**Wits: the transcendence of latitudes**

*Professor Zeblon Vilakazi*

Madam Chancellor, Dr Judy Dlamini;

Former Chancellor and retired Deputy Chief Justice, Dikgang Moseneke;

Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, Dr Blade Nzimande;

Director General in the Presidency, Ms Phindile Baleni;

Chair of Council, Mr Isaac Shongwe;

Members of Council;

President of Convocation;

Fellow Vice-Chancellors and Rectors from fraternal institutions;

Members of Senate, the Senior Executive Team, and other University structures represented here today;

President of the Students’ Representative Council;

Students, staff, alumni and friends of the university joining us virtually;

My lovely wife Mary and the children, family and friends;

Distinguished Guests;

Ladies and Gentlemen;

I would like to dedicate this speech to my late parents, sister, and Kamo – I am sure that they would be brimming with pride at the occasion.

I want to thank all of you for joining us on this occasion as I symbolically take on the position of Vice-Chancellor and Principal of this august national and continental asset that is the University of the Witwatersrand. There will be some who will ask why we are holding this ceremony in the middle of a pandemic. The installation of the Vice-Chancellor is a significant event in the life of the university – not for the pomp and circumstance, but for the institutionalism. In times of disruption, we need strong institutions to remain steadfast and not buckle in the face of challenges. We remained strong during apartheid. We remained strong during the transition to democracy. And we will remain strong through the challenges we face today, just as we have done in the past.

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge my predecessors who have been the custodians of that institutional strength over the last 99 years; two of whom are here in person and virtually, namely Professors Nongxa and Habib respectively. In particular, I would like to thank Professor Habib whom I have worked with over the past seven years and I appreciate the carefully managed handover during the last six months of his tenure, which allowed for a seamless and exemplary transition.

Before I continue, I would like to reflect on the devastating fire that struck our sister university, the University of Cape Town, last week. Universities are treasure troves of knowledge that need to be protected. As we saw last week, this knowledge can be gone in a flash. But it can also be eroded over time if not carefully valued, guarded, and strengthened. It is why the strength of our public institutions, such as universities, is so important. UCT, like Wits, has survived many challenges due to its institutional strength and global excellence. I would like to convey on behalf of the entire Wits community our support as you rebuild.

Wits is home to over 35 000 students from diverse backgrounds but with the common goal of becoming a successful graduate of our university. The backbone of our university is the nearly 6 000 committed teaching, research, professional, joint, clinical and administrative staff who ensure that Wits remains at the leading edge of academic excellence. We host the highest concentration of nationally-funded Centres of Excellence in the country and have 30 South African Research Chairs. We have recently been ranked 12th in the *Times Higher Education* Emerging Economies University rankings and we are the highest ranked university on the continent by the prestigious Shanghai rankings and, more broadly, among the top 200 in the global research rankings. To put this in comparison to our peers in the Global North, we would be amongst the top 60 in the European Union and top 10 in both Canada and Australia.

Given that some of our competitors have several hundred years of history behind them, what we have achieved over the past 99 years is truly remarkable. I believe that the best is yet to come. I provide you with all these statistics to demonstrate what we have achieved as an institution in the past, and the solid foundations on which we will build our future. This is, indeed, a gravity-defying performance.

Like many others, I was shaped by this University and would not be standing where I am today without the values it instilled in me. We have helped shape global leaders, some of whom are now at the forefront of academic and scientific excellence in the response to the pandemic. We are also the proud alma mater of four Nobel Prize winners, including one of the world’s greatest leaders, Nelson Mandela. Wits has been ranked in the world’s top 100 universities for educating CEOs of Fortune 500 companies and is the university that produces the highest number of business leaders in South Africa. It is now my duty and privilege to lead this great institution through its next chapter.

From the outset, I cannot ignore the fact that I am taking on this position amidst a pandemic that we have not seen in over a century. Our world has fundamentally altered. However, with every challenge comes an opportunity to re-think how we do things. Wits has shown over the decades that we respond to challenges with innovative ideas and solutions whether it be in deep-level mining, public health, or addressing inequalities. We have always aspired for a better future. The pandemic provides the world, and this institution, with an opportunity to reimagine the future of our university.

The higher education landscape is changing rapidly, and we need to move with the times while remaining true to our core academic business of producing the next generation of leaders and knowledge that will have an impact on society. We need to be ready to adapt and embrace change in order to stay ahead of the curve. I do not speak of a bold vision for this University naively because I know that there are other challenges that we must deal with; but today’s challenges require bold vision and the institutional ability to deliver meaningful outcomes. Wits is ideally suited for the mission.

All my life, I have been inspired by great visionary leaders of prescience. I think one of the boldest and most daring visions was articulated by then President John F. Kennedy in 1962 when he said:

We choose to go to the Moon, we choose to go to the Moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win, and the others, too.

Kennedy’s speech was important not only for the vision but for the ‘other things’ he refers to. During that decade, America was going through internal convulsions with the culture wars, the civil rights movement, and four assassinations. By the time Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin landed on the moon and realised Kennedy’s vision, America had seen the escalation of the Vietnam War as a result of the Tet Offensive which brought the war to the television screens, the streets of America and college campuses. It is that goal that ushered the world’s first integrated computer that was used for the guidance, navigation, moon landing, docking and safe return to earth, and is now such an ubiquitous technology that we take for granted. But it was also the genuine moonshot, with one of the engineers explaining the Apollo mission like hitting a tennis ball over the roof and hoping it lands where planned. But look where we are now – just over a month ago, NASA landed its newest rover, called Perseverance, on Mars which is now sending us daily video updates on its exploration of the Martian terrains.

Today’s world seems to be polarising and facing unprecedented challenges. It needs brave, principled, formidable graduates from our institution, and others, to meet these challenges, to explore and navigate the future guided by the compasses of reason, factful-ness, and deep thought. And grounded in the principles of strong ethics and civic responsibility. That looks like a moonshot right now.

What I take from Kennedy’s bold statement, is that you do not usher in a vision in a moment of euphoria. You do it because the vision you are articulating is as important as the other challenges which must be overcome. Over the next few years, we will have to face the challenges of university funding and sustainability, adapting to the changing nature of the skills needed in the workplace, and addressing the digital divide that has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Wits as an institution is embedded in society, and we are hit by all the winds that buffet society. These challenges must not hold us back from aspiring to a better future. Rather, they should drive us forward to achieve the goals that we set out for ourselves. Moonshots, combined with perseverance, will open up new worlds of possibility.

It is time for Wits’ moonshot moment. It is time for perseverance.

We do not commit to these big ideas because they are impossible or moonshine. It requires us as a community in this University, in this city, in this country, and on this continent to aspire to what we can achieve. At the heart of this vision are the intellectual project and academic excellence. To shape our future, we should draw on our past – both its imperfections and its excellence. We should address the challenges of inequality that are right on our doorstep but also draw inspiration from the role we have played in fostering innovative solutions to the challenges we have faced as a country. Two years after the birth of this University a young Wits scholar, Raymond Dart, took on the dominant powers of the North in the study of human evolution and prevailed with the strength of the idea that the story of humanity, as told by the Taung child, has its locus here on the savannah grassland of the highveld.

Wits has always been ahead of the curve. We played a key role in the development of RADAR in the 1940s. We were the first university in this country to acquire a nuclear accelerator and a mainframe IBM computer. Wits has played a key role in the formation of leading civil society organisations such as the Treatment Action Campaign which came out of the Aids Law Project of the Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALS). It is this rich history that we should be proud of and leverage as inspiration for a brighter future.

Over the past few months, I have been engaging with students, staff, and alumni on the future of Wits. I have been inspired by the support for our vision. I want to reiterate that this is *our* vision because no vision can be achieved without the collective buy-in of those who need to make it happen. The support from the Wits community for our moonshot moment and the ideas that have been put forward to make this vision a reality have been overwhelming. I have listened to and read all the comments and ideas you have sent me over the past few months, and I appreciate the thought and consideration that you have put into how we can achieve this together.

Based on these conversations, there are three core areas that we will focus on as Wits transitions into its next century: developing excellent graduates who leave their mark on society; conducting world-class research and fostering innovation; and using our location in the economic heartland of Africa to lead from the Global South. These three pillars will need to be underpinned by a renewed commitment to the principles of Wits’ core values.

Producing excellent graduates is at the core of what we do. The next generation of leaders, not just for our country but for the world, will one day walk across this stage at their graduation. But this does not start and end once students enter the gates of Yale Road or Jorissen Street. It starts with supporting and inspiring those learners who want to come to our great University and ensuring that talented pupils at every kind of school anywhere in South Africa and beyond can benefit from the richness of our academic programme. It is about ensuring that those students find success at our university so that they can leverage their experience at Wits to make meaningful contributions to society.

The current technological accelerators have had a transformational impact on how we live, work, and learn and we now have to think about the future skills and knowledge systems that are needed to manage these exponentials. We must be at the forefront of developing graduates who will find solutions to the pressing problems of the 21st Century, some of which are still unknown. This will require us to further promote integration across disciplines and support continuous learning through online courses and flexible learning models. We must view this as an opportunity to harness digital transformation to be at the cutting-edge of excellence in teaching and learning but also to address how we overcome the digital divides of our society.

This University is unapologetically elite but not elitist. We will continue attracting the brightest students from all backgrounds who are determined and driven to succeed. We are a university that sees itself as a beacon of inclusivity and diversity. A student that comes to Wits, comes to be challenged in this Large Hadron Collider of ideas. Our graduates must be equipped with both the hard knowledge and soft skills required to make them globally competitive.

The core tradition of this University is to provide an environment where people from different ideologies, racial backgrounds, religions, cultures, and genders emerge equipped as global citizens able to navigate the complexities of this world and to contribute to addressing its challenges. These are citizens who break away from their narrow enclaves. Citizens who are beacons of what is possible. Citizens who can inspire their communities and the world. We must continue with this tradition and push beyond our latitude.

Our students come and go, Vice-Chancellors come and go, but the academy remains. In the words of the Gaudeamus Igitur “*Vivat academia*” – “The academy lives forever”. Wits is home to some of the best scholars in the world - nearly 30 of whom are considered by the National Research Foundation (NRF) as world leaders in their respective fields - as well as several globally-respected research entities. We are recognised as one of the premier centres of thought on the continent; and we have the chance, using our distinct expertise, location, and context, to lead from the perspective of the Global South. We must harness our local and global connections to conduct research that produces real innovation.

I believe that in the decades to come, we will have research that comes out of our university that will be Nobel Prize winning. That work starts now. Africa needs to produce its own scholars who understand and can leverage the local context to contribute original knowledge to the global academy. We must aspire to create the African academy of the future. It means nurturing our postgraduate students and early career academics to ensure that we create a pipeline for future global scholars. One of the main focus areas for the next few years will be on building this pipeline to ensure that we develop the next generation of scholars that both excel in their disciplines but also bring diverse backgrounds and knowledge to the global academy.

It is not only about producing knowledge, but also about harnessing that knowledge into innovative technologies, policies, and societal impact. With the financial difficulties facing the higher education sector around the globe, this is an opportunity to think through how we can use our research and innovation as a way to ensure financial sustainability of the intellectual project.

Our position in the economic heartland of this continent creates the perfect space to experiment and innovate. Wits is a microcosm of the society in which we live. Some of the major challenges facing the world such as inequality, migration, and public health, are right on our doorstep and we should use our knowledge, research, and expertise to address these issues.

Wits is, after all, a city university. We are as much a part of Johannesburg’s DNA as Johannesburg is a part of ours. We have the energy, strength and resilience of Africa’s greatest city. For almost 100 years, Wits has played a pivotal role in shaping our city and nation by addressing current challenges and innovating for our future.

Creating an ecosystem of knowledge generation, innovation, and entrepreneurship where our students and academics can thrive is key to turning Braamfontein and this City into a vibrant hub. Braamfontein must be a space that is the creative and innovative arc of Johannesburg and the Global South. If we do this, and we do it right, we will create a hub which will spawn Africa’s own tech companies that will grow and multiply to scale. Partnering with the City of Johannesburg, provincial government, and the business community is important to achieve this goal as we support each other towards the economic development of this country.

Beyond our city and country, we must also be a centre of excellence and resourceful solution for our continent. We must ensure that our continent plays a leading role in shaping knowledge production and fostering innovation, rather than being seen as a recipient of knowledge from other parts of the world. We have what it takes. We have the people, the drive, the resilience, the history to develop these big ideas. To quote a great leader to come from this University, Robert Sobukwe, who is now memorialised on this building:

The wheel of progress revolves relentlessly and all the nations of the world take their turn at the field-glass of human destiny. Africa will not retreat! Africa will not compromise! Africa will not relent! Africa will not equivocate! And she will be heard! Remember Africa!

We reflect the world, but we are African. It is time for us to take our turn at the field-glass of human destiny and make sure that Africa is heard in the global academy. Wits can do this.

Under my leadership, and leveraging our legacy as a leading university on the continent, Wits will be the place where the Global South and Global North connect. We can achieve this through building strategic partnerships across the public and private sectors and civil society, and reaching out beyond our borders, aligning with institutions with a shared passion for excellence.

In order to achieve all of these goals, we also need to get the basics right: we must foster collegiality and respect for each other and the environment; we must maintain a clean and safe campus; and we must ensure the delivery of academic, research and service excellence at all times. My engagement with staff over the past few months has shown that we all believe these principles are essential for the success of our academic project.

The eight Corinthian pillars which support the façade of the Great Hall represent the eight non-negotiable values of this University:

* Excellence;
* Leadership;
* Diversity;
* Collegiality;
* Integrity;
* Accountability;
* Academic freedom; and
* Social engagement.

To borrow the words of one of our professional staff members, these pillars are not fuzzy and clichéd concepts but core strengths of the University. If every member of the Wits community – whether staff, student, or alumnus – lives these values, then we will succeed. And to our alumni – new and old - Wits is your *alma mater,* loosely translated it means ‘our mother’. She is calling you to walk this journey with us, especially as we celebrate our centenary next year.

As I close, I would like to share a story of a child who in 1981, growing up in a dusty township east of Johannesburg watched as the Space Shuttle Columbia, the STS-1, took off until it was just a tiny speck of dust in the sky. That child was inspired to reach for the stars and transcend the latitude that apartheid imposed on him. This child found himself representing his country and continent at the CERN laboratories in Geneva, in what was the largest scientific experiment of its time. It is this child who, 40 years later, stands here to address you today as the 16th Vice-Chancellor and Principal of this great university – the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. Our mission at Wits is to be the place where thousands of highly-talented children from all backgrounds have the opportunity to strive for excellence and emerge as leaders.

Finally, I will once again turn to the lessons of history. Big goals are not achieved in a moment of plenty. One could argue that the greatest spurt of human genius, across many civilisations, happened in the period between around 500 and 400 BC; a period after the Greco-Persian Wars and start of the civil wars between the city states led by Sparta and Athens. During that *interbellum* the seeds of democracy were planted in Plato’s *Republic*; it was a period in which the philosophies of reason and deep thought were developed and reverberated through the works of Aristotle and others; the now fundamental idea of the citizen and the state emerged. It was an era of human creativity that spawned the plays of Aechylus, Euripides, Sophocles, and Aristophanes that have inspired us; the tragedies that have enthralled us to this day and the comics that were doing political parody about 2 400 years before our own Trevor Noah regaled us on the *Daily Show*. It was during that period of dire straits that great and controversial ideas were allowed to flourish.

Diamonds are created under conditions of great pressure. This pressure cooker called Wits will allow the flourishing of great ideas that will lead this continent into the era of innovation, of change, of growth; and a future brighter than a thousand suns.

For that to be realised, ladies and gentlemen, we need to think big and push beyond our imaginary frontiers in our quest to achieve this great transcendence of latitudes.

I thank you.