

**Address by UCT Vice-Chancellor Dr Max Price at the Faculty of Science graduation
on 15 June 2016**

Today is a landmark day for us, and for all of you. It's the culmination of years of work and a springboard into the wider world. It's an opportunity to shape a career and make a life outside the university.

But the timing is also significant in our series of 13 graduation ceremonies, as we reflect on the events of June 16, 1976. We are commemorating the month of June by linking our graduation ceremonies to that pivotal point in South Africa's history.

Tomorrow, June 16, is an opportunity to honour the sacrifices made by young people in the name of education 40 years ago, and to look back at the significance of June 16 – then and now.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, political movements and people had been banned and imprisoned, apartheid was at its zenith and the system seemed unassailable. Liberation appeared to be an unattainable dream and after being beaten down in the 60s and 70s there was a general sense of hopelessness. That sense of hopelessness in itself dampens resistance.

When schoolchildren took to the streets of Soweto to protest against the compulsory use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in schools, the day erupted in chaos. Soweto schoolchildren were gunned down by police as they protested and tried to flee from the scene. The June 16 shootings sent shock waves across South Africa and the world. The uprising spread to nearby Alexandra and across the townships of South Africa.

By the end of 1976, 575 people had died across the country, 450 of them at the hands of police. The protests were reignited in June 1977 – the anniversary of the 1976 uprising – as people rose up against the might of the police and in the face of the army in the townships.

For many people, June 16, 1976 marked the turning point in the struggle against apartheid. What it did was rekindle the hope that had been lost. It gave people the sense that a popular uprising, while it may not overcome the might of the apartheid police and military, could create a situation which would ultimately have to give, because it was impossible to maintain and to continue normal life under those circumstances.

The state's attempts to brutally suppress schoolchildren were seen to be temporarily quieting, but not effective in settling the unrest in the long run. This sent a message to all people – white and black – that apartheid could not survive and that it was only a matter of time before it would crumble.

The white minority and government agencies did indeed continue their business, but cracks were exposed. Almost everyone could now see that the independent separate homelands were a myth; that it was not tenable to sustain a migrant labour force using the pass law system and that it was not tenable to sustain a white minority and suppress the majority of the people of the country forever.

That evident truth also became much more present overseas, where the pressure from the world was ramped up as a result of the exposure of the patently racist system that apartheid represented.

While the Soweto uprising, and the violent protests that followed over the next few years, was not a practical overthrow of the State, it was symbolic in the message that it conveyed that things would have to change. It was this that gave hope to people in a way that ultimately persuaded the oppressed and the oppressor about the need to find another way forward.

So what are the lessons and significance of June 16, 1976 for us today?

I want to draw out five messages. The first is that it is salutary and disappointing that the key issue that gave rise to the protest – the state of education in the country 40 years ago – remains a flashpoint for conflict today. It probably represents the new South Africa's signal failure in the last 22 years. The thing that we have most significantly failed at is to fix the school education system.

The issue of education is as important today as it was then and there is as much work to do now as then. If we cannot get the school education system right then we will still be in a similar situation 40 years hence. I think that must be the first lesson we take away.

A second lesson which we can derive from that time is not what we should do, but what we should not do ... and that is the strategy of the 1970s and 1980s that argued for liberation first and education later.

What we have seen as a consequence of that strategy is a lost generation ... a generation that did not achieve education. That has a long term, perhaps a two-generation, effect that continues because that education can never be recovered.

It should worry us enormously when we see that message in today's protest, in the burning of schools and the destruction of educational infrastructure, as if that will be the most effective way of improving our education system. We have to remind people that it will not.

The third message is about the value and the necessity of youth taking the lead. Around the world, activism often starts at universities and schools. We see evidence of that today in our own environment at schools, but especially at universities.

Young people see the world with fresh eyes. They are idealistic. They believe the world can be different. They can imagine a world in a different way to the older generation, who accept things in a more complacent way. So when we see the youth activism we have seen, we must recognise this as an essential part of what has changed the world in the past and what will change the world in the future.

We need to value that and encourage it. I hope that our graduates who are moving out of the university and into the world today will see themselves as active citizens and see the need to be activists in all sorts of ways – from ensuring that they vote and raise their voices through letters to the editor, in petitions and in social media, to participating in protest activities and ensuring

that we hold authorities accountable. Government is one authority, but certainly the university authorities are another and holding us all accountable is part of the job of youth and students.

The fourth message is to think about how South Africa today is different from 1976. The democratic environment we are in should lead us to recognise that different modes of protest are appropriate today.

In 1976 the vast majority of South Africa's people – 87% or so – were disenfranchised and had no legal way to express a voice. We did not have the constitutional institutions that protect individual rights and civil rights. People were locked up simply for protesting peacefully, often for up to 180 days, or even longer, without trial. Police could and did use live fire in peaceful protests. In that environment, when the laws were unjust and not founded on any democratic principles, certain modes of protest, including violent protest, would have been justified. But the situation is very different today.

Today we live in a constitutional democracy which we can and should protect. In signing up for that social compact that says we respect the rights of others, it also means we live by the rule of law and our protest activities have to be within the rule of law. We need to condemn the levels of violence and arson and some of the forms of protest that we have seen over the past year.

The fifth area I would raise, and perhaps the most difficult lesson about protest and modes of protest, is to find the extent of protest that is sufficiently disruptive to ensure that marginalised voices are heard.

Despite our democracy, we recognise that many voices are silenced by people who have power. We need to tolerate and encourage forms of protest in which those voices can be heard.

It's important that people protest peacefully. Certainly, at UCT, most protest has been within the realms of what we think is appropriate. We have tried to tolerate levels of protest. There have been occupations of buildings that we have allowed, as uncomfortable as it may be, and as disruptive as it may be.

Through protests last year, we have seen many voices that have been marginalised find a place in the public realm, and we are grateful that those concerns have been raised. We applaud the students who have brought transformation into focus, who have brought into focus the sense in which black students may have felt alienated, and do feel alienated. Students who are members of the LGBTQIA+ community, students with disabilities, students with mental-health challenges as well as students who have been the victims of sexual assault, have found voice in the past year. The university is and will be a better place for the raising of those voices and challenging us as the executive of the university to respond constructively.

Finally, I want to say something about the role of young people and all of us in changing our society. All of us can be active citizens and can change the world in many other dimensions beyond protesting and lobbying.

While protests have been important in exposing the issues, the sacrifices of June 16, 1976 are also a reminder of the other roles that we play.

Many students across the UCT faculties plough their energy and passion into making a difference in the world in practical ways – through after-hours teaching and offering legal services to thousands of people who can't afford lawyers, to working in clinics through SHAWCO [Students Health and Welfare Centres Organisation].

Some of the UCT sporting clubs have development programmes in schools that don't have facilities. During weekends, students teach youngsters to surf and offer access to surfboards. A group of UCT engineering students are also keen skateboarders and have developed a skateboard park in Langa.

Another group of students have developed technologies to help control the problem of fires in shacklands. A humanities student is using his spare time to conserve heritage in the Bo-Kaap area in Cape Town. Others have used their time to improve disability services in communities.

Students in the computer science department have designed applications for use in communities, which others have used to teach maths and science to school learners.

Through the UCT Upstarts programme, aspiring social entrepreneurs have developed everything from a low-cost community security system to a mobile art gallery that can be taken to schools.

Many students who are the first in their families to come to university go back to their communities in the holidays as role models, encouraging friends and family members to go to university and particularly to come to UCT. Some of them have also set up their own NGOs and projects in communities.

Another way students are a force for good is through UCT's Knowledge Co-op. Community groups who need research done come to the university and are matched with postgraduate students, who do the research for them. Postgraduate students have been involved in projects ranging from setting up websites and blogs for community groups to reading projects and urban farming.

Beyond the lectures and tutorials, we hope you will carry forward the important values that you have learnt while at UCT. We hope you'll have a commitment to social justice and respect for diversity and that you go beyond your personal material goals and think about the impact of your enterprises on other people and the environment.

In particular, recognise the enormity of the privilege you have had in tertiary education and in being part of the elite group you form in having a degree from UCT. With that privilege comes responsibility to give back and make the world a better place for people who have not had those privileges.

I urge you as graduates to go out and make a difference in some way. Through your attitude and actions, you will be honouring the sacrifice made by young people on June 16, 1976, 40 years ago, and in the struggles that have followed up until today.