



## **Inauguration Speech by Prof Letlhokwa George Mpedi**

**Friday, 10 March 2023 at 18:00**

I am Letlhokwa George Mpedi, the son of Daniel Pule Mpedi, a construction worker, and Josephine Hambile Mpedi, a housewife. As far back as I can remember, my father said he wanted me to be a lawyer while my mother instilled a strong sense of discipline in me and sparked my love for education. Their words and unwavering belief in my potential certainly informed my journey. For many years, I wanted to be the best criminal lawyer in the country until I was bitten by the academic bug. It was in academia that I really began to understand the transformative nature of education. I hail from a village in the Hammanskraal area.

I spent my childhood with my homeboys collecting water and wood for our families. Together, we enjoyed shooting birds with *keti* and eating *moretlwa* fruit (Brandybush fruit), which I must admit I haven't seen again since I moved to the city. As we adventured as young boys do, we dreamt about the possibilities growing older would bring, we dreamt of moving to the big cities and eking out livings. I am testament to the transformative power of education and the might of access. However, many of my childhood friends who were smarter than me and demonstrated stronger work ethics were not as fortunate as me. The reality is that the South African condition only affords some of us opportunities and only allows for a handful of us to emerge out of our contexts. There is great unrealised potential in villages like mine that we have to fight hard to realise.

In his seminal 1975 play 'Death and the King's Horseman', Nigerian playwright and Nobel Prize winner Wole Soyinka poignantly asks, "There is only one home to the life of a river-mussel; there is only one home to the life of a tortoise; there is only one shell to the soul of man; there is only one world to the spirit of our race. If that world leaves its course and smashes on boulders of the great void, whose world will give us shelter?"

It is an honour and a privilege to take up the helm of this incredible institution that has emerged as the quintessential African success story. In recent days, Soyinka's words have reverberated through my mind. This call to change the world is a powerful one. It is a call to prioritise humanity through every shift, every new era, every epoch. As I search through the crowd of familiar faces from the podium today, I am reminded of how remarkable the University of Johannesburg's (UJ) story is. Our emergence as the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) University has been nothing short of extraordinary.

Born out of a merger, we seem to have beaten the odds, achieved the impossible and traversed paths previously untravelled. Since UJ's conception in 2005, it can be asserted that the University has taken on the baton of transformation and carved a space in higher education that has quite literally had a quantifiable impact on society. Former Minister of Education Kadar Asmal said at

the time, “There can be no doubt that the higher education landscape is well on its way to reflecting the values, ethos and aspirations of our democracy, away from the false divisions of the apartheid past, which have for too long scarred our higher education system and limited its ability to truly respond to the current and future needs of our country.” UJ is a unique institution. It serves as a microcosm of our society. Many of the inequities and inequalities in South Africa present themselves here – many of our students are first generation, many have emerged from lower quintile 1 and 2 schools, many are impacted by the digital divide. Our student body is a true representation of the demographics of our country and our understanding of the complexities of the country’s dynamics is based on our very own experience. We are a tale of the ability to subvert the South African narrative that has taken hold in recent years. This is the very spirit of this institution. We are a University of possibilities that demonstrates the transformative power of education. Like many of our students, I am a first-generation graduate. It is my very beginnings at Vista University and later the Rand Afrikaans University (RAU) that have led me to this podium. My passion for labour law and social security formed within those very walls. At the Max Planck Institute for Foreign and International Social Law, I began to understand the value of approaching education through the gaze of societal impact.

I know all too well the importance of an institution that emphasises access and excellence. In our country, there is a distinct divide. UJ has done a great deal to widen access, but still the gap persists. Given our history and our roots in RAU, Vista University and the Technikon Witwatersrand, there seems to be a greater responsibility placed on our shoulders to widen access and opportunity. Ladies and gentlemen, an important initiative in this regard will be the creation of a digital twin of our brick-and-mortar campus. This digital campus will take shape over the next few years, drawing from our experiences under the lockdown and benchmarking globally for best practices. The pandemic has demonstrated that online modes of teaching and learning are a tangible solution to ‘inaccess’. This, in part, addresses the thresholds and limited capacity of institutions. By the same token, there is a fundamental need for us to double down in our efforts to support academically deserving but financially struggling students. The Double our Future Impact Campaign launched at the end of last year, for instance, demonstrates our commitment to ensuring that those who get a seat are able to take it regardless of their family’s circumstances. The campaign financially supports the Missing Middle students to register for their degrees and diplomas with the goal of assisting at least 10 000 students. So far, we have managed to raise in excess of R3.5million. Our emphasis has to be on ensuring that no one is left behind.

After all, since our inception, we have challenged the status quo with an unparalleled commitment to innovation. We are a post-apartheid success story based on a model created with the intention of rewriting the higher education narrative. The recent research metrics and rankings indicate that UJ is a destination of choice – a worthy contender even beyond our nation’s borders. With Soyinka’s words in mind, I want to highlight two metrics. Firstly, we are among the top-ranked research universities in the country. Secondly, in the Times Higher Education Impact Rankings, which focuses on how well an institution performs in areas related to the United Nation’s (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), UJ was placed among the top 70 universities in the world in 2022, and ranks first in South Africa. In the 4IR space, we have broken barriers and ensured our stature as leaders in this sphere. As I recall, Professor Tshilidzi Marwala’s words at his inauguration served as a clarion call to respond to our shifting context and emerge as dynamic and active participants in the 4IR. This is a legacy we have to build on. It is a legacy that took root in Professor Ihron Rensburg’s commitment to transformation, equity, access and Pan-Africanism. I promise to build on this powerful legacy of my predecessors with our current and future world in

mind. Continuity, innovation, humanity, inclusivity and purposeful progress are the prerequisite guiding principles.

The futurist writer Joel Barker is credited with the phrase, "Vision without action is merely a dream. Action without vision is merely passing time. But vision with action can change the world." We have, indeed, emerged as the 4IR University with a competitive approach to teaching, learning and research. We now need to ensure that we continue this trajectory with greater attention paid to sustainability and development. We have made some strides in these areas already – the goal, however, is to ensure that our future-centric stance stresses the importance of humans and their needs. We are in dark unprecedented times in recent memory– characterised by great uncertainty, global upheaval, leadership crises, polarisation and startling rises in inequality. In South Africa, we are seeing rapid rises in crime, infrastructure deficits that have resulted in electricity and water crises, unusual weather phenomena that have caused untold destruction and vast divisions that only seem to be growing. Wherever you look, we seem to be in crisis. To allude back to Soyinka, we seem to be smashing into boulders in the great void. This is a world in desperate need of solutions and new ways forward. It is a world calling out for action. In his 1963 song *Blowin' in the Wind*, Bob Dylan asked:

"How many years must a mountain exist

Before it is washed to the sea?

And how many years can some people exist

Before they're allowed to be free?

Yes, and how many times can a man turn his head

And pretend that he just doesn't see?"

The answer, he says, is blowing in the wind. This, I would argue, is the wind of change blowing through academia as we shift from the technical to the practical. As a public university at the southern end of Africa, UJ does not exist in a vacuum. It exists in and is buffeted by an environment that is marred by these social, economic and political challenges of increasing extent and complexity. There are issues in our local and national environments, such as corruption and ineptitude, that need to be addressed head-on, but equally, we are not immune from the wicked challenges of our time. Universities have a mandate that extends beyond their own walls – we have a responsibility to society to provide answers. As UJ continues to rise, my vision and mission is to ensure that we do so with societal impact. This concept represents the effect of our research and work in the real world. It represents a shift beyond academia to the economy, society, culture and beyond. It is incumbent on us to lead through ideas, actions, and programmes in ways that deliberately seek to ameliorate these challenges and positively impact on the world around us. The Greek mathematician Archimedes once said, "Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it and I shall move the world." In a contemporary context, the lever and fulcrum could be considered the convergence of the 4IR and the sustainable development goals (SDGs). The emphasis on societal impact is not only confined to the UJ community but demands that we push our collective gaze outwards. As we continue to make strides with technology, we must do so in a way that advances and positively impacts humanity and society. Among others, we have a responsibility to address gender disparities and gender-based violence. Fighting this scourge must become part of our culture. As our Chancellor Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka said at her

inauguration, “A university which fails to address discrimination of women or gender non-conforming people and has no clear GBV policies in place creates an environment that normalises discrimination.” We need to continue challenging the dominating narratives and pushing for transformation by, among others, expanding existing programmes such as the Accelerated Academic Mentorship Programme.

In the midst of the 4IR, UJ has led the way in building understanding and capabilities in a changing world. And as this change accelerates, the role of technology is changing. Beyond the internet of things (IoT), artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics, for instance, there is a distinct need to co-create a purposeful and inclusive societal future, within the reality of technology and constant innovation. Guided by the SDGs, UJ has already demonstrated that it is uniquely poised to combine its 4IR and education expertise to enable this future, equipping our students and the world with the knowledge tools and opportunities to solve society’s most pressing needs. The recent 3D printing project that has been rolled out at UJ in collaboration with the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI) is a prime example of how we can leverage the technology of the 4IR and posit sustainable solutions that benefit local communities. The 3D printer at UJ can complete a house in one day. The finished house is stronger, can handle fire better, and is better insulated than conventional houses. It demonstrates the ability of technology to address some of our glaring deficits and gaps, particularly in response to the issue of homelessness in our city.

Another example is the fleet of electric buses that have been unveiled, which produce much lower carbon emissions while offering a smooth ride even on steep routes. This has been made possible by our shift to renewable sources of energy, which currently comprise 15% of our energy at UJ. To allude to the words of the World Economic Forum (WEF) founder Klaus Schwab, these are examples of how we strike a balance between the promise and peril of technology. We must continue to emphasise addressing these broader challenges through our research and act quickly – this is how we ensure that our approach to the 4IR speaks to societal impact. The proposed medical school that we hope to finalise during my term as Vice-Chancellor emphasises our commitment to healthcare with a technological bend ensuring the health and well-being of our community, in line with the Constitution of the country and the SDGs. UJ has established a solid foundation in its internationalisation drive. I will continue with all faculties and our GES Institutes to entrench our position as a globally recognised African University. At the heart of our approach to this goal is the well-being of our staff and students, which is supported by various structures. This is a taste of the human-centric approach. As 1 Corinthians 9:25 reminds us, “Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.”

Just as we demonstrated the importance of adapting to the 4IR in recent years and emphasised transformation and Pan-Africanism before that, we must now work with the thesis that technology is only advanced through humanity. And as we have demonstrated in recent years – UJ is willing to do the work! This, of course, cannot be done in a silo. I invite the entire UJ community – council, senate, alumni, staff, students, unions, institutions, and friends of the University to ensure our approach is human-centric and impactful. This multistakeholder approach will ensure that this is a legacy that stretches beyond my term. Perhaps we can answer Soyinka’s questions through the words of Kenyan political activist Wangari Maathai. “Today we are faced with a challenge that calls for a shift in our thinking, so that humanity stops threatening its life-support system. We are called to assist the Earth to heal her wounds and, in the process, heal our own - indeed to embrace

the whole of creation in all its diversity, beauty and wonder.” At UJ, we are called to do this with the same spirit and vigour that has defined our short but illustrious history.