

Summoned by Brilliance, Convened by Excellence: A Letter to the TUT Academic

Prof Tinyiko Maluleke
Vice Chancellor and Principal: TUT

29 November 2023

Protocols

Master of ceremonies, Ms Thami Ngubeni, we couldn't have found a better programme director, even if we tried. You and the Tshwane University look good together. After all, excellence attracts excellence, gravitas gravitates towards more gravitas even as good must surely move to great.

On behalf of the Chancellor of the Tshwane University of Technology, Dr Gloria Serobe, and on behalf of the Chairperson of Council, Mr Ivan Ka Mbonani; and on behalf the one Council member in attendance, Ms Yedwa Mbali Mjiako; please allow me to observe all other protocols in one fell swoop.

Nonetheless, owing to the academic and research-laden nature of this exceptional occasion, a few exceptions are worth making; namely, our Dr Vathiswa Papu-Zamxaka, DVC Research Innovation and Engagement; Prof Barend Jacobus van Wyk, DVC Teaching, Learning and Technology; *as well as our indomitable Executive Deans: Professors* Nalini Moodley-Diar, Marry-Ann Polly Mashigo, Mashupye Hebert Maserumule and Ntebogeng Sharon Mokgalaka-Fleischmann, as well as the **Doctors**, Mukondeleli Grace Kanakana-Katumba, Edgar Alufheli Nesamvuni and Etienne van Wyk. Allow me also to briefly insert the name of Ms Brenda "Rakgadi" Watson and her tireless team, they; who methodically and systematically put this glittering occasion together.

The preeminent colleagues listed above notwithstanding, this evening belongs to none other than they who radiate academic excellence and impactful research – the awardees of the 2022/2023 academic excellence whom we have come to honour and acknowledge tonight.

A Letter from a Village Letter-Writer

Please indulge me by allowing me to begin with a brief biographical excursion. I was brought up, with unconditional love, by my paternal and maternal grandmothers¹, in two tranquil villages of Limpopo. Although neither of the two old women could read or write, they dragged me to school, kicking and screaming - literally².

But the payback was swift. Soon, the two old women 'employed' me fully.

Each time my paternal grandmother received the very rare letter from any of her two sons who were working in Johannesburg and living in Meadowlands and Vosloorus respectively, (one of whom was my own father), I had to read the letter out loud to her, by the family open-air fireside. I also had to translate grandmother's furiously dictated reply-letters into writing – dictations which she performed in loud voice, like an actor, complete with animated gesticulations. The same routine would occur, every time my maternal grandmother, who lived in the neighbouring village, received a letter from her two policemen brothers, one based in Hamanskraal and the other in Krugersdorp³.

Soon enough, my letter-reading and letter-writing skills became the talk of the two villages, thanks to the free 'marketing and publicity' provided by my proud grandmothers. Before I knew it, I had become a famous village letter reader. At that time, the only people slightly more famous than I, were *sangomas*, herbalists and gossipmongers. For the rest, I was up there among the top ten percent of hifalutin village celebrities.

And so, today I wish to return to the 'ancient' letter-writing arts of my early teens. That way, I may perhaps kill several birds with this little shining stone of mine. That

¹Tinyiko Maluleke, "A Great South African Woman" <https://thoughtleader.co.za/a-great-south-african-woman-2/>

² Tinyiko Maluleke "School Arson Reveals a People at War with Themselves". <https://mg.co.za/article/2016-05-13-00-school-arson-reveals-a-people-at-war-with-themselves/>

³ Tinyiko Maluleke "Bow for Iconic Imbokodo". <https://sundayworld.co.za/news/opinion/bow-for-iconic-imbokodo/>

way, I may honour the memory of the old women who made a person out of me, while at the same time honouring colleagues whose names will be called out tonight - colleagues whose sheer academic brilliance has summoned us here tonight.

Receive herewith my letter to the TUT academic.

My Dearest TUT Scholar, Researcher, Innovator and Entrepreneur

As I write this letter, I am sitting in a makeshift study, watching the African December raindrops, mixed with tiny balls of hail, dancing on the stoep. My spirit is uplifted by the pleasant aroma of rain-soaked soil permeating the air.

My dear TUT academic, young and old, dead and alive, men and women of all genders and nationalities; when I think of the academic stature you have bequeathed upon the Tshwane University of Technology over the two short decades, spanning the period 2004 to 2024; my chest swells with pride.

Out of three disparate institutions – two for blacks and one for whites as per the Apartheid higher education prescripts of the day – you, my dear colleagues, have, in twenty years of quiet but remarkable academic outputs; invented a distinct and uniquely TUT teaching and research brand. It is a brand that sits in the space where industry meets academia and vice versa.

Through your concerted research and innovation, day by day, week by week, from one semester to the next, and from academic year to the following, ***you have bestowed upon TUT, the distinction of being that University that only TUT can be in the world. Look around you, in this country, in this continent and elsewhere in the world, there is nothing quite like TUT. And you my dear colleagues, researchers, lecturers, innovators are the secret sauce, you are the value proposition, you are the unique selling point.***

The 21st century curricula you are crafting and deploying in consultation and in liaison with our industry partners, as well as the way in which you have flipped the classroom, has turned TUT into the premier entrepreneurial University of South

Africa - an institution where innovators, inventors, creators and future-ready graduates are made.

In the Midst of the Sixteen Days of Activism

And yet, even as I pen this missive of salutation and acknowledgement, I realise that today's occasion takes place smack in the middle of the Sixteen Days of Activism against Gender Based Violence (GBV) – a scourge which is nothing but a crime against humanity. GBV sits down there in the cesspool of litanies of human crimes against fellow humans. Apart from open wars, poverty, hunger and climate change few made-made atrocities threaten the future of humanity like GBV. Indeed GBV is a silent war against women and children.

My dearest TUT scholars, researchers, innovators and entrepreneurs and postgraduate students, while we all know that our police and prosecutorial authorities ought to do more and better in responding to the GBV scourge, I am not convinced that innovators, entrepreneurs and researchers have done enough either to shine a spotlight on the GBV problem or to come up with solutions and interventions.

It is not as if it is raining anti-GBV applications, innovations, inventions and scientific investigations. If necessity is the mother of invention, the necessity occasioned by violence against women and children does not seem to have led to enough inventive research and innovation interventions either to better understand or to deal better with GBV.

My dearest TUT academics and researchers, GBV is not a problem out there, it is a problem in here; here in the University, here in the workplace, here in the class room, here in the laboratory, here in the curriculum we teach, the materials we prescribe and in the research methodologies we employ and deploy. Our generation of scholars and researchers runs the risk of being accused of being participants, or worse still, bystanders in the ongoing terrorising and slaughtering of women and children.

My fellow researchers, at least two issues should dominate curricula, research, innovation and entrepreneurial agendas: these two issues are the scourge of GBV as well as global push sustainable development/environmental sustainability.

While there will and there must always be room for blue sky research, ***the ultimate test of all research, all curricula, all AI and all 4IR, all innovations, all entrepreneurial ventures, all quantitative and all qualitative research; the ultimate test, is the extent to which these will advance environmental sustainability as well as the extent to which these will contribute to the prevention and elimination of violence.***

My dearest TUT scholars, researchers, innovators, entrepreneurs and postgraduate students, without your academic inputs and the research outputs as well as those of your peers, we stand no chance in hell, of ever overcoming GBV or ever attaining the low carbon economy touted in the National Development Plan.

Dear colleagues, while you, as individuals and as groups of researchers, have recorded remarkable achievements already, there is so much more for you and your peers to do. Please do not misunderstand our acknowledgement and celebration of you today to mean that you can now begin to slow down or even stop. No! Academic excellence awards are not retirement awards. They are intended to rejuvenate you and to spur you towards greater heights.

My dear colleagues, until TUT has at least 150 rated researchers, we have not even begun to flex our muscles. We will and we must have an A rated researcher. It is not good enough that the whole TUT has only one B1 rated researcher – and that researcher also happens to be the Vice Chancellor. We will raise the number of TUT staff members elected members of the Academy of Science for South Africa from 7 to 20. We will put systems and interventions in place to improve these numbers.

We shall soon be hosting several seminars and conferences of national significance where our research chairs will be launching ground-breaking books and game-changing research findings.

My dearest TUT scholars, researchers, innovators, entrepreneurs and postgraduate students, all these quibbles notwithstanding, I know that in you, I am preaching to the converted. You are the exemplars. It is your academic inputs, research outputs, inventions and entrepreneurial spirit that makes TUT deserving of the title University. The sheer academic brilliance that you have consistently summoned, has in turn summoned us here tonight. And yours is a summons we could neither ignore nor resist, because it speaks to the core of who we are as an institution that is dedicated to the production of future ready graduates.

Knowing fully well that I am preaching to the converted, I do wish to say to you still, that, ***your office may not be the most elegant, your lab may lack an equipment or two or more, your classrooms may not be the best equipped, your supervisor may be too strict, your line manager may not be the kindest, promotion may have eluded you for some time, and the research funding may be inadequate, but listen to me; there is nothing inadequate about you as a researcher, scholar and thinker.***

You know better than to allow prevailing circumstances to be your limit. You are TUT's best. You are far better than Mamelodi Sundowns Football Club. The sky is not your limit. You are. You are your own limit. You are part of the glorious first generation of TUT academics and researchers, who, in 20 short years, have changed the higher education game in South Africa. Together with the entire cohort of excellent TUT academics over the past 20 years, we celebrate you tonight.

My dearest TUT scholars, researchers, innovators, entrepreneurs and postgraduate students, I am extremely thankful that you have read/listened to my wide-ranging letter, inspired by my memory of the letters I used to read and write, as a teen.

To conclude my letter, let me say, yours in the name of the people's university - the Tshwane University of Technology.