

NELSON MANDELA

UNIVERSITY

MOU Signing: Nelson Mandela Foundation

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14:30 - 16:00, 3 February 2020, Mandela Bench Statue

Good afternoon and welcome...

Today, we are gathered here to celebrate the partnership between Nelson Mandela University and the Nelson Mandela Foundation. It is significant that two institutions, bearing the name of Nelson Mandela, are formalising their partnership by signing a Memorandum of Agreement on the eve of the 30th anniversary of Mandela's release from prison; 30 years ago on 11 February 1990, the South African political landscape was irrevocably changed when Mandela, a political prisoner of 27 years, walked out of the gates of Victor Verster prison, with his close allies by his side.

It is said that hindsight is 20/20, and since we are in the year 2020, one can only imagine the dialogues and discussions to be had this year about our country's history. I am certainly looking forward to the three events to be held by the NMF later this year, to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the release of Nelson Mandela. These dialogues, entitled "From Freedom to Liberation" are set to be engaging critical discourses on controversial topics relating to physical and societal prisons, and the failures of restorative justice and the self-made prisons of our homes and minds.

Since February is the month wherein, we celebrate relationships, allow me to frame this institutional partnership with the NMF accordingly as "a match made in heaven". The Foundation and the University are both cognisant of the great responsibility associated with carrying the name of Nelson Mandela. It is our duty to foster the intertwined legacy and memory of Madiba, but simultaneously to recognise that it is not a static inheritance and if we are to critically engage with that legacy, then we should move beyond the man to the multiplicity of the social figure of *Mandela*. The space of *Mandela*, the social figure, is the dense location of scholarly work where history and subjectivity make social life.

Interestingly, Mandela understood that his legacy could not simply be preserved through the ages. Although, the past may seem unchanged in museum displays, stories and memories live in the minds of the people who shared in those experiences. This is why Philippe Lejeune refers to autobiography, one's life story, as "co-property". In an interview with John Battersby¹, a decade after his release from prison in February 2000, Madiba contemplates his legacy: **"Whatever my wishes might be, I cannot bind future generations to remember me in the particular way I would like"**. These words show insight into the human psyche, and an understanding of memory as a living legacy to be mobilised and utilised by future generations.

"Living the legacy" is the motto of our partner, the Nelson Mandela Foundation. The NMF is a human rights-oriented non-profit organisation founded by Nelson Mandela in 1999. Its mission is to contribute to the making of a just society by mobilising the legacy of its founder, providing public access to information on his life and times, and convening dialogue on critical social issues. It has a fundamental stake in the transformation of South Africa's education sector and in the promotion of Mandela-related research and analysis. Leadership development imperatives inform everything it does.

From this brief description of their mandate, it should become clear why we wished to work closely with the NMF. The Nelson Mandela University is a public higher education institution in terms of the Higher Education Act and performs its function of teaching, learning, research and engagement in terms of its Institutional Statute. That is, to be a values-driven, engaged and people-centred public higher education institution that serves the needs of its diverse communities. We also strive to be a dynamic African university, recognised for its leadership in generating cutting-edge knowledge for a sustainable future by contributing to sustainable development through excellent academic programmes, research and service delivery offering a diverse range of quality educational opportunities that will make a critical and constructive contribution to regional, national and global sustainability.

Since the Nelson Mandela University sought a mandate to name itself in honour of Mandela and reorient its character and praxis in line with the values of principles of this global icon, the Nelson Mandela University and the Nelson Mandela Foundation, the primary custodian of the *Mandela* legacy, collectively embarked on establishing a robust working relationship. Today's signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) seeks to formalise this relationship.

The purpose of this MoU is to define the basis for collaboration between the Foundation and the University in the areas of **social justice advocacy, scholarship and research, and human rights related projects** to be identified by both parties.

The relationship between Mandela University and the NMF is not merely symbolic, it is a working relationship. We are committed to a vigorous intellectual collaboration that supports research and scholarship, for example the forthcoming Nelson Mandela biography by Prof Xolela Mangcu. Many of you will remember Prof Mangcu's two lectures on Mandela, entitled "The Untold Heritage" and "Mandela's Tragic Pragmatism: Leadership as Radical Sacrifice", that concluded the year-long Mandela Centenary Celebrations that took place from July 2018 to July 2019.

The Centenary Celebrations were rooted in the intellectual mandate of the University, while also reflecting the responsibility to social justice that we believe the University should aspire to, and which is inherent in our understanding of Mandela as a *social figure of justice*. As the only University to be named after Mandela, these celebrations have been particularly important to us, not only to celebrate the man, but also to explore what his legacy means for us as we strive to be a university in service of society. This has included a critical exploration of Mandela, how he has been constructed, and how he calls us to a future of generative possibilities.

The official Centenary Programme began with a two-day colloquium by the Faculty of Education seeking to interrogate Mandela's well-known declaration that "Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world". This quotation also serves as the inspiration for the University's motto: "Change the world". The Centenary was an intellectual feast, as well as an exploration of social justice concerns, with conferences, public lectures, and the launch of a new initiative, the Annual Nelson Mandela Convention for Youth Development, focused on issues relating to education, leadership, employability, entrepreneurship, health and wellness.

In September 2018, we held the *Dalibhunga: This Time? That Mandela?* Film, Book and Documentary Festival, where we explored the diversity of the figure of Mandela through the myriad books, films and documentaries *about* Mandela. This was a precursor to the *Dalibhunga: This Time? That Mandela?* colloquium held in March last year. This seminal colloquium was hosted at Nelson Mandela University as a collaboration between the university, the Nelson Mandela Foundation (NMF) and the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). This colloquium explored the figure of Mandela in relation to a number of key issues facing the academy and potential avenues for a Critical Mandela Studies programme, which we hope to advance with the establishment of a *Transdisciplinary Institute for Mandela Studies* (TIMS).

Amidst all the programmes and projects linked to the Mandela name across the world, the uniqueness of the Nelson Mandela University name change in 2017, is the imperative for the University to become the pre-eminent academic expression of *Mandela*. Far from being about Mandela, the scholarly formulation of *Mandela* is the endless, relentless pursuit to bring an intellectual angle to this figure of justice to generate new praxes for engaging social injustices. Preliminary research indicates that such a formulation ‘around’ Mandela does either not yet exist or is scant; a point confirmed by Prof Harris’ analyses. That is, the social figure of *Mandela* as the dense location of scholarly work where history and subjectivity make social lifeⁱⁱ to advance engaged scholarship and impactful programmatic work, has not yet taken shape, neither here nor elsewhere.

To engage with *Mandela* the social figure is not just to understand the history of the person, but to consider some of the most profound questions of our time; an age in which social, political, economic and environmental challenges are accompanied by a general (local and global) mistrust in democratic institutions, the neoliberal attrition of human rights, and the way these are knitted together with the status, quality and agency of citizenship, civic service and public leadership. These challenges include the systemic anchoring of socio-economic inequalities; the escalation and deepening of war and organised political violence; the intensified mooring of discrimination and the spread and amplification of global racism, sexism, fundamentalisms, every-day fascism, and so on; environmental degradation and climate change; poverty and unemployment; the growth of the precariat; and the wanton expansion in human vulnerability and psycho-social, cultural and economic disaffiliation.

The Institute (TIMS) will be anchored in an institutional partnership between the University and the NMF. This partnership, amongst others, is located within an overarching Memorandum of Understanding. The NMF will draw on the full range of its programmatic work in adding value to TIMS’s strategy and implementation plan. The resources of its Centre of Memory will be made available to TIMS and it will facilitate access to the Mandela Archive for TIMS-associated scholarship. Mandela University will, where relevant and appropriate, put its intellectual, physical and financial resources at the disposal of the Institute, and together the two partners will explore opportunities for exchange and collaboration.

This vision is interwoven with the grand challenges of this historical moment that demands from Nelson Mandela University to be the pre-eminent academic expression of *Mandela*. Far from being about Mandela, the scholarly formulation of *Mandela* is the endless, relentless pursuit to bring an intellectual angle to this figure of justice to generate new praxes for engaging social injustices; to move the very idea of justice further than *Mandela*.

A distinct, industrious way to put a concept and design around the ethical-academic responsibility of Nelson Mandela University in relation to *Mandela*, is the establishment of a *Transdisciplinary Institute for Mandela Studies* (TIMS). There are many academic institutes and centres named after Mandela, the person. None, as far as we can establish, is dedicated to *Mandela Studies*, as a distinct scholarly configuration around this *social figure*.

TIMS will be one of the principal articulations of the university's intellectual project and its pragmatic manifestations around social justice; poverty, inequality and unemployment; public, transformative leadership; university transformation; non-racialism, equality, human rights and democracy; university, community and society (reimagining engagement); the Mandela identity and posture (memory and legacy); renewal of the academy and curriculum; humanising pedagogy; transdisciplinarity; revitalising the humanities; and student-centrism.

In addition, TIMS will be well-positioned to engage the Institutional Research Themes of Ocean and Coastal Sciences; Social Justice and Democracy; Environmental Stewardship and Sustainable Livelihoods; Innovation and the Digital Economy; Origins, Culture, Heritage and Memory; and Humanising Pedagogies in a truly transdisciplinary fashion.

Possible future endeavours as part of the Mandela Scholarship Programme could include online webinars on topics such as African Political Theory and Mandela University's support of the Atlantic Fellows for Racial Equity (AFRE), a fellowship programme hosted at the NMF, by assisting with their curriculum design.

As we are gathered under an African sun on the premises of an African university, permit me to adapt the well-known Western idiom 'to hear the clarion call'. Instead of hearing the clarion call for Transformation and an African-purposed curriculum, let us momentarily do away with the clarion, a medieval trumpet, and rather foreground an instrument of historical value to us. In this place, we hear the beating of the drums that call us to action, and the rhythmic beating of our hearts as we stand interconnected as humans. In our efforts to revitalize the Humanities, the core question that we need to consider is: "What does it mean to be human?". Our namesake, Nelson Mandela, was known as a humanist and through engaging others, even his prison warders, in conversation, he managed to humanise them and set the stage for the national reconciliation efforts to follow.

In the concluding remarks to her short biography on Mandela, Prof Elleke Boehmerⁱⁱⁱ cautions against the overzealous excavation of this iconic leader's legacy, lest the

human disappears and only the social figure remains. Instead she foregrounds Mandela, the human being with tremendous emotional quotient (EQ), otherwise known as emotional intelligence:

Nelson Mandela – figure, icon, sign, simile – has been over-represented to the point of being rendered banal, excavated for meaning till all sense of the human being behind the public face disappears. His story of overcoming is widely regarded as his country’s ethical bequest to the new century. Yet, ironically, there is as yet no representation of Mandela that evokes **possibly his greatest achievement, how he came to understand conversation as a human imperative**. If there were such a representation, it would probably resemble improvised ensemble music, a complicated jazz rhythm scattering itself through time, impossible to recover exactly in script. A jazz riff alone would capture at once the risk and tenaciousness of Mandela’s commitment to sheer talk: how he placed the **idea of the human-in-interaction at the heart of his vision of the future**.

In several auto/biographies about Madiba, as well as through interviews with him, a picture emerges of a humanist who valued **conversation, listening and trust**. These three elements are also necessary for a solid partnership. It is our belief that with the continued support of students, academics and other stakeholders, like the NMF, we will be able to “change the world” for the better. May we continue to learn from one another, as well as from Madiba who believed in the “**human-in-interaction**”, to make the vision for a better world, a better future, a reality.

We must be seen to cultivate humanity, and put effort into engaging ourselves, and our communities, in as yet unimaginable ways. New forms and modes of thought, and new practices of producing, framing and distributing knowledge and its relationship to society need to emerge. This is the central task of the university, which must embody and advance the scholarly formulation of the Mandela legacy, and do this in solidarity with our continent, and the global south.

ⁱ Nelson Mandela interview with John Battersby of the *Christian Science Monitor*, 10 February 2000

ⁱⁱ Gordon, A. 2008. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, p.8.

ⁱⁱⁱ Boehmer, Elleke. 2008. *Nelson Mandela: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 181.