

Chancellor's Graduation Address

Dr Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi

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Chairperson of Council, Ambassador Nozipho January-Bardill
Vice-Chancellor, Professor Sibongile Muthwa
[Ceremony 1 only] Honorary doctorate recipient, Dr Judy Dlamini, her family and special guests
Deputy Vice-Chancellors
Executive Deans of Faculty
Dean of Students
The Professoriate
Members of the Academy
University staff members
Members of the Student Representative Council
Graduandi, family and friends
Manene nani manenekazi [*Ladies and Gentlemen*]

Molweni, Good morning, goeie môre.

INTRODUCTION

On behalf of Nelson Mandela University, it is my great pleasure to welcome you all to the 2018 Summer Graduation.

Today marks a milestone event in the lives of our graduating students. Graduation is an occasion for celebration, representing the culmination of your years of hard work, commitment and focus. You and your families have made sacrifices to achieve this goal, and we salute you all.

We recognize that the attainment of a degree in a tertiary institution is an event to be celebrated especially within a South African context, as it is often in defiance of obstacles such as discrimination and for some poor mental health, resulting from inherited poor social, cultural and economic conditions.

Today we are here to acknowledge your efforts, to thank those who have made sacrifices on your behalf, to congratulate you on staying the course despite obstacles that may have come your way. We celebrate your achievements as we wish you well on the next chapter of your intellectual and career journey.

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Achieving a degree or diploma is the product of a collective effort – parents, guardians, families, sometimes an entire community; sponsors and funders; teachers, schools, and the university academia and support staff have all walked this journey with you, and so it is fitting that we come together as a community to share our pride in the achievements of the 1,965 students who will graduate this week.

I wish to address my remarks today specifically to those who sit before us as the graduating class.

Whether you are continuing on to further studies, entering the world of work, or are one of the few to have achieved the pinnacle of academic endeavour, Graduation is an occasion where you may be asking yourself “where to next?”; you may be considering the next stage in your life’s purpose, and how you are going to use this qualification just achieved.

Since the academic endeavour of addressing challenges and finding solutions starts with asking questions, I am going to frame my address with some questions that I would urge you to contemplate.

[The question of what it means to be a Nelson Mandela University graduate]

What does being a graduate of Nelson Mandela University mean to you?

South Africa, and the world, celebrated this year as the centenary of the birth of Nelson Mandela, and as a university community we have reflected on Madiba’s influence on humanity, and also on what living his legacy means for us as a university. A university that contributes to a democracy which truly puts people in power, our generation of knowledge that enables informed decision-making and contributes to social justice, equality and sustainability; and most importantly, what it means for you as graduates of Mandela University - responsible citizens, people who care and want to make a difference in the world that we share.

At the same time as the university is grappling with questions of what it means to be an African university; and how to carry Madiba’s legacy forward as the only university in the world bearing his name – we are also thinking about what it means to be a graduate of Mandela University: What qualities do we want our graduates to take with them into the world?

In my inauguration as Chancellor, I articulated a vision of Nelson Mandela University as a global player; firmly located within the continent of Africa, drawing on the accumulated knowledge and heritage of Africa to make a difference in the world. I believe these are not only characteristics we would like to see in our university, but in our graduates too.

We – and I mean all of us as the university community – are set apart from any other educational institution by our commitment to reflect the values and ethos of Nelson Mandela in all that we do: in our teaching and learning, research and innovation, engagement, outreach and internationalisation. We are set apart by our commitment to anchor humanity at the centre of everything we do, and how we do it, and to place Africa at the centre of our scholarship.

This is not simply a mission statement, but a responsibility that I know is taken very seriously by the leadership of the university, and all who work and study here.

So, my first question for you to think about is this: How are you going to reflect that responsibility, embody and enact those values in the next chapter of your life? How are YOU going to “be the legacy”, how are YOU going to “change the world”? On posing this question the words of an African leader, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf comes to mind, “The size of your dreams must always exceed your current capacity to achieve them. If your dreams do not scare you, they are not big enough.”

We refer often to one of Nelson Mandela’s most famous quotes about education, namely that “education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”.

To my mind, this refers not only to education as a tool that equips people with skills and the ability to DO things, as important as that is in terms of the ability to earn a living. Yes, doing things, making

things, and even finding ways to do them better, and earning an income – all of those do change our world.

But on a more philosophical level, education as a “weapon to change the world” challenges the notion of colonial and traditional approaches to education which worked as weapons of indoctrination, entrenching inequality and oppression not only in the selection of what people were taught, but also in how they were taught to think about themselves.

Changing the world through the weapon of education is about the power of education to bring light rather than destruction, to change the way that people think – about themselves and about the world. Here, education is the weapon that eliminates ignorance and fear, spotlights prejudice and bias, advances equality through development of both skills and intellectual capacity, and empowers people in their choices of how to think, act and be.

Our namesake and the founder of our democracy described racism as “a blight on the human conscience”. He said: “The idea that any people can be inferior to another, to the point where those who consider themselves superior define & treat the rest as subhuman, denies the humanity even of those who elevate themselves to the status of gods”.

I ask you then, how are you going to use all that you have learned and experienced in your university, to shine a light on the darkness of racism, prejudice and intolerance? How will you use your education as a weapon to empower others?

Mandela University has the example of Dr Judy Dlamini, who received an honorary doctorate yesterday. As you are aware she was recently installed as the chancellor of Wits University. She embodies the values of Madiba and of our University, and is a role model of what it means to be a graduate of this institution.... Successful in medical practice and business, renowned for her example of servant leadership,

Dr Dlamini has not only built a highly successful and diversified, multinational business enterprise, but she has achieved academically – publishing a book based on her PhD research and developing a model for strategies for gender transformation at leadership level – and with her family has significantly invested in giving back through bursaries, internships and other ways of supporting education.

I would like to quote her in saying that: “Quality education is both an equalizer and a liberator”.

Education as liberator and equalizer is an important concept for me, and here I want to particularly refer to the role of education for young black women. For many of those sitting here today, and in graduation ceremonies across the land, achieving their qualification and thus the road to “liberty and equality”, has come with added burdens of systemic discrimination, harassment, abuse or even violence.

One matter that has sadly pre-occupied students over the past year is best captured in the hashtag #totalshutdown or the UN hashtag for 16 Days of Activism, #hearmetoo. This has been around femicide and sexual violence, which sadly exists even on university campuses. Importantly, I would acknowledge the work of the university leadership, along with the student body, in tackling this issue. This must stop... our universities must be safe spaces for knowledge and learning.

[Transformation in practice]

Changing attitudes, behaviours, policies and practices that allow racism and gender discrimination to persist is at the heart of transformation – a re-balancing and reinvention that we must tackle persistently and fearlessly because it is critical to our collective, shared future.

In this vein, the launching of Nelson Mandela University last year went beyond a new name and visual identity to spark renewed vigour in the University's aim to give effect to **meaningful** transformation.

I am pleased to say that I can see this “renewed vigour” taking hold in all aspects of the University – serving to enhance our core purpose of teaching, learning, research and engagement that unleashes the full potential of our staff, students and graduates to “change the world” through their contributions to scholarship and social change.

All of the work being done to clarify the distinctive educational purpose and philosophy of Nelson Mandela University – through curriculum innovation, technology-enhanced teaching and learning, promoting multilingualism and cross-disciplinary work, and efforts to understand “Africanised” teaching and learning – all of this is underpinned by the guiding philosophy of a Humanising Pedagogy. In all that we do, people and what it means to be human, and humane, must be at the centre, enabled not only to learn but to take ownership of knowledge, not only to know but to have the agency to act with knowledge and insight for the good of society.

The issues facing post-school education in our country are many and complex. There are no easy answers on how to achieve access for all to tertiary education, and then to enable success; nor for creating inclusive and humanising institutional cultures (as opposed to the dehumanising cultures of the past, which many students still feel today); and nor for how to develop a “decolonized” curriculum which acknowledges and draws on diverse histories and knowledge systems.

The answers will not be the same for all institutions. But in seeking the answers for Nelson Mandela University, we are guided by the statement of the Vice-Chancellor in her inaugural address, that “the quest of a Mandela University is for a more equal and socially-just world” – and this is the yardstick that I can see being used to evaluate all the University's efforts to find solutions to the challenges facing all higher education institutions.

As you go out to seek answers in your own lives and in your world, my question to you is: What is your yardstick? How do you measure your efforts against your quest?

CONCLUSION

In concluding, I return to the notion of education being the most powerful weapon with which to change the world – and what I said earlier about education being more than the development of skills.

Speaking in 1997, President Mandela said that “the power of education extends beyond the development of skills (that) we need for economic success.

“It can contribute to nation-building and reconciliation”

- “Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mine worker can become the head of the mine, that a child of farm workers can become the president of a great nation. It is what we make out of what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person from another.” You as graduandi of the faculty of education go out there knowing that we entrust

you with shaping the destinies of our children, and as result our collective futures, for a different world.

- Remember President Mandela reminded us that “It is not beyond our power to create a world in which all children have access to a good education. Those who do not believe this have small imaginations.”

At Nelson Mandela University, we invite and urge our students and staff to “change the world” changing the world isn’t necessarily about what you do or make, but is more importantly about the mindset with which you engage the world.

As you enter a new chapter in your lives, I trust that this university has equipped you not only with skills but also with the capacity for critical thinking and a desire to engage with the world around you.

And my final question to you, as you prepare to walk across this stage and into the next chapter of your journey, is to keep asking yourself “what am I doing with my education to change the world – for my family, my community, my profession?” What is my contribution towards Africa’s growth and development. With confidence we believe you will contribute to the difference required.

Congratulations once again. Thank you.