

X P Guma: Higher education in South Africa

Graduation address by Dr X P Guma, Deputy Governor of the South African Reserve Bank and Chairperson of Council, at the Cranefield College of Project and Programme Management, Pretoria, 23 March 2007.

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1. Introduction

- Principal of Cranefield College, Prof P. Steyn;
- Distinguished colleagues, members of the Governing Council of Cranefield College;
- Graduands;
- Parents and relatives of the graduands;
- Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome you to this our 14th graduation Ceremony: the first for 2007. This is worthy of mention if only because 2007 will be the year during which the higher education sector will first admit those school-leavers who have spent their entire school careers in a free and democratic South Africa.

Were we to use the American expression “Commencement” rather than graduation – with which many are more familiar – likely, we would note, immediately that the composition of the body of persons entering the higher education sector will be expected now better to reflect the demographics of our society – a path on which Cranefield College commenced from its inception: and which is evident in the evolving composition of its Council and its student’ enrolment.

2. A perspective

Before addressing the graduands, it may be appropriate for me to note a few pertinent issues. First, as Vice-Chancellor B. Pityana of UNISA has noted,

... In any society, ...prosperity presupposes a well-equipped and trained source of human capital, capable of facilitating the required development, and there can be no doubt that in that sense, higher education is a national resource.¹

In South Africa, moreover,

... there is now an urgent need for higher education institutions to respond in a more targeted fashion to national growth and development needs.²

We at Cranefield anticipated this requirement early on, constituting ourselves as a targeted “College of Project and Programme Management”.

Second, it does appear to be a justifiable concern, here and abroad that in general, we may be breeding a culture of mediocrity, where excellence and aspiration are no longer “cool” or fashionable: where too many of our young people love the high life but do not wish to work to attain it.

What is more worrying still is the fact that many of the young people who emerge from the school system, seem to be the worse for it. As an exasperated Professor Jansen has stated: –

... while some schools celebrate “a 100% pass in matric”, their graduates run around Pretoria East, beating up homeless and anonymous black citizens. Young people, who should be in school, run rampant through our society killing and maiming at random. ...

¹ B. Pityana (2007) “Increasing the Business Viability & Employment Growth in the Country – A Higher Education Perspective”, Keynote address, Skills Development Summit, Sandton, Johannesburg.

² *ibid.*

Growing numbers of school-age children begin to overpopulate the prison system....³

And yet it must be stressed, as Prof Jansen does, that it is not true that all young people suffer from these pathologies. We would point to the enormous drive towards aspiration and achievement of today's graduands, in counterpoise.

Viewed from an historical perspective, it is interesting to recall the views of John Maynard Keynes – one of the towering economists of the twentieth century – regarding “the triple evils of modern society”. The first evil, in Keynes' view – which has resonance in South Africa today – is the “vast enrichment of individuals out of proportion to any services rendered”.

He saw the second and third evils as being “the disappointment of expectations and difficulty of laying plans ahead”; and third “unemployment”. Re-stated in the elegant prose of Mervyn King, “Fat cats, short-termism, and the jobless society”, this in the United Kingdom, in 1923!⁴

We at Cranefield earn, honestly, that which is attributed to us; acknowledge the existence of and manage the short and the long-term; and attempt to make our modest contribution to the improvement of the conditions of our modern society through thorough training. Not here mediocrity: rather, the pursuit of excellence.

3. To o the graduands

For today's graduands, this ceremony is the culmination of systematic application to structured learning. Each one of you, no doubt, has had high moments and has suffered, at least occasionally, despair: – moments of absolute clarity and commitment to what you are doing interspersed, perhaps, with moments of confusion. Each of you has a story of personal achievement to tell: and tell it you must. Your achievement is commendable.

You graduate from a credible institution and your qualification is recognised here at home and internationally. South Africa has many things for which it could be grateful: today, one of the most important of these is your achievement. Use it wisely: even to confront the evils of modern society. As the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy wrote, in his poem Ithaka; which treats of the ancient evils of the Laistrygonians and Cyclops, angry Poseidon too: –

... don't be afraid of them:
you'll never find things like that on your way
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,
as long as a rare excitement
stirs your spirit and your body.⁵

4. Conclusion

One clown is alleged one day to have said to another: “Considering the cost of tuition, clothing and books, a person today, more than ever, has to be careful, very careful in his/her selection of parents!”.

Viewed from the perspective of parents, however, isn't it true that you age by about 20 years per child – between his/her 18th and 22nd year? Or was I unlucky?

To all, the mothers, fathers, children and other relatives of our graduands – however well you chose each other, and whatever have been your relative aging processes – we say, Congratulations indeed!

Savour this moment. Cherish it, for yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery. Today is reality.

³ Jansen, J (2006) “Teaching the Wrong stuff in a Dangerous World”, Teaching Times.

⁴ See Mervyn King (1998), Speech at the Employment Policy Institute's Fourth Annual Lecture: 1 December.

⁵ C.P. Cavafy (1911) in Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (1992) Collected Poems, Princeton University Press.