

Naming & Renaming Launch
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Deputy Vice-Chancellors and Members of Management
The Professoriate, Members of the Academy, and Staff
Members of the SRC and Students
Honoured Guests and particularly Members of the Families gracing us with their presence today
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today marks a very significant day for Nelson Mandela University, as we come together to formally launch the naming and renaming programme of our University facilities, places and spaces. This work has its foundation in the official name change of University in July 2017. Being named after the world famous icon, Nelson Mandela, carries with it a number of obligations.¹

It means we need to strive constantly to reflect the values and ethos of our famous namesake. It means we need to cultivate a new consciousness to demonstrate that we are truly deserving of our name. It means we need to position the University's identity in line with Nelson Mandela's love for humanity and his lifelong commitment to social justice, equality and a democratic world order.

The naming and renaming process is an important part of our transformation and development. It is an important and deliberate step in the continued evolution of Nelson Mandela University, through which we wish to assert our identity. It is also an outward manifestation of our values and ethos. The naming and renaming project is thus an integral component of the transformational and identity-building programme of our University.

It is significant that this naming and renaming launch is taking place in May 2019. Firstly, this is Africa month and the developmental trajectory of our University involves foregrounding Africa in our scholarship and engagement. Secondly, this ceremony takes place just after the inauguration of a new President in our country, during the 25th year of our democracy, a momentous event that signals our renewal and rededication to our Constitutional democracy.

Similarly, with our University, the naming and renaming of our buildings, spaces and places is part of our renewal as a University. It talks to how we can use our heritage to build social solidarity and promote social justice. It is no secret that our University, like many others in South Africa, owed its origin to the macro-apartheid policies of a discredited regime. But

¹ Address by Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa at the renaming of Nelson Mandela University, 20 July 2017, pp. 4-5.

drawing on the rich heritage of our country, we are able to select names that signal a move away from this divisive past.

In this regard I must emphasise that history and heritage are not the same thing.² “History is essentially what happened in the past (or more accurately, what is written about events in the past). Heritage, however, consist of those aspects of the past which we wish to identify, elevate, and emphasise for the inspiration, enjoyment, or use of current and future generations.”³ There are a number of concepts intricately bound up in this: inheritance, memory, meaning, organisational solidarity. Heritage, in a certain sense, is what we have inherited from the past and which we want to use to construct meaning, organisational solidarity and cohesion in the present.

Heritage can also be a receptacle of memory. Thus the names we have chosen for our residences are names that draw on our past, but which have deliberately been selected because they help us to remember some noble aspect of that past. By emphasising positive aspects of our past we can hopefully transcend the divisions of history that continue to haunt us.

In this regard, Achille Mbembe argues that in order to move forward towards a collective sense of identity, we need to “demythologise and de-commission” the symbols of history that hold us back.⁴ The collective and discursive approach to choosing names has offered an opportunity to engage and, in some instances, confront the political and class origins of the institutions that merged to make up our University. This is a necessary debate and needs to continue as we seek and search out the names we choose for buildings, streets, facilities, spaces and campuses. Failing to have these debates will prevent us from confronting the negativity still embedded in our fractured history.

Naming and renaming debates can, and should, serve as an enabling platform to confront our history honestly and openly if we are to truly break with the past and move forward. The last thing we wish to see is that the naming and renaming process itself becomes a source of contestation. The decision-making process itself offers significant opportunities to build social solidarity and a shared and common sense of identity, which is why we embarked on an extensive consultative process. Key to the creation of social cohesion is the belief that appropriately named spaces at our University present an opportunity for promoting inclusion, for bringing a deeper connection to our Afrika project and our Afrika deliberate and purposeful mission.

So clearly, the naming process is so much more than the replacement of a sign, or the erection of a new name board. Rather, it should be embraced as an opportunity to redress the past, learn from one another, to reach a deeper understanding of others and of ourselves as we seek mutually-acceptable names that also align with the values of Mandela, and our African heritage.

In deliberating, debating and engaging as the University publics about the names we would wish to bring into our presence, requires that we reflect fundamentally on the desired footprint

² D Lowenthal, “Fabricating Heritage”, *History & Memory*, 10(1), 1998, pp. 7-8.

³ S. Mancotywa, *Continuing Conversations About Heritage: Engaging on Heritage Issues IN South Africa* (Ed. by D.A. Webb, Pretoria: NHC, 2019), pp.79-80.

⁴ A. Mbembe, ‘Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive’, p. 2 (Africa is a country website <https://africaisacountry.atavist.com/decolonizing-knowledge-and-the-question-of-the-archive>, retrieved 15 April 2016).

and scholarly reach of our missions of learning and teaching; research and our public work through engagement. All of these need to align with our intended contribution to the creation of a better world that Nelson Mandela espoused. We need to situate ourselves on the less-beaten track of a courageous intellectual culture of innovation and change that enrolls the talents and goodwill of all those who commit to take this University to greater heights. The way we choose to name our facilities and campuses can be key markers along this path and serve to continually focus our thinking on this vital work to set us apart as a university in service of society.

Today, we are launching the remaining and naming process with the renaming of our residences. The process does not end here, but will continue to be rolled out further. I wish to encourage staff and students, and also external stakeholders, to engage in debate around name choices as part of a deliberate journey that seeks to build a future where everyone feels they belong. In this way, we aim to reach a point where all our University spaces and places recognise, respect and honour all people and our country's rich heritage in ways that resonate with our values and Mandela's ethos.

In particular, I wish to acknowledge that the process of renaming residences today emerged from a consultative process in which students were integrally involved. Student dialogues brought forth the consensus that names should emphasize our Afrikan identity and reflect on our location in the Eastern Cape. In addition, students put forth that names identified should *"resonate with human rights, engagement, decoloniality and cultural upliftment"*. These principles undergirded and informed the proposed names for student residences. Also important was to identify men and women who through their lives gave of themselves to build a better world. Situating these legacies in the spaces where students spend much of their time, is intended to transform the living and learning experiences of students whilst serving as a continuous inspiration and motivation to students during their stay in university residence.

We are thus deeply honoured that the families present here today have allowed us to name our student residences in memory of their loved ones. I thank the families for entrusting us with the rich legacies of:

Sarah Baartman
Solomon Mahlangu
Charlotte Maxeke
Lillian Ngoyi
Hector Pieterse
Sol Plaatje

We also honour the contributions of student leaders Yolanda Guma and Claude Qavane. May they live on in our memories, having served the university before their untimely passings.

To the family members present here today, I wish to assure you that the University will safeguard and carry forward with pride the noble legacies of each and every one of your family members. We recognise that by enjoining your families with the University, you journey with us as we strive to emulate the values espoused by Nelson Mandela of social justice and a more humane world.

I thank you.
