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UCT VC calls on higher education to reinvent itself

Disruption is inevitable, and society must take the initiative in order to stay ahead. This according to University of Cape Town (UCT) Vice-Chancellor Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng while delivering the 23rd annual Kgosi Edward Patrick Lebone Molotlegi Memorial Lecture.

Professor Phakeng delivered the lecture at the Royal Bafokeng Sports Palace in Phokeng near Rustenburg, recently. The annual lecture in memory of the late Kgosi Edward Patrick Lebone Molotlegi is one of the most celebrated events on the Bafokeng calendar.

While disruption may not be the kind of action that people want to embrace today, especially since COVID-19 has already disrupted their lives, it is inevitable, Phakeng said.

“Disruption can have a powerful, positive connotation when you are the one who is doing the disrupting for the benefit of society. So, we believe higher education needs to seize the opportunity to disrupt and reinvent itself – in other words, ‘building better’ for the future.”

Phakeng explained why she believes higher education can “open the way for Africans to help lead the world through the crises all human beings are experiencing around the world today”.

“‘Disrupt’ is one of the two verbs that the University of Cape Town has selected as our response to the challenges we face as an institution and as South Africans over the next 10 years.”

Phakeng said signs that things need to change were obvious, and that action needs to be taken.

“When I took office as vice-chancellor in July 2018, I was aware that we were at a crossroads: not just UCT, but also this nation, this continent, and, indeed, the whole world. We were starting to emerge from three years of continuous protest in universities across

South Africa. Other protests were happening outside of South Africa, such as #OccupyWallStreet, #MeToo, anticolonial demonstrations and climate change activism.”

Back in 2018, she recalled, the university knew transformation had to include people who had been marginalised in the past, and who would now know that they too “belonged” in the academic ranks that had excluded them for centuries.

“The academic ranks ... had expected them to assimilate into the culture of institutions. We needed to address UCT’s colonial and apartheid history. We needed to affirm our African identity, reclaim African agency, and commit to the future of the continent as a global African university,” Phakeng said.

She said that the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) had posed challenges; however, she believes it is unacceptable for higher education to be playing catch-up to 4IR.

“We should be leading how the Fourth Industrial Revolution changes our society, especially in applying the Fourth Industrial Revolution technology towards achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

“I did not want us to become complacent about UCT’s status as the top-ranked university in Africa. So, I challenged the university to take a critical view of ourselves, by defining excellence, transformation and sustainability as interdependent, so that we can be the best for Africa and not just the best in Africa,” Phakeng said.

The vice-chancellor explained that UCT’s Vision 2030 is an experiment in inclusive and transformative leadership at the university, unleashing the creativity and imagination of staff and students to change the future.

In 2018 Phakeng created a Futures Think Tank to investigate the university’s potential responses to the 4IR, and to help lay the groundwork for UCT’s Vision 2030.

“We understood that we had a choice: we could wait for the Fourth Industrial Revolution to disrupt our ways of doing things in higher education, or we could lead the disruption, and in that way steer the changes the Fourth Industrial Revolution would bring to our society.”

The vice-chancellor said that she believes leadership in events such as the 4IR must include a commitment to meeting the needs of the poor and marginalised in Africa and around the world. She said that COVID-19 is exacerbating historic inequalities based on economic poverty, poor education and development, and racial and gender-based violence.

Phakeng said that education must unlock resources for developing new ways of supporting environmental sustainability across campuses. It must address issues of inclusiveness, including accessible education for people with various disabilities; attitudes and actions that show respect to women and people of different sexual identities; and mental health. It must encourage good governance and accountability across all departments and pay classes.

“New ways of teaching and learning can explore not only digital technologies but also the new ways of applying education in the world that is developing as a result of technological advances. These ways include entrepreneurship: giving students the freedom and the professional support to develop their own ideas for creating new businesses and applications of technology,” she said.

Phakeng said that one result that she believes will be achieved from developing design thinking at UCT, and engaging with Vision 2030, is ‘antifragility’ – a term coined by Nassim Nicholas Taleb, the author of *The Black Swan* and *Antifragile: Things that gain from disorder*.

“You know, we often talk about resilience. Resilience is important. But while resilience is the ability to resist shocks and remain the same, antifragility is the ability to grow stronger and even thrive as a result of shock, stress and disorder. So, antifragility is a level higher than resilience. Oftentimes people think, ‘We’ve got to be resilient, you know, develop a thick skin.’ Well, antifragility is a notch up from resilience,” she said.

“We need to seek not to return to that life, before COVID-19, but to stretch ourselves forward into a life that embraces accident, randomness, disorder, stress and shock – events that force us to be creative and responsive to real situations. We need to put ourselves in the way of learning and practising antifragility – as individuals and as institutions and as a country.”

ENDS

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