

NELSON MANDELA  
UNIVERSITY

# *Answering Mandela*



Change the World.



# Acknowledgements

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This report was written by Michaela Penkler, Neil Honeycomb, and Crain Soudien.  
Many thanks to Verne Harris, Tlangilani Nyathi, and André Keet for reviewing and proofing the document.  
The design work was done by Rachel Larkin.

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October 2024,  
Bird Street Campus, Nelson Mandela University,  
Gqeberha, South Africa





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# Introduction

The renaming of the University after Madiba presented a unique opportunity for the institution to re-invigorate its purpose and re-establish its relevance with those whom it serves. Previously named after the Nelson Mandela Bay Metropole,

**the University wished to shift its identity beyond its geographical location and create a distinct and emphatic identity based on the conceptual and symbolic significance of Nelson Mandela.**

For many, carrying the Mandela name brings great responsibility. But what does the name mean, and what bearing does it have on the University?

Since 2017, the University has formally engaged in reflection and debate about the meaning and significance of the name through various activities and structures, which are detailed in the mapping note, [Embodying Mandela at Mandela University](#). A great deal has been learnt from these engagements, and as the mapping note illustrates, the University has made substantial strides in deepening its understanding of what it means to be the Nelson Mandela University. One such stride was the establishment of the Transdisciplinary Institute for Mandela Studies (TIMS).

TIMS aims to be a leading centre for the intellectual study of the social, political, and cultural significance of Nelson Mandela and the Mandela legacy – the field of [Mandela Studies](#). By attaching the descriptor “studies” to the name, we deliberately constitute Mandela’s life, politics, and worldview as a *site of enquiry* through transdisciplinary

research, documentation, community engagement, academic events, and networking. This field embraces a dual signification of Nelson Mandela. The first signification references the historical figure, and the second concerns the “deeper and more transformative space of the social figure”. The second signification is denoted in text as “*Mandela*”. Mandela Studies contributes to the revitalisation of the Humanities through transdisciplinary social justice research and deepens the transformative<sup>1</sup> process in the University’s institutional culture. The field also presents itself as a long-term and generative site of intellectual possibility throughout the institution.

**The institute’s work on the academic expression of Mandela articulates the latent transformative significance of the social figure and informs the University’s curricula and research innovations imaginarily<sup>2</sup>, and its broader scholarly and community engagement.**

Imminent in this work are outlines of new praxes that suggest ways through which the University could present itself and take form. Since its establishment, TIMS has led a rigorous and critical process of engagement with *Mandela* at the University and among a wider community of social justice activists and scholars.

This report provides reflection on the thinking and work the University has done in deepening its understanding of what it means to be the *Nelson Mandela University*. It ought to be contextualised and interpreted in light of the numerous innovative conceptual and programmatic initiatives that have emerged over the past few decades, not only those laid out

<sup>1</sup>Transformative change and leadership involve intellectual and social development that challenges “inappropriate uses of power” by maintaining a moral purpose to seek social justice, see Muthwa, S. 2018, April 17. Taking Nelson Mandela University Boldly into the Future in Service of Society, Inaugural Address, p.5.

<sup>2</sup>Coined by Cornelius Castoriadis, the imaginary represents the symbolic systems and meanings through which individuals make sense of their social world and develop a shared sense of identity with others. See Castoriadis, C. (1987). *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. MIT Press.







in *Embodying Mandela at Mandela University*. The report constitutes a baseline for understanding how the work of TIMS has contributed to the process of the University's engagement with the name of Mandela. It seeks to provide insight into TIMS's community-stakeholder engagements on the Mandela name and how the *Mandela* identity has landed and been given academic expression at the University. The report is divided into three main sections.

Section 1 outlines how community-stakeholder engagements for this project were conducted. Section 2 presents a thematic analysis of discussions and offers interpretation into how the University formulates its understanding of the name and the extent to which the University critically engages with it. Finally, conclusions and recommendations are covered in Section 3.

***"Nelson Mandela University embraces the responsibility and honour of being the only university in the world to bear the name of the late Nelson Mandela. This brings with it the responsibility to embody his legacy and ethos."***

~ Prof Sibongile Muthwa





## Section One

### RATIONALE AND PURPOSE OF THE STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENTS

Nelson Mandela University is committed to embodying the Mandela legacy and ethos. This commitment was expressed by the Vice-Chancellor, Prof Sibongile Muthwa, in 2017 at the launch of the new name. Since that pivotal moment, the University has embarked on a self-conscious and ongoing journey to explore questions of “What does the name Mandela mean?” and “What new possibilities might emanate from it?”. Every committee, faculty, department, unit, and entity has engaged with these or similar questions. Questions of Africanisation and decolonisation, as well as how these find expression across disciplines and fields, are now reaching all corners of the institution. Each division, in its own way, has begun to formulate how it is positioned in relation to these questions.

**Emerging conceptual formulations around a Mandela posturing found root in a heterogeneous mix of policies, organisational, and organic manifestations. To understand how these emergent conceptualisations were taking form, TIMS sought to investigate how the University’s commitment to the Mandela name translated into questions of intellectual and scholarly focus and organisational form and practice.**

Put differently, how does a university (with distinct modes of operation and its calling as a site of intellectual engagement) own, embody, and express its nominal identity?

The investigation’s aim informed the chosen engagements with stakeholders in focus group settings. This

approach is well suited to gathering rich, descriptive data on perceptions, opinions, and attitudes towards or around a concept. The intention was not to seek definitive answers but rather to listen deeply to voices and perspectives on Mandela within the establishment. The discussions sought to gather the subjective meanings attributed to the name and the implications these meanings may have, for example, teaching and learning, a particular discipline, or deepening a sense of community at Nelson Mandela University.

### ORGANISING THE FOCUS GROUPS

DVC Engagement and Transformation proposed focus group engagements across faculties at the Transversal Deanery in order to gain support from members. The proposition was well received, and Deans offered to facilitate participation and recruitment within faculties. A letter of thanks was presented to each of the Executive Deans for their interest in the project and outlined TIMS’s interest in engaging with the University community. Faculty management subsequently recruited and/or referred groups and individuals for participation. Key limitations to participation included on-campus access to staff and students and schedule availability.

Once participant groups were identified, respective department heads, secretaries, and lecturers were contacted by email to outline the purpose and nature of the proposed focus group discussions and to request their support in organising the focus group sessions with staff and students. Departments proposed different methods for inviting participants to the focus groups, ranging from internal departmental communication by staff to direct communication with prospective participants.





Figure 1. Focus Group Invitation

Join TIMS for a discussion on the University's

## MANDELA IDENTITY

Nelson Mandela University has been reorienting itself to become a more responsive and socially embedded institution, and TIMS is one of its strategic initiatives to advance transdisciplinary studies, social justice, and reimagining engagement.

TIMS is investigating the University's evolving Mandela identity. As such, the TIMS team would like to discuss opinions and perceptions around the Mandela Identity and its significance to the University with you.

*The TIMS team is looking forward to hearing your thoughts and opinions.*


*We will provide tea and coffee to heat up the discussions!*

**ARCHITECTURE**  
TIME: 09:30 - 11:00  
DATE: 04-08-2022  
VENUE: STUDIO INCUBATE

**INTERIOR DESIGN**  
TIME: 09:30 - 11:00  
DATE: 05-08-2022  
VENUE: STUDIO STUPOR

**SCHOOL OF ENGINEERING**  
TIME: 13:30 - 14:30  
DATE: 05-08-2022  
VENUE: ROOM 003

For enquiries, contact  
[michaelap@mandela.ac.za](mailto:michaelap@mandela.ac.za)





### FOCUS GROUP SESSION STRUCTURE

Professors Crain Soudien and Verne Harris engaged with participating groups by asking questions about the name Mandela and encouraging open participation. The sessions ran for approximately 60 minutes each, and the proceedings were recorded by note-takers. Focus group participants were advised that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the discussion at any point. Participant input would remain confidential, and no identifying particulars would be included in this final report. A letter outlining the purpose, procedure, benefits and risks, as well as the terms of confidentiality was provided, and informed consent was sought. Tea, coffee, and a snack were provided at the end of each session.

### FOCUS GROUP SESSION DETAILS

In total, ten focus groups (173 participants) were organised. Of these, five groups consisted of student stakeholders (112 participants), three of faculty staff (40 participants), and two of executive management (21 participants). Owing to constraints, the focus group session with the Middle Management Forum (MMF) did not go ahead. Instead, a brief information/awareness session was hosted in the MMF forum. This session, together with other information sessions, ran parallel to the focus group discussions that were held. These included conversations with the Hubs of Convergence on food systems, the Centre for Women and Gender Studies on maternal legacies, the First-Year Success team on student orientation, and the Department of Arts, Culture and Heritage on the Naming and Renaming and the Signs and Symbols projects. Details for focus group sessions are presented in the table below.

Group	Stakeholder Type	Session Date	Participants
Architecture	Undergraduate Students	4 August 2022	35
Interior Design	Undergraduate Students	5 August 2022	27
Engineering	Postgraduate Students	6 August 2022	5
Transversal Deanery	Executive Management	6 April 2023	21
Law	Postgraduate Students	24 May 2023	25
Psychology	Undergraduate Students	25 May 2023	20
Sociology	Faculty Staff	26 May 2023	3
Science	Faculty Staff	3 August 2023	19
Middle Management	Executive Management	4 August 2023	-
Health Sciences	Executive Management	31 August 2023	18





## Section Two

### UNDERSTANDING THE NAME

Given that the University has been carrying the Mandela name for five years, it was important for TIMS to establish an understanding of what the name meant to community-stakeholders: firstly, to determine whether an observable shift in perceptions had occurred, and secondly, to ascertain whether perceptions influence how individuals relate to their field of specialisation and vice versa. The following section broadly outlines the emerging themes and dominant perceptions for each of the three stakeholder groups: students, staff, and management.

#### Students

Engagement with the students presented a wide array of perceptions encompassing enthusiasm, curiosity, disinterest, and negativity in a range of philosophical, polemical, and pragmatic registers. The student discussions were generative and nuanced, with students actively giving expression to their perceptions by integrating opposing viewpoints in the group discussions. Sessions provided opportunities for probing and clarification for the elaboration of new ideas, and the sharing of lived experiences.

Across all the faculties and disciplines, a number of students were deeply critical of what they de-

scribed as a “glorified image” of Mandela. These students felt that the image of Mandela had been carefully constructed through “choreographed PR campaigns” to produce a drastic shift in how he was portrayed pre- and post-1994. In his early career, Mandela was portrayed as a warrior for freedom. The iconic pugilist portrait, for example, projected him as a warrior of freedom, overlooking the fact that he supported the armed struggle and the violence it brought. In dramatic contrast, the post-1994 image depicted Mandela as Tata Madiba, the “Christ-like figure” of peace. The students linked this sanctified interpretation of Mandela to his status as a “global icon” and stereotype. This, many felt, was not something to which they could relate.

**Through discussion, they proposed that the University should explore ways of humanising Mandela, such as by sharing stories of his experiences at university, his relationships with friends and family, and incidents where he recognised his own mistakes.**

**Students holding sceptical views argued that a “one-sided image” was being created, and, like a brand, this was something that could be bought and sold or changed to suit the situation. They said that they felt betrayed or “sold out” by this idea of Mandela.**

NELSON MANDELA UNIVERSITY







The brand of freedom, unity, and equality did not align with their reality, particularly their lived experience at the university, where the values of ubuntu and diversity were overtly recognised but were not concretely apparent in the day-to-day workings of the institution. Students expressed frustration at what they saw as a lack of unity and care on campus. This perception was underpinned by what they saw as i) change efforts that were bureaucratised, ii) massification processes that were impeding curricular reforms, and iii) siloed operations.

There was also a positive view of Mandela that emerged from discussions with student groups. Many students across all disciplines felt that Mandela signified for them the ideals of justice, equality, and social change". They argued that Mandela had promoted these ideals through his actions and was the "man who headed racial equality in our country". Because of this, they supported the Mandela legacy and its principles. They felt called upon to take responsibility for it. However, the form and expression of this responsibility appeared to be strongly informed by the students' disciplinary location or field. Students of law and engineering broadly believed that the University should reflect this legacy in terms of its governance and how teaching and learning were managed. Students of psychology and architecture expressed that the responsibility of effecting the Mandela legacy falls on everyone associated with the University.

**An important insight brought forward was the notion of agency. Students felt that the expression and development of student agency were essential for any embodiment of Mandela at the University. Furthermore, by nurturing student agency directly linked to Mandela, students suggested that the University might indeed be able to move "beyond Mandela" and embody a figuring that invoked a meaningful impact that could be sustainable over time.**





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*STUDENT DISCUSSION GROUPS*

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STUDENT DISCUSSION GROUPS

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Student-agents suggested agency could be nurtured by incorporating practical social justice work and critical thinking into the curriculum and providing students with appropriate platforms to address real-world problems. Beyond this, students expressed the importance of being supported as active role players in tangible systemic transformation. While some sentiments were shared across focus groups, they found expression in different forms. That is, conceptions of “ubuntu” as professional responsibility might also find expression in, for example, practising within safety standards and regulations within engineering and related fields. While these two broad yet dominant student views strongly came to the fore, the nuance in their feedback should not be underplayed. This distinction was evidenced in a clear struggle in their real-time thinking about how to work with the name with which they were associated. As noted previously, student participants did not easily relate to the image of the historical figure, citing that it was one-dimensional, outdated, and impersonal. They rarely took the opportunity to think “beyond Mandela”. They drew attention to the difficulties of the Mandela brand as an intergenerational frame for cohering the University and helping it gain direction. Central to this challenge was that Mandela was being presented as a figure to look up to without providing the student body with rigorous and critical opportunities to understand the complexity of Mandela.

Work around the name and image was perceived as superficial at times and, when used in one-dimensional ways, resulted in a fading legacy. For some, the symbol had lost its meaning, and so, as a consequence, deepened the generational disconnect.



**It was argued by students that, as an institution of knowledge, Mandela University was responsible for deepening its understanding of Mandela in ways that would instigate rethinking knowledge and higher education – and to do so in a way that helps liberate people from systemic oppression. expression of Mandela was emerging within the department.**







In making this argument, students put forward the view that current University structures at times suppressed existing creative energies and opportunities, especially in cases where students were seeking to engage with institutional challenges and change. Students expressed that efforts to challenge the status quo and participate in decision-making were draining and wore them down. While they acknowledged the establishment of entities such as the Engagement and Transformation Portfolio, the Centre for Gender and Women Studies, and the Hubs of Convergence as “big changes” in the University, which were actively focused on systemic change, they criticised them for being unrelatable. Building on this, they suggested that most students were “intellectually unprepared” to participate, let alone understand the topics and concepts explored by these entities. In the spirit of Mandela, they felt strongly that there was a duty to make these conversations accessible to all.

While the student discussions aligned with the dominant themes and perceptions that emerged from the other engagements, their contributions provided a robust critique of the transformative potential and possibilities linked to and associated with the Mandela name.

## Staff

Broadly speaking, participating staff perceived Mandela as a point of inspiration and a symbol representing a myriad of social justice values. As most of the participating staff were educators, Mandela’s endorsement of education as a tool of change was considered highly relevant and a key mandate of the University. The discussions provided insight into how the departments were advancing an academic expression of Nelson Mandela’s legacy through their curriculum, research agenda, and student and faculty culture.

**The Department of Sociology and Anthropology is making important strides towards achieving transformative goals through its curriculum and research. It was agreed that an unacknowledged, undefined academic expression of Mandela was emerging within the department.**

This was evident in rearticulation initiatives reflecting African and social justice priorities, in the development of a “distinct postgraduate research agenda”, in the profile of the postgraduate cohort, and in the establishment of research centres, chairs, and





programmes in the department. The department felt its culture and knowledge production were incubating a *Mandela* social consciousness.

Social consciousness was a prominent theme that arose from the Faculty of Science. The discussion linked scientific advancements for the good of society to the “Mandela value of being in service of society”. The Faculty felt that it expressed this through various outreach programmes, literacy programmes, lecturer engagement, and rearticulation efforts. Importantly, again, for understanding how the Mandela name was taking life in the University, there were differing views within the faculty as to Mandela’s direct relevance to some disciplines.

**For some, the hard scientific nature of their discipline did not lend itself easily to decolonisation or a Mandela figuring. At the same time, some proposed that the idea of mastery of basic science or scientific literacy was not inimical or in opposition to the idea of Mandela. “Good scientific literacy”, they suggested, needed to be promoted and protected as a component of social consciousness.**

This way, social consciousness at Mandela University would be more effective as it would have a direct impact on the good of society through the reliable use of evidence-based literacies and learning. Good scientific knowledge would enhance possibilities for good social development. It would also nurture a critical transdisciplinary or multiple knowledge base approach. This view suggested that Mandela University could “set itself apart” from other institutions by extending its programmes and giving students more time to adopt the graduate attributes infused into teaching and learning. This would not only alleviate the burden of lecturers but potentially improve graduates’ employability in light of a more robust work-integrated learning approach being adopted. These comments notwithstanding, all acknowledged that their pedagogical approaches could be directly linked to and influenced by an understand-

ing of the significance of Mandela for society.

Values and attributes were but two salient themes emerging from the Health Sciences Faculty discussion. Staff spoke about the Faculty’s desire to produce “Mandela graduates” (i.e., the Mandela Doctor). However, staff noted that the content-dense curriculum, in conjunction with students who were primarily focused on achieving excellent grades, made teaching the “hidden curriculum” a challenge.

**This was especially so when students’ interest in the field was motivated by expected financial or status gains in the future rather than responding to a vocational call. It was suggested that incorporating community service more deeply into the curriculum was something the Faculty could explore to nurture Mandela graduate attributes.**

Staff spoke about the “different faces of Mandela” and that, similarly, Nelson Mandela University did not need to select “just one area of value but could help students occupy a number of different spaces”. By exploring any of the innumerable aspects associated with developing one’s identity, students were offered the opportunity to explore similar tensions in the *Mandela* name – a name which offered a site to explore and make sense of (or balance between) contradictions alien to a physical and social contemporary reality experienced by humanity.

## Management

The discussion around the Mandela name amongst management was more concerned with *Mandela*, the social figure, and less so with the historical figure. Focus group participants exhibited a keen understanding of the *Mandela* concept and how its ideals were inscribed into strategic documents such as Vision 2030. Familiarity with the concept could be attributed, they felt, to previous discussions and debates on the Mandela name and its significance for the University.







There was a general consensus amongst the participants that both senior leadership and policy contributed to a positive promotion of *Mandela* within the University. This was understood loosely as an ethos and praxis underpinned by social justice, dignity, and critical thinking. The Mandela name itself was perceived as a catalyst for “reimagining the University” rather than an ideal to work towards, which some held. Vision 2030 was the cardinal point from which each faculty and discipline developed its strategy. A feeling of cohesion, at the University’s strategic level, was affirmed. The name had come to promote engagement, transdisciplinarity, and an ethos of *Mandela*.

Managers felt that orientation programmes, leadership courses, and other development spaces were engendering a *Mandela* identity through a focus on social consciousness, sustainability, Africanisation, and decolonisation. They explained that at a curricula level, the *Mandela* posture and ethos “landed” differently in each discipline.

**Members noted that some faculties, through the nature of their practice, had cultivated stronger and more direct Mandela postures than others (e.g., in the disciplines of Law and Education). At the same time, other disciplines and faculties have implicit relationships based on their Vision 2030 underpinnings and special projects (e.g., Science and Medicine).**

Participants observed that there were clear and distinct initiatives and processes underway in the University to actively explore what it meant to be called Mandela. There was a strong sense that students should be “fostered as future leaders who will be in service of the community and society”. Participants pointed to departments reviewing their curricula to ensure that learning and teaching were African-purposed and instilled social consciousness and sustainability. These amounted, in the view of many managers, to self-conscious and self-critical processes running throughout the University, and where critical and difficult questions were being worked with.





These included questions such as, “How do our modules and what we teach link to the Mandela values?” and “How do the modules contribute to the Transformation Agenda?”. From this, the concept of a “*Mandela pedagogy*” was discussed as an avenue to explore. It was noted that it would need to be differentiated and distinct from (yet commensurable with) a humanising pedagogy, and consideration should be given to how to move from a broad humanising- to a *Mandela*-focused pedagogical underpinning.

**A *Mandela*-based ethos was viewed as a powerful semiotic resource to inform learning at Mandela University. Participants noted the challenge of reimagining it in a way that was mutually intelligible or cut across all disciplines equally. As a result, there was a call for a more explicit and coherent intellectual reach, with inclusion in study guides, LMS, and curricula as embodied pedagogy.**

The structure of the University, with its divisions into faculties, was seen as one barrier to critical engagement and transdisciplinary work. Members proposed the formation of multi-disciplinary teams to conduct transdisciplinary work, thereby curbing “siloes operations”. The discussion of this theme conveyed an overall anticipation that the *Mandela* figure could be explored as an Africanisation and decolonisation project unique to Mandela University.

A further reflection on this idea was the need to “connect Mandela to the rest of the African continent” and to those with similar ideologies. This led to the question of the location or relocation of the archive. Members agreed that a well-placed and supported archive would enable access, interaction, and general scholarship related to Mandela Studies.

It was noted that, as a consequence of ending outsourcing, some literacies and navigational capacities amongst groups of university staff were low. Mem-

bers proposed that *Mandela* should be brought into future programmes across the University, offering space for everyone who is connected to the University to take ownership of the institution’s purpose. In other words, given the opportunity to connect with the project of building a *Mandela* identity. *Mandela*, in this instance, was seen as a challenge to rethink the “problematic divide” between academic and professional administrative support and service (PASS) clusters within the University.

While participants appreciated that the institution had made great progress in its project to conceptualise *Mandela* in constructive ways, some gaps were indeed identified. However, important progress has been made. Work undertaken around symbolisation and signalling the *Mandela* identity, for example, was steadily picking up; Phase Two of the *Naming and Renaming Project* across campuses in Gqeberha and George was nearing completion.

The focus group engagements across University spaces reveal that an idea of *Mandela* is equated with conceptions of social justice, with broad consensus that bearing the name implies responsibility towards embodying a *Mandela* legacy.

**Based on the shared experiences and perceptions in the focus groups, the emerging *Mandela* concept and its practice could arguably be seen as an invaluable catalyst for social reflection and change. Participants acknowledged that the idea of *Mandela* was evident at a strategic and conceptual level, but more tangible options and alternatives needed to be explored.**

These options and alternatives would need to (more purposefully) take learnings from engagements such as these and embed them deeper within University practices across levels and divisions. *Mandela* could offer a “third way” – developed out of a “commons”<sup>3</sup>, the collective coming together to thrive

<sup>3</sup> Muthwa, S. 2018, April 17. *Taking Nelson Mandela University Boldly into the Future in Service of Society*, Inaugural Address, p.14.







within a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) context<sup>4</sup>. It could be possible to harness *Mandela* as a stakeholder-adopted institutional approach to complexity/VUCA, which permeates across the system and holds it together - a *Mandela-in-complexity*. One site worth locating, exploring, and practising *Mandela-in-complexity* lies, for example, in energies and initiatives aimed at sustaining healthy institutional cultures.

It is recommended that the University undertake reflexive internal engagements, similar to the focus group engagements explored here, to better unpack the emerging *Mandela* undercurrent and how it organises and sustains itself. Deep explorations of this kind every five years, or at key moments in the institution's strategic journey, would allow Mandela University to continually critique its Mandela identity. Without such reflection, the institution runs the risk of operating within an unproductive orbit of *Mandela*, which may prove socially unproductive or inviable for the task at hand.

### ASSESSING LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT WITH THE NAME

TIMS was also interested in stakeholders' level of engagement with the Mandela name. A rubric was developed to map the 'intensity of engagement' based on four qualifiers, namely, i) understanding, ii) curiosity, iii) resilience, and iv) contributions. A copy of the rubric is included in the appendix.

When considering the participating student cohort as a whole, their engagement with the topic of Nelson Mandela placed them in the "deep engagement" category. They demonstrated a deep and nuanced set of interpretations and understandings of Mandela through the open curiosity displayed and frequent, in-depth contributions. The discussions showed insight into Mandela's legacy and values and how these were perceived and embodied by the University. This is indicative of a high level



of interest and motivation to grapple with the topic. This categorisation, however, was not representative of all students and all disciplines. For example, the engineering cohort demonstrated a solid understanding of the name but displayed lower levels of curiosity and resilience to dig deeper compared to other groups, with facilitators needing to encourage contributions through prompts and seeking clarity on statements. The psychology cohort contributed with deep understanding and curiosity but had varied levels of contributions and a sense of agency and resilience within the University space.

**However, it is valuable to know that, as a stakeholder group, students not only have the capacity but observably exhibit the ability to engage meaningfully with Mandela.**

<sup>4</sup>Nelson Mandela University, 2021. *Vision 2030 Strategy Plan*, p. 9.







As with the student groups, the combined staff groups engaged with the Mandela name on a deep level. Their understanding was nuanced and critically thought out. Staff showed significant curiosity about the topic and encouraged one another to share contradictory or parallel themes. Despite the complexity of the discussion and the everyday demands on staff scheduling, participants showed a willingness to engage and disclose their thoughts and perceptions. Staff members frequently made insightful contributions and kept the conversation going without the need for prompts from the facilitators.

It was interesting to observe how staff from the Sociology department demonstrated a profound engagement with Mandela on a subconscious level. Initially, their contributions were straightforward, and their understanding of Mandela was not easily

connected to other concepts. At the beginning of the discussion, staff members were not aware of a link between the department and the *Mandela* concept. This perception shifted towards the end of the discussion as staff members became aware of how their pedagogy, curriculum, research, and projects all embodied a *Mandela* posturing. Staff members suggested that the link was made possible as a result of the reflexive exercise conducted with the TIMS team.

**It was expressed that all Mandela University staff members should engage in such a reflective activity. The reflection allowed this group to acknowledge the substantial progress made and gave them a new perspective from which to consider obstacles and barriers.**

Members of executive management also demonstrated deep levels of engagement. While the discussion was similarly reflexive in nature to others, the ease of working with *Mandela* at a deep level within this group could be attributed to previous engagements with the Mandela name over the past years. Discussions within the group clearly indicated familiarity with two distinct significations of Mandela, and their curiosity and sense of resilience allowed them to creatively problem-solve.

This assessment of engagement levels is not intended to be definitive. Rather, it intends to provide a point of reference for considering and understanding future engagements of this nature. The continued engagement with the Mandela name, as envisioned by the University and TIMS, ought to be critical, reflexive, and progressive. This report on stakeholder focus group engagements, together with a vast number of other emerging and documented initiatives at Mandela University, presents a springboard from which to launch future engagements that push the boundaries of understanding “in service of society”. Neglecting to do so may result in an unsustainable, circular, and constrained understanding.





## Section Three

### CONCLUSION

**The reflexive exercise showed that engagement with the Mandela name and the exploration of the *Mandela* Identity are endorsed by all participating stakeholder groups and that the name positively implicates the University as a social change agent.**

The focus group discussions evidenced the *Mandela* name being understood as an embodiment of Mandela's social change legacy. This embodiment encompasses operational and teaching practices, the organisational configuration of the University, transdisciplinary work, critical social consciousness, institutional culture, and more.

**Stakeholders do not see the Mandela name as something specific for the University to live up to; rather, it is a reflective, iterative, identity-creation process. This identity-creation process involves humanising Mandela (the historical figure) and developing an ethos and praxis that "moves beyond Mandela" and occupies the deep transformative frameworks of *Mandela*.**

Significantly, ethics was identified as fundamental to embracing the Mandela name. Inferring from the discussions, ethics is seen as the social justice component of any discipline or group and, therefore, has the most logical and relevant link to Mandela.

While Mandela is widely viewed as a symbol of social justice ideas, stakeholders identified a disconnect between this conceptualisation and their daily lived experiences at the University. Stakeholders acknowledge strategies that orient the University

around Mandela's values. However, these frameworks have yet to deeply and robustly permeate operational and teaching practices across faculties. The structural configuration of the University is frequently viewed as problematic, fracturing, and posing barriers to transformational and critical transdisciplinary work. Current approaches to curriculum, pedagogy, and student support are perceived as not adequately nurturing student agency and social consciousness to empower grassroots change.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Moving forward, it is recommended that the University develop an overarching *Mandela Framework* to guide and support curriculum transformation and orient the institution holistically. The framework ought not to be prescriptive but should offer broad parameters for all levels and divisions to read themselves into the framework through their practices. It would be beneficial for departments to conduct reflective reviews of projects, initiatives, and policies to identify existing or emergent applications of *Mandela* embodiments.

A deeper understanding of *Mandela* as a site of reflexivity across the institution is important. The task ahead is to find ways to translate multiple, parallel, and congruent forms of *Mandela* practice into a common language of conceptualisation and application across spaces. Once such a shared language of purpose is made known, the University becomes conscious of what is being said and done in regard to its commitment to "embody [Mandela's] legacy and ethos".

A Mandela posturing might offer opportunities to confront complex planetary challenges out





side contemporary imaginations. Creating opportunities for multi-disciplinary practical social justice work, community engagement, and critical thinking helps shape and guide how students interface with reality both outside and after the University. At a pedagogical level, there is an ethical responsibility to empower students with the technical and communicative capabilities to, in the future, generate solutions and alternatives unheard of or thought of today. Although more are needed, innovative opportunities for staff and student capacitation along the themes of leadership and culture, are finding root. For example, *Leaders at All Levels Vision 2030* and the *Social Consciousness and Sustainable Futures Course*, currently being offered as short learning programmes, could add significant value should they be rolled out as mandatory core modules.

Discussions raised an important sentiment amongst participants – that existing structures (or specific parts thereof) within the University are suppressing some of the grassroots efforts to draw focus to and address institutional challenges. Students, in particular, expressed frustration at the perceived lack of unity, caring, and willingness to address real-world problems on campus. They expressed the desire to be active role players in tangible systemic transformation rather than just given a voice on a platform. Among staff,

**differing views emerged around the direct relevance of Mandela's values and legacy across disciplines. This suggests that more work might be needed to build a shared understanding, language, and commitment to a Mandela institutional vision.**

The discussion among managers noted lower levels of technical and other literacies after outsourcing changes and proposed connecting all University staff to the envisaged institutional purpose. It was suggested that this could be done through a lens of *Mandela-oriented upskilling*.

Taken together, these points indicate a need to build human and social capacities and shared literacies within the University community. Leadership development and culture change programming could help nurture participatory and transformative skillsets, collaborative mindsets, and ground-up initiative-taking. Fostering student, staff, and worker agency through capacity building finds close alignment with Mandela's own emphasis on grassroots empowerment.

**Strengthening University leadership and culture through shared responsibility-holding is thus recommended as a useful element in advancing a concrete embodiment of the Mandela ethos at an institutional level.**





# APPENDIX

## LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT RUBRIC

Qualifier	Minimal	Moderate	Deep
Understanding	Demonstrates a basic understanding.	Demonstrates a solid understanding of the name but lacks insight.	Demonstrates a deep and nuanced understanding of the name through questions, comments, and discussions.
Curiosity	Rarely asks questions.	Asks clarifying questions only when prompted.	Actively seeks out additional resources to further knowledge and makes insightful connections to other concepts.
Resilience	Shows little interest or motivation to grapple with the name.	Shows some interest, but engagement is inconsistent.	Shows a high level of interest and motivation to learn more about the topic.
Contribution	Contributions are limited even when prompted.	Makes straightforward contributions when required.	Makes frequent contributions that illustrate in-depth critical thinking about the name.





**Change the World.**