

Graduates have responsibilities

It is the time of year when thousands of students will graduate from South Africa's universities. Graduation ceremonies are special occasions for students, families and loved ones. Through them we recognise and celebrate our students, who have worked hard and long to acquire their higher qualifications. There is a fantastic achievement in the context of a university system that still struggles to realise the talents and potential of all our students.

Their success is also a testimony to the contributions of the university staff, who all contribute to creating an intellectual, social and physical environment in which students can develop and acquire knowledge, expertise and skills and succeed. In an all too patriarchal, sexist and abusive society, the women and mothers who graduate are likely to have had to overcome additional burdens and obstacles.

And let us spare a thought for the valiant families and guardians of those who graduate. Many will have endured considerable hardships to enable their loved ones to receive a university education and to graduate.

Those who graduate from our universities will become part of a very small section of the South African population that enjoys many advantages and privileges in our society.

They will have much greater prospects of securing employment and will earn substantially higher incomes than most other South Africans. They will also enjoy higher standards of living, many more doors will be open and many more of life's pleasures will be available to them than to their fellow citizens. As one witty graduate remarked, "The future is so bright I need a pair of shades."

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No one should begrudge our graduates their benefits or their successes in the years ahead; indeed, we should celebrate them.

Still, this season of graduations is a good time to ask whether a person's university education and qualification, paid for in large part by public funds, is solely for her/his private benefit. Or must it also contribute to the wider public good and have societal benefits?

In anyone's life a university graduation ceremony is a grand occasion. But in Xhosa, Zulu and Sotho culture, a graduation ceremony, *Ukuthweswa isidanga, ho apara purapura, umyeezane*, takes on especially profound significance.

With graduation, a graduate becomes a living symbol of hurdles overcome. S/he has made history, but is also on the threshold of making more history. The wrapping in a blanket in the Xhosa initiation ceremony symbolises that the graduate now takes on a new identity and a new mantle. And with it s/he has to enter a new covenant with the South African community and assume new and greater responsibilities.

How equipped are our graduates to assume these greater responsibilities? And what should be our expectations of them?

The recent racist incidents at the University of Free State make clear that the core purposes of our universities must also include the formation of critical intellects, the forging of social cohesion and the promotion of democratic citizenship. And that the knowledge, skills and competencies produced by universities must, as a previous

Minister of Education has argued, be embedded "within the broad set of ethical and moral values and principles that give meaning to human existence".

It is difficult to consider graduates to be highly educated if they fail to understand their responsibility to "respect, protect, promote and fulfil" the values of human dignity, and if they display no or little commitment to social justice and equality, the advancement of non-sexism and non-racism, and the human rights and freedoms that the South African Constitution proclaims.

It is the responsibility of universities to ensure that graduates leave not only with knowledge and professional expertise and skills, but also as enlightened, ethical, critical and compassionate citizens who are equipped to deal with our myriad challenges, including issues of race, gender, culture and identity.

The problem is not, as is often alleged, that we focus too much on race. The truth is that we give insufficient attention to race, gender, culture and identity.

Unless and until universities do that, and create critical yet safe and empathetic spaces for openly, passionately and knowledgeably confronting difficult issues, the rainbow nation, which some mistakenly believe we already are, will remain a tantalising but distant mirage.

And we will bequeath to our children and grandchildren challenging social issues that we should be boldly and creatively confronting now, in much the way we did to fashion our democracy.

In the *Algebra of Infinite Justice*, Arundhati Roy writes: "The only dream worth having ... is to dream that you will live while you're alive and only die when you're dead".

This, she says, means "to love. To be loved. To never get used to the

unspeakable violence and vulgar disparity of life around you. To respect strength, never power. Above all, to watch. To try and understand. To never look away".

We must hope that our graduates will "never look away", or "get used to" the coexistence of unbridled wealth and desperate and grinding poverty, great privileges and huge deprivation, unbound economic and social opportunities for some and the absence of opportunities for many others.

That, instead, our graduates will continuously ask: "How do I:

- Contribute to ridding our country and continent of unemployment, poverty, hunger, inequality, the abuse of power, Aids and other diseases;

- Counter racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia and intolerance of all kinds, and promote tolerance, the value of diversity, and the 'oneness of humanity'.

- Help create a caring and humane society, advance social justice, build a substantive democracy, assert a culture of human rights and ensure a vibrant civil society characterised by open, vigorous and critical public intellectual debate,

- Creatively and boldly make our young democracy and our economy and society so full of promise and potential, work for all South Africans."

A season to celebrate the achievements of our graduates; certainly. But also a season during which we must declare our expectation of them to put their immense capabilities to work in a way that all South Africans are able to enjoy full, decent, productive, rich and rewarding lives.

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