

Advancing Mandela University – Consolidating the Gains, Charting the Future
Together

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Business School Auditorium, 29 March 2023

Renowned Afrikaans poet Antjie Krog, in the 'Letter-poem lullaby for Ntombizana Atoo' translated into English, asked the child to:

... to see differently

for us Africans – us the children of the abyss

we all have to balance differently

this continent drifting like a big black plundered heart on the globe

continent that is us...

you have to feel the tremor that things have to be different

that something has to become true of what we are

that what we are as Africans is something so soft so humanly skinned

so profoundly constitutionally big and light and kind as soul

so caring as to surpass all understanding

motho ke motho ke batho babang

rather

*we are what we are because we are of each other....*¹

In a round table discussion on his award-winning and acclaimed film Zulu Love Letter, Bhekizizwe Peterson observed:

*I was created as a love letter to those who passed on and those still tasked with creating a better future for all.*²

1. This afternoon I stand before you - our broad Nelson Mandela University family - to return to the centre of what makes us special as a University. This event is an affirmation of a chosen culture of collective accountability for, and communal celebration of, the life and advancement of our beloved institution. I thank you all for taking time to join us, whether in person or virtually.
2. In the life of a functional and successful institution, its people- communities and commons- and its leaders are intrinsically linked. Indeed, successful institutions are scaffolded by the goodwill and generosity of their people.
3. And these linkages and connections are produced by our histories and how we show up at our University, in all our differences and diversities.
4. My life philosophy, rooted in my humble, rural upbringing, and shared in my inaugural address in 2018,³ has dovetailed quite seamlessly with the vision the

¹ Krog, A. (2012, January 12). *Letter-poem lullaby for Ntombizana Atoo*. Versindaba.

² Isabel Hofmeyr, 24 June 2021 in *The Conversation* on Peterson, B. and Suleman, R. (2004). *Zulu love letter* [Film]. JBA Production.

³ Muthwa, S. (2018, April 17). *Taking Nelson Mandela University Boldly into the Future in Service of Society* [Inaugural address]. Nelson Mandela University, Gqeberha, South Africa.

university adopted through a wide-ranging consultative process, including the listening campaign we conducted in 2018 ahead of, and after the inaugural.

5. This deep connection with the cause of those at the margins of history and life, has largely influenced my own prism in navigating leadership and daily awareness of decisions we make. I am also convinced that this posture and paradigm align with the intentions of this institution and the ideals it seeks to pursue through the canon of the African academy; throughout the university
6. That is, our university community wants a more efficient, and humanising institution, to better serve the imperative of transformation and social embeddedness ... a university in the service of society. These outlines are becoming clearer, day by day.
7. Amidst all our challenges, within and beyond, we have made strides; and need to continue to make our future together.
8. This is the central theme of my address today.

Madame Chancellor, Dr Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi

Chairperson of Council, Ambassador Nozipho January-Bardill

Members of the University Council

Members of Senate

Alumni Association Executive, local, and global alumni network

Members of Executive Management

Executive Deans

All academic, professional, administrative and support staff

Leadership of our unions: NEHAWU and NTEU

President of the SRC, and student leaders

Partners, collaborators and friends of Nelson Mandela University

Leadership, political and administrative, of the three spheres of our government

Representatives of the private sector

Community leaders and activists here today

Honorary, Emeritus, Adjunct, and Visiting Professors and Associates online and in person

Dignitaries, family, friends

Honoured guests

9. On 17 April 2018, I had the privilege and honour of being inaugurated as Vice-Chancellor of Nelson Mandela University. On that occasion, and under the title of 'Taking Nelson Mandela University Boldly into the Future in Service of Society',⁴ we outlined a five-year vision and programme for our university.⁵

10. A big part of the first term was characterised by the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on work and life, in addition to the broad perennial challenges that our country has been grappling with... rising levels of poverty, socio-economic

⁴ See Footnote 3.

⁵ The Office for Institutional Strategy, Nelson Mandela University. (2022). *Five-year strategic review (2018-2022)*.

inequalities, environmental degradation, all requiring a constant re-evaluation of our responses as institutions for the public good.

11. The opportunity to share this address this afternoon on advancing Mandela University is important for at least two reasons. It provides an opportunity to give an account of progress made, and secondly, it sets out the intentions of the second term of office, sketching what I believe is a very exciting journey ahead. I am especially pleased that we are meeting this afternoon in our Business School auditorium as the foregrounding of the Business School is something that has been enjoying attention of late and is a matter that will come to fruition in the next year or so.
12. The *Five-Year Review Report*,⁶ which accompanies this address, articulates our context in detail and also fleshes out the progress made on the inaugural undertakings of 2018. I will therefore not dwell on these in any great detail.
13. To a large degree, the strategic direction we charted in 2018 remains valid for the next five years. These priorities are embedded in our Vision 2030⁷ and find expression in the strategic plans of the different University portfolios; whilst being cascaded throughout the institution.
14. I must emphasise that the gains we have made at Nelson Mandela University would not have been possible without the unflagging support, guidance and wisdom of our governing Council; my colleagues in Management and Senate; and staff, students, alumni and our various stakeholders. To you all, we owe a debt of gratitude. In addition, when I took office in 2018 I found a merged

⁶ See Footnote 5.

⁷ Nelson Mandela University. (2021). *Nelson Mandela University Vision 2030 Strategy*.

institution that already had a defined developmental trajectory. I want to thank the many people who catalysed the institution that we now have.

15. These include our national and international partners and associations to which we belong; as well as the Department of Higher Education and Training,⁸ the Council on Higher Education,⁹ the National Research Foundation,¹⁰ the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences,¹¹ Universities South Africa,¹² and many others.

Our system is in transition, locally, regionally and globally.

16. My reflections on our progress and future directions are located within the context of a volatile global state of fragmentation, disarray, conflict and disasters.

17. This demands of us that we collectively chart future trajectories that will ensure our sustainability and our relevance, while simultaneously distinguishing ourselves as a university in the service of society.

18. Universities globally are being called upon to position their work in ways that best respond to the intractable challenges that face humanity. In South Africa, and in our continent, we are expected, increasingly, to address our

⁸ See *Department of Higher Education and Training, South Africa*, <https://www.dhet.gov.za/>

⁹ See *Council on Higher Education, South Africa*, <https://www.che.ac.za/>

¹⁰ See *National Research Foundation, South Africa*, <https://www.nrf.ac.za/>

¹¹ See *National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences, South Africa*, <https://www.nihss.ac.za/>

¹² See *Universities South Africa, South Africa*, <https://www.usaf.ac.za/>

developmental needs, through decolonised African forms of knowledge organisation.

19. The fundamental question we posed in 2018 – what are universities for?¹³ – is still relevant. The urgent need for transformational and transformative leadership has not abated; it has grown stronger. There is no blueprint to safeguard the success of higher education in the future. The conversations and debates about the role, shape and future of the university continue around the world. But there can be no doubt that universities will need to be responsive, agile and adaptable if they are to both thrive and contribute to the positive remaking of the world.

20. Universities are expected to keep pace with rapid transitions to deliver on evolving expectations, including quick pivots to quality online and hybrid learning. Digitally adept youth perceive learning as a social act. They expect universities to provide them with inclusive learning environments that meet their academic, financial and future career needs. And they expect us to do so through the provision of quality teaching, vibrant student life, as well as robust academic support, and experiential learning opportunities.

21. Complex forces are shaping the workforce of the future and it is estimated that half of all employees will need significant re- or upskilling by 2025. Technological advancements, such as automation, artificial intelligence, and blockchain technologies are amplifying the importance of knowledge, skills and attributes that are uniquely human, such as creativity, imagination, and critical thinking.

¹³ See Footnote 3.

22. Amidst the advancement of our sciences, and in this technological moment, we should stay close to the university's role in cultivating humanity. In our case, not only because we carry the humanising name of *Mandela*, but because as an African university, we must work the gift of Africa: that is, 'giving the world a more human face', as Biko so profoundly argued.¹⁴
23. The idea of 'the African university' is for us not simply a catchy byline or tagline, but an ethical injunction that should make clearer the gifts of our country and continent, including its peoples, knowledges, cultures, and languages. In short, 'the African university' should offer us a different way of encountering the world.
24. In this way we can further make the university part of the everyday life of the community and society, through our philosophy of engagement-as-convergence: the democratisation and co-creation of knowledge, and the equalising coming-together of the university and community.¹⁵
25. This way of coming together of university, community and society is one way to define 'the African university' for ourselves.
26. In addition, we are, like never before, building strong relationships across our continent for our work to (in Kopano Ratele's memorable phrase), 'better locate African and Africans in knowledge' across our disciplines in engineering, health

¹⁴ Biko, S. B. (1987). *I Write What I Like*. Oxford: Heinemann.

¹⁵ Sources: i) See Footnote 3; ii) Damons, B. (2019). *Hubs of Convergence* [Unpublished concept paper]. Engagement and Transformation Portfolio, Nelson Mandela University; iii) Keet, A., & Muthwa, S. (2021). The transformative, responsive university in South Africa. In C. Brink (Ed.), *The responsive university and the crisis in South Africa* (pp. 216-242). Brill.

sciences, science, law, education, economic and management sciences and the humanities.¹⁶ *None of us are exempted from this responsibility.*

27. Aligning our committee system with our strategy and organisational redesign, is key in deploying our knowledge fields, learning and teaching, and engagement practices for local, regional and global development. But we need to do so as a placed and socially-embedded university that contributes to the co-creation of a more socially just and sustainable world ... starting in our own backyard, so to speak.

28. In this regard, the budding experiments steered by the Hubs of Convergence (HoC), established in 2019 within the Engagement and Transformation portfolio, are generating exciting lessons on what a socially-embedded university may look like in the real world.

29. There are many of our project partners and communities present here and online. Thank you for guiding us in making the HOC and convergence philosophy a reality. We hope to grow these partnerships and travel with you, as friends, in an equalising fashion.

30. Our gratitude also extends to our partners across the public-state-private sectors, industry, and community and activist organisations.

31. The crafting and implementation of Vision 2030 revealed distinctive intellectual niches and strategic opportunities that are being leveraged as Mandela University seeks to chart its future directions.¹⁷ For example, the Chair for Critical Studies in

¹⁶ Ratele, K. (2019). *The world looks like this from here: Thoughts on African psychology*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, p.53.

¹⁷ See Footnote 7.

Higher Education Transformation (*CriSHET*) and the Transdisciplinary Institute for Mandela Studies (*TIMS*) constitute key intellectual differentiators for the University. Whereas *CriSHET* is leading the national and regional programme on Critical University Studies, *TIMS* is driving the University's pursuit of becoming the pre-eminent academic expression of Mandela in partnership with the Nelson Mandela Foundation.

32. This work has been slow, and deep; and we now have arguably the most productive record of work on *Mandela* as scholarship; and what this may mean for our university and for our sector.

Consolidating our gains and collectively charting future strategic directions

33. Building on these, we need to **consolidate our gains and collectively chart future strategic directions.**

34. There is considerable continuity between the strategic imperatives we outlined in 2018¹⁸ and the course we are charting today. To a large extent we are working towards consolidating our gains, and where necessary, fine-tuning and adjusting emphasis to meet changed circumstances. In essence, we want to stay focused and productive, yet flexible and adaptable.

35. Vision 2030 reaffirms our commitment to harness our core academic missions to liberate human potential through humanising, innovative learning and teaching, impactful research and innovation, and transformative engagement with all

¹⁸ See Footnote 3.

publics, to co-create contextually responsive solutions that change the world.¹⁹

To this end, we will **consolidate and deepen our work** in a number of areas that we prioritised in the past five years, including:

- a) Continuing our work on equalising forms of engagement, coordinated by the Engagement division, and threaded into the work of scholars in different domains of science and programmatic areas across our University. Finding ways of appropriately incentivising engagement is also something we need to advocate for, and think through, along with government and its agencies.
- b) We will also continue to centre our transformation work and strengthen its architectures; whilst contributing to debates, strategies and programmes at an institutional, national and global level.
- c) Sustaining our drive towards research and innovation excellence in our areas of institutional strengths, and differentiation, while ramping up research outputs, and maintaining an upward trajectory for enrolment of Masters and Doctoral candidates, remains critical. Developing new international partnerships and strengthening existing ones, is one of the strategies we can deploy in this regard. I am encouraged by recent engagements in East Africa, the United States and the United Kingdom that there is considerable appetite internationally to partner with Nelson Mandela University.
- d) Maintaining and enhancing our standing as a pivot for student access and success will remain a key strategic imperative. Our Learning and Teaching

¹⁹ See Footnote 7.

portfolio has put substantive programmes in place to promote student access and success. It is crucially important for us that once a student is admitted to Nelson Mandela University their success is guaranteed, as long as they apply themselves and make use of all facilities available to them. *We also understand that student success is buttressed by our capacity to support and nurture our academics.*

- e) Revitalisation of Humanities will continue to be an area of consolidation for us as it is key in reimagining the transformative potential of all disciplines to awaken African scholarship and systems of thought. It is important for our scholar community to conceive of humanities as a broader field of academic endeavour encompassing social sciences. The work being done on unearthing the African archives and the work of early African intellectuals holds many lessons for us.

- f) Transdisciplinarity and the decolonising of knowledge remain objectives to pursue, not only because knowledge democracy should be key to the academic enterprise, but also to learn from epistemes in our communities, rural, traditional, and otherwise. In our university, this work has already grown, as is evident in research in both the sciences and the humanities. Our Transdisciplinarity and Internationalisation Committee (TIC) will provide future guidance in this regard.

- g) Our approach to medical education, as a proposition that advances participation of underserved populations in our region in particular, will remain a differentiator for us. Our unique community-focused approach and

early career interprofessional collaborative practices set us apart from other universities.

h) Our expertise and capacity in a wide range of Ocean Sciences continue to grow. We continue to extend our partnerships and footprint in our continent and globally. One of the latest exciting developments is the construction of a Science Centre on the Ocean Sciences campus, scheduled for completion this year, which will significantly enhance our engagement programmes with schools and the public generally.

36. Given the changed macro-environment in which we find ourselves, and on the back of our achievements, and opportunities that we envisage, as well as challenges to which we have to respond, we will be placing a renewed focus on **certain key priorities** in the next few years.

Renewed Focus on Certain Key Priorities

37. **First**, the deep and central question of youth employability and student entrepreneurship, is already receiving focused attention. Mandela University is also seized with the challenge of rising youth unemployment.

38. Building on the successes of the Student Employability and Entrepreneurship Development (SEED) programme and the dedicated Madibaz Youth Entrepreneurship Lab, we are repurposing parts of our infrastructure towards the establishment of a Rapid Youth Entrepreneurship Incubator. This is in

partnership with the National Department of Small Business Development, together with its Small Enterprise Development Agency.

39. Furthermore, the university is scaling up its contribution to student employability by integrating and aligning its work in this area into a Mandela Africa Hub for Entrepreneurship and Social Innovation. The Mandela Africa Hub will be an integrated platform for collaborative partnerships and co-learning, that facilitate the nurturing of Afrocentric entrepreneurs and social innovators in critical sectors. Significant progress has been made in mobilising support for the Hub provincially, nationally and internationally.

40. **Secondly**, food security and food sovereignty is a key indicator of just, sustainable development. We all know the statistics, and many of our students, staff and surrounding communities have direct experience with hunger and general food insecurity. The question of food is folded into the water and energy nexus; on a local, national, and global scale. We have a highly productive food systems working group; and I thank the community activists, colleagues and students who are working on this. *And, we will now also re-invest our energy in setting up a Food Systems Research Chair to contribute to meeting the challenge of hunger in the context of climate change in Southern Africa.*

41. **Thirdly**, bringing to life our work on the Virtual Academy and greater digitalisation of our systems is going to take centre stage at our University.

42. The rapid technological advances in all sectors of society, accelerated further by the impact of the pandemic on the academic project, present us with new insights and opportunities to turn our focus to our work on the *Virtual Academy* – an initiative which has already received the support of our Council.

43. How we give shape and form to, and capacitate the Virtual Academy and its work, is a critical task that we invite the entire university and its communities to engage in, to guide us in developing an inclusive, social justice approach to this work.

44. Building on the historical and contemporary strengths in the sciences and engineering, the **fourth** area of renewed focus is going to have to be assembling our work in Sustainability Science into an identifiable collaborative commons, to elevate collaborations among our scholars, and also take advantage of available resources in an area in which we already possess so much research pedigree.

45. The activities of entities such as the Coastal and Marine Institute, Marine Spatial Planning, the Sustainability Research Unit, Centre for African Conservation Ecology, and AEON as well as many Research Chairs, are underpinned by a social and environmental sustainability approach. Some exciting transdisciplinary work on the hydrogen economy is emerging at Mandela University.

46. The envisaged Institute for Sustainable Futures, led by our portfolio for Research, Innovation and Internationalisation, will bring this work together.

Leadership in the 'New' Historical Moment: Having the Courage to Walk into What We Choose to Be

47. I would like to stress that advancing Mandela University, and achieving our vision of being a great African university in the service of society, depends on the

leadership we all display. It also depends on us having motivated, talented and committed staff. In this regard, the wellbeing and wellness of Mandela University staff are of paramount importance to us.

48. The COVID-19 pandemic had a severe impact on staff, students and their families. As we look back over the last three years, we need to be mindful of the pain and suffering of those who lost loved ones to the pandemic.

49. At the same time, we are proud of how Nelson Mandela University managed the lockdown resulting from the pandemic. The flexibility, innovation and initiative that staff at all levels showed in keeping the university functioning, in delivering on our mandate, in very difficult circumstances were remarkable. I am also proud that unlike other sectors of the economy, there were no retrenchments; no staff were placed on half-pay; and everyone who was meant to receive a salary, did so. This all happened because we worked together to respond to the crisis at hand, cushion the academic project, and preserve jobs.

50. Studies show a strong connection between leadership and institutional culture. Our capacity for compassion, affirmation, inclusion, kindness and community will have to watermark all that we set out to do as the University. It should hold us, guide us, steer us, and animate us. Understanding that the path that leads us to this place is a network of tributaries, mountains and valleys of privilege and deprivation, requires multi-cultural and diverse competencies from all of us; in particular, the competencies of love and justice.

51. Placing ourselves at the cusp of impactful life-changing educational experience will require no less from us. We have already signalled in policy, practice, and

example that we place zero tolerance on all forms of discrimination, including racially motivated, and gender-based forms.

52. *Creating a positive institutional culture is not something we only want to speak to. We have to strain forward into it, in classrooms, and interpersonal encounters, so that we sustain an environment where we all belong in all our diversities. For those of us tasked with leadership, this requires moral courage and clarity.*

53. In essence, we have to bring forth the good that is in all of us, to make our institution an embodiment of its values.

Conclusion: A Call to Action

54. In conclusion, Programme Director, I would like to end with a call to action. As we reflect on the past five years and chart future directions, we need to commit afresh to embracing the ideals of our namesake who dedicated his life to creating a more humane and just society.

55. I know that I speak for the majority present this afternoon when I say that we are humbled and honoured to have been granted the opportunity to serve the best interests of the University and the broader society, through our respective roles and responsibilities.

56. Though we have different tasks, the university is us, all of us. It is not at a distance from what we do; it is what we do.

57. Let us embrace this collective ownership as we journey towards co-creating a future that further advances us as a transformative, socially embedded university in the service of society.

58. I want to thank the team from Communication and Marketing, led by Ms Chantal Janneker, and the organising Committee led by Professor Andre Keet, our DVC for Engagement and Transformation, for all the work that has gone into organising this event.

Chancellor, Chair of Council, Councillors, colleagues, students and stakeholders, I appreciate all your continued support and encouragement to me and my team as we strive daily to ensure that this great institution rises to its true potential.

I thank you.

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