



**Vice-Chancellor's Report to Council  
Quarter 2**

**20 June 2024**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Given Nelson Mandela University's commitment to preparing students for lifelong success, the quarter two report to Council focuses on student success. The University has observed a concerning decline in student success rates and graduate outputs in 2023. This report will explore possible causes for this trend, as well as strategic interventions that are in place to address this.

## **2. VISION 2030 AND STRATEGIC TRAJECTORIES**

### ***2.1 Medical School***

The University's Medical School Community Advisory Board (CAB) was inaugurated on Missionvale Campus in May. Chaired by Gqeberha medical practitioner Dr Jeff Govender, the nine-member board includes academics, civil society representatives, and seasoned medical practitioners. The CAB will support the Medical School by bringing together diverse insights and community voices as agents of change.

The pass rate for the 100 first-year medical students registered in 2023 was 98%, with similarly high pass rates achieved by 80 second-year and 47 third-year medical students (96.3% and 97.8% respectively). Despite this, financial challenges remain the most common barrier to success. To this end, a database has been created to link medical students to scholarships and bursaries mobilised by the Strategic Resource Mobilisation and Advancement (SRMA) through the Nelson Mandela University Trust. Out of 67 financially needy medical students not funded by the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), 44 have been supported through funding mobilised by SRMA from external donations.

### ***2.2 Ocean Sciences***

Following its launch earlier this year, the new Science Centre convened a multi-stakeholder workshop in May to explore the development of inclusive and transdisciplinary pathways. Emanating from this workshop, a proposal was approved by the Senate earlier in June to establish the Science Centre as an engagement entity.

The head of FishFORCE, Prof Hennie van As, has been appointed to serve as a legal expert on the board of directors of SADC's Fisheries Monitoring Control and Surveillance Co-ordination Centre from 1 June 2024 to combat illegal and unregulated fishing in the region.

Dr Mia Strand from the Institute for Coastal and Marine Research (CMR) has been selected as the South African Champion in line for the global US\$1.1 million (more than R20m) Frontiers Planet Prize with her paper focusing on reimagining ocean stewardship, which was written with Dr Nina Rivers and Adjunct Professor Prof Bernadette Snow.

### **2.3. Revitalising the Humanities**

Second quarter highlights included a transdisciplinary seminar in April where scholars interrogated the role of business in creating a desirable future in and for Africa. A School of Theory workshop was convened in May for our postgraduate students and early career academics. In May, Ambassador Ebrahim Rasool anchored the 2024 Archbishop Thabo Makgoba Development Trust Annual Lecture and a masterclass. The lecture focused on values-based leadership in times of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity.

### **2.4. Transdisciplinary Sustainability Sciences**

The University has been awarded two major externally funded grants to realise the potential of a sustainable green hydrogen economy for South Africa. One grant of R8.7 million will fund the development of the Eastern Cape's green hydrogen strategy while another, of R24 million, will fund a feasibility study to be undertaken by a consortium led by Nelson Mandela University and the Ikgai Group, comprising several industry leaders from the United Kingdom, Europe, and Japan.

A further transdisciplinary sustainability initiative will contribute to a just transition from fossil fuels to more sustainable development pathways. To this end, the Presidential Climate Commission has adopted the report *Social Ownership Models in the Energy Transition* compiled by a team led by Development Studies' Professor Janet Cherry.

Nelson Mandela University hosted guests from the University of Venda, Stellenbosch University, and Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences at the George Campus for a two-week Forest21 student project in April. The project brought together students from various disciplines at these four institutions to strengthen capacity.

## **3. DISTINCTIVE EDUCATIONAL PURPOSE AND PHILOSOPHY THAT CONTRIBUTES TO STUDENT ACCESS FOR SUCCESS**

### **3.1. Graduation**

The Autumn Graduation season comprised 18 ceremonies in April, with two taking place in George, and 16 in Gqeberha. While graduation is one of the most visible expressions of student success, we are concerned that the total number of graduates for 2023 (5 815) declined from 7 373 in 2022. The decline in 2023 graduates can largely be attributed to the University not meeting its international and postgraduate student enrolment targets over the past few years. The Enrolment Management Committee has been tasked with designing interventions to reverse this trend.

### **3.2. Student Success**

We are equally concerned about the success rate for all modules, which declined from 81% in 2022 to 74% in 2023. Early indications are that the decline in success rates can be

attributed to students starting university during the COVID-19 pandemic when learning and teaching were severely disrupted. In most instances, formal, summative examinations were not possible during the pandemic due to the rapid transition to emergency online learning. Continuous assessment was therefore widely implemented, which resulted in students being granted multiple opportunities to be assessed and success rates increased steeply from 79% in 2019 to 85% in 2020 and 84% in 2021.

A working group led by the DVC LT has been established to explore the factors contributing to the decline in student success in more depth. The findings will be reported to the Learning and Teaching Committee to inform corrective actions to address these challenges.

### ***3.3. Learning and Teaching Development and Support***

Academic support systems need to be enhanced and more precisely targeted to identify at-risk students who require support to succeed, especially first-time entering students. Student Success Coaches fulfil a vital role in enhancing the welfare of these students. The coaching sessions empower students to develop a success plan, which enables them to deal with challenges related to time management, organisational skills, and stress management.

In the LT Collab, Learning Development (LD) is developing a Framework for Student Success to guide student learning development programmes and services. Our First-Year Success Programme holistically onboards first-year students into university life, setting them on a trajectory for academic success by exposing them to the necessary services and resources to thrive in their studies.

In addition, 51 modules are currently being supported through Supplemental Instruction (SI) and the University is identifying further modules with low success rates which will benefit from this intervention. LD also continues to drive peer-assisted learning (PAL) and has trained over 450 mentors, tutors, and SI leaders this year who provide out-of-class academic support.

### ***3.4. Digitalisation and the Virtual Academy***

The Virtual Academy (VA) is a key innovation to expand the academic reach and impact of Nelson Mandela University. In line with this vision, the VA proposes a transdisciplinary Professorship in Human-Technology Interaction (HTI), to advance knowledge and foster collaboration, efficiency, and digital inclusion, linked to human-centred digital innovations across the entire university, and within resource-constrained environments. A proposal to this effect was approved by Senate earlier this month.

## **4. ENGAGED, INNOVATIVE SCHOLARSHIP CULTURE THAT GENERATES KNOWLEDGE RECOGNISED FOR ITS CONTRIBUTION TO SUSTAINABILITY**

### **4.1. Research**

Nelson Mandela University continues to grow its annual publications, with 573 research units claimed for the 2023 reporting year (still to be confirmed by DHET), compared to 556 for 2022. A significant proportion of the University's research output is generated by HEAVA professors and Research Associates (RAs). It will thus be important to assess mechanisms to boost the research productivity of academic staff.

The University has 95 National Research Foundation (NRF) rated researchers, of whom 35 are female and 60 are male. Of these, 24 are Black (African, Coloured, Indian, and Asian) and 71 are White indicating that diversifying the demographic profile of the established and rated researchers remains a priority.

The application for the Eastern Cape node of the National Institute for Theoretical and Computational Sciences, based at Nelson Mandela University, was successful. This will bring new niche areas of science to the University and attract talented postgraduate students and postdoctoral research fellows.

A lecturer in the Department of Chemistry, Dr Zikhona Tywabi-Ngeva, has been nominated in three categories in the National Science and Technology Forum Awards. She was also elected as South Africa's representative in the Women in Marine Science Steering Committee for 2024/25.

### **4.2. Postgraduate Support**

As of 20 May 2024, 343 Honours, 472 Masters, and 272 Doctoral scholarships were awarded with funding from Council, the NRF, and other external funders. The beneficiaries are 86% Black and 66% female.

Over the review period, 125 postdoctoral and research fellowships were awarded, of whom 78% are Black and 42% are women. The projected investment in postdoctoral and research fellowships for the 2024 academic year is R30 million and the fellows are co-supervising 58 postgraduate students.

The number of academics with a PhD increased from 45% to 46% in 2023, but this needs to be further boosted. The University is committed to transforming the equity profile of academic staff with doctoral degrees and has leveraged funding from the NRF and DHET to ensure academic staff receive the support and training needed to attain higher qualifications. The DHET-funded New Generation of Academics Programme (NGAP) cohort at Mandela University consists of 18 Black academics, of whom 11 are women.

Over the period under review, a combined investment of R1.2 million was awarded to 37 early-career researchers for research running costs, teaching relief and conference participation. Of these grant recipients, 24 (65%) were Black and 22 (60%) were women. In addition, there are currently 11 active Thuthuka grant holders of whom 82% are Black and 73% women and the Black Academics Advancement Programme (BAAP) currently funds four academics.

### **4.3. Internationalisation and Expansion of African Footprint**

As of 10 June 2024, the University had enrolled 708 international students compared to 906 in 2023. The International Office (IO) has observed a decrease in applications for full-degree studies from international students, which is a trend impacting many South African universities. Three persistent challenges contribute to declining international enrolments: visa processing backlogs; financial challenges confronting incoming international students; and a lack of funding to support international postgraduate students.

It is encouraging to note that the Department of Home Affairs has committed to finalise all pending visa applications by 30 June. The IO has appointed recruitment agents in Kenya and Uganda to address the decline in international student enrolments from the continent and plans to appoint further agents in West Africa.

#### *Global South and Africa*

South Africa's Policy Framework for Internationalisation of Higher Education recommends strategic partnerships with Africa, BRICS, and the Global South. Transdisciplinary initiatives have been our focus, with an NRF grant secured to facilitate collaboration with institutions in São Paulo, Brazil. The University was also represented at the inaugural West Africa Hub Convening in Lagos, Nigeria.

The IO and CANRAD jointly hosted the Inaugural Africa Month Symposium on 20 May 2024 with the theme "*Educate an African fit for the 21st Century*". The Director of the Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society (CASSA), Prof KK Prah, delivered the keynote speech and Dr Ongama Mtimka was the respondent.

#### *Global North and Asia*

A delegation from Ningbo Municipality in China visited Nelson Mandela University in April, while West Visayas State University in the Philippines hosted a virtual symposium on classroom strategies using Artificial Intelligence (AI) on 22 April 2024. A delegation led by the DVC LT participated in the South Africa Sweden University Forum (SASUF) Research and Innovation Week in Sweden from 13-17 May 2024. During this visit, the World Maritime University (WMU) in Malmo submitted a draft MoU on Postgraduate Student Exchange to facilitate maritime research, staff training, and funding for joint degree programmes.

#### **4.4. Innovation**

Through the University's commercialisation company, Innovolve Pty Ltd, three active licence agreements for University Intellectual Property (IP) are being managed with various partners. To date, over 200 patent applications have been filed and support is provided to early-stage technology development projects via the Technology Innovation Agency (TIA) seed funding programme. The Vertical Take-off and Landing (VTOL) drone shows potential for commercialisation and discussions are underway with Autonosky (Pty) Ltd to license the patented technology. InnoVenton has also developed a novel process technology combination to produce a herbicide (Tebuthiuron), which will be offered to interested SMEs or industries.

#### **4.5. Library and Information Services (LIS)**

LIS has been focusing on providing digital literacy programmes to students. One-on-one consultations with subject librarians and access to specialised databases have been pivotal in promoting student success.

### **5. TRANSFORMATIVE INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE THAT PROMOTES DIVERSITY AND SOCIAL COHESION**

#### **5.1. Engagement Office (EO)**

The Engagement Office (EO) has made significant strides in co-constructing inclusion and advocacy programmes with students through the development of the Student Hub of Convergence (SHoC). Impactful events this quarter included a national Climate Change seminar hosted in collaboration with the Nelson Mandela Foundation and Old Mutual, and a commemorative screening of a documentary on the sinking of the SS Mendi.

#### **5.2. Transformation Office (TO)**

The Transformation Office (TO) has various initiatives underway to inculcate a transformative and inclusive institutional culture. This includes painting the Israeli Apartheid Wall at the South Campus Library, accompanied by anti-apartheid posters, mentorship presentations on systematic racism, and podcasts on student nutrition advocacy.

The TO also organised events, training sessions, and film screenings focused on LGBTQI+ rights, human rights, and gender-based violence (GBV) awareness. These include LGBTQI training for peer helpers, a pride mural, sexual harassment training for Law Clinic staff, and GBV training for student wellness peer helpers.



### **5.3. Centre for Women and Gender Studies (CWGS) and DSI-NRF SARCHI Chair in African Feminist Imaginations (AFEMI)**

The CWGS and the AFEMI Chair have been awarded the prestigious Carnegie African Diaspora Fellowship Programme to develop a programme on African Queer Vocabularies and Womanist Approaches, as well as an online global module for gender studies. The Centre is also making progress in developing a research Master's programme in Gender Studies to create a 'gender corridor' in the Eastern Cape.

### **5.4. Chair for Critical Studies in Higher Education Transformation (CriSHET)**

Among other initiatives during this quarter, CriSHET co-hosted a book launch and presented a workshop series on decolonisation in collaboration with the Anti-Racism Lab, which drew a global audience.

### **5.5. Transdisciplinary Institute for Mandela Studies (TIMS)**

TIMS co-hosted the Africanisation-Decolonisation Indaba in March, highlighting various exciting initiatives across all faculties. The institute has completed a draft report on the Mandela Identity focus groups to assist in reshaping the University's identity and advancing social justice research. TIMS is also drafting a handbook to institutionalise the Mandela Identity.

### **5.6. Centre for the Advancement of Non-Racialism and Democracy (CANRAD)**

Collaborating with the Independent Electoral Commission and the Democracy Development Programme, CANRAD trained election observers and hosted meetings for political parties to present their visions ahead of the national general election on 29 May 2024. The Centre also focuses on empowering informal recycling entrepreneurs and digitally marginalised citizens, and has prepared a substantial funding proposal to address social inequalities.

### **5.7. Chair for Youth Unemployment, Employability and Empowerment (CYUEE) and Centre for Integrated Post-school Education and Training (CIPSET)**

The Centre and Chair have initiated studies on TVET students' transitions to work. They are also collaborating on a new SLP to build the capacity of community representatives on clinic committees. The Centre and Chair also support farmworker rights, community education, and small-scale fishing cooperatives.

### **5.8. HIV and AIDS Research Unit**

The HIV and AIDS Research Unit is revising its institutional policy and collaborating on a study on the effect of Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) on immune response and diagnosis

in HIV patients. The Unit also supports adolescent sexual reproductive health and rights, empowering girls in vulnerable situations.

## **6. ENHANCING STUDENT LIVING AND LEARNING EXPERIENCES**

### **6.1. Student Governance and Development**

It is encouraging that enrolments for the Beyond the Classroom, LeadHer, and Ebuhlanti programmes have increased compared to 2023. These initiatives promote social consciousness, self-awareness, and leadership competencies among students. Student Governance and Development successfully organised a community dialogue in partnership with the National Youth Development Agency and the Nelson Mandela Museum. The two-day programme focused on youth activism, civic responsibility through voter participation, and election readiness.

### **6.2. Student Entrepreneurship**

The Centre for Entrepreneurship Rapid Incubator (CfERI) conducted a roadshow across all faculties in April to explain its work. In the same month, CfERI also presented and published a manuscript at the CBER-MEC 13th International Conference on Business and Economic Development in New York. Additionally, the Centre has received Small Enterprise Development Agency approval for the 2024/25 financial year, which is a major boost.

During this quarter, twelve lease agreements were signed through the Madibaz Youth Entrepreneurship Lab to promote student business on campus, including barbershops, tuckshops, and ice-cream vendors. Induction, training, and a strategy session have been held to promote sustainability and business scaling.

Student entrepreneurship specialist, Karen Snyman, has been elected as the national Entrepreneurship Development in Higher Education (EDHE) Chairperson for the Student Entrepreneurship Coordinators Community of Practice.

### **6.3. Student Housing and Transport**

More than 7 900 students are registered with Student Housing, with 4 577 of these students funded by NSFAS. Furthermore, 7 248 cards have been distributed to students registered for shuttle services. Changes in how NSFAS funds and accredits off-campus accommodation have created uncertainty about transport funding, which indirectly led to a three-day strike by transport/shuttle service providers in May, but this was resolved through engagements with the service provider representatives.

### **6.4. Student Wellness**

As part of the University's drive to address the pervasive issue of student hunger, Student Health Services (SHS) issues nutrition packs to 600 students each month. In addition, the

Department of Agriculture has revived the nutrition garden, and vegetables are distributed to students.

In April, SHS consulted and treated 1 584 students for acute and chronic conditions, pointing to the high demand for these services. To address this, there are plans to open the clinic on weekdays and Saturdays. Furthermore, SHS and the LT Collab are collaborating to deliver support directly to students in the residences. The pilot stage focuses on addressing adjustment issues, substance abuse, and broader mental health concerns.

Despite awareness campaigns such as “First Things First”, it is concerning that higher numbers of students are testing positive for HIV. There is also an increase in students receiving anti-tuberculosis treatment, and those who test positive for pregnancy.

### **6.5. Madibaz Sport**

In April, Madibaz Sport hosted the Campus Life Festival, which officially launched the second Campus Sport leagues programme. This popular, multi-code league event, inaugurated in 2023, will run until October 2024 and involves football, futsal, netball, rugby, and basketball. During the Autumn graduation season, 47 Madibaz Sport students graduated, signalling the progress made in simultaneously promoting sporting and academic excellence. Some of these athletes passed with distinction, while others are Olympians and national representatives in their sports codes.

### **6.6. Universal Accessibility and Disability Services (UADS)**

Approximately 60 students have been assessed since the beginning of the academic year for academic accommodations. The increased number of UADS graduates is evidence of the success of advocacy campaigns, improved funding, and institutional support.

## **7. ENABLING SYSTEMS AND INFRASTRUCTURE THAT PROMOTE AN EXCEPTIONAL EXPERIENCE FOR STUDENTS, EMPLOYEES AND KEY STAKEHOLDERS**

### **7.1. Human Resources**

To date, 85 appointments have been made this year, including 30 academic employees, with 67% of these appointments from underrepresented groups, thereby fostering a more representative staff demographic profile. Despite the turnover of 46 employees in this period, efforts are underway to address retention challenges, including a review of remuneration strategies and benefits packages. Furthermore, the Institutional Culture and Equality Working Group (ICE WG), has been overseeing the co-creation of an Institutional Culture Conceptual Framework, Strategy and Programmatic Interventions to embed an inclusive, transformative institutional culture.

With the recent tragic suicide of one of our academic staff members, our ongoing commitment to employee well-being remains crucial. During the first and second quarters, HR implemented various initiatives such as occupational health and workplace wellness programmes, financial wellness sessions, and counselling services with more than 450 employees benefiting.

## **7.2. Information and Communication Technology Services**

A new, intuitive system designed to streamline the student online application process went live in April. The student device initiative has resulted in 2 500 NSFAS-funded first-time entering students receiving new laptops, while “missing middle” students can buy pre-used devices at a discounted price. In addition, more than 75 accredited off-campus residences are connected to the University network, offering close to 9 000 students uncapped internet access.

## **7.3. Infrastructure Services and Space Optimisation (ISSO)**

The R2.15-million project to refurbish the Solomon Mahlangu Residence has been completed and signed off. The University is seeking legally sound mechanisms to enable the completion of Blocks 7 and 8 of the new student residences on North Campus.

As part of the University’s energy security strategy, its photovoltaic installation project, estimated at R65 million, is in the procurement phase. The University has started the process to appoint a consultant to oversee the design and installation of load-shedding solutions, with an estimated cost of R46 million. Revised laws make it mandatory to evaluate energy efficiency in buildings, and a contractor has been appointed to issue the necessary energy performance certificates. Three reservoirs and pressure pump installations were installed and linked to three boreholes on the South Campus. Test results indicate the water is suitable for campus use but needs minor treatment for human consumption.

## **7.4. Protection Services**

The number of crime incidents increased in March compared to January and February. The most common crimes reported were laptop and cell phone theft. Protection Services is reviewing the Safety and Security Strategy and will host a safety indaba in the third quarter to focus on reducing crime on all campuses. In July, the University will also co-host a two-day campus safety awareness workshop in collaboration with the South African Police Services in George.

## **7.5. Campus Operations**

Multi-stakeholder forums have been effective in collaboratively resolving cross-cutting issues affecting all campuses. The integration of various portfolio initiatives continues in response to existing and emerging issues, especially in support service delivery.

## **7.6. Communication and Marketing**

The graduation ceremonies received significant coverage on social media platforms, which bodes well for the University as we expand our online reach. This year's graduation coverage yielded 25 clips across print, broadcast, and online media, with a total reach of 1.6 million people and an advertising value equivalent of nearly R440 000.

## **8. ENHANCE LONG-TERM FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH EFFECTIVE RESOURCE MOBILISATION AND RESPONSIBLE RESOURCE STEWARDSHIP**

### **8.1. Strategic Resource Mobilisation and Advancement (SRMA)**

The University aims to mobilise at least R95 million in 2024 for bursaries and scholarships to support undergraduate "missing middle" and postgraduate students. By the start of May, R68.8 million had been mobilised, of which nearly R30 million had been paid. More than 91% of the 398 beneficiaries of bursaries from income mobilised through the Nelson Mandela University Trust are Black students. Of these, 307 are undergraduate and 91 are postgraduate beneficiaries.

### **8.2. Short-term Financial Planning**

Strong growth in undergraduate enrolments has resulted in tuition fees raised exceeding the budget by 5%. The financial position of the University reflects a net positive variance, and the cash flow is sound.

To date, there are 18 703 registered NSFAS recipients of which 6 386 are first-time entering students. On 12 April 2024, the Minister appointed former Accountant-General, Mr Freeman Nomvalo as the NSFAS Administrator to steer the organisation in a manner that strengthens good governance. There have been difficulties linked to the accredited accommodation pilot programme. After threats of eviction of students, NSFAS issued a directive that the University could pay accredited service providers from February to July, whereafter NORRACO (NSFAS-appointed service provider) will disburse.

As of 17 May 2024, total concession applications stood at 10 841, of which 3 250 were awarded. More than 4 000 of these students are now funded by NSFAS.

### **8.3. Long-term Financial Planning**

There is a real risk of funding and subsidy shortages in an already financially constrained national economy, and the higher education sector will be under significant pressure in the foreseeable future. We project that the decline in student success and graduate outputs in 2023, will result in a net loss of at least R59 million in government output subsidy. Collective ownership of efforts to foreground the University's long-term sustainability is crucial, particularly as it relates to reviewing our academic size and shape and the salary bill.

#### **8.4. Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE)**

The University achieved its target of a level 4 discounted to a level 5 for the latest Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) scorecard based on the 2022 financial year. Verification for 2023 is in progress. A pre-audit score of Level 4 (no discounting) has been projected by the B-BBEE consultant based on the draft annual financial statements.

### **9. CONCLUSION**

As we continue to promote a sustainable and socially just future, Nelson Mandela University remains resolute in its commitment to promoting student access for success. To this end, we will devote careful attention to qualitatively analysing the causes of the decline in student success and graduate outputs in 2023 to craft evidence-informed strategies and interventions to reverse this trend. We thank Council for its ongoing support and judicious stewardship in guiding the University towards achieving its Vision 2030 aspirations.