

Valedictory report from the Vice-Chancellor - Highlights of a decade: 2008 to 2018

Executive Summary

Tradition and transformation

In the minds of many people, institutions of higher education tend to evoke a particular tradition – represented symbolically through colonnaded and cloistered architecture, academic leaders and scientists of a particular race and gender profile, libraries full of books and journals, a certain traditional pageantry of graduations and ceremonies rooted in the mediaeval church origins of Western universities. When the University of Cape Town’s main campus was built in the 1920s, the architect wished to emulate the styles of older European and American universities such as Cambridge, Oxford and Harvard. Until recently, the portraits on the walls of a university in the Western world would likely display only white males, revering their contributions and presenting them as role models for new generations of students. The students themselves would have come from a specific set of feeder schools, with shared cultures and backgrounds, and a deep, dynastic familiarity with the culture reflected in the university.

But this is not true anymore. Around the world, this traditional university culture is being challenged and changed. I believe during this decade we have reached a tipping point in South African universities, and also in the USA and some other ex-colonies, reflecting both the growing pressures and growing acceptance of the need to confront the dominance of the traditional Western patriarchal upper-class culture in universities, and to transform that culture to become more diverse and inclusive.

At UCT, transformation had been progressing at a steady pace over two decades before I became vice-chancellor in 2008, but in the years since then the pace and magnitude of transformation have picked up dramatically. This was indeed one of my hopes when I was invited to lead this great university.

In my installation address in August 2008, I said, “Transformation requires a recognition of the weight of the past and its implications for an agenda of redress, including measures to ensure equality of opportunity and access and efforts to change organisational cultures to become more inclusive and tolerant; and a capacity to change the way people think – about our heritage, culture, values and sense of self.” Also in that address, 14 years after democracy, I said, “The university community has still inadequately tackled the need for attitude shifts, culture shifts, proactive redress, to ensure that black people and women feel at home here.”

I believe those shifts, that tipping point, has been achieved in the past decade, and more urgently, in the past four years. A key factor contributing to this shift has been the increasing numbers of students from non-traditional backgrounds, who have achieved a critical mass and found their voice to protest against the marginalisation they had been experiencing over many decades. That protest has been particularly assertive and challenging, impatient and sometimes angry, and it has also achieved results. This is not to justify the unlawful protest behaviour that was on show

nationally and at UCT – I do not believe anything justifies that, nor that it was necessary to achieve the goals of the activism. But the combination of mass protest, alliances between students and labour, led to the realisation among the broader community that the issues being raised – both around institutional culture and around affordability of higher education – were deeply and widely felt. This generated a new commitment, a buy-in across the campus community, to accelerating transformation. Transformation was no longer someone else’s task, it was everyone’s business.

While we still have a long way to go, UCT has made significant progress since then in changing the look and feel of the campus environment. The full report includes a chapter devoted to the transformation of the university over the decade. But in line with the theme of tradition and transition, I offer one small example of such change – the graduation ceremony. While we still follow traditions such as the wearing of academic gowns, capping of graduates and conferring of honorary degrees, the UCT ceremony now includes contemporary African music, and an *imbongi* – an isiXhosa praise singer – opens the proceedings. Students often wear traditional dress with their graduation gowns and their families take full advantage of the occasion to ululate and dance as the graduands’ names are called.

One thing that has not changed is the inspiration I have always felt when I presided over these joyful and life-altering ceremonies. They are the culmination of our academic work. Sometimes, I meet family members of three generations – all of whom take enormous pride in having studied at, and graduated from UCT. But even more exciting is being introduced to a graduate’s parents from a village in Limpopo, who have a few years of schooling, have never been to Cape Town, never seen the ocean, and in front of us stands the person representing the next generation – now a doctor, accountant, lawyer or engineer. This is the visible evidence that UCT is changing the lives and circumstances of an individual, a family and a community within the scope of a single generation.

So transformation has many dimensions. Over the past decade, we have addressed the challenge of transformation head-on, acknowledging its colonial and apartheid genesis. We have improved access for disadvantaged students – addressing both race and class inequality. We have invested in academic and social support programmes to improve success rates of students from poor schools. We have stimulated debates on the inclusivity of the environments and made changes – from the names of buildings to the profile of symbols and the iconic Rhodes statue, to the artworks and curation of collections to the modes of engagement with those who experience the institution in radically different ways. We have, unfortunately, made only limited progress with the recruitment and retention of black South African academic staff at professorial levels, in spite of considerable investment in programmes to “grow our own timber” – but the increasing numbers of mid-level black academic staff gives hope for a future more diverse professoriate. This process, while fragile and uncertain, is making inroads – for example more than 67% of permanent academic staff recruited in the past year (May 2017 to April 2018) were black. We have consciously sought to redress inequalities within the institution, with the insourcing of 1 300 previously outsourced workers being a major policy change

that dramatically improved the lives of some 25% of the university community. We have also run many projects which seek to advance social justice outside the university – the Schools Improvement Initiative and Poverty and Inequality Initiatives being two examples. Finally, there have been numerous projects and initiatives aimed at embedding UCT’s African identity and connectedness in the global higher education landscape.

Highlights of the decade

As UCT’s transformation drive has made history – as well as headlines – the institution has continued to record achievements in teaching and research that exceeded all our goals: consistently and significantly increasing the number of research publications, increasing our high graduation rates (our overall graduate total grew by 37% between 2008 and 2016), increasing the number of individual donors giving to the university, and maintaining our position as the top university on the continent in the various world ranking systems. UCT competes successfully in the global space for international research funds and partnerships, international students, and is sought after as a partner of choice by institutions globally.

These achievements will be covered in more detail elsewhere in the full report, but looking back over the decade, some of the highlights that stand out for me are the following:

Internationalisation

- Securing our position as a globally competitive research university, thanks to new internationalisation strategies that led UCT to cement links with a host of new institutions and forge vital new research collaborations. We joined or founded three networks in particular which have promoted these collaborations – The Worldwide Universities Network (WUN), the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) and the International Alliance of Research Universities (IARU). Participation in the World Economic Forum’s Global Universities Leaders Forum (GULF) has also raised our profile and opened many doors.
- A concerted focus on developing our networks, partnerships and research focus on the African continent in terms of our vision to become an Afropolitan university. Having positioned ourselves as the hub of the continent helps differentiate UCT among the top universities globally.

Increasing Access and Growth

- Intensified and expanded efforts to address educational disadvantage in respect of student admissions and success. This saw the introduction of a new admissions policy and an expanded financial aid system to enable needs-blind admission and free laptops. Since 2010 we have not turned away any academically eligible students for financial reasons. Increased resources have been devoted to educational and social support interventions to increase success rates, such as the First Year Experience programme, tutor training,

automatic lecture recording, and strengthened Academic Development Programmes.

- We have grown our student numbers from 24,000 to 29,000 – some 23%. Most of this growth has been black students and much has been postgraduate.
- In parallel with the student growth, we have grown our infrastructure. We completed a number of major building projects – the Obz Square residence, the Harold Cressey residence, the New Engineering Building, the new Snape Learning Centre, the New Lecture Theatre, the New Economics Building, Masengeni (housing student administration and the International Academic Programmes Office), and we have started on a conference centre at the Graduate School of Business and a major refurbishment for the Neurosciences Institute and contributed to a new forensic pathology centre. We spent R100 million upgrading classrooms, and other buildings. Many of these were supported with funds raised from donors.

Research-intensive

- Moving UCT from being “research-led” to “research-intensive”, by developing research management systems, mentoring and supporting emerging researchers, appointing or retaining senior retired scholars as mentors, revising policy on retirement of A-rated researchers, introducing policies and projects to promote open-access publication and discoverability, financial and organisational investment in postdoctoral programmes, growing numbers and quality of postgraduates, and creating new interdisciplinary programmes and institutes. The impact of all this was an 85% increase in the number of unique publications over the decade, a 136% increase (i.e. more than doubling) the number of publications that are co-authored internationally, a 50% increase in SARChI research chairs with UCT having a third of all such chairs in the country, and also a third of all A-rated scientists. We have also doubled the number of Post-Doctoral fellows to 355 in 2017. 18 start-up companies were spun out during the decade – with 11 of those in the last 4 years.

Taking teaching seriously

- Amending staff promotion criteria with a view to valorising teaching for all academic promotions, as well as creating a teaching track. We expanded recognition of outstanding teachers. This elevated the status of teaching and helped to raise commitment levels and quality, and helps retain lecturers whose forte is teaching rather than research.

Embedding social responsiveness

- Strengthening our commitment to social responsiveness by revising policy to refocus on engaged scholarship, introducing an annual report and awards to

match those in teaching and research; introducing the Knowledge Partners programme to inspire postgraduate research for community-based projects; inaugurating UCT Plus, which formally recognises a student's social responsiveness activities on the degree transcript; and introducing the optional Global Citizenship and leadership course available to all students and incorporated into some degree programmes.

- Four flagship Vice-Chancellor's Strategic Initiatives were established as university-wide, transdisciplinary research and action programmes to address key national challenges. These focus on climate change and development, poverty and inequality, safety and violence, and improvement in basic education.
- Strengthening our ties with local communities through the establishment of a small campus in Philippi; working with local schools to improve school education in Khayelitsha and Mitchells Plain; ongoing student support for schools and clinics through SHAWCO, Ubunye and others; the CityLab project in Cape Town and surrounds; dozens of community-based health projects such as the Perinatal Mental Health Project in Hannover Park, the Desmond Tutu HIV Centre in Masipumelelo, TB vaccine research in Worcester, and many more.

Innovation in higher education – leading the way

- Rising to the challenge of online learning technology with online qualifications, designing and delivering the first massive open online courses (MOOCs) at a South African university, rated among the best in the world; and implementing lecture capture facilities in most large classrooms, which allows for lectures to be recorded and put online, giving students 24/7 access to teaching for review. A few courses have also implemented a flipped classroom model with lectures delivered online backed up by face-to-face tutorials. There are now many online short courses which generate significant third-stream income and we have piloted online degree programmes.
- The establishment of the Graduate School of Development Policy and Practice has raised our profile with senior public managers in South Africa and across the continent by providing training programmes, thematic policy workshops and fellowships, and a new master's degree. With the blessing and support of the Nelson Mandela Foundation, this graduate school will soon become the Nelson Mandela School of Governance, and will in the future be housed in a custom-designed building which will also serve as a Centre of Memory honouring Nelson Mandela, located on Table Mountain in a position in relation to UCT upper campus that represents a counterpoint to the Rhodes Memorial.
- The creation of the Hasso Plattner Institute for Design Thinking (or d-school) – a sister institute to two other d-schools at Stanford and Potsdam

universities. This school too will soon have its own building on the lower campus funded by the Hasso Plattner Foundation.

Acknowledgements

Reflecting on these achievements is also an opportunity for me to pay tribute to the inspired leadership seen at many levels throughout UCT, our governing bodies, and to all the staff, students and stakeholders who have celebrated the exhilarating highs and grappled with the stressful lows that we, as a university community, have faced over the past 10 years. At the most senior level, these achievements belong to a team – the DVCs, deans, executive directors and Registrar. Those who played pivotal roles in counselling, guiding and advising me during my tenure are acknowledged individually in the appendix of the report.

Particularly important for me was building successful connections with global alumni generally, but especially with those black alumni who were previously not participating in or contributing to UCT. These alumni can be important role models for students, and I defended the establishment of the UCT Association of Black Alumni because I felt so strongly that the experiences of these past students are vital to learn from as we drive UCT's transformation forward. Today many of these black alumni are vocal participants in UCT debates and alumni chapters, putting forward candidates for election to the UCT Council and also becoming donors to the UCT.

The past 10 years of activity and progress would also not have been possible without the committed generosity of funders from across the world. I am extremely proud of the record levels of fundraising achieved together with our Development and Alumni Department – close to R3 billion during my tenure. We also boosted our bequest programme from just 30 known bequest commitments to more than 250.

These donations enable the university to fulfil its mission through scholarships, funding capital projects and special projects, supporting community outreach work, and advancing research through equipment, projects and posts for emerging scholars. This philanthropy has benefitted not just the university but the country and even the global community.

Students are, of course, the lifeblood of any university. The calibre of our students has been exceptional, and their achievements in the classroom, on the sports fields and in civil society continue to bring great credit to UCT.

UCT has navigated through a tough economic environment to maintain our capital programme and very generous financial aid programmes. In turn, these have enabled us never to turn away qualifying students who couldn't afford our fees. On the research front, we have built up the research office infrastructure, and a technology transfer office which has assisted our researchers to bring in ever-increasing grants.

As I take my leave I am content in the knowledge that in passing the baton to Prof Phakeng, her experience here over the last two years will ensure a seamless transition though no doubt she will bring significant changes, as she should – that is

why we limit the tenure of those in leadership positions. We have, in Prof Phakeng, an strong academic committed to research excellence, someone who is acutely tuned in to the nuances of institutional culture that cause alienation and can articulate them exquisitely which is the first step to creating a more inclusive climate. She is clear what she wants to achieve, and decisive and a wonderful public face for the institution. All this bodes well for the ability of UCT to implement its strategic goals.

I wish to thank Council for the opportunity to lead this institution and to extend my heartfelt gratitude for all they contribute to the university.

DR MAX PRICE
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