

***Understanding the Context of “Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world”***

Keynote Address by Dr Geraldine J. Fraser-Moleketi

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Repositioning our understanding of the “weapon” Education Colloquium

19 July 2018

**Introduction**

Chairperson of Council, Ambassador January-Bardill

Members of Council

Vice-Chancellor Professor Muthwa

Deputy Vice-Chancellors

Executive Dean of Education, hosting us today (Dr Muki Moeng), and other Deans

Visiting Academics, Scholars and Representatives of NPOs and Civil Society

Students and Staff

Friends and Comrades

It gives me enormous pleasure to deliver the keynote address at the first of the series of events organised by Nelson Mandela University to commemorate the centenary of our namesake. It is a year that is being celebrated in South Africa and beyond to mark the life, times and legacy of the internationally renowned and revered first President of post-apartheid and democratic South Africa – a man who struggled, suffered and sacrificed so much for the liberation of his country and the rebuilding of South Africa. The Mandela centenary is also the year the University will celebrate the first anniversary of its new name following the launch of the Nelson Mandela University name in 2017.

Given Nelson Mandela's love of education, I cannot think of a better way to begin the centenary commemorations than a colloquium deepening our understanding of his famous dictum that, "Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world" and what it means for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. So, the official Centenary Programme kicks off today with this two-day colloquium, hosted by the Faculty of Education.

Of course, it is important to remember, as the great man himself emphasised, he was part of a collective. As we celebrate his centenary this year, we need to also recall that it is the centenary of Albertina Sisulu. Moreover, Nelson Mandela was a multifaceted statesman. His life at different stages and his legacy mean different things to different people. That is why Nelson Mandela University is running a twelve-month programme, stretching from the

anniversary of his birth on 18 July 1918 to what would effectively be the end of his hundredth year in July 2019.

The Vice-Chancellor outlined the Centenary programme in her opening address, but I want to emphasise that the year-long programme will be exploring a number of topical themes around the life and legacy of our iconic namesake, including ethical leadership, Mandela the lawyer, Mandela the youth activist and the humanity of Nelson Mandela. The programme is strongly rooted in the Faculties, but it is also hugely pleasing that a number of public lectures by notable South Africans will be exploring aspects of the legacy and meaning of Nelson Mandela. Tonight, Advocate Thuli Madonsela, in collaboration with the Moral Regeneration Movement and the Centre for the Advancement of Non-Racialism and Democracy, will be addressing the social justice gap and the Constitution. I hope that many of you will be attending.

In the time available to me this morning I would like to briefly talk about Mandela University and what sets us apart from the many other institutions that bear his name. Then I would like to outline the evolution of thinking around education that provides context to the famous quotation which is the theme of this colloquium.

### **Nelson Mandela University: What Sets Us Apart**

In this hundredth year of the birth of our namesake, with the very welcome number of commemorative events taking place, with the large number of institutions seeking to associate themselves with his name, it is important that

we – as the only university in the world bearing the name of Nelson Mandela – reflect on what it is that sets us apart from other institutions that carry his name.

What sets us apart is our commitment to reflect the values and ethos of Nelson Mandela in our learning and teaching, our research and innovation, and in our engagement and internationalisation. What sets us apart is our commitment to place Africa at the centre of our scholarship in the service of society. What sets us apart is a commitment to anchor humanity at the core of what we do and how we do it.

This approach to higher education, that which distinguishes us, was at the heart of what both the Vice-Chancellor and I shared in our respective inaugural addresses in April this year. In my inauguration as Chancellor of this fine university, I articulated a vision of Nelson Mandela University as a global player firmly located within the continent of Africa and drawing on the accumulated knowledge and heritage of Africa. The Vice-Chancellor, for her part, articulated her personal vision in her inaugural address of the University in the service of society, emphasising the importance of both transformational and transformative leadership. As she proposed in her inaugural lecture, *“In transformational terms, we must all work to make the University organisationally more efficient to serve our students, staff and community better. In transformative terms, we must give our University a sharper social justice purpose and praxes.”*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> S. Muthwa, “Taking Nelson Mandela University Boldly into the Future in Service of Society”, inaugural lecture, 17 April 2018.

Since the inaugurations in April, I am pleased to say, the University has been steady working at achieving this. Prof. Sibongile Muthwa and her leadership have begun a process of reconceptualising an internationalisation strategy that will place Africa at the centre, rather than at the margins.

One of the key pillars of the vision of a university in the service of society is empowering communities to liberate their own agency. To this end, the process of re-imagining engagement at the University has begun. Considerable thought is being given to the hubs of convergence Prof. Muthwa referred to. A funding application to mobilise resources for the first of these, which will focus on enterprise development, has already been submitted to National Treasury. Work is also being done to explore possibilities around enterprise development and job creation in township and rural economies with both national and provincial government. It is too soon to release details, but all I can say is watch this space. Some exciting things are coming.

In terms of transformation of higher education, we will be launching the Chair for Critical Studies in Higher Education Transformation (CrisHET) on 24 July 2018. This is going to assist us considerably in furthering both our transformation and transformative agenda. With respect to research, a greater emphasis is being placed on transdisciplinary research and resolving some of the practical impediments to enhancing this. At the same time, the University has completed a useful review of the status of research outputs and

the interventions needed to improve these. This should go a considerable way to improving the University's profile and track record in this area.

All of this is underpinned by our approach to learning and teaching. Within the Academy, the curriculum renewal work being undertaken is exploring the decolonisation and Africanisation concepts as framed within the philosophy of humanising pedagogy.

Our understanding of a humanising pedagogy is largely based on the liberatory education philosophy and work of Paulo Freire, originally published in 1968.<sup>2</sup> We seek to recognise in our learning and teaching endeavours what it means to be human, honouring and respecting everyone's humanity and unique background, developing consciousness and agency in relation to issues of social justice/injustice, and teaching to enable development of people's full human potential. These aspects are at the centre of the pedagogical encounter.<sup>3</sup>

This is what will distinguish us as Nelson Mandela University. In years to come people across the globe should look at Mandela University and intuitively know that through our graduate attributes, through the staff who work here and through the texture and approach of our programmes we are a university in

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<sup>2</sup> P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (30th anniversary edition, M. Bergman Ramos, Trans.), New York: Teachers College Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> A. Keet, D. Zinn, D. & K. Proteus, 'Mutual Vulnerability: A key principle in a humanising pedagogy', *Perspectives in Education*, 27:2(2009), 109-119.

the service of society – one that truly reflects the values and ethos of Nelson Mandela.

### **The Task at Hand: This Education Colloquium**

Programme Director, I would now like to turn to this colloquium and its theme of “Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world” with the sub-topic of “Understanding the contextual relevance of Mandela’s statement to meet the 21<sup>st</sup> century realities of growing inequalities and hegemonies of knowledge, within the drive for a decolonised education system”. Over the next two days all of you here – from higher education institutions, schools and civil society organisations – will be interrogating these topics.

In essence, the Faculty of Education has brought together in this room representatives of what has been referred to as the formal, informal and non-formal education sector with a common purpose: to deliberate on the education path we have taken in the last few decades, identify the challenges facing us today and begin to articulate how we might address these. There are key questions around which you might do so:

- What was the context in which Nelson Mandela made this famous statement?
- What did he mean by it?
- Has education since 1994 lived up to Nelson Mandel’s expectations?
- If not, what are the root causes of the problem?

- If our education system has failed a succession of learners is it because of poor policy, or failed implementation or flawed curricula? If so, what exactly has been the problem?
- What has been the role played by teachers, unions, and community agency within schools?
- What do we mean by a decolonised education system? And what is its relevance and impact in the ways in which we set up schools and higher education institutions, the way we teach, the curricula we choose, and the relationship with communities?
- What ideal should we all aspire to as a nation for education?
- What do we need to do to achieve this?

I am not here to provide answers to all of these questions – that is the purpose of us all coming together here as a collective.

For my part, and without in any way seeking to pre-empt the deliberations of this colloquium, I would just like to touch on a few aspects that are very close to my heart. I would like to step back a bit and outline the main trends in education that provide the context to the statement that is the theme of this colloquium.

It is not a secret that education was used by the colonial authorities and apartheid regime to divide people and to attempt to ensure that the majority of the population would be permanently assigned a place of inferiority in South Africa. The 1953 Bantu Education Act, one of the cornerstones of apartheid, took African education out of the hands of missionaries (and we should



perhaps recall that Nelson Mandela and many of his generation were educated at mission schools like Clarkebury, Lovedale, St Matthews, Shawbury and Healdtown, Marianhill and many others) and placed it firmly under the control of a Department of Bantu Education, where schooling was premised on a racially discriminatory, inferior curriculum. This was most succinctly captured in Verwoerd's infamous statement that:

*"There is no place for [the Bantu] in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour ... What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice? That is quite absurd. Education must train people in accordance with their opportunities in life, according to the sphere in which they live."*<sup>4</sup>

The manner in which education was being used to entrench inequality and to oppress the masses was something that was recognised by those struggling for our liberation. A huge contribution to the fight against the colonial and apartheid education system was made by teacher organisations like the Teachers' League of South Africa (TLSA) and the Cape African Teachers association (CATA) from the early 1940s. Their activism, and writings on education (such as in *The Torch* and *The Education Journal*), offer some of the most potent critiques of colonial and apartheid education.

In 1955 the drafters of the Freedom Charter, issued the clarion call that:

*"The Doors of Learning and Culture Shall be Opened!"*

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<sup>4</sup> H.F. Verwoerd, Speech as Minister of Native Affairs, 7 June 1954, Apartheid Quotes- Bantu Education website: <https://www.thoughtco.com/apartheid-quotes-bantu-education-43436> (site accessed 12 July 2018), citing Brian Lapping, *Apartheid - A History* (1987)

*The government shall discover, develop and encourage national talent for the enhancement of our cultural life;*

*All the cultural treasures of mankind shall be open to all, by free exchange of books, ideas and contact with other lands;*

*The aim of education shall be to teach the youth to love their people and their culture, to honour human brotherhood, liberty and peace;*

*Education shall be free, compulsory, universal and equal for all children; Higher education and technical training shall be opened to all by means of state allowances and scholarships awarded on the basis of merit;*

*Adult illiteracy shall be ended by a mass state education plan;*

*Teachers shall have all the rights of other citizens;*

*The colour bar in cultural life, in sport and in education shall be abolished.”<sup>5</sup>*

In the late 1960s and 1970s the rise of Black Consciousness began to focus attention on the soul-sapping, identity-destroying effects of Bantu Education which strove so hard to make Black people believe they were inferior. In 1972, Onkgopotse Tiro delivered a stunning critique of Bantu education at his graduation ceremony at Turfloop University. In a statement that became known as “Turfloop Testimony” he stridently proclaimed:

*“Addressing us on the occasion of the formal of the formal opening of this university Mr. [Cedric] Phatudi, a Lebowa territorial authority officer, said that in as much as there is American Education, there had to be Bantu Education. Ladies and gentlemen, I am conscientiously bound to differ with him. In America there is nothing like Negro Education, Red Indian Education, and White American*

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<sup>5</sup> “Freedom Charter, Congress of the People, Kliptown, on 26 June 1955”, SA History on Line website: <http://www.sahistory.org.za/article/freedom-charter> (site accessed 12 July 2018).

*Education. They have American Education common to all Americans. But in South Africa, we have Bantu Education, Indian Education, Coloured Education and European Education. We do not have a system of education common to all South Africans.”*<sup>6</sup>

He went on to conclude, *“In conclusion Mr. Chancellor I say: Let the Lord be praised, for the day shall come, when all shall be free to breathe the air of freedom which is theirs to breathe and when the day shall have come, no man, no matter how many tanks he has, will reverse the course of events.”*<sup>7</sup> For those of you who may not know, Onkgopotse Tiro was murdered by the apartheid death squads with a parcel bomb on 1 February 1974 in Botswana.

Steve Biko also strongly drew attention to the evil impact of apartheid education,

*“The logic behind white domination is to prepare the black man for the subservient role in this country. Not so long ago this used to be freely said in parliament even about the educational system of the black people. It is still said even today, although in a much more sophisticated language. To a large extent the evil-doers have succeeded in producing at the output end of their machine a kind of black man who is man only in form. This is the extent to which the process of dehumanisation has advanced.”*<sup>8</sup>

The effects of colonialism and apartheid in general, including Bantu education, on the minds and psyche of Black South Africans is what Steve Biko had in mind when he stated,

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<sup>6</sup> Graduation speech, Onkgopotso Tiro, Turfloop University, 29 April 1972, History on line website: <http://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/graduation-speech-onkgopotse-tiro-university-north-29-april-1972> (site accessed 13 July 2018).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> S. Biko, *I Write What I Like* (Cambridge: ProQuest, 2005), p.28.

*“The philosophy of Black Consciousness, therefore, expresses group pride and the determination by the blacks to rise and attain the envisaged self. At the heart of this kind of thinking is the realisation by the blacks that the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.”<sup>9</sup>*

Such were the pervasive negative implications of the education system forced on the majority of South Africans that it is therefore no accident that the 1976 Soweto student uprising was sparked off by resistance to the apartheid regime’s attempts to impose Afrikaans as a language of instruction to further entrench its power and oppress the masses through education. The 1976 Soweto student uprising soon spread across the country and galvanised resistance to apartheid.

Although the 1976 uprising was brutally suppressed through the massive use of violence, its flames were re-ignited in the 1980s with widespread school boycotts and the emergence of People’s Education. That became a catalyst for much wider resistance and mobilisation that ultimately led, in 1990, to the negotiations for a democratic dispensation.

Faced with the devastating effects of three centuries of colonialism and apartheid, the architects of our democracy saw education as one of the tools that would transform society, lift people out of poverty and create greater equality. The aspirations of the Freedom Charter found expression in our Constitution and in policy developed for a post-apartheid education system.

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.68.

The general trajectory of future education policy in 1994 was reflected in the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), which stated, inter alia:

*“3.3.1 We must develop an integrated system of education and training that provides equal opportunities to all irrespective of race, colour, sex, class, language, age, religion, geographical location, political or other opinion. It must address the development of knowledge and skills that can be used to produce high-quality goods and services in such a way as to enable us to develop our cultures, our society and our economy.*

*3.3.2 Education must be directed to the full development of the individual and community, and to strengthening respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It must promote understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all South Africans and must advance the principles contained in the Bill of Rights.”<sup>10</sup>*

The RDP went on to propose specific interventions for Early Childhood Educare, Adult Basic Education, Special Education, Compulsory School Education, Further Education and Training, Higher Education.<sup>11</sup>

The dreams for education that were articulated in the Freedom Charter were reflected in our new Constitution when this was written. In the Bill of Rights the following fundamental principles were set out:

29. (1) *Everyone has the right –*  
*(a) to a basic education, including adult basic education; and*

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<sup>10</sup> African National Congress, *The Reconstruction and Development Programme. A Policy Framework* (Johannesburg: ANC, 1994), p.60.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.62-67.

*(b) to further education, which the state, through reasonable measures must make progressively available and accessible.*

*(2) Everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable. In order to ensure the effective access to, and implementation of, this right, the state must consider all reasonable educational alternatives, including single medium institutions, taking into account -*

*(a) equity;*

*(b) practicability; and*

*(c) the need to redress the results of past racially discriminatory laws and practices.”<sup>12</sup>*

As you will all know, the broad provisions of the Constitution then found practical expression in various policies and pieces of legislation.

It is interesting to note that even in his twilight years, Nelson Mandela recognised that education was the weapon most able to eliminate ignorance and fear, to unlock the potential of individuals to develop themselves and their communities – to counterbalance the weapon of the oppressors which Steve Biko identified. Almost 15 years ago to the day, on 16 July 2003, in launching the Mindset Network, an educational satellite multimedia network he stated:

*South Africa inherited a highly dysfunctional educational system from the Apartheid era. It is our one of our major tasks of reconstruction to build an educational system that provides quality opportunities for all our people. It is fundamentally important that our children are prepared to compete with confidence in the international arena. We need to ensure*

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<sup>12</sup> The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Act 108 of 1996), clause 29.

*that every one of our children has access to a world class, quality education.....”<sup>13</sup>*

This brief overview of the salient features of the evolution of our education system would be incomplete without mention of the 2015 #RhodesMustFall and the FeesMustFall movements. In a very real sense these movements focused renewed attention on the incomplete transformation of South African society. What initially started as a protest around a statue of an arch imperialist (Cecil John Rhodes) soon grew into calls for a broader examination of some of the fundamental assumptions and concepts underpinning our knowledge systems and curricula. That is why we need to take the decolonisation and Africanisation discussion seriously and respond appropriately. In essence, it represents the next phase in the evolution of our democracy and it picks up on, and extends, the ideas expressed by thinkers and activists such as Tiro and Biko.

We also need to acknowledge that the student protests from 2015 re-emphasised the challenges of inclusivity and women and education. Fees must fall, in particular, also brought through a strong assertion of young women leadership. It would be tragic if the greater awareness of the complexities and subtleties of gender issues in society, if the gains made in terms of women in leadership positions in student movements, were to be lost.

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<sup>13</sup> N.R. Mandela, “Lighting your way to a better future “, speech at launch of Mindset Network, 16 July 2003, , Nelson Mandela Foundation website [http://db.nelsonmandela.org/speeches/pub\\_view.asp?pg=item&ItemID=NMS909](http://db.nelsonmandela.org/speeches/pub_view.asp?pg=item&ItemID=NMS909) (site accessed 16 July 2018).

Similarly, the FeesMust Fall movement refocused attention on the plight of students from working class and poor backgrounds. It reminded us that higher education was both a personal and a private good. The movement was a timely reminder to government of some of its own positions on higher education. The National Planning Commission had, for example, articulated in 2012:

*“Universities are key to developing a nation. They play three main functions in society:*

*Firstly, they educate and train people with high-level skills for the employment needs of the public and private sectors.*

*Secondly, universities are the dominant producers of new knowledge, and they critique information and find new local and global applications for existing knowledge. South Africa needs knowledge that equips people for a changing society and economy.*

*Thirdly, given the country’s apartheid history, higher education provides opportunities for social mobility. It can strengthen equity, social justice and democracy. In today’s knowledge society, higher education is increasingly important for opening up people’s opportunities.”<sup>14</sup>*

Equally significantly from our perspective, is that the FeesMustFall movement reminded us all of the commitment contained in the Freedom Charter that, *“Higher education and technical training shall be opened to all by means of state allowances and scholarships awarded on the basis of merit.”* And as I

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<sup>14</sup> National Planning Commission, *National Development Plan 2030. Our Future - Make It Work* (Pretoria: Presidency of the Republic of South Africa, 2012), p. 318.



indicated earlier, our Constitution called upon government to take reasonable measures to make further education progressively available.

The phased implementation for free higher education is most welcome. Whilst there are still kinks that need to be ironed out, we need to see access to higher education in the context of fulfilment of a commitment made as far back as 1955 and which was referred to our Constitution. As a society, we need to acknowledge the role the FeesMustFall movement had in reminding us of these commitments.

I will leave it to you to debate what has been achieved and what is yet to be achieved in respect of the noble vision those who struggled for our freedom had for education in a democratic South Africa. It is imperative in the centenary year of the birth of Nelson Mandela and Albertina Sisulu, and almost a quarter of a century into our democracy, that we collectively pause and take stock of whether we have all lived up to these promises.

## **Conclusion**

I am sure many, if not all, of you watched President Barack Obama's rousing Mandela Memorial lecture a few days ago. He used the opportunity to step back, to review recent global political, economic and other developments. He concluded that the world is at a decisive moment, *"On Madiba's 100th birthday, we now stand at a crossroads. A moment in time at which two very*

*different visions of humanity's future compete for the hearts and the minds of citizens around the world.”<sup>15</sup>*

Some of you might have read the thought-provoking article by former Deputy President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, “Using our freedom to fight for gender equality”, published as part of the Mandela100 series of articles. She also used the centenary as an entry point to reviewing Nelson Mandela’s deep commitment to gender equality and the path we have followed since his presidency championed women’s rights. She concluded that, *“In just a few years of his life, Madiba increased women’s representation at the highest levels of government. Today, South Africa’s parliament is ranked tenth best in the world for women’s representation, with 41% women MPs. He got the ball rolling, and it has gathered momentum.”*<sup>16</sup> But although he had a catalytic effect, there is still a long way to go to ensure parity in the work place and to eliminate gender-based violence, *“The femicide rate in South Africa is well above the world average of 2.4 per 100 000 women. One in two of these women is murdered by her intimate partner, the person meant to respect and support her.”* Citing former United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon, she argued that, *“The meaning of Madiba’s birthday is a call to action. It is action that is sorely needed in South Africa.”*<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Barack Obama, 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Mandela Memorial Lecture, 17 July 2018, transcript on website: <https://www.news24.com/Columnists/GuestColumn/on-madibas-100th-birthday-we-now-stand-at-a-crossroads-read-obamas-full-speech-20180718> (site accessed 18 July 2018).

<sup>16</sup> Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, “Using our freedom to fight for gender equality”, Mandela100 website: <https://mandela100.news24.com/using-our-freedom-to-fight-for-gender-equality/> (site accessed 18 July 2018).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

It is incumbent upon us as Nelson Mandela University use the opportunity of the centenary of his birth to do the same for education, to take a step back and review where we are and what needs to be done to achieve Nelson Mandela's vision.

That we as a country might not have yet achieved the dream Nelson Mandela had in 1994 for education does not, in my view, negate the value of the concept of a humanising pedagogy nor of education as a weapon for changing the world. Indeed, the challenges of education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should inspire us to redouble our efforts to achieve a more just society in South Africa where the challenges of poverty, inequality, unemployment, lack of access to resources and massive social injustice are buried once and for all.

That is no small undertaking. And that, in essence is the task you have before you today: to understand what role was envisaged by the founders of our democracy for education, ascertain where and how we might have fallen short and devise strategies for getting us back on track. As Mandela University, we dare not fail.

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