

# NELSON MANDELA UNIVERSITY

## *The Transformative, Responsive University* Occasional Paper Series Paper TR2

### The Renaming of the Nelson Mandela University

Cyril Ramaphosa

PresidentRSA@Presidency.gov.za

Themes: Mandela's legacy; institutional identity; social  
equality

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(E) Oriole.Friedemann@mandela.ac.za (W) crishet.mandela.ac.za

# **The Renaming of the Nelson Mandela University**

CYRIL RAMAPHOSA<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This paper is published as part of this Series in November 2021. It was originally given as a speech by then-Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa on 20 July 2017, during the renaming ceremony of the then-named Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University.

## **Bio**

Matamela Cyril Ramaphosa is currently the President of South Africa. He studied law at the University of the North and through the University of South Africa. He has received honorary doctorates from national and international universities, and was the Chancellor of the University of Mpumalanga between 2016 and 2021. In 2004, he established the Shanduka Foundation (now the Cyril Ramaphosa Foundation), focusing on education and small business development.

## **Abstract**

Nelson Mandela University's rebranding is a statement of intent to reshape its identity, Ramaphosa argues. He contends that in taking such a name, the university is shouldering the responsibility of giving life to Mandela's dream of creating social equality. In order to do so, he continues, the university must make education available to the marginalised, work at decolonising the education system, and place itself at the forefront of resolving the challenges experienced by the communities that surround it. In carrying the legacy of Mandela, he concludes, the university is challenged to build relationships of cooperation and understanding, redefine higher education in our country, and educate successive generations in the building of a humane society.

It is a great honour to be present at the dawn of a new era for this institution.

It was William Shakespeare who wrote: “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose, / By any other name would smell as sweet.”<sup>3</sup>

For this university, for this community, for our society, the name of the rose is indeed important.

In all the cultures of this land, names are imbued with great meaning.

The decision to become Nelson Mandela University is not simply an exercise in corporate re-branding.

It is a statement of intent.

It is a statement of values.

It is a validation of the struggles of our people against colonial occupation and apartheid oppression.

It is an affirmation of their history and identity, of their dignity and rights.

The act by the colonial authorities of naming this locality Port Elizabeth was an act of dispossession.

The act by the democratic government of renaming it was an act of reclamation.

So too with the renaming of the university.

It makes a statement about justice, rehabilitation and reconciliation.

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<sup>3</sup> *Romeo and Juliet* 2.2.46-47

It starts to reshape our South African identity.

It helps us to move forward, together, as a people.

That is because Nelson Mandela embodied the best in us.

He represented the values which we South Africans, black and white, united in our diversity, cherish and uphold.

In a letter he wrote in prison, Madiba said:

The anchor of all my dreams is the collective wisdom of mankind as a whole. I am influenced more than ever before by the conviction that social equality is the only basis of human happiness ... It is around these issues that my thoughts revolve. They are centred on humans, the ideas for which they strive; on the new world that is emerging; the new generation that declares total war against all forms of cruelty, against any social order that upholds economic privilege for a minority and that condemns the mass of the population to poverty and disease, illiteracy and the host of evils that accompany a stratified society.<sup>4</sup>

In naming this university after Nelson Mandela, you are shouldering a great responsibility – to encourage, educate and nurture the new generation about which Madiba wrote.

You are shouldering the responsibility of giving life to Madiba's dream of social equality.

That means that this university must be at the forefront of efforts to make higher education accessible to the poor and marginalised.

This university must be at the forefront of efforts to ensure that higher education is an instrument for the achievement of social equality – that it does not simply perpetuate privilege.

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<sup>4</sup> From a letter to Senator Douglas Lukhele in Swaziland, dated 1 August 1970: 182-3.

While we have made huge strides in making higher education accessible, many capable and deserving young people are still not able to enter universities.

Many of those who do gain enrolment struggle to succeed.

Many study in substandard living conditions.

The support they receive is not sufficient.

Too many drop out.

These are the challenges that a university named after Nelson Mandela will have to confront.

It will also have to confront the challenge of harnessing, as Madiba put it, the collective wisdom of humankind.

This means looking at what we teach and how we teach it.

We must decolonise our higher education system.

We need an education system that will see Africans as worthy contributors to the development of curriculum content.

A university that associates itself with Nelson Mandela must necessarily review its curriculum, and examine the subtle layers of colonial and neo-colonial norms that underlie its thought systems.

It will have to liberate the minds of the oppressed and awaken them to the potential of African scholarship.

It will have to remove the cloak of institutionalised racism and sexism.

It will have to promote an African renaissance and contribute, through teaching and research, to the making of the African Century.

It must remain rooted in answering the challenges that confront our society in a global economy.

This must be an African university that serves the continent and her people.

By naming this institution after Nelson Mandela, you are making the commitment that out of your teaching will emerge African scholars and academics that can bring a diversity of thought to traditional knowledge systems.

You are recognising that you are situated in a society and on a continent that is ravaged by poverty, inequality and unemployment.

It means your curriculum will, in content and character, seek to answer the social and economic challenges that confront our country and continent.

A university named after Nelson Mandela will have to be an example for other African universities.

It will have to build partnerships for African scholarship through knowledge sharing.

It will have to be deeply-rooted in its African identity.

When students walk onto the grounds of this university they should feel the humanism of Nelson Mandela.

They should feel part of a people-centred university – where all are recognised and valued for their individuality.

This should be a place where diversity is a strength.

This should be a place where differences of opinion, ideology, culture and interest are able to thrive and contest.

This should be a place where there is respect for the cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity that characterises the beauty of our people.

You cannot be an ivory tower.

You cannot claim autonomy, but remain aloof from society.

You cannot merely seek truth for truth's sake.

You must seek truth to create new and useful knowledge.

You will have to work closer with government, business and civil society to marry what is studied to the needs of our people.

That is what decolonised university ought to be: dynamic, humane, inclusive and futuristic.

By recognising the legacy of Madiba, by studying what he stood for and what he means to our people, you will fully realise the transformative value of higher education.

From now on, the many thousands of students passing through these gates will have the name 'Nelson Mandela' in their résumés.

Will they too go on to become unifiers, innovators, internationalists?

Will they too dream of a new society founded on equality and the pursuit of human happiness?

And will they have the skills, the knowledge, the consciousness to strive together to build such a society?

A new university is born today.

At its birth, it is challenged to find new ways of connecting with its most important stakeholders – students, workers and the community.

It is challenged to build relationships of cooperation and understanding.

It is challenged to redefine higher education in our country.

It is challenged to school successive generations in the values of honour, selflessness, justice and the building of a humane society.

Nelson Mandela University is born today.

It is an institution with a worthy academic heritage, an exciting future and an awesome responsibility.

I have no doubt that you will eagerly shoulder this responsibility and prove yourselves worthy of your new name.

I thank you.

## References<sup>5</sup>

Mandela, N. 2010. 17: From a letter to Senator Douglas Lukhele in Swaziland, dated 1 August 1970. *Conversations with Myself*. 2010. London, Macmillan.

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<sup>5</sup> Although Ramaphosa quotes Shakespeare, it is unclear to which, if any, publication he has referred.