



Nelson Mandela University Alumni Association Annual General Meeting

Address by Acting Vice-Chancellor

Virtual Meeting, 18:00 29 September 2020

The President and Executive Committee of the Alumni Association

Members of the Association

Members of management and staff

Friends of the University

Introduction

Thank you for the invitation to address the Alumni Association and to share information about developments at your alma mater, Nelson Mandela University. Mr President, I wish to offer the apologies of the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Sibongile Muthwa. She would really have wished to be hear this evening, but has a long standing family commitment.

Our alumni are critical stakeholders of the University. I am pleased to note that in recent years there has been a very satisfactory increase in the numbers of active alumni. We welcome your involvement in the University and we are stronger and more firmly on course because of your participation. Ideally, the increase in the number of graduates we are producing as Mandela University will lead to an even more vibrant, engaged and committed alumni body ploughing back in different ways to your university. I have noticed over the last

few AGMs the increase in younger alumni becoming actively involved in alumni issues and would like to welcome that as a very positive development.

Today, the Alumni Association is having its first online Annual General Meeting and we welcome representatives from the UK and East Africa, and from other provinces of South Africa. Covid-19 and the lockdown regulations, whilst impacting on so many aspects of our personal, professional and social lives, have also had the positive spin-off of driving digital innovation and transformation. These adaptations and innovations have opened up new ways of engaging with alumni and organising alumni events. I am hopeful that the Alumni Relations Office and the Alumni Association will take full advantage of the available technologies to take alumni engagement to a new level at Mandela University.

It is unfortunate that these new opportunities arise in the context of a global pandemic and economic meltdown, that has wreaked havoc in the lives of many. It would be remiss of me not to pay my respects to those alumni who have lost loved ones to Covid-19. As a University family we have lost students, staff, alumni, family, friends and colleagues to the pandemic. We share in these losses and mourn their passing. Although we as a country have entered lockdown level 1, we all have the collective responsibility to ensure that we remain vigilant and adhere to the protocols to prevent a resurgence of Covid-19. Limiting the spread of the pandemic truly is in our hands, wherever we find ourselves in the world.

The pandemic has exposed the best and the worst in society across the globe. The outpourings of solidarity and generosity have been humbling to behold and most welcome. But at the same time, the pandemic has exacerbated inequalities in society and fuelled new manifestations of entrenched social exclusion, othering, intolerance and polarisation. We must take up our collective responsibility to make constructive contributions to re-imagine and rebuild society to ensure that our efforts decrease the widening gap between the rich and poor and marginalised communities.

Institutional Developments

I am proud to say that your University responded in an agile, flexible and innovative way to the challenges of the pandemic and related lockdown. I am sure that you would have seen or heard of the range of measures that we put in place to enable us to respond to the evolving situation to ensure the 2020 academic year is able to be completed. These included developing different pathways of learning and putting in place mechanisms to ensure students, irrespective of their backgrounds, would have access to the necessary resources to be able to successfully continue their studies. It also involved remote working and putting in place measures to protect staff and students who had to return to campus. I can assure alumni that we will successfully complete the 2020 academic year.

Nelson Mandela University has positioned itself as a University in the service of society, partnering with civil society and government to help solve pressing societal issues. I am very proud to say that your University responded very

positively to the socio-economic challenges brought about by Covid-19. Parallel to putting in place measures to save the academic year, we entered into partnerships with the Provincial government and the Nelson Mandela Metro to provide practical and intellectual capacity in the fight against the pandemic and its socio-economic consequences. Our social engagement interventions were coordinated by a Covid-19 Coordinating Committee chaired by the DVC for the Engagement and Transformation Portfolio. These interventions include:

- Engineering solutions: eNTSA did amazing work in manufacturing face shields for public health facilities staff and in contributing to the design of affordable ventilator options.
- Sanitiser Production and Distribution: Innoventon made a significant contribution in this regard, producing hundreds of litres.
- ICT innovation: The Centre for Community Technology played a vital role in developing ICT solutions to assist Provincial Government and the Metro, as well as the Department of Education, in their efforts to fight Covid-19, and to design psycho-social support tools to provide support as communities rebuild beyond the ravages of the pandemic;
- Research and Modelling: Our academics, especially in Business and Economic Sciences have been active in assisting the Provincial government with economic modelling and with research towards revitalising the provincial economy post-Covid.
- Water and Sanitation: Colleagues in Human Settlements and AEON have been actively in trying help government address the huge challenges the pandemic has exacerbated in human settlements and the provision of water and sanitation.

- A Community Convergence Work Stream that actively worked with communities and NGOs around nutrition, GBV and other social challenges exacerbated by the pandemic.

One of the University interventions was the establishment of the Mandela University Convergence Fund. This fund is a vehicle through which staff and the broader University family can contribute to address the pressing social problems experienced by communities. So far over R600 000 has been raised. This has been disbursed in partnership with credible civil society organisations. Initially, this focussed on immediate safe food relief to address the very real problem of hunger; but the emphasis is now shifting to developing sustainable food networks. Alumni can visit the Convergence Fund webpage for details as to how the funds have been disbursed to assist vulnerable communities.

I would like to thank the Alumni Association and individual alumni for contributing to the Mandela University Convergence Fund and would like to encourage other alumni to please continue to do so. We do not see the Convergence Fund as a short term intervention, but as an important vehicle for mobilising resources for our commitment to be a university in the service of society and our Hubs of Convergence, which we are actively co-establishing with communities and social partners.

I am also pleased to share major developments at you're alma mater, notably the Medical School and our organisational redesign process. We are delighted we have now received the necessary accreditation from the Health

Professions Council [HPCSA] and that all is now firmly on track for inviting the first cohort of MBChB students next year. If you visit our Missionvale Campus I think that you will be suitably proud of the infrastructure that is now in place. I cannot, however, mention this very important development without also pausing to pay tribute to the late Professor Lungile Pepeta, our Executive Dean for Health Sciences who drove the establishment of the Medical School with such passion, energy and skill. His untimely passing due to Covid-19 is still a shock we are struggling to overcome.

In 2019, the University embarked on an organisational redesign process. The intention was to develop a structure that was fit for purpose and that would enable us to achieve the noble goals we have set ourselves. This has been approached in a phased way. I will not go into details here except to highlight two aspects that alumni might find relevant. Firstly, at executive level we have sharpened our focus and lifted engagement and transformation. We now have four DVC portfolios:

- Learning and Teaching
- People and Operations
- Research, Innovation and Internationalisation, and
- the Engagement and Transformation Portfolio [with warm congratulations to Professor Andre Keet on his appointment this month]

Secondly, some of the names of two of our Faculties have changed to reflect our strategic intent. So, alumni will notice that the Faculty of Arts is now the

Faculty of Humanities; and the Faculty of Engineering, Built Environment and IT (EBEIT) is now the Engineering, Built Environment and Technology. These are not merely cosmetic changes, but reflect a number of significant developments within Faculties which will serve to enhance our academic offerings and deepen our research and innovation.

Important role of alumni

The university-wide organisational redesign process, has also had a positive impact on the Alumni Relations Office (ARO), which was transferred to a newly configured Strategic Resource Mobilisation and Advancement office [SRMA]. This became effective from 1 January 2020, but aspects of the organisational redesign process like the approval of a new structure for the Alumni Relations Office and its full integration of functions in the SRMA are being implemented in the course of 2020 and will be finalised by early 2021. This new institutional home for alumni relations is located within the office of the VC and is a recognition of the special part alumni play in the life of the University. Equally importantly, it recognises the potential role alumni can play in contributing to the bold and imaginative journey the University has embarked upon to change the world, as inspired by the life of Nelson Mandela.

The SRMA is working on proposals to build the ARO's fundraising and capacity. Given the impact of the pandemic and economic meltdown your university needs support from our alumni more than ever to help us to continue to provide quality and impactful learning, teaching, research and engagement.

At last year's AGM our young graduates emphasised the role alumni can play in mentoring, coaching and helping with employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for our graduates and students. We need positive role models, we need our alumni to go back to their communities and motivate prospective potential students and support them in their efforts to enter higher education. We need alumni to share their skills and networks with their alma mater. We need alumni to return to their alma mater to further their studies and their continuous professional development. As our alumni, you are uniquely positioned to continue to be loyal ambassadors and the fly the Nelson Mandela University flag at its highest, all across the world.

In conclusion

I would like to thank you all for supporting your alma mater and for your participation in this online AGM. A special word of thanks to our Alumni Association Executive Committee and their commitment to ensure good governance and alumni representation. I appreciate that members of the Alumni Association Executive Committee give freely of their time and energy. We acknowledge your contribution so deeply.

My last, and very pleasant, task today is to launch a special edition of *Thetha*, our Alumni and Friends magazine. This special edition shares our institutional story during this period and the good work of staff, students and alumni. Enjoy *Thetha* and please stay connected. I thank you.