course the Jesuits failed ultimately because gigantic figures sided with the Infinitesimal argument – Galileo, Rene Descartes, Picasso... Of course what happened was the centre of mathematics, which was in Italy, shifted to the UK. John Wallace, to I don't know what it was called that time. But shifted to the UK, John Wallace and company picked it up and of course Einstein had developed calculus which came from this, right. And I don't think Italian mathematics ever recovered, but that is not the issue. The issue is that knowledge intensive institutions such as universities have the potential to be powerfully subversive. That's what *** (16:46). And this is what we have to understand about universities. And it is partly why there is so much conversation about universities. They are hugely subversive. And we have to understand that. And by the way our history has taught us that. When we think about the 70s and 80s and that, we think about the black consciousness movement and how we grew and *** (17:13) the universities. I am not going to spend too much time on this because this is what you all know. It's the purposes of higher education and public goods, if you like. We have to create active citizens, we have to meet the needs of the economy, we have to produce new knowledge etc. I'm not going to go through this. The blue one is important of course because we have to build new cohorts of leaders. It is not enough for us just to churn the handle right, we have to produce leaders. We have to produce intellectuals. That is what universities have to do. And of course in the brownish writings, things we have to do, so I am not going to spend any time.

(17:55)

But there are genuine challenges facing our higher education system. There is chronic underfunding. I know Thandi is here, but I know Thandi you are not really in the department, I know you are in the department, but not really in the department but... when we speak to our department, they don't mind my saying that there is underfunding. They hate it when I say there is chronic underfunding, but there is chronic underfunding and we have to understand its impact on access, teaching and learning and research. By the way, the issues that were raised by students, in terms of free education, by definition raises the whole story, the whole story of underfunding. Language is a big issue in our universities, and as I was saying to the Vice Chancellor today, John Volmink, one of my favourite people, I worked with him for a long, long time, that he said to me once, "there are some questions, for which there are no right answers and you have to just choose between, choose the best of the bad answers, or the wrong answers". But I think that the language we choose, we have to think hard about it, it is a critical, it is a critical issue. We have a fraction schooling system, let's not kid ourselves, let's not... we have a fraction schooling system. I have just come back from Japan and it was my first visit there and I was staggered by the, staggered by the quality of private school education there. I mean, we have got so much to learn. There's a massive illegitimacy here, very few people in

South Africa think of the universities as their universities. I mean, I hope you understand, it's a very uncommon phenomenon if you compare it to the USA for example, where people buy into their universities. We don't have that. There's illegitimacy here. So what are the challenges we have, we should try to understand how to create meshes, I call them meshes, you can call them whatever, meshes between society and universities, between students and the universities, to try and understand how students can see the universities as their universities. Staff at the universities and students at the curriculum, and again, I am not going to spend too much time on this because there are experts at this university who know much more about that than I do. But it's really about saying that actually, unless we understand fully, what students are coming with, and that there is enough meshing between the curriculum and what they are coming with, you know, we *** (20:48). So you have to create these meshes, actively. It is a challenge and we have to work at that. The intricate interweaving of the local and the global, and the last thing that I wanted to say, is that there are serious questions to which they may not be correct answers and we must work at that. I just want to say that we have to think hard about this issue around creating these meshes, because for me at least, creating these meshes, and there may be others by the way, I just got a few here, creating these meshes provides us with the opportunity of beginning to understand what it is that makes the universities in South Africa a South African university. So the big question is how we do this. So I just got two points, right, and there are a number of sides but I've got two big points. The first point is, we have to decolonise our knowledge project, now please don't ask me to define that, I don't know how to define it. And to be honest, you know, the Indians have tried, the Brazilians have tried. What I do know is that I think that there is a way of addressing this, and there is a way of getting to a point where we can begin to talk about it with more knowledge and authority and so on. The first one is, let's just understand that there the centre of gravity of the global knowledge system is somewhere in the North *** (22:10) Atlantic. That is changing, but at the moment it is still existing somewhere there. The question is how do some African universities, how do South Africa's universities; enter that global knowledge system on their own terms? So let me just repeat this right. How do South African universities enter the global knowledge system, which we have to be a part of, because you cannot separate knowledge easily. Enter the global knowledge system on their own terms. So the first thing we have to do is, we have to define our knowledge project independently. We have to say to ourselves, this is our knowledge project. Now each university would have its own way of approaching that, so that is fine, but we have to deliberately ask ourselves, what is our knowledge project? The second thing is, we must define the knowledge project that is simultaneously intensely local and intensely global, because that is the nature of knowledge. You know you cannot separate knowledge, South African knowledge from the rest of the universal knowledge. You have to create a knowledge project which is, which speaks simultaneously to local and global. And I will give you some examples of that. So this is what I think is the purpose, right, of South African universities. So in addition to

all the public and private *** (23:48) of what is expected globally, South African universities must, and I will underline this, assume the responsibility for producing and disseminating knowledge of the context in which they are created. So what I am saying is, if you are located in a particular context, if you are in the Eastern Cape, for goodness sake, that knowledge project of yours has to speak to that local context. There are some provisions that come just under that. The second thing is that we have to, we have to produce knowledge of such quality, that we can invent that knowledge in the global knowledge system. See, what that does is that it takes us into the global knowledge system on our terms. Let me give you two examples. If you look at the (24:48) psychometric, not psychometric, sorry, the psychometric paradata*** (24:52), one of our best producing, our best performing sectors, is clinical medicine. Now we shouldn't be surprised, the reason is because clinical medicine has to engage with people who are in our hospitals, or people who are ill. You know you can't deal with our diseases, by dealing with patients from other parts of the world; you have to deal with the local context. And there was a very interesting conversation that I had with a Professor of Surgery at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, a few years ago, when it was still the University of Natal, and he wasn't arguing any of this. This person studied and he was a surgeon and he was studying cancer, cancer of the throat in the Transkei. And he had a little formula, his formula was that he would produce; he would publish ten papers in the local journal and one paper in the international terrain. It was his way of kinda saying, right, you know, I have to impact locally but it's important for us to take this knowledge and put it into the international terrain. Interesting kind of way of thinking about it. I know more about the second project. The second project: A young scholar called Paul Makoena, who got his PhD in Bio Technology at DUT. After finishing his PhD he decided that he wanted to study how fermentation had evolved outside Durban in Inanda** (26:40) in what is called the *** (26:42) community. You can't Google this stuff. You can't go to the lab and just do experiments because what would you experiment with? There is only one way of getting this knowledge. There is only one way. You go into the community. By the way there is a whole paraphernalia when going into the community, so if we have time, we can talk about that. So he goes into the community with a group of students, by the way the students, they have to be Zulu speaking because otherwise you are not going to become the nuances and so on, and you speak to four generations of women. And you ask them, how did you do fermentation in the old days, how did you do it today, then you go to your laboratory and you test to see whether in fact fermentation in fact actually occur. If it didn't occur, he went back. Ok to cut the long story short, articles get published. Two weeks after the first article gets published, he gets an email from China, saying hello, we would like to collaborate with you. We are doing exactly the same project. You see, this is the *** (27:54) of highly embedded knowledge, in communities, and it's a way in which we can think about taking the responsibility to produce knowledge about our own context. By the way, we should be doing this in all areas, water research and so on. Ok, now some *** (28:14) right, see what this does not mean, ok so this does not mean,

that our university should not be engaging in global knowledge products, that would be ridiculous, we have to save the earth. We have to change our behaviour patterns. So global warming, climate change, those are all things that we have to engage with. *** (28:37) It would be ridiculous for me to argue that we should not be studying the *** (28:40) because that's what I studied. But *** (28:43) goes on with the part of our context, you know, we have to engage in those things. It does not mean that we should not be collaborating with other universities on earth in unearthing knowledge about our context. And it does not mean that we shouldn't be studying other societies and other contexts. But what does it mean. It does mean that our universities must assume the responsibility for producing knowledge about our context. We shouldn't leave that to somebody else. We shouldn't say somebody else is going to do it. We must take responsibility. I want to argue, and I mean we won't have the time for this but I want to argue that we have to become angry institutions; we have to become institutions that are seriously engaged in the context in which we find ourselves. Rhodes University should be the go-to place for all the problems in Grahamstown. You should be. If you are not that, Mr Vice Chancellor I want to say, that is a project. If Grahamstown is having a water problem, that has to be a major major project for Rhodes. It has to. And what I want to argue is that we must be engaged. I'm not going to spend any time on this, all I am saying here is that you know there are things that we can do to become engaged. And I'm not going to spend any time on that.

(30:24)

Right, the second point I want to make, so the first point was the issue of engagement. You see when you think about that fermentation project, the only way to do it is through engagement. And now I am arguing that engagement plays a big part of the enterprises of universities. The second thing I want to look at is, at an institutional level, and I am really thinking about this through deliberate design, you know when you sit down and you decide to design this. Lets design our universities. I want to argue that in the context like South Africa, we have to assume a strong social justice agenda. It has to be a clearly defined social, political rubric around which we think about the universe. We are in South Africa, with its history and its huge, huge challenges. And it is within that rubric that we have to think about access and success. That we have to think about our research and our innovation. That we have to think about graduate employment and *** (31:34) and all of that. And student development. So what is the starting point if we want to do that. Well if we want to design the university, the first thing we have to do is ask ourselves, who are our students? Where do they come from? What kind of schools did they go to? What are they reading? What are they not reading? What is the, you know, what is the socio economic condition? And then, you have to design the university around that. So I think what I am punting is that we must be careful not to, well let me put it this way, I still hear, when I go to universities and when I was the Vice Chancellor at DUT and Deputy Vice Chancellor, I still hear people saying that students are not like they used to be. Of course

students are not like they used to be. But for God's sake, let's find out who our students are. Let's be sure that we understand who our students are and let's design the universities so that it optimises the chances of success. So we have to design the university around our students. I was saying to someone earlier today that.. am I out of time? I just wanted to say that I met a senior Professor at the University of Natal many, many years ago, new laboratory, so I visited there, a fantastic facility, so I asked him how are things and he said things are fantastic but you know we are just not getting students like we used to get before. H was talking about the graduate students. So I said well then what is the problem, students are coming from your under graduate courses Professor so what is the problem? No, no, he says, you know, in the old days, the students we had, used to grow up at the elbows of their fathers, fixing up *** (33:40). I was a bit puzzled, so I said and now. And he said now we have all these little Indian girls, you know... for goodness sake... you know there are many things I agree with Blade Nzimande, there are many things I don't agree with, but the one thing I do agree with, he said to the Vice Chancellors one day that, Dr Mabizela will remember this, he said: "for goodness sake don't complain about the students, they are the only students you got!" So understand your students. And design the university around your students. And what else? We have to focus on the second curriculum, because that is where the most amount of learning takes place. You can't teach young people about HIV/Aids in the classroom, most of the learning happens outside of the classroom. So let's engage the second curriculum, rig it, *** (34:40) and you do a good job... In my view at least, those are the two messages I had, engagement and student *** (34:57) as engines of transformation as a way to reshape the knowledge project, as a way to re-invision the structure of the university, as a way to re-invision the relationship between the university and its many communities, and as a way to produce new generations of socially engaged intellectuals. There are a whole range of systemic level issues that we need to deal with, which I am not going to go through because that is a really big discussion and Thandi is here and she probably knows more about that than I do, but we really have to think about redesigning the post school education system. It's not working. We have to redesign it. Thank you.

(Ends: 35:42)