

NELSON MANDELA UNIVERSITY

100 YEARS OF MANDELA

OFFICIAL LAUNCH OF THE CHAIR FOR CRITICAL STUDIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION TRANSFORMATION (CriSHET)

Keynote Address by Prof. Sibongile Muthwa
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Keynote Address at Launch of CriSHET
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Introduction

Programme Director

Honoured Guests

It is indeed an honour and a privilege to address you on the launch of the Chair for Critical studies in Higher Education Transformation (CriSHET), especially during the birth month of the world-renowned icon after whom we are named. Last night we were all treated to a scintillating professorial lecture by Prof. Andre Keet, which really affirmed our expectations of the Chair we are launching tonight. Congratulations Prof. Keet on a most thought-provoking lecture.

The launch of CriSHET forms an important part of our University's commemoration of the centenary of Nelson Mandela. Our University's approach to the centenary is rooted firmly in our academic, scholarly and engagement enterprise as we believe this is the best contribution we as a University can make in preserving and nurturing Nelson Mandela's legacy.

Locating our Mandela Centenary programme in the academic enterprise resonates with the importance Mandela placed on education, illustrated so emphatically in his famous declaration in July 2003 that "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world". This insightful declaration reflected Mandela's profound belief, arising from his personal and communal experiences, that education could be a tool for people to transform their lives and those of their children.

Our official centenary programme kicked off on a high note last week with a two-day colloquium, hosted by the Faculty of Education, which sought to interrogate the context of this quotation and what it means for us in the 21st century, and how Mandela's quest provides us with a useful platform to work towards our drive for a decolonised education system. The first day of our centenary programme also included a highly successful public lecture by Professor Thuli Madonsela, hosted by the Law Faculty and CANRAD in partnership with the Moral Regeneration Movement. Throughout the next 12 months our University will be proudly hosting a range of other activities as part of this centenary programme. I hope that all of you will freely participate in some of these.

There can be fewer better ways of commemorating Nelson Mandela's centenary than by launching a University Chair that is dedicated to deepening the transformation of higher education, as we are doing here this afternoon.

CriSHET and the Case for Higher Education Transformation

Higher education, both locally and globally, is in transition. In South Africa, student movements and various ministerial reports over the past five years have highlighted that the move towards more decolonized, equitable and inclusive institutions of higher learning has been slow, due partially to the contextual complexities relating to high levels of inequality still prevalent in society, and persistent divisions based largely on race, class and patriarchy.

In my inaugural address as the Vice-Chancellor, I challenged us all to disrupt the notion around the purpose of a university. I highlighted the need to be transformational - making the institution more effective in serving its students, staff and community. At the same time, I emphasised the need for the University to be transformative - to place a sharper focus on praxes that tackle issues of social justice and poverty alleviation locally, continentally and globally. True higher education transformation requires that we look not only at matters of redress, democratisation, development and the quality of the university, but also to zoom in on themes of institutional culture, curriculum and research, diversity, social cohesion and social inclusion, as well as community engagement.

Our vision for the University is thus to actively engage with the prevailing challenges of structurally-anchored inequalities, both within and outside of the academy, to purposefully generate a just institutional culture in which all

stakeholders can contribute to the renewal and revival of the curriculum, the academy and the community.

Although there have been some institutional shifts in transformative and inclusionary academic practices, we are yet to generate an institution-wide, deep-penetrating and paradigm-shifting ensemble of academic and administrative practices that fully and profoundly respond to our own social justice obligations and that of our students and communities.

To that extent, the purpose of CriSHET is to drive the transformation agenda of the University grounded in critical studies, framed within the concept of an African-purposed curriculum. This includes being a strategic resource to various key stakeholders, internally and externally, supporting the leadership team, and positioning Nelson Mandela University tactically within the higher education sector in order to make an impact.

The need for CriSHET directly arose out of the necessity to deepen and enlarge scholarship and programmatic work on transformation, linked to the idea that if we do not study universities as social institutions from the angle of social justice transformation, then the change and decolonising strategies we employ will be misaligned.

The work of the Chair is structured around seven key performance areas grouped under the themes of scholarship and praxis for transformation and social justice. These are underscored by principles of transdisciplinarity, collaborative engagements, critical scholarship, open dialogues, and opportunities for student voice and action. Therefore, according to Prof. Keet,

the work of CriSHET is focused on developing transformation capability, capacity, functionality and competencies within the system; whilst advancing the research and postgraduate agenda of the University.¹

Critical Scholarship and Research Agenda

Transformation work requires transformative scholarship and as such CriSHET is building a particular scholarly base for transformation practitioners and staff and students in general to contribute to a reservoir of intellectual and pragmatic resources from which we all can learn and draw. The research of the Chair joins up with the practical expression of the strategic transformation imperatives and programmes of Nelson Mandela University and the South African higher education sector generally.

CriSHET's research framework is strategically aligned with the University's intention to increase research outputs and innovation, and to cultivate a larger cohort of emerging and socially-diverse academics able to respond to the developmental challenges facing our country and continent. It therefore aims to generate original scholarship that critically analyses patterns of inclusion and exclusion and configurations of recognitions and misrecognitions within higher education.

Developing transformation functionality, rooted in a scholarly orientation, would need to be a collective project and a shared vision of the University's publics, including students, staff, and management. This is one of the exciting areas of the Chair, which will develop year on year. The staff complement currently consists of three postdoctoral fellows who contribute to the growth of

¹ CriSHET booklet, Nelson Mandela University.

the chair and its programmes within the university space, as well as seven students who are linked via masters or doctoral studies. In addition, I am informed, CriSHET has nine research associates and honorary professors from all over the world who bring different knowledge and cultural perspectives to the drive for transformation in higher education.

A current highlight of the research programme is the popular and highly successful Friday afternoon seminar series, *[Re] Directions / Ukutshintshwa Kwendlela*, featuring discussions around knowledge, praxes and the African-purposed curriculum. I am told that on the Friday afternoons this becomes quite an exciting space!

In line with our commitment to forging close partnerships with government, private sector, non-governmental organizations and civil society in communities to tackle the grand challenges of unemployment, poverty and inequality, collaborations are key in CriSHET's programmes. Bringing together a network of scholars on higher education transformation, the Chair has formed productive relationships with the Vaal University of Technology, Central University of Technology, Stellenbosch University, UNIZULU, the University of Johannesburg and Rhodes University, with more networks and collaborations in the pipeline.

Transformation and Enhancing the Transdisciplinary Focus

Crucially, transformation is about enhancing the transdisciplinary focus. The key to producing innovative and critical thinkers to challenge social injustices is through transdisciplinary collaborations that cut across academic silos. In my inaugural address, I noted that there is an urgent need to recalibrate the link between the natural sciences and the humanities, arts and social sciences. The

renewal of the academic project must, therefore, have as one of its focus areas, the re-imagination of the humanities to revitalise the transformative potential of its disciplines. I expect CriSHET to play a catalytic role in this regard.

Indeed, Prof Keet skilfully used the occasion his inaugural presentation yesterday to both plot and visually expose this link between science and Humanities.

Prof. Keet has demonstrated commitment to take on the challenge of breaking established patterns of academic power, privileges, credentials and scholarly “authority” into the CriSHET space by encouraging a re-imagination of innovative and non-conventional scholarly work that disrupts conservatism and outdated notions of knowledge and research. Thus, CriSHET seeks to engage in critical social and scientific inquiry, rigorous, imaginative, innovative and transformative scholarship that breaks boundaries on conventional disciplines.

Activating Student Voice

Students have been key participants and contributors to the transformation, Africanisation and decolonising conversations in recent years. As the University shifts towards a more student-centred practice of thoughtfully involving and connecting with its students on matters of higher education transformation, CriSHET is also committed to promoting active student engagement in the University and local community to discuss and challenge socio-economic issues of poverty, exclusion, inequality and unemployment.

To this end CriSHET’s focus on creating platforms to support emerging graduate students and young academics is intended to strengthen future academic

leaders imbued with transformative qualities of imagination, lifelong learning, civility, service, ethical leadership, self-transformation, self-reliance and adaptive expertise for mobility in an ever-changing world.

In a bid to capture student contributions in a formally documented fashion, CriSHET in partnership with the Office of the Dean of Students and Student Governance and Development, has introduced a student quarterly journal entitled *The Perspective Online: The Journal for In-depth Conversations*. The aim of the publication, which will receive submissions from under- and postgraduate students across all faculties on a range of themes, is to feature articles, columns and creative work by students on the deepening of transformation, decolonisation and Africanisation of higher education.

Re-Imagining Engagement and Hubs of Convergence

I have outlined how conceptually and programmatically the establishment of CriSHET advances the commitments made during my inauguration around learning and teaching, research and innovation. Locating CriSHET physically here at the Bird Street Campus also contributes to taking forward the plans we have for re-imagining engagement.

The Bird Street Campus is beginning to assume a new significance in the evolution of Mandela University. CriSHET forms a valuable addition to the campus alongside the Art Gallery and other units located here in the Central precinct of the city of Port Elizabeth. Symbolically it places us at the centre of city life and provides easy access for communities.

Significantly, the Bird Street Campus has also been identified for the first of the hubs of convergence Mandela University is establishing as part of its re-imagined engagement trajectory, a place where the University and society can come together in a physically engaged and engaging space. We hope that the Hub of Convergence located here in Bird Street, will further signal, in addition to the work of CriSHET and the established presence of the School of Music Art and Design, our commitment to extend our scholarship and to give it a deliberately multi-disciplinary focus, that attracts students and staff that want to locate their work beyond borders of discipline silos.

Conclusion

In concluding Programme Director, in a real sense the establishment of CriSHET is a tangible commitment to transformative and transformational leadership at Mandela University. It is a further manifestation of our posture on engagement.

It therefore gives me great pleasure in declaring CriSHET officially launched and in wishing Prof. Keet and his team all of the best. We have high expectations of you all.
