



**Vice-Chancellor's Report to Council  
Quarter 1, 2026**

**30 March 2026**

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## 1. Introduction

South African higher education is significantly impacted by fragmented global geopolitics, with shifting alliances affecting funding, research collaborations, and international mobility. Against this backdrop, Nelson Mandela University continues to leverage its strengths to mitigate emerging risks and optimise opportunities in a rapidly evolving global and national higher education landscape. As a values-driven, socially embedded institution, we remain committed to liberating the potential of students, staff, and communities for a more sustainable and socially just world. This report focuses on progress with implementing Council's key performance areas through the lens of student access for success, with an emphasis on the University's readiness for the 2026 academic year.

## 2. Vision 2030 and strategic trajectories

As we find ourselves midway through implementing our decadal Vision 2030 strategy, the University is at the cusp of the next five-year planning cycle, which extends from 2026 to 2030. It is therefore timely to pause and reflect on whether we are on track and assess what still needs to be done. The Vision 2030 mid-term review currently underway is being conducted through a quantitative assessment of key performance indicators and targets, complemented by a participatory, qualitative assessment based on the reflective inputs of students, staff, alumni, and selected external stakeholders. We will provide Council with feedback on this review in the next quarter.

### 2.1. Ocean Sciences

Nelson Mandela University has secured a prestigious Institutional University Cooperation (IUC) grant from VLIR-UOS to support a major collaborative programme titled SEALIFER, which stands for *Strengthening Sustainability, Engagement, Art and Learning Innovation through Fostering Excellence in Research*. The SEALIFER programme will be jointly coordinated by Professor Rosabelle Boswell from Mandela University and Professor Steven Van Wolputte from KU Leuven in Belgium. This partnership will focus on the complex relationships between people and the ocean, with particular attention to coastal communities, sustainable livelihoods, and the role of cultural heritage, knowledge systems, and innovation in addressing climate change and ecological transformation.

A further notable milestone was the hosting of the inaugural cohort of the South African Master's in Ocean Sciences (SAMOS) programme on our Ocean Sciences Campus in February 2026. This was enabled through an investment of R1.4 million towards refurbishments on the Ocean Sciences Campus to provide for dedicated teaching, laboratory, and administrative spaces for this flagship programme.

As part of a deliberate strategy to expand our programme offerings in ocean sciences, a Bachelor of Science Honours in Oceanography has been developed by the Faculty of Science to address a long-standing pipeline gap between undergraduate and Master's programmes. While the University has an attractive mix of postgraduate ocean sciences programmes, there is significant scope to expand interdisciplinary undergraduate offerings. Faculties have been

encouraged to consider this opportunity as part of the ongoing Programme and Qualification Mix (PQM) review.

A key milestone in the evolution of the Ocean Sciences governance and management model was the approval by the Human Resources and Remuneration Committee (HRREM) of Council of the position of Senior Director: Ocean Sciences, which will report to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research, Innovation and Internationalisation (DVC RII).

## **2.2. Medical School**

The Medical School enters a milestone year, with the sixth-year MBChB cohort set to graduate its first Mandela Doctors at the end of 2026. Academic performance remains strong, with an overall average pass rate of 95%. Fourth, fifth- and sixth-year students are concurrently placed on the clinical platform, strengthening peer mentorship, professional identity formation, and clinical readiness. Final-year students have begun a semester-long longitudinal district placement in the Sarah Baartman District at Midlands, Andries Vosloo, and Settlers Hospitals. This aligns with the Health Professions Council of South Africa's requirements for the Longitudinal Integrated Clerkship model and advances socially accountable, district-based training in partnership with the Eastern Cape Department of Health.

## **2.3. Revitalising the Humanities**

On 18 February, Nelson Mandela University hosted a commemoration of International Mother Tongue Day, with students, academics, and community members gathered to reflect on the role of mother tongues in a rapidly evolving digital society. The event was organised by the Faculty of Humanities in partnership with the Cultural, Religious and Linguistics (CRL) Rights Commission.

Mandela University's Dr Johannes Sibeko, the new Vice-President of the Digital Humanities Association of Southern Africa (DHASA), was recently invited to a landmark workshop in February 2026 at the Xplanatorium Herrenhausen in Hannover, Germany, joining 27 thought leaders from 16 countries.

## **2.4. Transdisciplinary Sustainability Sciences**

As the demand for green skills accelerates across South Africa, Nelson Mandela University's George Campus is spearheading a three-year collaboration, *Future21: Multidisciplinary Socio-Ecological Education in South Africa for Sustainability*. Future21 brings together seven institutions from South Africa, Finland, and Norway to integrate socio-ecological systems thinking into curricula, teaching methodologies, and institutional practices.

### **3. Distinctive Educational Purpose and Philosophy that Contributes to Student Access for Success**

#### **3.1. Student Access and Enrolment**

As Council is aware, the readiness of the post-school sector for the 2026 academic year is being closely monitored at the national level by Parliamentary oversight bodies. During February, we hosted visits by the Portfolio Committee on Higher Education and Training and the Acting Director General of Higher Education and Training, both of which focused on assessing registration processes, accommodation pressures, and student funding realities.

Together with members of our Council and other key constituencies, the University presented different facets of our efforts to enhance student access for success. This included an honest reflection on many of the sectoral and institutional challenges the institution has been navigating, such as the high demand for student transport and nutrition, inadequate on-campus student accommodation, rising student debt, and increasing crime rates in Gqeberha.

The University attracted a record number of 297 000 undergraduate and 20 305 postgraduate applications. This increase in applications reflects the University's growing reputation as a university of first choice. By the closing date of 30 September 2025, 172 000 conditional academic admission offers had been issued.

Messaging to applicants not to report to campus in January to seek admission-related information proved highly effective. Updates on the University website and the Mandela Mobile App, and the use of a new Artificial Intelligence (AI)-powered chatbot, which responded to student queries, resulted in significantly improved response times during the peak admission period.

As of 22 March, the University had enrolled a total of 34 091 students, which is slightly below our 2026 target of 34 785 enrolments, although research-based Master's and Doctoral enrolments will continue until April. First-Time Entering (FTEN) student enrolment has surpassed the target of 8 500, with 8 761 students enrolling. To date, we have enrolled 3 278 postgraduate students compared to our target of 3 474, and 531 international students compared to our target of 826. Strategies to address the declines in postgraduate and international enrolments in recent years were explored in depth at a workshop convened by our Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research, Innovation and Internationalisation on 20 March 2026.

Institutional research conducted by our Office for Institutional Strategy revealed that financial constraints remain one of the most significant barriers to postgraduate access. While students may meet the academic requirements for admission, available funding may not cover the full cost of study and living expenses. This propels some students towards part-time studies, which disqualifies them from certain categories of postgraduate funding. Furthermore, qualifying students with outstanding undergraduate debt are prevented from taking up postgraduate bursaries and scholarships and registering for postgraduate studies.

### **3.2. Student Readiness and Learning Development**

Extended First-Year Success orientation programmes supported more than 3 200 students through campus tours, information sessions, and exposure to academic and social resources. Student Success Coaches provided one-on-one support to students while Student Academic Development activities and the Academic Literacies Writing Programme strengthened and supported epistemic access. Supplemental Instruction (SI) supports 54 modules, with 33 SI leaders trained in the first semester.

Emthonjeni Student Wellness (ESW) provided counselling, crisis response, and preventative programming at the start of the academic year, processing more than 130 new counselling requests and delivering 172 individual sessions. Key presenting concerns included anxiety, depression, trauma, and academic stress.

### **3.3. Lecturer Readiness and Teaching Development**

Training strengthened the implementation of multilingual pedagogies aligned with the University's Language Policy. Funding was provided to translate course materials into isiXhosa and Afrikaans, supporting epistemic access and the intellectualisation of indigenous languages. The Beginning Your Journey (BYJ) Programme induction attracted newly appointed academics from across faculties, offering development in pedagogy, institutional culture, digital learning, student engagement, and the use of AI.

### **3.4. Technology-rich Learning and Teaching and the Virtual Academy**

The integration of FUNDA with university systems and Microsoft tools created a smooth digital learning ecosystem, improving single sign-on access, automatic module enrolment, and synchronisation between FUNDA and MS Teams. These developments have strengthened blended and hybrid learning capabilities across the institution.

The Executive Committee of Senate (ECS) approved the hybrid learning mode for selected Advanced Diplomas for the 2026 academic year. This will alleviate the challenge these students face at the beginning of the year, as many of them cannot afford accommodation, transport, and other essential needs.

## **4. Engaged, Innovative Scholarship Culture that Generates Knowledge Recognised for its Contribution to Sustainability**

### **4.1 Research Development**

Research Development advanced student access and success during the reporting period by strengthening inclusive capacity development through scholarships, postdoctoral and research fellowships, seed funding, and targeted training initiatives, ensuring equitable access to research opportunities.

The Mandela Undergraduate Research Academy (MURA) has been established as a strategic institutional initiative to strengthen the undergraduate-to-postgraduate research pipeline by providing mentored research hosting opportunities for high-performing final-year bachelor's

degree students. The outcomes of the calls for host researchers and undergraduate students are expected on 6 April 2026 and formal orientation is scheduled for 21 April 2026.

## **4.2. Postgraduate Support**

Council has approved an investment of R49.2 million for postgraduate scholarships in 2026, with R8.7 million (18%) already disbursed. Together with R29 million from external funders for Master's and Doctoral scholarships, this reflects the University's investment in advancing equitable postgraduate access and success. An initial R2-million allocation was secured through the Strategic Resource Mobilisation and Advancement (SRMA) Office to support part-time postgraduate scholarships, where demand has exceeded available funding.

A total of 102 postdoctoral and research fellowships were awarded for 2026, contributing to the University's emerging researcher pipeline, with 73% of awards made to Black researchers and 37% to women, reflecting continued progress towards a more diverse research cohort. An 80% uptake rate signals the University's competitiveness. The programme represents a consolidated investment of approximately R23.3 million, comprising R10 million in Council funding, R11.2 million from the National Research Foundation (NRF), R1.3 million from academic departments, and R875 000 in external funding.

During the reporting period, six research capacity development workshops were delivered, with a total of 162 participants benefiting, including 88 postgraduate students and 74 staff members. Of these participants, 96% were Black and 61% were women, which is indicative of the University's continued commitment to broadening access to high-quality research development opportunities.

Through the DHET-funded University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG), Nelson Mandela University provides targeted support to early- and mid-career researchers through a suite of Internal Research Grants. In addition, the DHET-funded New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP) cohort comprises 15 academics, with recruitment underway to fill nine additional vacancies. The Nurturing Emerging Scholars Programme (NESP) is also funded by the DHET, and the University currently has four active scholars.

In 2026, 13 new NRF Thuthuka grants were awarded, bringing the total number of recipients to 29. This represents more than a threefold increase over the past five years. A projected total of R2.4 million has been secured for the 2026 academic year.

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

The Africa Footprint Project advances the internationalisation of the curriculum by bringing African perspectives, collaborative teaching opportunities, and intercultural learning experiences into the classroom environment. The International Office recently welcomed His Excellency Professor Alex Turyatamba Bashasha, the Honorary Consul of Comoros, based in Uganda, and a distinguished Mandela University PhD alumnus. Prof Bashasha was joined by Eddy Barigye of Choice Placements and Dr Jack Kinobe, Chargé d'Affaires at the Consulate of the Union of Comoros. The strategic visit aimed to reinforce the University's presence in East Africa and enhance international partnerships through alumni diplomacy and reliable recruitment channels.

On 12 February 2026, a delegation from Utrecht University in the Netherlands met with Nelson Mandela University's International Office (IO) to advance collaboration between the two institutions. The engagement signalled a transition toward structured and programmatic collaboration focused on identifying practical mechanisms to operationalise cooperation across faculties, including postgraduate co-supervision arrangements, joint research initiatives, and the development of a joint summer school platform.

On 19 February 2026, the International Office hosted a visit from Ostfalia University of Applied Sciences in Germany. Following the renewal of the institutional MoU in 2025, engagements focused on operational planning for reciprocal student mobility scheduled to commence in the second semester of 2026. Further areas of cooperation include joint research collaboration, staff exchanges, and joint organising of symposia, summer schools, and conferences.

Outbound mobility for Nelson Mandela University students remains constrained by the absence of dedicated funding. Addressing this gap will be an important consideration in advancing a balanced internationalisation strategy.

#### **4.4. Innovation**

The Innovation Office attended the NRF Societal Impact of Research workshop in Pretoria on 26 January 2026 to deepen its understanding of how research outputs translate into real-world benefits. The key focus was unpacking what "impact" means in societal terms, including how researchers embed impact thinking throughout the research lifecycle.

The Innovation Office delivered a presentation at the Creative Arts and Entrepreneurship Exchange Session on 5 February 2026. The session aimed to bridge creative practice, business, and innovation by exploring mechanisms to transition student creative practice into sustainable economic opportunities. The University also hosted the National Cleantech Innovation Challenge (NCIC) Roadshow in January 2026, as part of the Eastern Cape leg of the national programme. The roadshow forms part of the national Just Transition to the Future Programme, aimed at supporting cleantech entrepreneurs.

The RII portfolio is establishing an Innovation Strategy Steering Committee comprising internal experts and leaders from across the University to support the successful development and implementation of an Innovation Strategy.

#### **4.5. Library and Information Services**

The activation of the new library management system, Alma, and discovery platform, Primo, on 8 January 2026, together with the full implementation of OpenAthens Redirector, significantly modernised the University's information services infrastructure. Students and researchers now benefit from secure, seamless remote access to licensed electronic resources. The University's digital collection is a cornerstone of student access and comprises nearly 380 000 e-books and over 82 000 e-journals. A key strategic highlight was the addition of over 9 200 new e-books to meet evolving curriculum needs.

## **5. Transformative Institutional Culture that Promotes Diversity and Social Cohesion**

### **5.1. Institutional Public Lectures (IPL)**

The Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe institutional public lecture was delivered on 25 February by Professor Kwandiwe Kondlo from Wits University, with Professor Zethu Cakata (UNISA) as a respondent. Entitled *Robert Sobukwe reading 'the signs of times' – a philosophical postscript*, the lecture focused on the need for leaders with the moral stature to address the failing economy, poor service delivery, unemployment, and poverty. The Dennis Brutus public lecture took place on 10 March 2026 at the South End Museum. The lecture was delivered by climate activist, Dr Kumi Naidoo, and focused on environmental degradation and the struggle for climate justice, which must be rooted in the protection of our shared future.

### **5.2. Mandela University Press (MUP)**

The Mandela University Press held two book launches as part of the Faculty of Humanities Multilingualism Indaba on 26 March: *Pan-African Integration from Below: Language, Publics, Culture* by Finex Ndhlovu and Jesta Masuku, and *Animal Farm* (translated into Sepedi) by Dr Lenkwane Henry Mathunyane.

### **5.3. Science Centre**

The Science Centre has continued to evolve as a transversal, community-facing platform, which extends the University's societal footprint. It has increasingly positioned itself as a hub for digital skills, sustainability-oriented learning, and public engagement with science. In partnership with Odin Education, a division of Jendamar, the University launched the Future Talent Centre on 31 January as a dedicated facility within the Science Centre to accelerate digital literacy, AI fluency, and inclusive innovation-led capability building. This initiative positions AI as a public good to address societal challenges.

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

The EO facilitated staff and student participation in the UNESCO Chair-hosted Knowledge for Change (K4C) Africa Region Residency from 25 January to 5 February. The residency deepened scholarly collaboration with partner institutions in South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda. Through this network, Mandela University also joined a national Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) initiative on climate change, hunger, and period poverty.

The Student Hubs of Convergence (SHoC) led a strategic collaboration with the International University of Grand-Bassam in the Ivory Coast to foreground youth leadership in environmental and coastal sustainability, Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), and transdisciplinary learning. Through SHoC, students also co-designed and implemented the Student Nutrition Advocacy Communication (SNAC) signature project.

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

The Safeguarding Policy and the Policy for Inclusive Gender Identities, Expressions, and Sexual Orientation were broadly consulted, approved at the committee level, and submitted to MANCO for approval. Advocacy, awareness, and policy training activities continue, with a specific focus on the first-year student success programme.

A comparative overview of the period 1 January–31 December 2025 against the same period in 2024 shows an overall increase in equality-related incidents. Most cases reflect student-on-student interactions, while incidents involving third parties also rose. Both discrimination- and sexual-related complaints increased, and a noticeable number of common assault cases underscored persistent challenges in non-violent conflict resolution. In response, the TO will implement de-escalation training and alternative dispute resolution initiatives for students and staff. On- and off-campus residences remained primary hotspots, although social media-related cases grew notably in 2025. While harassment incidents in residences declined, gender-based violence (GBV) cases in these areas increased over the same period.

The Legal Services Office is actively addressing the backlog in processing equality-related referrals by implementing parallel sessions to schedule and manage multiple cases simultaneously.

### **5.6. Centre for Women and Gender Studies (CWGS)**

The CWGS is hosting Visiting Professor Dr Yolande Bouka, Canada Research Chair in Afrofeminist Thought and Political Transformation, and Associate Professor of Gender and Politics and International Relations at Queen's University, Canada, from 21 February to 4 April 2026. With UNISA's Prof Darlene Miller also visiting the University, Prof Bouka will take part in public engagements focused on co-creating the MA in Gender Studies curriculum, interdisciplinary knowledge exchange, and global questions affecting women.

The Centre was represented at the African Women in Dialogue Review, hosted by the Zanele Mbeki Foundation and the Women's Development Trust. The event brought together 200 African women representing all 55 African states in Johannesburg in January 2026.

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

In February, CANRAD co-hosted a Youth Dialogue with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation focused on unpacking democracy, where external stakeholders such as schools participated. The Centre also co-hosted the Fourth Annual Black History Month Event with the Faculty of Humanities and the Democracy Development Programme. The book *Electoral Observation*, co-edited by CANRAD Director Prof Bhekithemba Mngomezulu, Dr Paul Kariuki (Democracy Development Programme Director), and Dr Stanley Ehiane (University of Botswana), has been published and will be officially launched ahead of the local government elections.

### **5.8. Centre for Integrated Post-School Education and Training (CIPSET)**

A flagship CIPSET programme, *Learning for the Future*, foregrounds the relationship between education, livelihoods, and sustainability. Through sustained engagement with small-scale fishers and community farmers, CIPSET supports peer learning, cooperative leadership, and

community-led climate adaptation planning. The Centre is also working with urban community farmers and supports the Green Technologies Engineering Cooperative, which integrates vocational skills development with green livelihood opportunities.

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

At the end of 2025, CriSHET hosted the Critical Sustainability Literacies and the Civic University workshop with partner universities. Professor Hugo Canham (UNISA) presented on Black Planetary Studies and how it might contribute towards Critical Sustainability Literacies.

This quarter, the Chair hosted Dr Joseph Besigye Bazirake, a Research Associate with CriSHET, to launch his new book, *Higher Education Institutional Change: Perspectives from South Africa* (2025). The book provides a layered analytical framework for institutional change and is a useful resource for thinking about university transformation.

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

TIMS and the Faculty of Humanities partnered with the House of Klaas and Dawid Stuurman to host the annual Chief Dawid Stuurman Memorial Lecture at the end of February. The lecture was delivered by anti-apartheid activist, Dr Allan Boesak, and focused on the theme, *But the Khoisan chose Freedom*. The event included local Eastern Cape Khoisan leadership, local schools, and representatives from the National House of Traditional and Khoisan Leaders.

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

The Unit has completed two studies that explore the knowledge, attitudes, behaviour, and practices of South African Police Service (SAPS) officials regarding gender-based violence (GBV) and commercial sex workers in Gqeberha. The findings were presented at an event hosted by the Office of the Premier and will contribute to revising training centre curricula.

## **6. Enhancing Student Living and Learning Experiences**

The Student Life and Development (SLD) portfolio's interventions during the first quarter were central to ensuring academic continuity and honouring the University's access and enrolment commitments in practice.

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

Nelson Mandela University hosted The Education Collaborative's Southern Africa Hub Convening from 14 to 16 January 2026 under the theme *Strengthening Student Development in Higher Education in Southern Africa: Centring Purpose, Belonging, and Impact*. Higher education leaders and stakeholders came together to advance shared strategies for student success and co-create solutions to the region's most pressing higher education challenges.

Leadership, training, and development interventions led by Student Governance and Development included the induction of the Student Representative Council (SRC) members, training 94 House Committee leaders, and an orientation for student societies.

## **6.2. Student Entrepreneurship and Graduate Employability**

In January, students and researchers participated in the Global Entrepreneurship Camp held in Bangkok, Thailand. This initiative focuses on entrepreneurial skill-building and engaging participants in cross-cultural collaboration, hackathons, and pitch competitions.

The South African Entrepreneurial Innovators Seminar 2026, held in February, drew aspiring entrepreneurs, business owners, and international delegates for a two-day workshop. The programme was presented by industry professionals and multi-skilled entrepreneurs and created a space for young entrepreneurs to exchange ideas on how to grow their businesses.

In February, the University and the Eastern Cape Development Corporation (ECDC) met to advance implementation plans to create pathways for innovation and entrepreneurship in the creative industries, including film, fashion, arts, media, and the oceans economy. Expanded programmes to be undertaken in 2026 include equipping students with industry-relevant skills, increasing practical exposure, and nurturing creative talent.

The University officially launched the Chancellor's Entrepreneurship Fund on 27 February 2026 at a fundraising gala dinner. More than R10-million was pledged in financial support and in-kind contributions. The new fund, a legacy initiative of outgoing Chancellor, Dr Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, will support students, graduates, and community-based entrepreneurs by providing funding, mentorship, internship programmes, business consulting, networks, and enterprise development support. The Samsung Innovation Campus programme was also launched at this event. At an estimated value of R3.6-million, this three-year partnership will focus on equipping students with critical Fourth Industrial Revolution skills.

## **6.3. Student Housing**

Accommodation demand continues to exceed on-campus capacity. Against this backdrop, an Accommodation Crisis Management Task Team has been established to monitor daily demand fluctuations, escalate urgent placement cases, coordinate with Financial Aid and Student Accounts departments, and engage with student leadership on status updates. Accommodation pressure for unfunded and partially funded students remains a structural risk requiring a long-term intervention.

An allocation of R1-million was secured through the Nelson Mandela University Trust to support Advanced Diploma students with accommodation costs. Eligibility criteria were developed and implemented by Financial Aid in collaboration with Student Housing.

Horticultural services have initiated a strategic partnership with Student Housing to develop landscaped recreational spaces within student residences, particularly in new developments. This initiative supports improved student wellbeing, enhanced quality of residence life, and the creation of functional outdoor spaces that promote inclusion and a sense of community.

## **6.4. Student Wellness**

Student Health Services activated structured awareness and preventative campaigns across campuses, including orientation talks, reproductive health awareness, HIV testing, and non-communicable disease monitoring. In addition, and in order to address the ongoing scourge of student food insecurity, approximately 500 nutrition packs are distributed monthly to unfunded students.

## **6.5. Madibaz Sport**

Sport recruitment strengthens institutional competitiveness while contributing positively to student success and throughput. The outcome of an ECS-approved concession enabling qualifying sport applicants meeting minimum requirements to receive firm offers outside merit ranking (for non-selection programmes) has led to 72 concession placements secured, 21 additional placements facilitated, and 160 prospective sport students submitted for consideration.

Nelson Mandela University's (Madibaz) sporting performance is headlined by a competitive FNB Varsity Shield rugby campaign, with the rugby team navigating a challenging season, experiencing a mixture of wins and tight losses. Our rowing teams showed strong results at the Buffalo Regatta in East London, with Madibaz students in the B and C divisions being awarded eleven medals, five of which were gold.

The University community was saddened by the death of a 21-year-old student on 24 February 2026, who drowned in the Indoor Sports Centre swimming pool.

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

For 2026, 2 593 applications were from students with disabilities, with 12 FTEN students registered. Disclosure rates historically comprise approximately 1% of enrolment, and there has been a decline in first-year disability registrations compared to 2025. Addressing infrastructure universal design gaps will be prioritised for the second quarter alongside strengthening early disclosure engagement strategies.

# **7. Enabling Systems and Infrastructure that Promote an Exceptional Experience for Students, Employees and Key Stakeholders**

## **7.1. Human Resources**

The events at the start of the academic year underscore how student access and enrolment are not sustained by academic strategy alone, but by the grit and dedication of the University's workforce. Institutional operational continuity during disruption, competitive talent positioning, and strengthened managerial accountability are central priorities.

The e-HR Strategy continues to modernise HR systems to improve efficiency, strengthen governance controls, and reduce administrative burden. Examples of these include enhanced

leave compliance systems, online termination, workflow redevelopment, the development of dashboards for workforce analytics, and an employment equity tracking framework.

The University is in Year 1 of the 2025–2030 Employment Equity Plan. As of 1 February 2026, there were 2 381 permanent employees, of which 93 (3.9%) were employees with disabilities, which exceeds the statutory requirement. Between 1 November 2025 and 13 February 2026, 53 appointments were concluded, of which 19 were academic appointments. 96% of the appointments made were from underrepresented groups, and 36% were female, contributing toward the trajectory of a diversified workforce.

Nelson Mandela University welcomes Professor Sudesh Rathilal as the new Executive Dean of the Faculty of Engineering, the Built Environment and Technology. Joining us from the Durban University of Technology (DUT), Prof Rathilal focuses on advancing green hydrogen research and developing innovative systems for micropollutant removal from wastewater.

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

The Process Improvement and Digitalisation Task Team of the Enrolment Management Committee was pivotal in strengthening the 2026 admissions and registration cycle through targeted system enhancements and automation. These improvements reduced manual intervention, improved turnaround times, enhanced auditability, and strengthened queue management during peak periods. The University provisioned interim digital access for students with a status of “accepted but not yet registered”, enabling early engagement with learning platforms while administrative processes were resolved.

Significant progress has been made in digital infrastructure by expanding campus-wide Wi-Fi capacity through Wi-Fi 6 deployment and upgrading the University’s SANReN bandwidth. The Student Device Initiative continues to advance digital equity, with more than 22 000 devices issued to National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS)-funded first-time entering students since inception. Enhancements to the Learning Management System (Moodle 4), Customer Relations Management (CRM) platform, timetabling systems, and student support platforms further strengthened operational resilience and service delivery.

As automation expands, cybersecurity remains a strategic priority. A multi-layered approach, including vulnerability assessments, penetration testing, data loss prevention measures, and exploration of a managed Security Operations Centre (SOC), reflects the University’s commitment to safeguarding institutional data and ensuring operational continuity.

## **7.3. Infrastructure Services and Space Optimisation**

The photovoltaic (PV) installations have started on various campuses to promote energy security, with completion estimated to be in November 2026. The University also embarked on an emergency backup power/generator plan that will integrate with the PV project. The Metro and George campuses all face renewed water risks as dam levels show a sharp decline this quarter, highlighting the importance of implementing Water Plan 2024-2029.

The project to introduce e-assessment and proctoring has included the roll-out of the digital platform and construction work to repurpose the Heinz Betz Hall into a modern e-assessment centre. The construction phase, valued at R40 million, should be completed in June 2026.

The DHET has granted permission for the University to start spending R100 million allocated for medical school infrastructure projects.

#### **7.4. Support Services**

Support services, such as safety and security, cleaning, catering, and horticultural services, have focused on stabilising operational environments to support safe, hygienic, functional, and student-centred campuses and residences. Safety and Security's migration of CCTV infrastructure to the HikCentral system will allow CCTV footage to be retained for up to three years, strengthening investigative capacity, compliance, and institutional risk management.

#### **7.5. Communication and Marketing**

Recruitment outcomes showed that a record number of applications were received for under- and postgraduate study at Nelson Mandela University, an important indicator that the University remains a viable study option for students in South Africa and beyond.

The Vice-Chancellor's Welcoming Address on 31 January 2026 drew more than 4 500 students and parents across the Gqeberha and George Campuses. The event served as a strategic platform to affirm Nelson Mandela University's values and value proposition.

Strategically timed articles and communication pieces were published on external and internal platforms. This included an article written by the Chairperson of Council, Judge Nambitha Dambuza, which was published in the Daily Maverick to reflect on the tragic student deaths that took place in 2025.

### **8. Enhance Long-term Financial Sustainability through Effective Resource Mobilisation and Responsible Resource Stewardship**

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

For 2026, the bursary fundraising target is set at R110 million. From January 2026 to date, approximately R23.5 million has been received. This includes R15 million from the MERSETA and Eastern Cape Office of the Premier to assist students who have completed their studies but who have historical debt preventing them from receiving their certificates. Disbursement of the funds received is currently underway to 395 identified and verified beneficiaries.

The target for engagement projects in 2026 is R25 million, up from R20 million in 2025, and more than R4 million has been received to date.

#### **8.2. Financial Planning**

The subsidy allocation letter from the Minister confirmed a 4.49% increase on the 2025 block grant subsidy, which was favourable compared to the University's budget projection of a 2.6% increase. The latest Ministerial Statement and the Medium-Term Budget Policy Statement indicate potential increases in block grants for the sector over the medium term. The cash flow

of the University is sound, as indicated in both the cash flow report and the analysis of funds. A detailed financial report will be tabled for Council.

By 26 February, 21 118 NSFAS-funded students had registered, 7 101 of whom were FTEN students. NSFAS allowances were released on 4 February 2026. To further advance student access and success, R119.68 million has been earmarked for student bursaries in 2026. An additional R2.68 million was added to the 2025 baseline allocation to address specific challenges related to postgraduate student access. Furthermore, approximately R14.8 million has been allocated to support staff members and their dependents who are studying at the University.

Council approved the 2026 budget and APP at its last Council meeting. This included a 4.15% increase in tuition fees and a 5.7% increase in student accommodation fees. Although Council has allowed an increase in the salary sustainability indicator to 66.5% (2024-2027), this must be reduced to 65% in the 2028 budget by managing staffing costs. Furthermore, the Sustainability and Institutional Viability Task Team (SIVTT) is devising strategies to promote long-term sustainability, complemented by the Masonge Siphuhlise institutional culture signature programme campaign.

Two new strategic reserves were established as part of the 2026 Budget, one for the Medical School to mitigate financial shortfalls arising from inadequate government funding, and another for a Digitalisation Strategy Reserve to fund the University's Digital Transformation (DX) Strategy.

### **8.3. Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE)**

The University has achieved an adjusted Level 4, in line with the targeted score communicated to all governance committees in 2025. The 2025 financial year-end target (to be verified in 2026) is Level 3, with the implementation of Learnership, Internship, and Apprenticeship programmes identified as the key areas for improvement.

## **9. Conclusion**

The first quarter of 2026 highlights the complexity of Nelson Mandela University's operating environment, and we thank all academic and support employees for their steadfast commitment to promoting student access and success as one of our core mandates. Council can be assured that the University is progressing purposefully toward Vision 2030, advancing access, equity, excellence, and transformation, thanks to Council's guidance and oversight. We wish to especially thank outgoing Chancellor, Dr Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, for her exemplary service and stewardship, as we anticipate the investiture of incoming Chancellor, Dr Grace Naledi Mandisa Pandor, in April.