

Unveiling of the Mande Bench Project
Vice-Chancellor, Professor Sibongile Muthwa
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Good afternoon honoured guests, staff and students.

I am indeed privileged to greet you today, Africa Day, when we as Africans across the continent and in the diaspora, celebrate our unity, our oneness, our freedom and our common destiny. Africa day has its roots in the Conference of Independent African States convened by Ghana on April 15, 1958, which laid the foundations for the formation of the continental integration body, the Organisation of the African Unity (OAU) on May 25, 1963, and which 38 years later, evolved into the African Union (AU). Africa Day is the annual commemoration of Africa's independence, freedom and liberation strife from colonial imperialists. We have a shared duty to actively ensure the reinforcement of this liberation with determined efforts to build unity among the African people, and socioeconomic freedom from foreign dominion and exploitation. As a university, this means ensuring the widest access for students from poor and working class backgrounds, specifically females, and offering curricula that are inclusive of the wisdoms and knowledges of the continent and its peoples.

Following the University acquiring its new name as Nelson Mandela University, the University Council debated the meaning and implications of our University being named after South Africa's first democratically-elected President and one of the greatest statesmen of the 20th century, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela.

Our new name, Nelson Mandela University, coupled with the Mandela Centenary year celebrations is an ideal context in which to launch this Mandela Bench public art work. It is also a deliberate choice to do so in May, to mark the remembrance of Madiba being sent to Robben Island on 27 May 1963 and then 31 years later, after a life-time of imprisonment, being elected by Parliament as first president of a democratic South Africa on 9 May 1994, and inaugurated the following day on 10 May as the President of the Republic of South Africa.

This event is one of several events at Nelson Mandela University which is best suited to showcase institutional culture change and deliver on our stated intentions to live up to the Mandela name. This identity creation project will be able to challenge and transcend the widely accepted notions of tolerance and co-existence and ensure that all stakeholders truly feel they belong.

Mbembe says that in order to move forward towards the positive side of history, we need to "demythologise and de-commission" the symbols of history that hold us back. The time is now ripe to confront the political and class origins of the institutions that merged to make up our University, which have not been sufficiently debated. This negative legacy from the past, manifests in our public spaces, buildings, names, symbols, rituals and continues to influence our institutional culture. A new generation of rising young academics at Nelson Mandela University has pointed this out in different ways and drawn attention to the need to confront our history honestly and openly if we are to truly break with the past and move forward on the developmental trajectory we are charting.

At our University this will have a lot to do with how we choose to leverage public spaces in a manner that communicates our vision of inclusion and commitment to humanity.

Decolonizing the university starts with the de-privatization and rehabilitation of the public space – the rearrangement of spatial relations Fanon spoke so eloquently about in the first chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*.

It starts with a redefinition of what is public, namely, what pertains to the realm of the common and as such, does not belong to anyone in particular because it must be equally shared between equals. The decolonization of buildings and of public spaces is therefore not a frivolous issue, especially in a country that, for many centuries, has defined itself as not of Africa, but as an outpost of European imperialism in the Dark Continent; and in which 70% of the land is still firmly in the hands of 13% of the population.

Research further indicates that the arts are able to influence the making of shared meanings and new perspectives. Public art on campus is the physical embodiment of institutional missions and largely contributes to the creation and maintenance of the places where the University community can learn, live, and dialogue within an environment rich in meaning. Turning again to Mbembe, *“the decolonization of buildings and of public spaces is inseparable from the democratization of access”*.

Public art on campus celebrates the search for knowledge, while promoting the free exchanges of ideas. It is clear that the arts thus have the ability to enrich and transform an institution such as Nelson Mandela University.

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.

In Conclusion

In conclusion it must be said that we have much to achieve. As Mandela said: *“The important thing is that no single person can do everything.”*

Universities in South Africa have emerged from an exceptionally fragmented and divided past and are responding to this by reconceptualising and restructuring their institutional governance structures.

This is been done through the introduction of policies and strategies aimed at transforming institutional landscapes and creating environments that are conducive to meeting the demands and pressures of a transformed SA.

As the course of institutional development unfolds there is a need to create spaces for interaction between the internal and external university community that are safe, yet

challenging enough to contribute to the transformative changes required to produce a 'new institutional culture'.

There is a common and true perception that the arts can indeed contribute to the establishment of a transformative institutional culture. Public art such as this work here has the ability to influence the making of shared meanings and is able to contribute to the creation and maintenance of the places where our University community can learn, live, and dialogue within an environment rich in meaning.

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

Lastly in the words inscribed on the book Mandela is holding
"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world".

I invite you to share in and enjoy this beautiful work of art. May it ignite your imagination, spark rigorous debates and offer a space of reflection and contemplation about how you, and indeed each one of us, can change the world.

Enkosi, I thank you.