



## **HIGHER EDUCATION IN AFRICA – FOSTERING LEADERSHIP FOR THE GLOBAL CENTURY**

**VISIONARY LEADERS AT THE HELM OF TWO DYNAMIC UNIVERSITIES IN AFRICA ARE DEFTLY STEERING THEIR INSTITUTIONS INTO THE GLOBAL CENTURY. VICE CHANCELLOR SIBONGILE MUTHWA AT THE NELSON MANDELA UNIVERSITY IN SOUTH AFRICA AND VICE CHANCELLOR ABDUL-RASHEED NA'ALLAH AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ABUJA IN NIGERIA SHARE A PASSION FOR EDUCATION. INSPIRED BY THEIR INTERNATIONAL BACKGROUNDS, BOTH REVEAL A PROFOUND COMMITMENT TO EMPOWERING THEIR STUDENTS AND TO EDUCATING THE AFRICAN LEADERS OF TOMORROW.**

Vice Chancellor Sibongile Muthwa grew up under apartheid in South Africa. Despite the limitations her country placed on her early life, she made her way to England to earn a Master's Degree from the London School of Economics and Political Science and a Doctoral Degree from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Over time she moved into

the role of Vice Chancellor at Nelson Mandela University, which has a student body of 32,000 and seven faculties spread around 7 campuses. "I consider myself a leader and a vessel for advancing the vision of the university - and for bringing to life Nelson Mandela's vision for education as 'the most powerful weapon... to change the world,'" she says.

Raised in Ilorin in Nigeria, Abdul-Rasheed Na’Allah moved to Edmonton, Canada to undertake his PhD studies. Given this bold move, when he took the helm of the Department of African American Studies at the University of Western Illinois some years later, he was quite prepared for both the climate and the leadership role. Then, Nigeria asked Na’Allah to return as the inaugural Vice Chancellor of Kwara State University, where he served as the Chief Executive for ten years. As exciting as founding this new university was, when the University of Abuja sought him out to serve as its Vice Chancellor for 50,000 students and 12 faculties, he followed the call.

### EQUALIZING INFLUENCE

A critical priority in her acceptance of the position of Vice Chancellor, Sibongile Muthwa insisted that the university centered its students among its key priorities. “In a country that is still highly unequal, Mandela University has set for itself an ambitious task to contribute to a more equal world by diversifying its student body and deploying its curriculum within a humanizing pedagogy philosophy,” she states. VC Muthwa describes her aspiration that Nelson Mandela University students be “recognizable by their attributes - their intellectual curiosity, their adaptability, their empathy, and compassion.” She argues that “Empathy and compassion are the new currency in leading for demands of the future.”

Because of historical inequality, many students who have attended less well-resourced schools in South African townships and rural areas arrive at Nelson Mandela University with big aspirations, but underprepared for the context of the university classroom and its institutional culture. The university provides the “scaffolding measures, including tutoring



and instructional support to ensure student success, in particular for the majority - close to 70% - who receive financial aid,” says VC Muthwa. She reveals proudly that “our graduation rates for 2021 were over 83%, which exceeds the national average.”

### STUDENT-CENTERED

Similarly, Abdul-Rasheed Na’Allah leads the modernization of the University of Abuja with a focus on students. The staff and faculty at the university now treat students as their customers. Importantly, “students now assess their professor’s performance - and these are relevant for their promotion,” VC Na’Allah recounts. “We have created mentorships for older students to support juniors, and we have competitive grants to support student research and the publication of the results in our undergraduate research journals,” he notes with pride. “We have built a beautiful student center, and we run buses to transport students around campus.”

As a part of the Nigerian Federal University System, the University of Abuja is tuition-free. “With fees for housing and services, the cost of a year’s education runs less than US\$1,000,” describes VC Na’Allah. To provide students financial opportunity, the university has established a policy that “any business working for the

university - be it a bank or a construction firm, must set aside 20% of their employment roles for students," he explains with excitement. "In this way, students can gain work experience and earn money," he adds.

### **CONVERGENCE WITH COMMUNITY**

Another of Nelson Mandela University's priorities lies in its connection to communities. As VC Muthwa describes, "Universities don't have all the tools and answers to advance society without engaging in fundamental ways with communities. We see this as an equalizing principle that respects and affirms the importance of communities as a site of learning and a zone of impact for what we do. For instance, our Medical School is located in one of the poorest parts of the city. From their first year, our medical students work in the communities, most of which bear the heaviest burden of disease," she explains. This approach facilitates engagement, not as a top-down relationship, but as convergence. "We advance society through the convergence of what the university has to share and the endless possibilities of what the community can teach us," she continues.

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With a similar focus, the University of Abuja hosts a Center for Community Development, which runs programs to address community needs. "We have mobile health programs, where we go to communities reachable only by bicycles and motorcycles," says VC Na'Allah. He continues, "Our Center gathers grant funds

to drill boreholes for wells to provide communities with drinkable water. Further, all our engineering students must create a community-focused final project. They may rebuild bridges or repair electrical grids, but the money they invest in their project must benefit a local community," he explains.

### **OCEAN SCIENCES AND FOOD SECURITY**

Under the leadership of VC Muthwa, Nelson Mandela University has expanded its new Ocean Sciences campus and, among other things, focused on food security. With a dedicated, transdisciplinary campus and significant university investment, the campus has a series of Tier 1 research chairs from Law to Marine Biodiversity to Ocean Cultures and Heritage. The university is currently seeking funding for a Chair in food security, which will focus on issues of farming, trading and preserving food on land and in the oceans. In addition, the University has joined hands with the Nelson Mandela Foundation on the 'Planting One Million Trees' program, mainly fruit trees, to combine and overlap environmental sustainability with food security and freedom to food.



### INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIPS

The University of Abuja has developed unique ties to its region. "Every department is required to have partnerships with relevant industries. These industry leaders are at the table reviewing the curriculum, so it will provide students with the practical learning that industry needs," he explains. Expanding on this, he notes that "we are creating a department of Geology and Mining - jointly developing the curriculum with industry partners, even seeking sponsored Chairs for professors."

Another unique partnership is developing at the university's newly founded Center for Environmental Studies. As Na'Allah describes, "Nigerians are largely farmers." With that in mind, "we have a proposal going to UNESCO in Paris requesting funding for a new Chair in Climate Change," he explains. "This will enable us to focus on how to realistically support land and river farming," he adds.

### SUSTAINABLE AND ENTREPRENEURIAL

"As a university, we are very cognizant that we have to educate our students to navigate a complex future and a world of work that we do not yet fully know. We believe that our graduates should gain adaptive expertise, and create their own future, in a way that transcends their formal qualifications. A sustainable future will be assured through leaders who can work across transdisciplinary borders, and who are entrepreneurial," says Muthwa. Mandela University is pursuing an active program of Student Entrepreneurship, in partnership with government and industry partners.

In Abuja, students are encouraged to gain practical experience through internships. Each must also test proficient in a non-African language and explore the related culture. In addition, the university requires all

students to undertake a program in entrepreneurship and create a business during their studies. "We don't want our graduates just looking for white-collar jobs. We want them to have their own businesses and learn to create wealth for themselves," VC Na'Allah explains.

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As both universities strive to develop stronger connections in the United States, the Nelson Mandela University and the University of Abuja each recently opened an American friends fund at KBFUS. Through those funds, their U.S.-based alumni and other supporters of higher education can seamlessly contribute to the inspiring visions of their rising universities.

**[mandela.ac.za](http://mandela.ac.za)**  
**[uniabuja.edu.ng](http://uniabuja.edu.ng)**

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