Empire State College Webinar in celebration of the Inauguration of
Dr. Merodie A. Hancock as the fourth President of Empire State College

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"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." – Nelson Mandela

Good afternoon. Thank you for the honor of participating in this Webinar in celebration of the inauguration of Dr. Merodie A. Hancock as the fourth President of Empire State College.

I wish President Hancock well as she steers Empire State College in addressing in principled and creative ways the considerable challenges that confront higher education institutions today. Certainly, leading a university today is one of the most taxing of leadership positions.

Ladies and gentlemen, Tatamkhulu Nelson Mandela implored: "Let there be justice for all. Let there be peace for all. Let there be work, bread, water and salt for all. Let each know that for each the body, the mind and the soul have been freed to fulfil themselves."

He reminded us that "to be free is…to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others" and that this was "the true test of our devotion to freedom". He emphasised "that none of us acting alone can achieve success. We must therefore act together as a united people… for the birth of a new world".

The fact is, as the poet Antjie Krog has commented, that, globally, in the United States and in South Africa, "around us today it is colder, more meagre, we are standing less anchored, less noticed, less loved and with less understanding of who we are".

Mandela, who was wont to remind us that he moved among us 'not as a prophet, but as a humble servant of the people', placed great emphasis on education. He observed that "education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world"; and that "education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mine worker can become the president of a mine, that a child of farm workers can become the president of a great nation".

In the context of the ravages of colonialism and apartheid on the education of black and working class South Africans, and the necessity for the formerly oppressed to equip themselves to lead, govern themselves and build a new constitutional democracy, it is understandable that Nelson Mandela laid great stress on literacy, reading and education.

Certainly, access to high quality education and higher education and meaningful opportunities to succeed creates the possibilities for the "daughter of a peasant", the "son of a mine worker" and a "child of farm workers" to rise above their parents station in life and carve out economically more salubrious lives. Still, dispassionate contemplation is necessary about the relationship between education and economic and social mobility and social change.

While it is widely-held that education is a critical instrument for social development and transformation, it may be "accorded (too) immense and unwarranted weight", especially when it is considered in isolation from the conditions outside education "which may either facilitate or block the effects" of education. (Wolpe and Unterhalter, 1991a:2-3).

Education is powerfully shaped by the economic and social structures of our societies. It is the object and outcome of ideological and political contestation between different social forces that accord it various and often diverse and even paradoxical social functions. It, thus, operates within a framework of both possibilities and *constraints*.

Not surprisingly, education plays a contradictory role. It simultaneously conserves and reproduces certain aspects of extant social, cultural and economic structures, relations and practices, while it possibly erodes and transforms other aspects of these structures, relations and practices.

For example, under certain circumstances education could be pivotal in eroding racism and different kinds of prejudices, and building respect and appreciation for difference and diversity – whether in terms of 'race', nationality, gender, sexual orientation, language or culture. Concomitantly, it could play no or little role in undermining class privileges or patriarchy or sexism, and may even reinforce these through its own institutional structure, culture and practices.

In a seminal article that analyzed the relationship between education and development and was tellingly sub-titled 'From the age of innocence to the age of scepticism', Hans Weiler argued: There is little evidence to suggest that education, even with a tremendous effort at reducing…its own internal disparities, is likely to have an appreciable impact on the achievement of greater distributive justice in the society at large, as long as that society is under the influence of a relatively intact alliance of economic wealth, social status and political power which is interested in preserving the status quo (1978:182).

This leads to my *first proposition*: Higher education holds the promise of contributing to social justice, economic and social development and democratic citizenship. Yet, this promise often remains unrealised and higher education instead becomes a powerful mechanism of social exclusion and injustice. The reason is that education is not an autonomous social force; it is a necessary condition of positive social change, but not a sufficient condition. If our concern is social justice and rich, rewarding and productive lives for all people, there have to be bold and purposeful social justice-oriented initiatives in other arenas of our societies if education is to contribute effectively to creating more just societies.

I mentioned earlier in passing the relationship between education and economic and social mobility. We frequently proclaim a commitment to social mobility: to people from historically and socially disadvantaged and marginalised social groups – the urban and rural working class, the unemployed, blacks, women, indigenous communities, Afro-Descendants and the like – being provided opportunities to enter occupations and professions that tend to be filled by, almost as a matter of birth right, those who are from wealthy and middle class backgrounds.

Facilitating social mobility is an important responsibility and function of higher education and universities. For much too long universities have, for a variety of reasons, provided access to mainly those from wealthy and middle class families and our doors have been largely closed to socially disadvantaged and marginalised social classes and groups.

Yet, formal equality and democracy are no guarantees of equity of access, opportunity and outcomes for subaltern social groups. It is precisely this reality that gives salience to the ideas of *social equity* and *active measures of redress* in higher education as necessary conditions for creating more equitable universities and societies.

Providing meaningful opportunities to socially disadvantaged and marginalised social groups to enter and succeed in higher education entails two things. First, we have to systematically identify and abolish all unjust structures, policies and practices at universities that discriminate and disadvantage people on the grounds of social class, 'race', ethnicity, gender, language, religion, disability and the like.

Second, we have to institute various measures of positive discrimination and empowerment, including academic transformations related to epistemological and ontological issues and curriculum, pedagogy and assessment; academic development initiatives; transformation of institutional cultures, and providing adequate financial support for talented students from subaltern social groups.

Fundamental here is taking teaching and learning seriously, activities which tend to be neglected and overshadowed by the supposedly more glamorous endeavour of research. The misguided naturalization of teaching and learning and their depiction as innate abilities or commonsense activities is untenable. We need much more rigorous theorization of teaching and learning and deep reflection on contextual realities, if we are to create meaningful opportunities for socially disadvantaged and marginalized social groups to succeed in higher education.

As a necessary consequence of the imperative of social justice, our students will possess increasingly diverse social and educational backgrounds and experiences. This "means they know different things and in different ways to 'traditional' student cohorts. We have to engage with these students not as deficient but as different. This calls for thinking deeply about teaching and learning" (Boughey, 2008). Being responsive means taking curriculum, pedagogy and assessment seriously. Curriculum is critical to equity of opportunity and outcomes and a

social justice agenda, with a responsive curriculum needing to address simultaneously "economic, cultural, disciplinary and learning-related" issues.

We have to recognize that while "academic language is no-one's mother tongue," the achievement of academic literacy is more readily attainable for some students than for other students. This requires giving attention to how students are supported to become academically literate.[i] The academy's 'ways of knowing' are based on particular conventions and practices; these are more foreign to some students than to others. Greater student diversity entails the need to re-think the privileging of certain 'ways of knowing'.

Many universities experience challenges related to the so-called 'under-preparedness' of students for higher learning. Here, there is "the danger of labeling, and thus pathologising, the students as underprepared", avoiding any "focus on the 'underpreparedness'" of universities and academics.[ii] Under-preparedness on the part of students, however, occurs "within an epistemic context that is in some way or another opaque or inaccessible to" them. It "is not some abstracted psychological condition" that students possess, "but is a relation between a familiar cultural context, which (they have) internalised, and the unfamiliar cultural and institutional context (a university environment), which (they have) not yet internalised. *All* students experience disadvantage when they enter into university learning practices, but some struggle more with it as a consequence of their specific learning histories" (Moll, 2005:11; emphasis in original).

If we do not take seriously the academic transformations that are required, we deny opportunities to people for no other reason than their social backgrounds. This is a tragic waste of the talents and potential of individuals from socially subaltern groups - from amongst who may be another Albert Einstein, Marie Curie, Angela Davis or Nelson Mandela. It also compromises democracy, which usually proclaims the promise of greater equality and a better life for all people.

However, and this is my *second proposition*, to confine higher education's role and responsibility to promoting mobility into middle class occupations and professions is to place much too modest and limited an expectation of higher education. It is also to reduce the importance of higher education to its economic and labour market functions. On both counts, we unduly restrict the value of higher education and denude it of its critical wider social roles and functions.

There are at least three wider issues with which universities must engage.

First, a four-fold development challenge confronts all societies: how do we pursue *economic development*, with greater *social equity*, in a way that is *environmentally sustainable*, and also extends and deepens *democracy* in our societies? And crucially, how do we do this *simultaneously* rather than sequentially or consecutively?

The question is how do universities engage proactively and actively with this significant four-fold challenge? What are the implications for the epistemic purposes of universities and the core purposes of teaching and learning, research and community engagement? Given our diverse and complex challenges, can we privilege the natural, medical and business sciences and engineering to the detriment of the arts, humanities and social sciences?

Second, universities have to contribute to forging a critical and democratic citizenship. Our taks is not only to produce capable professionals; our task is also "the arduous formation of a critical, creative and compassionate citizenry" (HESA, 2007:8). As the Indian Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore has put it "We may become powerful by *knowledge*, but we attain fullness by *sympathy*".

Martha Nussbaum argues that higher education is to be the "cultivation of humanity", "three capacities...are essential" (2006:5). The "first is the capacity for critical examination of oneself and one's traditions"; second is that students see themselves "as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern" – which necessitates knowledge and understanding of different cultures and "differences of gender, race, and sexuality" (ibid: 5, 6). Third, is "the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have" (Nussbaum, 2006: 6-7).

The contribution of higher education to democracy and citizenship is, however, not exhausted by the "cultivation of humanity". There are various ways that universities can through the pursuit of their core purposes contribute to the assertion and pursuit of ethical conduct, social and human rights, active democratic participation and critical citizenship.

Furthermore, universities can through their own ethos, structures, processes and practices serve as models for the respect, defence and promotion of human rights, democracy and democratic participation. It is important to not conceive higher education in purely political and instrumental terms for this may miss its vital cultural, expressive and symbolic contributions.

Third, our universities must proactively engage with our societies at the intellectual and cultural level and contribute to the development of a critical citizenry. This entails a cognitive praxis of social commentary and critique and the shaping of world views and ideas.

Beyond communicating with peer scientific communities, our universities have the responsibility, in the words of Stephen Jay Gould, to also "convey the power and beauty of science to the hearts and minds" of the general public. There is a "long and honourable tradition of popular presentation of science', and we should not make the 'mistake' of 'equating popularization with trivialization, cheapening, or inaccuracy" (Gould, 2006).

The issue of communicating beyond the confines of universities and scientific communities poses whether our universities and scholars engage sufficiently with the public and serve adequately as catalysts of critical public education and intellectual debate, as part of higher education's rationale of advancing the public good.

What is involved here is more than simply transmission of some established body of knowledge to users in the wider society, but a matter of the involvement of scholars in reflexive communication - an argumentative, critical and thoughtful public engagement that shapes the very constitution of knowledge (Delanty, 2001:154). Its purpose is human freedom, through continuously extending and deepening economic, political, social and cultural opportunities and rights, so that all may lead rich, productive and rewarding lives.

To return to Mandela's statement that "education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world", I have proposed that while indeed "the world cannot be transformed without education', education on its own "cannot transform the world" (cited in Chisholm, 2004:13). I have also proposed that if we are to go to beyond the occasional 'daughter of a peasant', 'son of a mine worker' and 'child of farm workers' entering a middle class occupation, significant transformations are required within and outside education. Finally, I have proposed that if education is to be liberating and "ennobling adventure for individuals, communities, nations, and the world at large", is to advance human dignity, solidarity and the public good, it must "transcend the edicts of market accountability and narrow commercial calculations and embrace the ethics of social accountability and an expansive humanism that will elevate and empower all …people" (Zeleza, 2005:54-55).

With the passing of Nelson Mandela, the world lost a great person. Our greatest tribute to him will be to contribute through higher education to "the birth of a new world"; to ensure "justice for all"; "peace for all"; "work, bread, water and salt for all". As educators and students, realizing his call on us to "live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others" should be our enduring monument to him.

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[i] Prof Sioux Mckenna of Rhodes University makes the point that "it's more a case of discipline specific literacy practices being more aligned to some (middle class) students' home and school literacy practices than to others. Race, gender and language do not correlate evenly to higher education success internationally….Even intelligence is not a consistently good correlate. But socio-economic status correlates to higher education success in all studies that take this into account. It's an indictment on our system that we systematically privilege the privileged" (personal communication, 2013).

[ii] My thanks to Dr Sue Southwood of Rhodes University for this important point.