

**Keynote – Prof Narend Baijnath**  
**UFS – PhD Passing Out Celebration**  
**SARCHI Chair in Higher Education and Human Development Research Group**  
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I would like to begin by conveying my greetings to all present. I thank Prof Walker warmly for the invitation and the honour of addressing you today, and the opportunity to share a few reflections of my own my journey. In doing so, I acknowledge that while I stand in the twilight of my career, and many of you on the launchpad of your own, the trajectories we each follow are quite unique, as the testimony of the graduandi illuminate. So, I am very happy to share a little of my own experiences and some of the lessons I have learned.

Before I do so, let me convey my warmest congratulations to those graduating with their PhDs today. It is a mighty achievement to reach this milestone. Only those who have completed the journey or who are currently embarked upon it will fully understand the momentousness of this occasion. It marks the highpoint of arrival, and confers a licence on the PhD graduate to practise as a recognized scholar. Each will deserve every bit of the newfound respect. Your voice will be heard more attentively, even with some reverence. Your opinions will be solicited and valued in hitherto unimagined ways. Increasingly you will be recognized as the go-to expert in your field, and job offers may even roll in.

Looking back, while I do acknowledge that adversity and struggle may build character and fuel perseverance, it is often the largesse and generosity of others that makes the difference between whether you realize your full potential or not, whether you can take up an opportunity or not. I was the first in my entire family to go to university, and only the third of my generation from my rural community, depending on where one draws the boundaries. I look back with enormous gratitude to a mother who valued education above all else, making sure that my needs were provided for as a priority before attending to others of the family. My elder brother dropped out of school to earn a living and support the family while playing an enormous role in funding my undergraduate studies.

Local community members pitched in to cover university fees and the cost of books when times were tough, and never asked to be repaid. When I completed my UG studies and began earning a living, I was able to contribute to funding my younger brother through university, and when he completed his studies, he funded the one younger than him. That was how three of my siblings were able to attain university degrees, aside from myself.

Today, getting to and through university is the daily struggle of many of our youth, desperate to escape poverty, and fulfil their dreams. They bristle with potential, are hardworking and focused, and hungry for success. Even though many more funding opportunities exist today that were non-existent back then, the struggle to escape poverty and disadvantage persists for many. What I have learned from the experience is not to be

captive to the past, nor to wallow in self-pity and victimhood, or to dwell on the woefulness of one's circumstances. Success and progress are determined by one's personal drive - despite adversity and obstacles. They are attributable to the amount of effort put in to rising above one's the circumstances; in utilizing opportunities that are abundant and available for those willing to make the journey. They require receptiveness to the generosity and commitment of the many who are willing to support you along your journey.

My own career in academe started with my appointment as a junior lecturer at UCT following my completion of a Master's degree. I began work in the field of academic development. A few years later, I secured a position at UWC in the Academic Development Centre where I joined a team of several young scholars and practitioners who were equally new to the field. Importantly, we came under the intellectual leadership and guidance of Prof Walker and Ms. Nasima Badsha, key leaders in the ADC.

As novice researchers without any track record and experience, Prof Walker played a critical role in inducting us into the rigours of scholarship, critiquing our work, providing opportunities for, and guiding us to our first publications, and our first international conference presentation at the American Educational Research Association. She was a great role model then of a dedicated, hard-working scholar, playing a spontaneous and generous mentoring role to novice scholars – as she has demonstrably continued to do over her career. I, together with many others, remain grateful and indebted to her and others of her calibre for their critical influences and guidance on our early careers. An important lesson I learned from Prof Walker is to always make time to assist and mentor those who need it. So, as you become more established and recognized as experts in your careers, I urge you not to lose sight of the inductive or mentoring role needed for the next generation of scholars.

After several years in the ADC, where I was supported to register for and complete my PhD, I was all poised to advance more decisively in my career as a scholar with its completion. I had barely handed in my thesis when I was approached by the DVC academic at UWC, Prof Colin Bundy, to head up the Academic Planning Unit there. He was already a formidable scholar and renowned academic leader, and I jumped at the chance. It was a time of great opportunity. I learned a lot and developed tremendously in the role that was geared less towards scholarship and more towards executive management, policy and planning related issues. After less than three years in it, I was offered a deanship at the then Technikon SA – incorporated into the UNISA of today after the mergers and restructuring in higher education that took place from 2000.

While these institutional positions led to great influence, recognition and satisfaction in the work, the enduring regret I had was not spending at least a few years in dedicated scholarly work. So, while I did attempt throughout my career to try to publish at least one piece annually, this came at tremendous cost – slogging after hours, utilizing fragments of time that I could dedicate to a particular project, and at times neglecting my family.

The outputs were also eclectic, responding to the issues of contemporary relevance – sometimes related to language education, at others to academic development, sometimes policy analysis, at yet others on internationalization or development issues. The drawback of such an eclectic approach is that like a rolling stone that gathers no moss, you ultimately find that your work does not develop any depth or gravitas in a particular field.

Consequently, the work does not garner the authority which is critical for peer recognition of your expertise in a particular field, even though you may attract recognition for your capabilities and intellect in other ways.

One of my early experiences as a dean was to manage the closure of a department, that was not viable. I marveled at the adeptness of the departmental leadership at playing the system – producing one new turnaround plan every year to 18 months but having gone 3-4 years without any implementation. When brought under scrutiny and required to account again, a solemn promise was made to produce a new turnaround plan in six months' time. What struck me was that the HoD basked in the glory of the title of Dr, but when I undertook a review of skills and capabilities in the department, I discovered that the HoD had not published one piece of work in 20 years – yet strutted around insisting on being called Dr. During my career, I have encountered several such others.

You will discover that it is not enough to merely have the title. It may carry you for a while, but not far. The PhD provides a training to produce knowledge. For the title to be worthy, the holder must demonstrably be a knowledge producer. The better the quality and consistency of your work in the future, the greater the number of opportunities that will arise for you to reach ever loftier heights, to utilize your expertise and knowledge to tackle the pressing challenges and questions that confront our society and humanity, to attain accolades, to build a reputation locally and globally, and to enjoy the rewards of a successful and fulfilling career. Moreover, an object lesson in this experience is one of academic integrity. If you work at a university, you will enjoy enormous freedom and autonomy. Your obligation is to value the freedom and do what is necessary to fulfil your responsibilities. Those who slack off and put in sub-optimal efforts begin to look for avenues of escape, for obstacles, and engage in blame-mongering, amongst others. It is the effort and the quality thereof that you put in while no one is observing that matters the most; not the number of hours you are present in the office.

If you are good at what you do, your reputation will precede you and the jobs will come looking for you, as I have experienced. I advise not to job hop. Do the job you have well and the next one will come looking for you. Recognition comes from having strong networks, and building a reputation for rigour, thoughtfulness, depth, and quality in your work.

It is vitally important to subject your work to scrutiny – don't hesitate to call on critical friends in your network. If you let the flaws in your work be exposed for the first time on a public platform, the damage is most often irreversible. The value of critical and honest, penetrating feedback cannot be overestimated. Being open to and responding to such feedback,

unpalatable as it might be, will do more for your development and advancement than years of learning and plodding on your own.

There are many other lessons I can share with you but time does not allow me to elaborate on any of them in detail. Let me reflect briefly on a few.

Confidence comes from thorough preparation and careful crafting of what you want to convey.

Be alert for leaders and peers who stand out and are worthy of emulating. Watch them closely, learn how they lead, influence, and relate to people. Observe how they conduct themselves, how they respond to different situations, how they communicate, how they deal with conflictual situations, how they empower others, and what their work habits are. Study how people respond to them and figure out why. Seek their counsel and listen attentively to their advice. There is an enormous amount to be learned from the good example of accomplished peers.

It is very important to know when you should speak and when you should remain silent. There is much pressure on you to be vocal especially when you are now a recognized expert. But speak only when you have thought something through and have something valuable or useful to say. Expressing half-baked ideas or loose thoughts will only reinforce the idea with others of superficiality or a lack of intellectual rigour.

Organizations are generally places full of gossip and politics. While politics are important, too often it is the mediocre and unaccomplished who find refuge in these. Guard against this and maintain a professional demeanor always. Stay above or outside these for your peace of mind. You can have good capabilities but your reputation can be blemished by your being perceived as the local gossip or as a political operator. Career advancement made through politicking will most likely lead you to a quick career dead-end.

A lesson I learned from Prof Barney Pityana, who was VC at Unisa, and under whose leadership I served for ten years, taught me not to be threatened by someone who is better than you. In leadership – recruiting the best and the most capable will serve you and the organization far better than finding only people you are comfortable with, not threatened by, who are meek, or who are not likely to be critical of you.

Be mindful that you will build your reputation on the quality of your work and contributions. Most leaders know that you could not have learned or contributed much in a role if you have spent only a year or two in it. I have learned over many years not to shortlist anyone who has a CV reflecting a series of jobs of short duration. There have been many promising candidates that I have not shortlisted because of this in the dozens of appointments I have made, many at very senior levels. So, with this kind of track record, you won't even make it through the door with most recruiters. The question which arises in the process is: if we

appoint this person, will he or she not immediately be looking for the next opportunity using our organization as a stepping stone?

A solid amount of time in a job – at least 3 years I would say, to around 5-6 years, unless it is an academic role, gives you time to get in-depth knowledge of the job, then to make a meaningful contribution to it, and to develop your own capabilities further so that you can take these to your next job. Recruiters know this. You should too.

Someone once said that you will get your first job because of your qualifications but will keep your last job because of your people skills. The short lesson is – be nice – not only to those whose favour or patronage you seek or look up to, but to people at all levels, and even in the most modest of roles. You would be surprised at how perceptions and reputations are influenced informally at all levels of an organization.

If you haven't already, you will experience that the only constant is change. The world is ever-changing; technology is changing the world. Several public intellectuals and commentators have dubbed the period we are currently in as the 4<sup>th</sup> Industrial Revolution. Each of us needs to be well read and alert to how things are changing, and what is driving the change. Only in this way will you be able to identify new opportunities and challenges, as well as the new skills and capabilities required, long before they become common knowledge. By then it will be too late to be of any advantage.

Universities too are changing. They are not the exclusive place or institution where knowledge is being generated, nor the only avenue through which it is being disseminated, or where skills and capacities are developed. Evolving technology will provide innovative ways in which we will be able to do even more sophisticated analysis, gather and mine hitherto unimagined amounts of data, and disseminate the knowledge we produce globally. We all must be demonstrably competent in the use of these technologies – not just Microsoft Word and PowerPoint.

It is also important to give thought to how the knowledge you produce is made available publicly. There are ethical and political choices about this – the central dilemma being whether knowledge produced and funded by the public purse is placed behind the paywall of a commercial publisher; whether it is available freely in an open journal; or through creative commons licensing.

Finally, I hope that after a rewarding and illustrious career, your aspirations and dreams are fulfilled, and you look back on your working life as having been a force for good, for greater social justice, for a more equitable society overall, and that some of the intractable challenges of our time were addressed through your own knowledge contributions.

Then, I believe, you could feel truly fulfilled and satisfied.

I wish you well on your journey and thank you.