

OPENING ADDRESS TO 2018 FIRST YEAR STUDENTS, PARENTS,
GUARDIANS, RELATIVES, STAKEHOLDERS AND FRIENDS OF
MANDELA UNIVERSITY

Professor Sibongile Muthwa

Vice-Chancellor

27 January 2018

Welcome

It is my great honour and privilege to welcome all of you to Nelson Mandela University as we begin the 2018 academic year. We greet all those who are participating in this event through live-streaming in a number of venues across our campuses, including our students, families and colleagues in George Campus. *Namkelekile nonke!*

As this is my first address to you after being appointed as Vice-Chancellor of Mandela University late last year, I wish to recognise, and thank my predecessor, Dr Derrick Swartz, assisted by his team, for his exemplary leadership and for leaving the University with a strong foundation on which we now have to build and grow.

Today is a proud and defining event in our academic calendar when we welcome all parents, families and guardians and our first-year students. This year we welcome more than 6 000 first-year students to this university. As this cohort of first-year students, you were selected out of a pool of over 57 000 applicants. You have done yourself proud in being selected to study at Mandela. We thank you for choosing this great university.

As I look out at you today, from all walks of life and from all parts of South Africa and even beyond the borders of our country, I am inspired. You are the very first intake of students of the newly renamed Nelson Mandela University. That is to say, you are the first group of incoming students to join Nelson Mandela University after we officially launched our new name on 20 July last year. You indeed become students of the only university in the world that carries this iconic name.

Today we are really making history. This year, your first year - 2018 - is also the centenary year of the birth of our namesake, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. I hope you will all come to realise what a special privilege it is to be the 2018 intake of new students in this watershed year.

Importance and privilege of our name

As the University community, we are fully aware of the privilege and responsibility of carrying the name of one of the world's greatest leaders in modern times. It is a name that is respected throughout the world. This is why we would like to encourage you all to refer to the university by its full name, Nelson Mandela University, rather than using the abbreviation 'NMU'.

The honour of bearing this name comes with huge responsibility. Nelson Mandela remains a commanding, and unparalleled leader. He dedicated all his life to creating a more equal and just society and ensuring a better life for all. He was a man of integrity; he was humble, caring and always stood for what was right; he believed in fairness; he was a nation builder and a servant leader. He had deep compassion for humanity, particularly for the marginalised, and as we all know, he made huge personal sacrifices in his relentless quest for a better world.

And, of course, he placed huge importance on education as a force for good.

So, it is expected of all of us – staff and students of Nelson Mandela University - to live his legacy. This is no mean task.

Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa set this out eloquently for us all in July 2017 at the launch of the University's new name, when he stated:

"By naming this institution after Nelson Mandela, you are making the commitment that out of your teaching will emerge African scholars and academics that can bring a diversity of thought to traditional knowledge systems.

You are recognising that you are situated in a society and on a continent that is ravaged by poverty, inequality and unemployment.

A university named after Nelson Mandela will have to be an example for other African universities.

It will have to build partnerships for African scholarship through knowledge sharing.

It will have to be deeply-rooted in its African identity.

When students walk onto the grounds of this university they should feel the humanism of Nelson Mandela.

They should feel part of a people-centred university – where all are recognised and valued for their individuality.

This should be a place where diversity is a strength.

This should be a place where differences of opinion, ideology, culture and interest are able to thrive and contest.

This should be a place where there is respect for the cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity that characterises the beauty of our people"

It is my very sincere hope you will witness this, and play a big role in entrenching that culture. For our part as the leadership of this university, this is what we will strive to achieve daily.

Universities and the state of the higher education sector

You are entering university at a time of heightened dynamism in the higher education sector in the country. This is on the back of the #FeesMustFall and decolonisation campaigns of 2015

and 2016 which reached an apex with President Zuma's announcement on free higher education in December 2017. This has affected the entire sector in terms of planning, but through a series of engagements we now have more clarity on how to handle this matter in a manner that enables and widens access for poor and underprivileged students, while we remain committed to the long-term sustainability of the university, and the sector.

We welcome the government's undertaking to invest more resources in the sector, and in particular to respond to the plight of those in our society whose class positioning has stubbornly prevented them from accessing higher education.

At Mandela University, we stand firm in our resolve to broaden and enable access for financially disadvantaged but academically deserving students. In the past few years we have worked with our students to develop a number of enabling mechanisms to achieve this. The newly introduced Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) Bursary Scheme for poor and working class students to access studies at public universities will further make inclusion a reality for students from disadvantaged and working class environments.

This new bursary scheme is one component of government's response to sustained engagement within the higher education sector on the costs of higher and post-school education and training in South Africa. This scheme complements the in-house instruments we have been fashioning in consultation with our students for financially deserving students and the "missing middle".

We have to continue to engage on the actual implementation of the proposed DHET funding model, as the government has made it clear that the implementation will be phased in over a number of years.

But widening access for academically deserving students by providing financial aid is only one side of the equation. We are acutely aware that access needs to translate into academic success. Our wish is that every student who registers in first year, as you are doing now, will complete your chosen path of study and exit as a proud graduate of Nelson Mandela University. We thus have in place an extensive array of support services and facilities. These include academic support; subsidized transport shuttle services between campuses with pick-up points accessible to off-campus accommodation; campus health services, including HIV testing and counselling; and vibrant initiatives to stimulate and provide an inter-active living and learning environment. However, providing a wrap-around student-support solution in response to the needs of a diverse student population, and particularly those from poor backgrounds, requires constant innovation accompanied by an on-going expansion for the resource envelop to underpin these initiatives. A range of innovations are underway in this regard.

Transformation and Institutional Culture

While the issue of free education has been at the centre of student struggles, we all know that additionally students have decried the slow pace of transformation within our universities. This year we will kick off with renewed energy to quicken the pace of change across the system. It is in this space that students and staff can become active university citizens as we deepen our

commitment to engage within a sound human rights framework, while we demonstrate our respect for diversity.

Infrastructure and facilities

We strive to provide modern, new age infrastructure on all our campuses. As you entered the various campuses today, we hope you will have seen some of our wonderful facilities. You will see in the photo-shots, images of many of our buildings – including the School of Engineering’s new buildings on North Campus; our new Science building; the High Performance Complex; the modern and well-equipped library at Missionvale Campus, and the Business School located at 2nd Avenue Campus which opened in 2015 as the country’s first ever ‘green’ public building. Our newest, and 7th campus, the Ocean Sciences Campus here in Summerstrand, is our latest acquisition of which we are very proud.

As the technology-savvy generation, you will be pleased to learn that free Wi-Fi is available on all our campuses; there are 24-hour computer laboratories, great sporting facilities and many spaces in which you can relax and unwind. We have more than 70 student societies – ranging from academic, cultural, political, sporting, religious - and many of these have voluntary or experiential opportunities for students.

Another value-add of being a student at Nelson Mandela University is that it is a cosmopolitan, international and multicultural university. About 8% of our students come from outside South Africa. We encourage you to take advantage of our diverse culture by engaging with students and staff from different corners of the earth. Learn from each other and together strive to change the world for the better. I urge you to get involved in the life of the university, and to complement your academic journey with co-curricula activities that will contribute to your personal growth and development.

As you may know, the main campus of Nelson Mandela University is in a 720-hectare nature reserve, so we are privileged to enjoy a free-space environment, where monkeys, zebra and a number of species of buck roam free. Here in Summerstrand, the beach is literally across the road. I hope this will be an attraction for you, to explore the ocean, and try out some water sports, maybe become a surfer!

And the George Campus is at the foot of the majestic Outeniqua Mountains, home to forests housing trees of unknown age, custodians of secrets of old. George Campus is also a short distance from shoreline caves where the secrets of the origins of humankind are being revealed through paleontological mapping of early civilizations who lived there.

Challenges and Co-creation

You might have observed that the University’s tag line is ‘Change the World’. I am sure you also know that this derives from Nelson Mandela’s famous quotation, *‘Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.’* As a university, we are committed to changing the world. This extends to you now as students, to be committed to change the world for the betterment of humankind. Your successful graduation will be a pinnacle milestone in our collective quest as the university community, to indeed change the world.

But to do this, we need to address a myriad of challenges. Let me briefly focus on some of the most pressing challenges that the university is currently addressing. One of these is re-curruculation, or curriculum review. We are transforming our curriculum, making it more relevant

to the growth and development needs of our country and our continent. Another is the challenge of resources and financial sustainability. We have set up new institutional capacity to lead our work around re-imagining resource mobilisation. This includes continuously looking at innovative ways of increasing our third stream income and ensuring we use our resources more efficiently, effectively and economically. We have embarked on a number of exciting propositions to improve the long-term financial sustainability of our university.

In addition, our new Ocean Sciences programme and our novel, ground-breaking approach towards the establishment of the country's tenth medical school – to be launched in 2020 - are some of the bold steps in our drive to grow the University, and to expand its footprint nationally, continentally and globally.

The safety and security of our staff and students are of primary concern to us. We are all aware that crime in the country is high. In this regard, Port Elizabeth and George, where our campuses are situated, are no different. This is the reason we are constantly rethinking our safety and security plans. In past years, while we had protection services staff deployed throughout our campuses, to protect students and staff, as well as buildings and assets, our campuses generally operated on an open campus philosophy on the belief that this encourages easy movement onto and off campus which further encouraged free engagement between community members and the university.

The rise in crime generally and the unsavoury incident of gender-based violence perpetrated on campus towards the end of last year has led us to totally rethink the open campus philosophy. We have now beefed security at campus entrances and are in the process of implementing a card swipe system for staff, students and visitors, and introducing access turnstiles for walk-ins. We have increased and enhanced CCTV surveillance, improved lighting on dedicated safety routes, and increased foot patrols, as well as contracted an armed response service as needed. More still needs to be done, and will be done in the course of the year. But given that crime is on the increase throughout the country, my plea to you is to think safety and be vigilant at all times.

As your Vice-Chancellor, I strongly believe in and practice the principle of consultative leadership and co-creation. The best and most lasting solutions to challenges are those that we, as a university community, co-create and implement. We welcome, and indeed encourage, student voice in university consultative and governance processes.

The Student Representative Council is your voice. So make time to get to know them, and to participate in SRC elections and activities through-out the year so that we hear your voice too.

Mutual Expectations

I now turn to what we at Mandela University expect of you as our new students, and what we expect of parents, guardians and families. These tips have, over the years, proved of immense value, and a cornerstone of student success.

We expect students to:

- Attend lectures, practicals, tutorials and other academic activities – this is non-negotiable
- Work consistently every day
- Ask questions, be inquisitive, stretch the boundaries of intellectual inquiry

- Meet deadlines for assignments
- Use the library, on-line teaching and learning tools, and internet facilities
- Make use of our student support services
- Be active - join a club/society; play a sport
- Give back to the community through engagement projects
- Manage your finances carefully
- Find that important balance between studies and social activities
- Lead a healthy lifestyle.

We expect of parents, and hope that families will:

- Provide emotional and psychological support throughout the year
- Be inquisitive about academic progress of their children and have regular chats about what is happening in their lives at university
- Encourage them to seek advice and deal with uncertainties as early as possible - don't wait for the problem to grow
- Be objective in assessing the rights and responsibilities of your son or daughter
- Adapt the home environment as much as possible to be conducive to learning
- Contact the Dean of the Faculty should you have any major concerns.

We are deeply vested in student success. To enable this, we promise

- To continue to offer and invest in quality education through our various teaching, learning, and research programmes
- To provide support programmes that enable academic achievement and personal growth
- To facilitate engagement opportunities that enable all round development of socially aware and responsive students involved in working in communities and working with community members to solve real community problems for the benefit of the immediate and greater society nationally and beyond
- To produce knowledgeable, compassionate and enterprising graduates capable of becoming leaders and entrepreneurs in chosen fields and professions.

In order to advance our promise of quality education, I will briefly address myself to the teachers, scholars and intelligentsia of our university.

While we continue to stand firmly grounded in our disciplinary expertise we have to also boldly embrace a transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary mindset and a possibility of validating knowledges beyond our immediate domains. The intractable problems that face the world today require solutions that cannot be found in a particular discipline. It is incumbent upon all of us to rise to the challenge and reach beyond our cognitive comfort zones, to create spaces and ask questions as to what it would be like to risk our long-held paradigms, so that ours continues to be a breakthrough scholarship.

It is our moral and intellectual responsibility to transform our scholarship such that its content reflects the essence of Madiba and is resonant of the vision, values and commitments to a more equal, socially-just and democratic world order he advocated for through-out his life.

Studying at a University ... What difference does it make?

I will now address myself to our first-year students in particular.

Besides the functional reason of earning a university qualification in order to enter the world of work and economic productivity, people might ask: What is the more lasting and transcendental value of university education? University education equips one to engage with evolving frontiers of discourse and new knowledge. A university executes its purpose through its three fundamental missions of Teaching and Learning, Research and Innovation, and Community Engagement. Through these missions, as students, and ultimately as graduates, university education will hone your critical thinking skills, and will give you an opportunity to engage in debates and shift paradigms that you or others might hold. University is also a place where innovation flourishes, new knowledge is created, and novel solutions are designed.

But also importantly, through community engagement, the university environment will provide you space to reflect on commanding challenges facing the world at this moment of our history, such as poverty, inequality, discrimination, environmental injustice and degradation, wars, human rights abuses, gender-based violence and so forth. This could be the only time in your life when all conducive conditions are in place for you to reflect deeply on the world as it is, and on the world as you would like it to be, and to choose your path in that journey, making your mark on society, and *Change the World*.

In Conclusion

We thank you for entrusting your dreams with us.

Live up to the challenge of being caring, responsible and innovative. Continuously grow and adapt in the pursuit of knowledge towards a better life for all. Emulate Nelson Mandela's moral values and replicate his servant leadership, his deep concern for others and his relentless fight for social justice.

If you do this, you will all be worthy ambassadors of the university which proudly bears his name. But most of all you will leave here at the end of your studies as a well-rounded human being with a solid educational foundation, able to actively make a contribution to change the world.

I thank you. *Enkosi*