

**Acceptance speech by Emeritus Professor Martin Tsamenyi for the honorary degree "Doctor of Laws (Maritime Law) (Honoris Causa)" from Mandela University.**

The Chair of Council;  
The Chancellor;  
The Vice Chancellor;  
Deputy Vice Chancellors;  
The Acting Executive Dean, Faculty of Law;  
Executive Deans of Faculty;  
Senior management and members of the Academy;  
Graduating Students and their families.  
Thank you all very much for this great honour.

I accept the honour with gratitude. Let me assure you that I do not take the honour for granted. I am aware that the honour comes with a corresponding obligation to use my knowledge and skills to advance the course of humanity and to support the aspirations of this great University.

I was born and raised in the rainforests in Ghana where my father was a cocoa farmer. I was the third of nine children in a close-knit family, and, probably like some of you, the first to get a University degree. I lived an idyllic, simple life hundreds of kilometres away from the nearest ocean.

I grew up with the smell of cocoa beans and did not see the ocean or set my foot into it until I was about 20 years old. Yet, I have spent most of my academic and professional life devoted to championing the sustainability and security of the oceans. I have inspired countless numbers of students.

I have walked the corridors of power talking to Prime Ministers and Presidents, always holding my Bible, in my case, *The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*, like a preacher spreading the gospel of a sustainable, peaceful and equitable ocean.

In March 2016, I was in Ghana at the invitation of the Government to work on several ocean matters. I planned for retirement upon my return to Australia. Those retirement plans included lofty ideas to leave my indelible footprint on the world's oceans.

Then my life came crushing down. I awoke in hospital and was later told by doctors of a massive stroke I had suffered during the night.

It was a miracle that I was still alive. I spent the next few months in a wheelchair and had to learn a number of basic things all over again.

Although my condition has improved significantly, I am still carrying some of the deficits of the stroke.

This single event dashed many personal hopes and aspirations for the future. The challenges I faced seemed insurmountable, but the wisdom of Nelson Mandela also

tells us that: *The greatest glory in living is not in falling, but in rising every time we fall.*

So, I continue to keep my dream alive.

I hope telling you the story of my life will serve as inspiration to the younger ones graduating today. Nothing is impossible. I am reminded by Nelson Mandela: *“Everyone can rise above their circumstances and achieve success if they are dedicated and passionate about what they do”.*

Mandela University is the only institution of higher learning in the world named after Nelson Mandela. As such, this University, including any person who works here or graduates from here, carries a great responsibility to live the legacy of Nelson Mandela in their service to society, learning, teaching and research.

Nelson Mandela was not only South Africa’s most beloved statesman, but also a man who is regarded as the world’s moral compass and one of history’s most inspirational and principled human beings.

My own life has been greatly enriched and inspired by Nelson Mandela.

Today, in speaking to you, I am going to draw on the ideas and words of Nelson Mandela that inspire me, with the hope that I will also inspire you.

The motto of Mandela University is: “Change the World”, a noble mission inspired by the famous statement by Nelson Mandela that *“education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”.* For, *“it is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mineworker can become the head of a mine, that the child of farm workers can become the president of a great nation”.*

True to the legacy of Nelson Mandela, this University is also a value-driven institution where social justice and equality are paramount in the endeavour to rectify the inequalities in our world. The Zulu philosophy of “*ubuntu*” underpins what you aim for and do as an institution.

Like all Universities the world over, in line with your values, you had to quickly adapt in the face of the pandemic to offer your twenty-nine thousand or more students online and mask-to-mask tuition. I appreciate that this has not been easy for you, especially given the gap between those who are privileged to have access to data, devices and internet and those who do not. I congratulate you for being true to your values in the face of difficult and unexpected challenges.

The globalised, competitive environment within which Universities now operate requires each institution to define specific areas of global challenge where it wants to make a difference.

In this respect, it is my understanding that one of the areas you aspire to distinguish yourself from other Universities, in other to change the world, is to channel your intellectual knowledge into the ‘Blue Economy’.

The ‘Blue Economy’ is the contemporary code word for our oceans, which comprise about 72 percent of our planet. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals calls it: *Life below Water.*

At the heart of the Blue Economy is stewardship of our ocean environment and its resources. It includes improving human wellbeing, food security, and social equity through the sustainable management of our oceans.

The Blue Economy provides us with the tools to gain better insights into climate trends, and to develop alternative energy options to mitigate the impacts of climate change.

The international community and policy makers are still debating the true value of the Blue Economy.

In economic terms, the global economy is valued at about 1.5 trillion US dollars per year.

In contrast, the value of the Blue Economy is conservatively estimated at 74 trillion US dollars.

The long-term sustainability of the Blue Economy is now in doubt, as the world witnesses its constant abuse and degradation.

Our oceans and seas have become garbage bins for large volumes of land-based waste.

We see increasing unregulated, unreported and illegal exploitation of marine fisheries, thereby threatening ocean biodiversity and the food security of many coastal communities.

Maintaining law and order at sea has become a global challenge.

Intellectual and political leadership is needed to restore dignity and direction for a sustainable Blue Economy.

The Blue Economy is what I have spent most of my life endeavouring to sustain, through law and policy. The decision by Mandela University to focus intellectual energy on the Blue Economy is a bold and strategic one for which I congratulate the University.

Nationally, South Africa's economy is essentially a Blue Economy, with about 95 percent of its trade being seaborne. South Africa itself holds a strategically significant location at the confluence of two major oceans – the Atlantic and Indian oceans.

Maritime research and training is an area of strength and comparative advantage enjoyed by Mandela University.

You already have all the building blocks to brand yourself as the global Blue Economy University.

You have a dedicated Ocean Science campus, with world class academics, undertaking cutting edge research into ocean and maritime affairs.

You have established the Institute for Coastal and Marine Research.

You participate in the One Ocean Hub, an international programme of research on sustainable development.

You host the Headquarters of the South African International Maritime Institute.

You are home to the only South African and the entire African continent Research Chair in the Law of the Sea, Professor Patrick Vrancken at your Faculty of Law.

Your home, Gqeberha, is a major hub port in South Africa.

I wish Mandela University all the best in its endeavours to focus intellectual attention on the Blue Economy, in pursuit of the principles of sustainability, equity and well-being.

It is because of your already well-established record on the Blue Economy that I did not hesitate to accept the honour you have given to me.

I do not believe that this honour has been given to me only in recognition of my past work. Rather, I see it as a wakeup call - a call to action to do more for humanity.

I am inspired again by Nelson Mandela, who said: *“After climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb”*.

I speak to you today as a representative of the countless number of people who have gone before me to champion the protection and preservation of our Blue Economy from human degradation.

I also speak to you on behalf of the generations yet unborn to urge you to support the ethics of a sustainable ocean environment so that they too can enjoy a peaceful, pollution free ocean environment.

I am heartened by the fact that one of the publicly proclaimed values of Mandela University is “sustainability and responsible stewardship”. These values must extend to your teaching, learning, research and stewardship of our oceans.

To all the graduating students, congratulations for making it through a very difficult and unusual set of circumstances.

Some of you would have completed your degrees online and virtually, just as you are graduating today. This pandemic will serve to define and unify this cohort of graduates. Collectively, you will be called: “The Covid Graduates”.

The degrees and qualifications you have earned and received today are only the beginning of your quest for knowledge. There is a proverb where I come from in Ghana that ***“knowledge is like a baobab tree. One can never wrap one’s arms around it”***.

I hope those of you graduating today will leave this University with a deep sense of gratitude to the University, your lecturers and your families who have supported and guided you through your learning journey.

To the new graduates, you have a great future ahead of you, and I encourage you to aim for the sky with the knowledge you have acquired from this University. Your destiny lies in your hands. Whatever you choose to do with your degrees, be guided by the wisdom of Nelson Mandela that: *“The only limits to your success will be yourselves”*.

This graduation is merely the beginning of an enduring relationship between you and Mandela University. I urge you to hold onto your connection with this University. You will reap enormous benefits by doing so, including access to a vast professional and

personal network of people. This University is your sun that has brightened your future. Do not turn your back on it when your fortunes improve. There is a proverb in my language that ***“if you turn your back to the Sun, your shadow will follow you”***.

Finally, the world we live in now is changing very fast, faster than the speed of light. I am confident that the certificate from Mandela University, which you will proudly and conspicuously hang on the wall in your office or living room, is a testimony to the whole world that Mandela University has prepared you to face the future with confidence.

Take pride in your University and believe in yourselves that you have the knowledge and power to change the world.

My best wishes to you all and I am confident that we will see each other in person one day.

Once again thank you sincerely for the honour.