

Address by Dr Martin Hinoul on the occasion of the graduation ceremony of the Faculty of Engineering and the acceptance of his Honorary Doctorate Degree in the Faculty of Engineering.

Vice Chancellor Professor du Pré
Professors
Friends, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen
Dear Students

It is a profound honour for me to receive today this “prestigious” Honorary Doctorate Degree at the Faculty of Engineering at the Durban University of Technology, in this beautiful city of Durban , in this truly amazing country: South Africa.

Prof du Pré, allow me to express my sincere gratitude that you have bestowed upon me the honour of this prestigious degree.

It is probably not a coincidence to receive this honorary doctorate degree during the Graduation Ceremony of the Faculty of Engineering of the class of 2009.

Indeed, today 287 students will receive their diploma from this university. Today they will turn a page in their lives, and as of tomorrow they will take their first steps in the “real World”: looking for, or starting a new job or pursuing further academic interests. The real World is exciting, but challenging, and 2009 sure is a challenging time, you may believe me.

Recently, I read an interesting article in “the Economist” entitled “Global Heroes”. The article referred to a meeting held in Mumbai- India in December last year, only three weeks after the terrorist attacks in Mumbai and amidst the worst global recession since the 1930’s. Seventeen hundred bright and young Indians gathered in a hotel in Bangalore for a conference on entrepreneurship. As you are probably aware, the Bangalore region, also known as “the Electronic City”, has become one of the most important knowledge economy regions in India. The 1700 young entrepreneurs were captivated, listening to the stories told by great Indian business heroes, their role models: “world champions” in entrepreneuring. The conference was such an overwhelming success that a huge tent was needed to accommodate all participants. These young aspiring entrepreneurs did not just want to strike it rich, they wanted to play their part in forging a new India.

Speaker after speaker praised entrepreneurship as a powerful force for doing good as well as doing well.

Indeed, a country like India with more than a billion people, clearly witnesses the globalisation of entrepreneurship. They realise that the competitive stakes are rising for everyone and they strongly believe that it is no longer a privilege that belongs to the rich countries only.

Today, entrepreneurs can come from almost anywhere: London, New York, Bangalore, and Shanghai. But they may just as well be from Durban and other great cities in South Africa. South Africa remains determined to excel as a leading economic region in Africa. Therefore South Africa’s economic focus remains firmly on boosting growth and investment to create new jobs. And thus we need entrepreneurs. We thus need you!

Current communication technology and its relatively low cost have been detrimental in the globalisation of the world economies. Thanks to this (r)evolution, young entrepreneurs from anywhere in the world can reach global markets, today, from the day they start their first job! In front of you stands a man who has been fortunate enough to have observed this phenomenon for the last three decades from a very privileged perspective.

Indeed I was rather lucky to be at the right time, and at the right places where history was being made in entrepreneurship.

All over the world, I have met with numerous young entrepreneurs, and continue to do so today. I studied, lived and worked in California at the time when people like Steve Jobs launched Apple computer, when Gordon Moore and Andy Grove set up Intel and when John Chambers setting up Cisco. I remember Bill Gates starting in Albuquerque and moving to Seattle to create Microsoft. I saw Larry Page and Sergey Brin, two young kids, setting up Google and Pierre Omidar, a young entrepreneur from Paris, setting up e Bay. The list goes on, in biotech, for example, we encountered brilliant entrepreneurs like David Goeddel and Bob Swanson who founded Genentech and the famous George Rathman who started Amgen. Today there are no less than 5000 biotech companies worldwide.

I met many of these entrepreneurs: “bigger than life” heroes, role models... Nevertheless, ordinary people like you and me.

In 1998 after more than twenty years observing this phenomenon in the United States the vice chancellor of the university of Leuven (my own Alma Mater) asked me to return and lead the Leuven University transfer cell as their business development manager.

With a couple of bright people we started to commercialise or valorise the technology in the laboratories of our university.

Our formula would prove to be very successful.

Last year KU Leuven R&D received the IPTEC price ,the International Technology Transfer Award or the price for the best transfer cell of the year 2008.

Indeed today we spin off 6 to 8 new companies, on a yearly basis and deliver 100 million Euro's (1200 million Rand) in contract research. Each year we file no less than 100 new patents. This makes that in Leuven, a rather small region with only 90.000 people, we now house more than 100 spin off companies and have also attracted hundreds of other companies. Vice Chancellor du Pré and professor Prinsloo visited us a couple of times and witnessed what we realized with our team over the years.

To sustain our growth, our model today looks at a much broader region, namely the triangle Eindhoven (in the Netherlands), Leuven (in Belgium) and Aachen (in Germany). We call this region with roughly 6 million people, the “ELAT triangle”.

Now, what can you all learn from our experience? What contributed to the success of our “formula”?

-First of all, the University of Leuven has a long tradition of excellent science and technology. Many laboratories are the home of hard working, ambitious scientists.

-We had some money; call it venture capital or seed money. Our first fund was named “Gemma Frisius One” and this after a famous scientist who lived in Leuven in the first part of the 15th century. We brought together 12,5 million Euro’s (150 million Rand) and we started investing in our small spin offs. Typically we put in 300 à 400.000 Euro’s (5 million Rand) in these new ventures.

-We invested in the building of appropriate infrastructures such as 2 new research parks and incubators.

-We could also attract a series of international companies, companies such as Philips, JSR Electronics, Diatos, IDT

-We actively built professional networks like with our friends in Cambridge, so we could exchange our experiences and learn from each other’s mistakes and successes.-But most importantly, we made our people *aware* that it could be done. For the first time, scientist and engineers were being pointed in the direction that their intellectual property, not only had an academic value but also a commercial potential. This allowed us to convince many of our people to take the risk to set up their own business.

From our side, we assisted them in setting up their business by helping them to evaluate their technology. We would perform some marketing and we would make a small business model or business plan. When everything seemed to be in place we would participate with our own venture capital Fund Gemma Frisius in these new ventures. And, there is no such thing as a free lunch, they taught me when I was living in the States, so we also made sure that the venture could hold the promise of a real incentive for the entrepreneur.

So this brings me back to this University of Durban. I am convinced that among these graduates today, there are certainly some brilliant youngsters willing to set up their own business. I am pretty sure that there is plenty of interesting technology around in the departments at this university where you studied. I am also pretty sure there is the will from this university to continue to provide guidance while setting your first steps as an entrepreneur.

So, let me steal my final words of advice to you from the most inspiring American Football coach ever: Vince Lombardi. Vince Lombardi’s emphasis was always on hard work and dedication. He was renowned for his motivational skills. One of his quotes which I feel is appropriate for today’s ceremony, to help you all believe in the long path ahead of you is that: “We would accomplish many more things if we did not think of them as impossible.”

Good luck to you all and thank you for your attention.