

# NELSON MANDELA UNIVERSITY

## **Nelson Mandela University Alumni Association Annual General Meeting**

**Address by Vice-Chancellor: Prof S Muthwa**

Virtual Meeting, 24 August 2021, 18:00 SAT

- President and Executive Committee of the Alumni Association,
- Members of the Association,
- Members of management and staff, and
- Friends of the University

### **Introduction**

It gives me great pleasure to address members of our Nelson Mandela University Alumni Association at its AGM. I appreciate the opportunity to share some of the challenges and developments at the University and to emphasise the very important role of our alumni in the continued growth and development of their *alma mater*.

### **Challenges and Opportunities**

The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted all our lives in so many ways, and this evening we acknowledge with sadness all the lives lost during the pandemic. We have lost students, staff, alumni, family, friends and colleagues. It was therefore, with a sense of relief that vaccinations are now open to 18 year-olds and above. The majority of our students – **future alumni** – fall into this cohort and we are thankful for the opportunity to move a step closer to achieving a greater measure of safety and hopefully, of normality.

The socio-economic impact has been massive. South Africa has long been recognised as the most unequal society in the world, and the pandemic has exacerbated this. Our already unacceptably high unemployment rate (especially amongst young people) has increased even further. So much has already changed, and is changing in our lives and in the lives of the broader university family. The global economic downturn and the national fiscal outlook have called into question the sustainability of higher education institutions in South Africa.

As a public university in service of society, we have striven to manage the impact of the pandemic as best we can with what we have, and to try to contribute to some of the broader societal challenges. In April last year, we established the Mandela University Convergence Fund as a solidarity fund for staff, students, alumni and friends of the University, to relieve hardship and distress in communities in which the University is located. I am proud to report that over R1,1 million was raised and deployed in partnership with credible civil society organisations. Initially the emphasis was on safe food relief (masks, sanitiser and food), but interventions through our Engagement and Transformation Portfolio are evolving to more sustainable food production. I would like to thank the Alumni Association and all alumni who supported the Convergence Fund. Your contributions have really helped us make a difference in the lives of some of the poor and the vulnerable. There were a number of other externally-focused responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, which were coordinated by a Covid-19 Coordinating Committee chaired by Prof. Andre Keet, the DVC for Engagement and Transformation. It is my sincere wish that as we rebuild our country after the pandemic, we build a more equal and caring society.

Internally, we put in place processes to manage the impact of the pandemic and lockdown on staff and students. I am proud to report that notwithstanding the very adverse circumstances, we managed to successfully complete the 2020 academic year, and start the 2021 academic programme in March. In this regard I must really pay tribute to all staff – but especially our academic staff – who responded in an agile and flexible manner, and who went far beyond the normal call of duty. As alumni you can be very proud of them.

Amongst the many interventions to mitigate the impact of the pandemic, the University established an accredited vaccination site for students, staff and the broader community. I am sure you have seen media reports of this. It is another example of how the University is seeking to leverage its capacity, within its mandate, to make a positive difference in society. We are very proud to be an engaged university. On this note, I would like to urge all of our alumni who qualify for vaccinations to get vaccinated if they have not already done so. If you are in Gqeberha and have registered for the vaccine, feel free to make use of our vaccination site on the North Campus.

I am also pleased to report that in March 2021 our new Medical School opened its doors with the first intake of 50 MBChB students. The Medical School has been conceptualised quite uniquely. Not only will our new programme address a pressing need for medical doctors, it will also hone the professionals of the future through a progressive curriculum, embedded in a social accountability framework, and geared to maximise the positive impact for local communities. We can all feel proud of this ground-breaking Medical School model, which is already attracting interest far and wide. It is a model that not only speaks to our

ethos, but also honours our namesake President Mandela, and all that he stood for.

Earlier this year, and for the first time, Nelson Mandela University participated in the Times Higher Education Impact Rankings (which measure contributions to supporting the UN Sustainable Development Goals). When the rankings were released, Nelson Mandela University was ranked fourth in South Africa (after the University of Johannesburg, the University of Pretoria and the University of Cape Town). In terms of our ocean sciences capacity ('Life below water', SDG 14) we were ranked 40<sup>th</sup> in the world - the only university in South Africa to rank in this SDG. **These results confirm the institution's commitment to being an engaged university that is making its contribution to the SDGs, as well as social and economic development.**

Another notable milestone in 2021 was the adoption by Council of Vision 2030. This is an evolution from Vision 2020, and charts a trajectory for Nelson Mandela University over the next 10 years. Vision 2030 went through an intensive consultation process before formal adoption. Our Alumni were of course, part of that process, and here too, I would like to thank the Alumni Association and alumni for engaging with Vision 2030 and helping us to craft a strategy that will guide our development and operations into the future. Strategic Priority 4 in Vision 2030 (**'Catalyse dynamic, student centric approaches and practices that provide life-changing student experiences within and beyond the classroom'**) specifically refers to the important role of alumni in the activities and initiatives of the University to enhance global visibility and reach, through value adding collaborative networks.

These achievements and many other matters are covered in our August 2021 edition of *Thetha*, the magazine for alumni and friends of the University. Please make sure you receive *Thetha* and feel free to share it with family and friends.

### **Role of Alumni to help realise Vision 2030**

I would now like to turn more specifically to the role of alumni in helping us realise Vision 2030. Alumni are often referred to as the only permanent and ever-growing stakeholder group of an academic institution, as well as important ambassadors who represent the global footprint of an academic institution. This is so true of our alumni.

During 2020-21 we invested in updating our alumni database. Our most recent reports (June 2021) indicate that Nelson Mandela University and its predecessors conferred 163 918 qualifications (of which 41 214 have more than one qualification). The Alumni Relations Office currently has 48 426 alumni email addresses, 55 607 cell numbers and 23 525 alumni LinkedIn connections. There are 48 987 alumni on LinkedIn who indicate they have an academic connection to Mandela University and its predecessors. It is clear from these figures that there are tremendous opportunities to reconnect with our alumni via different platforms. We intend leveraging those opportunities - always mindful of the Protection of Personal Information Act requirements.

One of the lessons the pandemic has taught us is the importance of virtual meetings and online engagements. At the end of 2020 we invested in an online networking platform called Graduway. The Alumni Relations Office started developing our *Mandela Alumni Connect* network on the platform during 2021. The vision is to develop a strong online network of alumni and special interest

groups, which will contribute in building a unique Nelson Mandela University alumni culture where the transition from student to graduate and active alumnus will be easy and organic. Our student experiences, graduate attributes and meaningful livelihoods are very important factors which influence affinity and connection levels. The role of academic and support departments in helping to develop these relationships is key. The future roll-out of advanced features of *Mandela Alumni Connect*, such as online mentoring, will be of great benefit to both students and alumni. Please use this platform to connect with your university and to stay engaged.

The roles alumni can play in support of their *alma mater* have generally included being ambassadors, mentors, coaches, advisors, Councillors, Trustees, donors, members of interest groups, volunteers, sharing expertise/skills, helping secure donations, furthering their studies at their *alma mater* and promoting the University, as a first choice University. These roles and contributions remain relevant.

I previously mentioned the impact of the pandemic and economic downturn on the sustainability of higher education institutions. Our University has a strong track record of judicious and prudent financial management, but we cannot ignore the risks posed by the current fiscal outlook. The University Council has mandated management to assess the full implications of the macro-economic outlook, and to recommend relevant interventions to ensure the continued sustainability and viability of your university. We have established a Sustainability Task Team which will be undertaking the necessary research and modelling, and which will make recommendations on suitable interventions.

The role of, and input of our alumni on the future sustainability of the University will continue to be crucial.

We cannot escape the possibility of declining government funding in real terms over the next few years, and will have to redouble efforts to mobilise additional resources. A very important area of alumni support is contributing to the financial sustainability of your alma mater. Through our organisational redesign process in 2020 we made provision for increased capacity in the Alumni Relations Office to manage fundraising campaigns nationally and internationally. The Nelson Mandela University Trust has steadily increased the funds it mobilises for bursaries and engagement projects. As a PBO, the Trust can issue tax certificates for qualifying donations in South Africa. We have now entered into a relationship with the King Baudouin Foundation in the United States, which is a leading resource for philanthropic giving. They will offer a platform for US donors to give tax deductible gifts to Mandela University. But I would like to hear from you – our alumni – how we can grow alumni financial support for this, your University. We are turning to you to not only support us financially, but to also advise on innovative ways of increasing alumni financial support to Nelson Mandela University.

It would be remiss of me if I did not pay tribute here to the Alumni Association and the Alumni Association Executive Committee. The personal time shared by office bearers and elected members to serve on structures of the University such as Council and the Institutional Forum (IF), is commendable. I would once again like to congratulate Mr Khwezi Blose and Mr Khaya Matiso on their re-election to Council and the IF respectively. We are grateful for these personal acts of

service to the university. We will continue to look to you for guidance and support.

The University Shop is an important alumni project. Our Alumni Association had the vision to invest in the establishment of the University Shop as a self-sustaining retail unit, with a mandate to contribute to the development of the Nelson Mandela University brand. As DVC **for Institutional Support** in 2017, I had the honour of cutting the ribbon of the rebranded University Shop and I have witnessed the growth in turnover, which only showed a decline during the pandemic period. The University Shop is an asset and a key brand development tool. It offers employment and experiential learning opportunities to students. With our product ranges growing, and the potential to grow our markets with students, alumni and friends of the University, there is also a need for new and bigger premises. The Alumni Relations Office has been engaged in discussions with the infrastructure Department of the University on exciting new premises for the shop. If these come to fruition, we can look forward to our own Mandela University Shop flagship store.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I would like to thank the Alumni Association Executive Committee and the Alumni Relations Office for all the alumni engagement efforts. A special word of thanks to all our alumni across the globe who continue to support their *alma mater*. We have an opportunity, as a new generation university, to build a unique alumni culture. It is a major long-term effort. It requires your continued support and goodwill. Let us continue to *Change the World*, together.



My last task today is to make a very special announcement: our University Shop is going online!

*Note: VC pause at this point.*

*A very short video will be played at this stage for impact <1 min.*

*After the video VC continues.*

Please be sure to be amongst the first online customers.

Stay safe and stay connected to your university.

I thank you!

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