

Address to the UWC graduation

17 March 2004

Trevor A Manuel, Minister of Finance

Chancellor

Vice Chancellor

Members of the Academic Staff

Graduates

Members of the wider community of the UWC

Dear Friends

Thank you for the opportunity to share with you in this wonderful evening of the celebration of achievement.

This is truly a great moment in the history of South Africa. It is a time to reflect on ten years of democracy, and acknowledge the immense contributions of so many to deliver freedom. It is also a time to reflect on our achievements of democracy against the objectives that we have set – “A better Life for All!”. But, it is a time to consider what remains undone, giving perspective to the challenge of this generation, both in South Africa and the world.

The greatest challenge that decision-makers across the world face is that there is an enormous mismatch between the rapid technological advancements and the number of entrants to the labour markets. Across the world, millions of job opportunities are shed as the rapid advances in information technology, engineering and biotechnology simplify production or cultivation. The financial

costs of these changes are monumental, resulting in greater concentrations of production and a rapid distribution of goods across sovereign borders. Capital, technology and goods flow across boundaries and borders, whereas labour is the only factor of production that is kept confined within sovereign borders.

As the competition for access to technology, capital and markets increases power relations are entrenched.

This has deepened the divide between the rich North and the poor South.

As Africans we do not want to be confined to being suppliers of our skills, mineral resources, limited savings and the providers of markets to the rich North. Ours is a battle to change the paradigm – our work for a rules based trading system in the World Trade Organisation, for representation and a voice in the World Bank and the IMF. Our endeavours towards NEPAD forms an integral part of a strategy to enlarge the gains of democracy.

The global challenges are accentuated in South Africa by the fact of our history – we start with a skew distribution of opportunities, skills and wealth within South Africa, and as a country competing with others, we start with huge deficits in our savings and skills levels. We must jealously guard against losing what is collectively ours, we must nurture the new opportunities and we must consciously and tirelessly work for change. Africa must enlarge the pool of her intellectual skills, nurture it, hone its skills and use it as part of a turnaround towards the African Century.

This is the context for our celebration this evening.

Graduates and members of this university community, this is where you play a role. You have succeeded in furthering your education, in obtaining a university degree and in advancing the human potential of our community. Countries and continents only succeed when people are able to rise up from adversity and

triumph in the pursuit of knowledge. You have done that, and today we are proud to celebrate your achievements.

You are a part of the movement to correct the imbalances in the world today and while this is a formidable challenge, it should not scare you. As young graduates, you probably do not want to hear that you are part of a bigger game – well, you are. Less than 8,4 per cent of the citizens of our country complete a university degree. An even smaller proportion of black people obtain a tertiary qualification. Our economy will only grow if we increase the skills base of our country. We can only create jobs and put bread on peoples' tables if we have an educated population. And, yes, the graduates here this evening are part of the brains trust that we need to take us further and build this country.

Societies progress when the young are able to get a better education than their parents; when they are able to use that education to obtain a higher standard of living. Societies progress when these efforts are conscious. Social progress depends on you translating your education into a brighter future for you and your community.

The institution that played no small part in your success that we celebrate today deserves mention too. Universities and technikons are playing an invaluable role in advancing the intellectual potential of our country. Our tertiary institutions are going through a turbulent period in their history. The process of restructuring of our higher education institutions is not an easy one. Many are apprehensive about the changes underway.

While I understand these apprehensions, creating a sound higher education system, free of the baggage of our past, able to produce high quality graduates, is an objective worth making sacrifices for. Our higher education institutions play a gigantic role in developing our human capital potential. Without these institutions, we will not be able to overcome the odds that are stacked against us,

we will not be able to lift South Africa, and our continent, out of the pervasive poverty.

I pay tribute to the esteemed members of this university today. Not only do you produce the intellectual capital our country needs, but you take people who, in the main, come from poor backgrounds, from cold, hard realities; and you produce graduates out of them. This is not an easy task and I salute you for this achievement. Young kids from the Cape Flats or the rural Transkei hinterland dream about passing through such an institution. You, here at this university, make those dreams a reality.

Regrettably, most South African graduates relate to their alma mater as a blur, a portal that had to be passed through on the way to somewhere else. Yet, a dynamic relationship with an institution such as the University of the Western Cape allows for the honing of skills. The relationships between business leaders and tertiary education centres are essential for economic advancement.

This relationship is important for two reasons . Firstly, it allows universities to keep up to date with what is happening in public policy and the business world. This strengthens the university and keeps it in touch with good practice, improving the quality of education. Secondly, by graduates keeping in touch with their universities, they can keep up to date with cutting edge developments on a global scale. The relationship between universities and their *alumni* play this crucial role of absorbing the newest technologies and disseminating it into the community. I appeal to you not to lose sight of the need for on-going learning for yourselves and for the university throughout your life. We need to give meaning to the concept of 'life-long learning'.

I know there is some nervousness and trepidation among our graduates today. There is anxiousness about the future. 'Will I get a good job?' Will I be able to work for a company that values my contribution?' Am I adequately equipped to

make a contribution?' These anxieties are natural. Every single graduate, whether he or she has a job lined up or is still searching will have these feelings of insecurity. This is perfectly natural. Don't panic. You are graduating at a unique moment in history. We are about to celebrate ten years of democracy. Today, we have a growing economy, a shortage of skilled labour, rising employment, well managed public finances, social stability and the absence of political violence, regular elections, freedom to work in the field of your choice and access to a global economy. Confidence in our economy and in our future has never been higher. It is a great time to enter the job market .

In conclusion, let me remind you, as you prosper and develop bright futures, as I am positive you will, to remember to give back to your communities, remember to support the young left behind in your neighbourhoods who are not so fortunate. It is very easy to turn a blind eye and say 'its Government's responsibility'. It is just as much your responsibility to uplift the communities that you come from.

Best wishes ladies and gentlemen. You have seen the fruits of your hard work, the many hours of revision, the many late nights bent over your books, the many, many hours in front of computer screens. Your hard work has paid off. Congratulations on your sterling achievements, you deserve all the accolades that you will get tonight and in the future. We are all proud of you. Success is a consequence of hard work.

In the handing out of accolades, we often forget the sacrifices that parents and loved ones make to put their family members through a university education. As many of the parents sitting in the audience tonight will bear testimony, there are many hidden costs to having a child in a university. This tribute tonight and the honours conferred, go as much to you for your sacrifices, as they do to your children for their achievements. We all owe a debt of gratitude to you.

Thank you.