

Chancellor's Address
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Delivered at a graduation ceremony on 12 April 2022

Madam acting vice-chancellor, colleagues, distinguished guests and graduands:

Today, you are graduands. This is a status that will not last for very long, for once you step out of this hall you will be graduates. This small difference in pronunciation is something that could be better explained by one of my colleagues in the Classical Languages department. It all has to do with the magic of Latin conjugation and declination. A graduand is someone who is currently receiving his degree. A graduate is one who has already received it.

Words like “graduate” and “graduation” all come from the old Latin word *gradus*, meaning a step. So this occasion is a step up the ladder, a stepping-stone to something bigger and better. But let it not be your last step. Even if you are here to receive a PhD, the task of learning never ends. You may never be at a ceremony like this again to receive a piece of paper certifying your achievements, but I hope that what you have learned from us, and with us, are skills that will enable you to find, analyse and operationalize the flood of information that will wash over you in the years ahead.

What is this thing called a university, which you have been a member of for three years or more as students? Is it as old as civilization itself, even as old as humanity itself, or is it a recent invention?

Let's start with Unisa. How old is Unisa? This is not the easy question it seems to be. Unisa as we know it today started in 1946, when it first started as a Distance Education University. But it already existed. The name “University of South Africa” dates back to 1916, when legislation established it as an umbrella organisation that spawned a number of campuses, each of which is now an independent university. So the year 2026 will be both our 60th and our 110th anniversary.

But the 1916 legislation did not actually create a new institution. It renamed an existing one, called the University of the Cape of Good Hope, which had existed since 1873 as a filtering mechanism, holding admission examination on behalf of Cambridge and Oxford. So the year 2023 will also be our 150th anniversary. It all depends on when you start counting. If we want to emphasize our heritage, we can say that we are the oldest university in South Africa, founded in 1873. But when we want to emphasize how young-at-heart and modern we are, we say that we were founded in 1946, and soon, we will be able to argue that the transition from printed material to fully online education represents yet another re-founding of the university. At Unisa, we have lots of excuses to throw a party!

Incidentally, that date of 1873 demonstrates the low esteem South Africa had in the eyes of the colonizing powers. Two hundred and twenty-one years had passed since 1652 before either the Dutch or the British overlords thought it a good idea to establish some kind of university structure in South Africa, and another forty-three years would pass before the first of the University of the Cape of Good Hope's colleges became independent universities. Those, by the way, were UCT and Stellenbosch, in the same year we first became known as the University of South Africa.

By way of comparison, in North America, Harvard University was founded in 1636, just sixteen years after the initial wave of English colonization in the area. It is not even the oldest university in North America. That would be the Royal and Pontifical University of Mexico, founded in 1551. South America does it one better. St Thomas Aquinas University in what is now the Dominican Republic was founded in 1538. To put that date in perspective, Christopher Columbus was still alive.

In Australia, the university of Sydney was only established in 1850, but keep in mind that the colonization of that land did not start until 1778, and its transition from a penal colony to a modern society only really started in 1810. So the general pattern is that European colonizers established universities within half a century. Even the Philippines gained a university within half a century of its colonisation. This seems to be the case everywhere except in South Africa, where we had to wait for over two centuries. We can legitimately ask: what on earth did the colonial powers have against us?

And yes, let us get rid of the elephant in the room. The university as we know it today is a European development, brought to us by colonialism. The robes we are wearing are based on robes worn by medieval clerics, and those were themselves based on robes worn in the Late Roman Empire. The whole vocabulary of universities worldwide, words like “professor”, “doctor”, “graduation” and so on, date back to the Middle Ages, and specifically to the cathedral schools that developed into universities in Medieval Europe. There is an exception, though, and we will get to that.

So let’s go to Europe. A few years ago, I attended a conference at Oxford University. The venue was a small room inside Oxford Cathedral. Inside the room, you can see a plaque declaring that the well known British charitable organisation Oxfam was founded there in 1942. But the room is much older. It was the site of the original library of Oxford University, since an unknown date in the early twelfth century. I don’t believe in ghosts, but I must admit that giving my paper in a space that had been used for academic purposes for nine hundred years was an overwhelming experience.

Oxford is not the oldest European university, though. That would be the University of Bologna, where teaching began in the year 1088. At least the teaching of secular subjects. Long before that, Bologna Cathedral had been a seminary, training priests and church officials.

Where did the Europeans get the idea to transform their cathedral schools into universities? Did they come up with it all by themselves, simultaneously across a whole continent, or was there something else, something older on which they could model their new invention?

There were universities in Muslim North Africa. They didn’t use the word “university”, of course, and they had grown out of religious schools, *madrassas*, just as the European universities later evolved from Cathedral schools. But yes, besides Quranic studies, they offered mathematics, law and astronomy. These institutions are so old that giving a formal founding date involves inspired guesswork, but Ez-Zitouna University in Tunisia is regarded as the oldest, having been in continuous operation since the year 737, just 120 years after the start of the Islamic calendar. It is closely followed by institutions in Morocco, Egypt and Mali. What’s more, they are all still in operation. Names have changed, venues have changed, but these ancient African institutions endure after thirteen centuries of scholarship.

In these Muslim schools which were all in hot countries, the custom was for the teacher to sit on a chair, while the students sat respectfully on the ground. Believe it or not, even today the lowest tier of university management is called “Chair of Department”. This is where the term comes from. In chilly European universities, the students failed to see the wisdom of this practice and demanded chairs to sit on as well.

Have we reached the end? Can we confidently declare that the university originated in Africa? Perhaps, if we are unwilling to stretch the meaning of the word “university” any further. But let’s do that anyway.

Consider Nalanda, the first Indian institution worthy of the name “university”. It was primarily a training centre for Buddhist monks, situated between the cities Rajagriha and Pataliputra, in India.

The doctrines of six major schools of Buddhism were taught there from 427 to 1197, but also subjects like grammar, logic and medicine.

In the year 258, a centre for Confucian learning was established by Emperor Jing of Wu. It survived dynastic rises and falls, wars, famines and foreign occupations, its direct descendant is known today as Nanjing University.

And then, finally, there was the Academy. About 1.5 kilometres north of Athens there was a grove of olive trees named after Akademos, a minor figure in Greek mythology. The philosopher Plato inherited it at the age of thirty and started to use the place for philosophical discussions. Around the year 387 BC he formally named it as a school of philosophy. We know it today as the Platonic Academy, and it would function as the equivalent of a university. Plato's most famous pupil Aristotle never took it over: instead he established his own school called the Lyceum, another term that survives today, though it is more popular in other languages than in English.

The destruction of the Platonic Academy in the Mithridatic wars in 86 BC meant the end of the original Academy. A Neoplatonic Academy was established five hundred years later. It would exist for over a century, until it was closed down by the Roman emperor Justinian in 529.

What are we to make of all this? Who actually invented the university?

Nobody did. And everybody did. Like war, like commerce, higher learning is a universal social phenomenon. When a society reaches a certain level of development, of organisation, then a university, or something very much like it by another name, becomes a necessity, a void that will be filled eventually. In the end, the university was invented everywhere. The specific form it has taken today is just a blip on the radar. Come back in a thousand years and the university will no doubt look very different. But there will be universities.

And so here you are today, waiting for me to finish so you can get your degree and get out into the wide world. But we are not alone. You are the heirs of twenty-five centuries of tertiary education, academic work, and social awareness. Metaphorically speaking, the spirits of all those who came before us are also in the hall, satisfied that one more generation has taken on the challenge. They challenge us to take it even further. No pressure.

And so I congratulate you on getting your degree today. But I will not congratulate you too much. For as Churchill once said in a totally different context, this is not the end, not even the beginning of the end. It is just the end of the beginning.