



## higher education & training

Department:  
Higher Education and Training  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

### **REMARKS BY THE DIRECTOR GENERAL, DR NKOSINATHI SISHI ON ACCEPTANCE OF THE UJ ALUMNI DIGNITAS AWARD, UJ COUNCIL DINNER, JOHANNESBURG COUNTRY CLUB, AUCKLAND PARK, 21 NOVEMBER 2025**

Chancellor of the University of Johannesburg and Former Deputy  
President of the Republic, Dr Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka,  
Vice-Chancellor of the University of Johannesburg, Professor  
Letlhokwa George Mpedi,  
Dr Yondela Ndema and Partner - Acting Chair of UJ Council,  
Members of Council,  
Distinguished Guests,

Tonight we are meeting on the eve of a historic G20 Leaders Summit—  
the first on African soil. As the world descends upon South Africa, we  
take this opportunity to wish our country and continent well. We are  
also meeting just days after our Chancellor, Dr Phumzile Mlambo-  
Ngcuka, led the charge in hosting a very successful G20 Social  
Summit. This university should be proud of what our Chancellor  
showcased to the world.

Programme Director, Directors-General often work in the background with minimal public appearances. When we do appear, two things are usually true: either something very bad has happened requiring our intervention, or something very good has happened warranting our attention. This evening, the latter is the case. I am deeply honoured by your recognition of my humble efforts as a public servant, and I wholeheartedly accept this UJ Council Award.

You have also asked me to do something outside my character—to speak a bit about myself. In order not to appear defiant, I wish to point out that, in addition to my unconditional love for South Africa—her sovereignty and her people—I am an educator by passion and later by choice. I have a deep respect for young people and have always viewed them as much-needed pathfinders in an increasingly complex, precarious, and contested global reality.

I am a proud alumnus of this institution. My doctoral study, titled "*Negotiation of Subjectivities in the Curriculum and Educational Assessment Policy in South Africa*," was completed here at this world-class university. Drawing inspiration from Michel Foucault's notion of power, discourse, and subjectivity, I sought to illuminate how institutional leadership, professionals, specialists, educationists, and practitioners—working together—could leverage their subjectivities, especially their social and intellectual capital, as a lever for overcoming both old and emerging obstacles to transformation in the socio-economic sphere, and to drive large-scale futuristic reforms

capable of advancing national wellbeing. What the Singaporeans refer to as *futurecasting*.

A decade and a half since this study, I am convinced that the field of higher education is at a crossroads—a moment that requires dispassionate futurecasting that places South Africa's national interests at the centre of policy, scholarship, and practice.

Against the backdrop of increasing financial constraints, shifting political landscapes, and the growing reality of digital transformation, and as Professor Robert Perich at the Swiss School of Public Governance correctly argued: "*Universities are no longer just institutions of knowledge—they are complex organisations requiring financial stewardship, strategic foresight, and the ability to manage significant institutional change.*"

As many have argued, during these turbulent times, survival, it turns out, is not an economic equation. It's a leadership one. It is leadership patterns that will predict institutional fate.

Here at home, as we mark exactly 70 years since the Freedom Charter (1955) and its clarion call that "*The Doors of Learning and Culture Shall Be Opened,*" I wish to say: we have come a long way. Whilst remaining constructively critical, we should not easily join the bandwagon of downplaying our progress. We must see the gains of the past decades as a foundation on which to build.

As one scholar from this university, Dr Masutha, has argued:

*"How we choose to fund students in higher education is inextricably linked to what, and for whom, we believe education is for. Whatever the choice, its implications stretch far beyond the walls of our universities. Over the years, student funding models have greatly shaped the sector and its perceived role in enabling—or hindering—efforts to build a more just and equitable society. This alone demands that we shoulder far greater care and responsibility in the views we advocate for, the values we elevate, and the interests we advance or overlook."*

Finally, I wish to take this moment to recognize the University of Johannesburg as a shining star and a source of national pride. As your former student, I am truly proud to be part of your alumni. It is the knowledge acquired in these corridors that shaped much of my public sector contributions, including my role as Group CEO of the Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa (PRASA) and now as Director-General of Higher Education and Training.

Please, continue nurturing future leaders and change-makers. South Africa desperately needs these kinds of people to take us to the next phase of our evolution as a society. I accept the UJ Alumni Dignitas Award 2025, as a reminder to myself and all of us, of the responsibility we have towards others as we collectively strive for a better society.

With 20 years of the University of Johannesburg behind us, may the next 20 years be even greater.

Congratulations!

I thank you.