

Taking Nelson Mandela University Boldly into the Future in Service of Society

Inaugural Address
Professor Sibongile Muthwa, Vice-Chancellor
Nelson Mandela University
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President and other members of the Student Representative Council;
Students;
Honoured guests;
Ladies and gentlemen;

Sanibonani, Molweni, Good afternoon, Goeie middag. I thank you all for having travelled to witness this watershed and historic event in the life of our University.

I thank our Council for entrusting me with the humble honour of leading the University. The congratulatory messages following the announcement of my appointment were positive and overwhelming. I thank you all graciously.

I am truly humbled and daunted by this responsibility. But I am also energised to be part of the enthusiastic team, and a vibrant community of this institution committed to take this University to greater heights of success.

I recognise the sterling work of my predecessors, Dr Rolf Stumpf and Professor Derrick Swartz, who worked hard to build strong foundations on which we are now able to grow. I can only pledge to lead with integrity to build on their work.

I request you to bear with me as I convey my gratitude to those that have supported me over the years and made it possible for me to pursue the calling that is the embodiment of the position of Vice-Chancellor of this great University.

I wish to acknowledge the following people....

The South African teachers and academics who were part of my tentative early association with the academy. These are teachers that made a lasting impression on me about the integrity of knowledge and its power to improve humanity. I will not be able to mention all of them, but would like to mention, Mr Shabalala, my high school History teacher who totally believed in me, Professor Mlungisi Makalima and Mr Singatha Mafanya, of Fort Hare, and the late Professor Brian McKendrick, and Dr Anne Letsebe, of Wits.

I also wish to thank my professors and promoters in the UK, some of them South African by birth. In this regard, I mention Professors Anthony Hall, Jo Beall, Ben Fine, Lawrence Harris, Richard Rathbone, Shula Marks, David Simon and my PhD promoter, Dr Deborah Potts.

I wish to thank my family especially my father, Mandlenkosi Muthwa, who could not be here today because of ill-health. Ngiyabonga Baba for a lifetime of selfless sacrifice. I also thank my late mother, Nompumelelo Muthwa. My late grandmother, Antonia Muthwa and all my paternal aunts and uncles loomed large in my young life, and shaped me.

I also thank my sisters, cousins and nieces who have always supported me. Some have travelled from different parts of the country to be with me today.

But I would like to pay special tribute to my late grandfather, Mfezi Muthwa. I come from a humble but confident stock of peasants who, while they had little material means, had a huge conviction of a great possibility that lies in education as a game-changer.

I have to mention my grandfather in particular, because of the many hours, days, months, years I spent with him in the formative years of my life. My grandfather was not formally educated. He taught himself to read and write. He did not believe jobs were for either men or women. He believed, and told me many times, that I could be anything and I could do anything. He instilled in me the importance of a quiet moment, that is, of waking up early to

think and do things while the world is still. He taught me, by his own example that it is fine to be different, and to value the importance of independent thought.

He taught me the importance of solitary contemplation as a disciplined practice that builds spiritual and mental resilience.

In addition, I want to recognise my colleagues and friends - my support network ecosystem - in my early career, in my previous executive jobs, and in recent and current roles. They are too many to mention by name, but they know who they are.

Again, I thank my colleague and my predecessor Derrick Swartz. He has been generous in his support, and exemplary in his moral and ethical courage. Dr Swartz has been a steady pillar of support when the University's quest for transformation was tested.

I also thank my extended family and my in-laws (particularly my late mother-in-law) for affirming my need to be free.

Last, but not least, I thank Qengeba my husband who is in the audience today, and my two children Zwelibanzi and Zethu for their unfailing support.

A World and a Sector in Transition

We are a world, a continent and a nation in transition. Both the higher education sector and our University are also in a state of change. We, as Nelson Mandela University, stand on the threshold of the next exciting stage of our evolution. It is up to us to define the trajectory we take into the future in the context of national, continental and global challenges.

Since assuming duty at the beginning of January 2018, I have embarked on an extensive listening campaign to meet with, and listen to, internal stakeholders. The listening campaign is not yet over, and we still intend to have further engagements with staff and to meet with external stakeholders, but a pattern has already begun to emerge from this engagement with staff and students at all levels of the University. At the same time, the literature on the state of higher education nationally and internationally is sufficiently voluminous to be able to chart a trajectory for Nelson Mandela University into the future.

This inaugural address, therefore draws on the themes flowing from my engagement with the Nelson Mandela University community, and on my reading of the state of higher education nationally and internationally.

Let me start with a fundamental question: What are universities for? This question has confronted higher education for centuries. Given our own historical moment in the wake of the Fallist movement and the hard realities of our broader socio-economic, politico-cultural and environmental challenges, it is back at the top of the agenda

It is a question that is asked across the global and African regional higher education landscape. Our university is part of the massive explosion of higher education globally after the World War II. The eminent African scholar, Paul Zeleza (2016), in his book *The Transformation of Global Higher Education, 1945-2015*, describes how the number of degree-granting institutions worldwide has grown from 3 703 pre-1944, to 18 808 in 2015. On our own continent, the number grew from 170 universities in 1970 to 1 639 universities in 2015 (Zeleza, 2016: 6).

Of particular relevance for us here is, as Zeleza correctly points out,

“Massification [of higher education] had a profound impact on the organization, role, and purposes of higher education. It offered unprecedented opportunities for higher education and social mobility for previously marginalized social groups of low income or racial and ethnic backgrounds, as well as for women. But social inequalities based on gender, class, ethnicity, race, and nationality persisted, and higher education became a powerful force for reproducing old structures of inequality and producing new forms of marginalization.” (Zeleza, 2016: 2)

The eminent humanities scholar Premesh Lalu (2015) argues, it is possible to look at the question, “What is the university for?” in two ways. On the one hand, we hear a query as to what the university is supposed to be doing now; and on the other, we hear inquiry about the university’s standpoint.

Leadership and the National Context

The scholarly literature in leadership studies suggests that these two questions, what the university is supposed to be doing and what the university should stand for, can be linked to the integration of the notions of **transformational** and **transformative** leadership. Based on a comprehensive review some scholars (Hewitt, et al; 2014), argue that **transformational** leadership focuses on improving organizational qualities, dimensions, and effectiveness. **Transformative** educational leadership begins by challenging inappropriate uses of power. Furthermore, transformative leadership “begins with questions of justice and democracy; it critiques inequitable practices and offers the promise not only of greater individual achievement but of a better life lived in common with others” (Shields, 2010: 559). It involves “moral purpose, intellectual and social development, and a focus on social justice”.

In **transformational** terms, we need to work to make the University organisationally more efficient to serve our students, staff and community better. In **transformative** terms, we must give our University a sharper social justice purpose and praxes.

Efficiency and social justice here emerge as interwoven objectives of the University. These are principles that permeate various higher education policy documents.¹ Since the mid-1990s, higher education policy has been grappling with transformation. Significant progressive shifts in terms of expanded access and integration have been made. Transformation is generally conceptualised around the following principles, as expressed in the White Paper on Higher Education and Training of 1997: equity and redress; democratisation; development; quality; effectiveness and efficiency; academic freedom; institutional autonomy; and public accountability. Present scholarship on higher education transformation, however, suggests a focus in addition on the following themes: institutional culture; curriculum and research; teaching and learning; equity and redress; diversity; social cohesion and social inclusion; and community engagement.

Higher education policy and praxes have generally tried to respond in alignment with these issues, but the very nature of the South African university transformation project was brought into question by the 2015-2016 student protests on three fundamental issues: affordability, institutional culture and the decolonisation of knowledge and curricula. Now that affordability is nationally being addressed, the next frontline of contestation will be institutional culture and decolonisation. It will be our new battleground. An organisationally efficient university with a social-justice orientation, with **transformational** and **transformative** leadership, will stand us in good stead to engage with these challenges.

This is, however, simply the first entry point. Our student and our community protests rip open a key ailment in our society: our apparent tolerance for socio-economic inequality, and our acceptance of hardship and suffering made possible by the delusions of meritocracy. The growth of global justice movement implies that it would be a mistake to think of student and community protests in our country and in other parts of the world as delinked. Krastev (2014: 4) has powerfully argued that the rise in world-wide protests since 2008 is linked to the financial and economic meltdown and the further entrenchment of structurally-anchored inequalities on a global scale; and a mistrust of institutions.

The role of higher education must inevitably engage with these challenges; and as Mandela University, we must purposefully generate a just institutional culture within which we can all contribute to the renewal of the curriculum and the academy in order for us to play this wider role more successfully.

¹ For e.g. White Paper 3 on the Transformation of the Higher Education System (1997); the Ministerial Report on the Elimination of Discrimination and Promotion of Social Cohesion in Higher Education Institutions (the 2008 Soudien Report); the National Development Plan of 2012; the White Paper on Post-School Education and Training (2013); the report of the South African Human Rights Commission on the Transformation of Higher Education (2016); and the Draft National Plan for Post-School Education and Training of 2018.

Reverting to Lalu's (2015) two questions, what the university is supposed to do and what its posture should be, at Mandela University we can draw on the immense social resources that come with the effort to conceptualise what it means to be *the* Mandela University. That is, what the University should do and what the University should stand for, are closely tied into the stature of our namesake: the expansion of human understanding; pushing forward the frontiers of knowledge in all sciences to cultivate humanity; and contributing to the well-being of our city, our province, our nation, our continent and our world. In short, the quest of a Mandela University is for a more equal and socially-just world.

It is no secret that South Africa, nearly 25 years into democracy is still facing a large number of societal challenges. One of the fundamental challenges facing the South African society, one that was exposed so trenchantly by #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, is the stalled transformation of South African society.

Recent political changes in our country give hope that we are emerging from a particularly difficult period in our young democracy. It is too soon to tell the extent to which government can regain the confidence of the nation, re-establish the legitimacy of state institutions and meaningfully reduce social injustice, poverty, inequality and unemployment. The signs are encouraging and it is still too early to make definitive pronouncements, but government alone cannot achieve this. The higher education sector also needs to put its collective shoulder to the wheel.

The State of the University

The objective conditions within which we work are constantly changing. New challenges and opportunities have arisen. I have listened to the inputs made by staff and students over the last two months. Amongst the challenges articulated around the academic project are a need to overhaul the enrolment value chain to be more flexible, agile and responsive.

The Teaching and Learning enterprise needs to confront and address a range of operational and strategic challenges ranging from overcrowded lecture venues to wrestling with the issues of decolonisation and Africanisation of the curriculum. Our research portfolio needs to ramp up research outputs and innovation, and foster a larger cohort of emerging and socially-diverse academics able to respond to the developmental challenges facing our country and continent.

We need to redefine the purpose of engagement and reposition engagement with communities to make a meaningful contribution to overcoming societal challenges. This is particularly important as we bear a special responsibility associated with the name *Nelson*

Mandela to align our intellectual resources to the historic task of creating a non-racial, equal and democratic society.

We are ready to respond to the clarion call to the nation made by our President Cyril Ramaphosa in his State of Nation Address of 2018 to rise to the challenge of creating a new society. Towards this end, we will commit our resources, skills and expertise to work with government, private sector, non-governmental organizations and civil society in communities where our campuses are located, as well as the wider nation on the major grand challenges focused on tackling unemployment, poverty and inequality.

If we fail to achieve an equal society, the university cannot fulfil its mission and purpose.

As we broaden access to quality higher education we need to ensure appropriate support mechanisms are put in place, and that conditions conducive to teaching and learning prevail. Concerns that emerged from the listening campaign in this regard include:

- ensuring that our human resource policies, procedures and management systems are agile, people-friendly, responsive and efficient;
- dealing decisively with issues relating to gender-based infractions and other exclusionary practices;
- resetting the relationship between management and organised labour;
- building the financial sustainability of the University; and
- rethinking support systems that define student life and learning – from safety and security, to transportation and accommodation - to ensure that we mitigate the negative effects of an unequal society and enable **all students**, whatever their circumstances, to live and learn on a relatively level footing.

I want to reassure the University community that we have heard you, and we have much more clarity in how we will together tackle these matters going forward.

The change agenda we are conceptualising to address the above challenges will have to be owned and implemented by all of us, in collaboration. I have no illusions and know that our success lies only in our ability to harness our collective goodwill, and in our success to build institutional solidarity.

Our Identity and Our Posture

All of this is intimately embedded in our institutional culture. We need to inculcate an institutional culture that draws on the essence of Mandela, particularly as this relates to his

leadership, his notion of social justice and the value of education in changing the trajectory of the marginalised and the vulnerable in society

Reflecting on the obligations of this institution, during his address at the launch of the new name of our University in July last year, then Deputy President, Cyril Ramaphosa, dedicated most of his speech to addressing the new consciousness that we need to develop to demonstrate that we are truly deserving of our name. He challenged us to rethink the content and approach of our teaching and learning, our research agenda, to re-examine our attitude to Africa, and to pay attention to the lasting impression and resultant attributes of the students that have come through our University. In particular, he challenged Nelson Mandela University to position its identity in line with Mandela's ethos of love for humanity and his lifelong commitment to social justice (Ramaphosa, 2017).

Work on shifting our organisational culture started over the past decade; and we need to defend and connect the gains as we work towards taking the University to the next level.

In that regard, we pledge that this University will commit its intellectual asset base to serve the legacy of Mandela and all the freedom fighters who worked alongside him here in South Africa and in the diaspora. Especially during this centenary year of Madiba's birth, we will intensify our engagements with the Nelson Mandela Foundation, the family and other Mandela legacy stakeholders to position the essence and the desired and lasting impact of our contribution.

Redrawing the Frontiers between Science and the Humanities

To be human, and to cultivate humanity, as a key message of Mandela University, requires the frontier between "science" and the "humanities" to be reconceptualised and redrawn. The findings of the Academy of Science of South Africa's *Consensus Study on the State of Humanities* (2011) and the *Report on the Charter for the Humanities and Social Sciences* (2011) commissioned by DHET, suggest such a recalibration between the natural sciences and the humanities, arts and social sciences. The renewal of the academic project must, therefore, have as one of its focus areas the re-imagination of the humanities to revitalise the transformative potential of its disciplines.

The humanities, with open and malleable borders, are called upon to use their innate potential to awaken African scholarship, epistemologies and systems of thought so as to excavate the African praxes of our regions to write an inclusive narrative of progress.

There is a constitutive link between knowledge, teaching and learning and institutional culture. Much of our non-transformative, exclusionary academic and non-academic practices

and behaviours are closely knitted into our views of pedagogy, knowledge and institutional ethos. Whereas there have been clear shifts and progress in the system and institution, we are yet to generate an institution-wide, deep-penetrating and paradigm-shifting ensemble of academic and administrative practices that fully and profoundly respond to our own social justice obligations and that of our students and communities.

Teaching, Researching and Innovating

Teaching and learning, integrated with research and engagement, are the core business of the University. Central to these pursuits, we recognise that learning is intrinsic to our humanness, to our development as human beings, and to the full realisation of our potential and contribution to the world in which we live.

We have embraced the philosophy of a humanising pedagogy, as we believe it addresses, underpins and advances our purpose, and the manner in which we cultivate our humanity, the ways in which we are best able to learn, and the critical ways in which we seek to put our learning to use.

Our understanding of a humanising pedagogy is largely based on the liberatory education philosophy and work of Paulo Freire (2003). We seek to recognise in our teaching and learning endeavours what it means to be human, honouring and respecting everyone's humanity and unique background, developing consciousness and agency in relation to issues of social justice/injustice, and teaching to enable development of people's full human potential (Keet, Zinn & Porteus, 2009; Zinn & Rodgers, 2012). These aspects are at the centre of the pedagogical encounter. This, we believe, is key to transformation in an academic institution. A humanising pedagogy has to develop the kind of teaching and learning interface that enables agency, a sense of coming not only to know, but also to bring one's own knowledge and experiences into the pedagogic and institutional context. It seeks to avoid deficit notions of students' abilities and potential.

Our approach has been to engage in interdisciplinary curriculum conversations which provide guidance and inspiration for decolonisation and Africanisation of the curriculum. We aim to offer multifaceted curricula relevant to both local and global contexts and which draw on a diversity of philosophical and ideological orientations and worldviews. We will soon be launching a Centre for Philosophy in Africa, which will become a focal point directing, attracting and exploring these various sources and resources that will assist in supporting our research and engagement projects, and informing our curricula transformation efforts.

In 2018, we are also launching a Social Consciousness Sustainable Futures (SCSF) programme which is largely based on student inputs and includes themes exploring what it means to be

human; land, environment and food; economy, technology and dignity; the Constitution, rights and freedoms; and ethics, entrepreneurship and leadership.

With regards to research and innovation, Mandela University must produce independent scientific thinkers to help solve pernicious social injustices; to alleviate local poverty **through transdisciplinary collaborations** with the humanities; and by cutting across academic silos to solve global challenges such as climate change, water, food, and health securities; and to ensure that our planet and other species survive.

Social and natural scientists, engineers, medical and agriculture researchers will be encouraged to take on collaborative roles in projects that aim to better understand public concerns and engage with issues to solve their challenges.

Indeed, the notion of a “*Commons*” to solve problems and create innovation has always been central to African social and innovation fabrics; and thus young African researchers must be enabled to successfully inculcate their own knowledge-heritage towards creating new university learning systems and contribute to the creation of a better world.

Our University will within one year establish its first Hub of Convergence, between the University and community. These Hubs will be physical spaces where the University meets community to engage on common platforms to find solutions to practical problems that affect our immediate communities. The Hubs will provide an outward focus, and will benefit from the intellectual and other assets of the University, and the conscious wisdom of the communities that surround us.

Being Student Centric

Our vision for student life should be knowledge-based and collaboratively-fashioned to inspire and connect with the aspirations of our students. It should be anchored on binding values that will serve as the epitome in our collective mission to evolve the new generation of African leaders as envisaged by Africa’s Development Programme - Agenda 2063 (African Union Commission, 2015).

Student life at Mandela University will centre the student. It will thoughtfully involve and connect our students into the full life and promise of the University and its inter-connections with wider society. Fashioned in an integrative way, student life should stimulate not only student development, social solidarity, multi-culturalism and diversity - through the execution of excellent and vibrant intellectual, social, cultural, sport, recreational and other value-adding programmes on campus. In addition, it will promote active student engagement in communities aimed at solving the challenges of poverty, inequality and unemployment.

Our commitment to enhancing the quality of our student life through implementing student centric programmes will only succeed if we activate our students as leading actors in the development and implementation of such programmes.

To this end, we intend to strengthen our Leaders for Change Programme aimed at sharpening and emancipating agency in our students. This leadership development programme should produce 21st century leaders who are imbued with such qualities as imagination, lifelong learning, civility, service, ethical leadership, self-transformation, self-reliance and adaptive skills for mobility in an ever-changing world.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we stand on the threshold of a new era as Nelson Mandela University. The direction we take depends on all of us. I am by nature an optimist. Notwithstanding the societal and institutional challenges facing us, I firmly believe we have the opportunity to take Mandela University to the next level and, in so doing, to indeed change the world as we aspire to do – that is, to address both the transformational and transformative questions I have alluded to.

In doing this, we cannot deny the history from which we have emerged. We cannot ignore that we operate in one of the most unequal societies in the world. In this regard, I take inspiration from the words of Maya Angelou (“On the pulse of the morning”, 1993), who spoke for those carrying the scars of historical injustice, oppression and domination:

“History, despite its wrenching pain,
Cannot be unlived, but if faced
With courage, need not be lived again.”

It is therefore up to all of us to take Nelson Mandela University boldly to the next level in the service of society.

I hope and trust that you will all join me on this journey.

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