

NELSON MANDELA UNIVERSITY
CONFERRMENT OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (*HONORIS CAUSA*)
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ACCEPTANCE ADDRESS
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Chairperson of Council, Ambassador Nozipho January-Bardill

Chancellor, Dr Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi

Vice-Chancellor, Professor Sibongile Muthwa

Deputy Vice-Chancellors and other leaders of Nelson Mandela University

Members of the Student Representative Council

All students graduating today and honourable guests.

Thank you for the opportunity briefly to share my thoughts on this auspicious occasion. I do not have the appropriate words to express my appreciation for the honour bestowed on me by the Nelson Mandela University. In my humble opinion, I am not entirely certain that it is deserved.

But in ultimately relenting, I convinced myself that this honorary doctorate is less about the past; but rather an injunction to persist in the efforts to attain a better life for all South Africans and broader humanity. Even in the hallowed chambers of research and intellectual pursuits, where I am currently located, the struggle for social equity essentially has no end.

Nelson Mandela University contributes to this effort by constantly striving to become 'a dynamic African university', a leader 'in generating cutting-edge knowledge for a sustainable future'. In this context, the association with both the symbol of an iconic name and the substance of the university's pursuits, confers a profound responsibility.

We live today in a global society characterised by immense contradictions. On the one hand, the possibility to extricate billions from poverty has been demonstrated through multifaceted domestic and global efforts. Yet inequality has actually widened in most parts of the world. Natural sciences have advanced in leaps and bounds, making a decent quality of life possible for all. Yet, as underlined in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic, the benefits are not equitably shared.

And so, a number of riddles come to mind on the state of human civilisation today.

Is it the perfection of social sciences that we are unable to turn around political economies that encourage mindboggling wealth in the midst of poverty; that the self-indulgence of a billionaires' space race captures the global imagination, while mother earth is smothering in the Anthropocene of global warming?

Is it a reflection of human ingenuity, that scientific excellence is measured by the power of hypersonic weapons, and communication technologies that have, to a significant extent, become instruments of the invasion of privacy and platforms for irrational discourse?

Is it self-assurance or a perverse sense of insecurity to fear and loath those who are different from us?

Closer to home, do we have the will and the capacity to ensure mature discourse and action to deal with a concentrated expression of these global trends?

In politics can we contain the bile that threatens the constitutional order and the revered institutions established to protect it?

How do we deal with the desperation of cornered fugitives who pursue social disruption and economic harm?

Arising from this, four interrelated issues stand out, as we celebrate this occasion.

Firstly, in the pursuit of knowledge, our commitment to the needs of humanity, especially the most marginalised – including women and youth – should be unwavering.

Secondly, research, teaching and communication of knowledge should be informed by transdisciplinarity within and across the sciences.

Thirdly, the presence of Nelson Mandela University in these spatial environs should be felt in the local and wider political economy: in state performance, economics, social programmes and other endeavours to improve the human condition.

Lastly, in the allocation of research resources and determining academic priorities, the lodestar should always be the interests of all humanity.

It is heartening that this university keenly recognises the link among these imperatives.

As we receive these accolades today, and venture into the wider world, we, the alumni of Nelson Mandela University need to continue learning by learning and by doing. To quote the celebrated philosopher and economist Karl Marx: *There is no royal road to science, and only those who do not dread the fatiguing climb of its steep paths have a chance of gaining its luminous summits.* (Preface to the French edition of *Das Kapital*, 1872)

I venture these thoughts because I'm convinced that the collective intellectual capacity resident in this university is capable doggedly of pursuing answers to complex social and natural mysteries.

Thank you once again for the honour!

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