

**Keynote Address at
St Joseph's Theological Institute's
Graduation 2009**

by

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A graduation ceremony is an event that marks change in our lives, the closing of one chapter and the opening of the next. It is a tangible and memorable way of marking achievement through hard work and fortitude, for many in the face of difficult and challenging personal and family circumstances. Through this celebration, we acknowledge and pay tribute to your achievements.

While signifying the successful completion of a particular phase in one's life, graduation ceremonies are also occasions that are filled with a sense of anticipation about the world that awaits each graduate.

What is the status of the world in which our graduates find themselves? Chief among our concerns about our current world is the global economic

recession. There are large -scale job losses affecting thousands of families. Government and business leaders across various countries are desperately discussing economic recovery plans in an effort to curtail further negative effects. In the midst of the global economic recession, South Africa is about to have a general election, one that is the most contested since the advent of our democracy.

What does this mean for higher education? This was a question posed in a recent international higher education publication. I was rather taken aback at the how the question was tackled in the article. I was disappointed that all the author did was to try to assess the impact on the budgets and fundraising efforts of universities. What I had hoped for was an article that examined questions regarding university curricula– is what is being taught and studied? What values are being conveyed and are these the values that we hope will build a better society?

It is regrettable that in the dominant discourse of today the emphasis tends to be more on the economic utilitarian role of higher education in producing scarce skills for the economy. There is no doubt that in the current information and technological age, there is high demand for certain technological and scientific skills. There is also ample evidence to support the call for the training of engineers and other related professionals. The need for countries, like South Africa to invest more in infrastructure and the upgrading thereof, to enable national social and economic development is clear. The consequences of the 2007 power outages brought home this point to all South Africans.

But, we also know that while the economy does require skills to design and construct infrastructure and generate new technologies, our developing society requires much more. The upward economic growth we experienced in the first fifteen years of our democracy is a reason to be proud but what we observed too, is that positive economic growth does not, by itself lead to poverty reduction or a better quality of life for all. Our rapidly changing society requires imagination and creative solutions to a diverse array of problems both technological and non-technological and very importantly, our society requires a fundamental shift in values and notions of good citizenship in order for us to reduce inequality, crime, violence and poverty.

The current global economic crisis compels us to deeply reflect upon moral and ethical issues after all, the current economic crisis is attributable to leadership behaviours motivated by the push for greater profits and personal gain without regard for ethics and morality. The majority of the executives and board members who took decisions to borrow money knowing that the likelihood of repayment was very slim, who made decisions to pay high bonuses when the company was evidently not in good financial shape are highly educated university graduates – some from the most highly regarded universities in the world!

What does this say about the ethics of our education?

Perhaps the lesson is that social development in the 21st century is not merely about profit or about technical skills. A World Bank Report published at the beginning of this century pointed out that participation in the knowledge economy is not merely a matter of more of the same, but also about a new set of human skills. There is an increasing realization that we

must also reconsider the qualitative or perhaps the 'softer' aspects of skills development in order to succeed individually and collectively in our rapidly changing world.

In response to these changes, curricula are being substantially revised in many countries around the world.

In many instances, the impetus for curriculum reform is driven by market imperatives. For example, American manufacturing has largely moved overseas and so have the markets. American companies forecast immense growth in rapidly modernizing countries such as China and India. So insofar as manufacturing is concerned, the thinking is that graduates need to understand the cultures of future customers in order to design products that will succeed in those markets.

But, market needs are not and should not be the sole driver of curriculum reform initiatives. There are other factors such as the growing gap between rich and poor, widespread protest, conflict and violence associated with rising poverty and general awareness of the threats of governance failures and of corruption. These social factors have also brought to the fore the need to rethink curricula – to go beyond narrowly defined professional and technical skills in order to contribute to the development of responsible citizenship.

While curriculum reform is an international issue, as we in South Africa give attention to the curriculum, it is imperative that we bear in mind the factors that differentiate South Africa from other national contexts. We must take

seriously the features that define us a society in development; features such as the wide imbalance of wealth distribution, inequality in access to basic services, the relative youth of our democratic institutions and the high levels of violence.

The relationship between institutions of higher learning and communities was the subject of a recent symposium convened by the Council on Higher Education. We focused on the concept of community engagement and the question of how universities through teaching and research can contribute to social and community development.

Institutions of higher learning have a significant impact in society through the students they teach. Educational attainment has been shown to be a significant effective lever for a government to increase social capital and social cohesion. Social capital encompasses factors such as employment rates, health indicators, teenage pregnancy and crime rates. Research comparing several countries has also found a positive and statistically significant correlation between tertiary education enrolment rates and indices such as the absence of corruption, rule of law and public administration quality.

The how and what we teach has a critical bearing on the nature of the society, which we wish to develop for South Africa. It is imperative that our institutions of higher education play a significant role in reflecting and promoting the public values to which we aspire. Institutions of higher learning can realize this role in four main ways: by embodying the values such as fairness, anti-discrimination, open debate and diversity in all

policies, systems and procedures, through continuous assessment of curriculum – the what and how of teaching and learning, through the dissemination and diffusion of its knowledge and expertise into our communities and very importantly, through the conduct of its leadership and of its graduates.

As we celebrate the achievements of the graduates today, I ask that we also take up the challenge of how higher education institutions through our selves, as graduates, teachers, professionals and leaders may enhance social consciousness so that as a society we may make choices that lead to a better way of living for all our communities.

Congratulations to all the graduates whose achievements we celebrate today. In recognising your achievements, I also wish to acknowledge the contribution of those who have supported you throughout your studies – your family, friends and of course, your lecturers. We also look forward to the contributions you will make to improve our communities and country as a whole.