

Alumni UK Chapter Launch

4 October 2023

There is an African proverb that says, “Tomorrow belongs to people who prepare for it today.” As I reflect on our gathering today, this is certainly a fitting sentiment. This year has brought with it great excitement and possibilities but has also necessitated change – particularly towards a more human-centred future. This is encompassed by the very idea of reimaging the future. It marks a new chapter for the University of Johannesburg (UJ) and for me. It is necessary for me to begin by introducing myself.

I am Letlhokwa George Mpedi, the son of Daniel Pule Mpedi, a construction worker, and Josephine Hambile Mpedi, a housewife. Though trained as a lawyer, it was in academia that I really began to understand the transformative nature of education. Growing up in a village with my homeboys, we dreamt about the possibilities growing older would bring, we dreamt of moving to the big cities and eking out livings. I am testament to the transformative power of education and the might of access. Like many of our students, I am a first-generation graduate. It is my very beginnings at Vista University and later the Rand Afrikaans University (RAU) that have led me here. I know all too well the importance of an institution that emphasises access and excellence.

UJ's history is rich and represents a long legacy that you are all now a part of. UJ is a unique institution. It serves as a microcosm of our society. Many of the inequities and inequalities in South Africa present themselves here – many of our students are first generation, many have emerged from lower quintile 1 and 2 schools, many are impacted by the digital divide. Our student body is a true representation of the demographics of our country and our understanding of the complexities of the country's dynamics is based on our very own experience. We are a tale of the ability to subvert the South African narrative that has taken hold in recent years. This is the very spirit of this institution.

We are a University of possibilities that demonstrates the transformative power of education. Throughout the world, Universities take great pride in the achievements and influence generated by their alumni. This establishes a lasting legacy with far-reaching implications for future generations. It is indeed an exciting prospect to launch this alumni chapter in the United Kingdom today! In recent years, UJ has emerged as the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) University – unparalleled in this space nationally and on the continent. Additionally, we have placed an emphasis on research that addresses the various United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and contributes to policy development.

Our learning revolution, now, is one defined by our societal impact in this endeavour. We are a young University that has demonstrated its ability to respond to our shifting context and emerge as dynamic and active participants in the 4IR alongside our commitment to transformation, equity, access and Pan-Africanism. This will continue to remain our focus and ethos going forward. However, we cannot ignore the context of the world around us. Steep rises in inequality, growing divisions, pandemics, climate change and leadership crises are but a few descriptors of our current era. We are undoubtedly a world in crisis which is reflected in our country and this vibrant city.

Alongside our commitment to excellence and innovation, we have a responsibility to ensure that we emphasise humanity in our approach. UJ's vision emphasises continuity, innovation, humanity, inclusivity and purposeful progress as prerequisite guiding principles for societal impact. This concept represents the effect of our research and work in the real world. It represents a shift beyond academia to the economy, society, culture and beyond. It is incumbent on us to lead through ideas, actions, and programmes in ways that deliberately seek to ameliorate these challenges and positively impact on the world around us. The emphasis on societal impact is not only confined to the UJ community but demands that we push our collective gaze outwards.

As we continue to make strides with technology, we must do so in a way that advances and positively impacts humanity and society. At UJ, we have begun to emphasize societal good based on the convergence of our interests in 4IR and achieving the SDGs. This concept represents the effect of our research and work in the real world. The African author and profound intellectual Wole Soyinka once said, “Intellectuals have a duty to humanity. It is to insist that the human entity remains the primary asset in overall development; thus, it must be safeguarded.” In fact, through our various faculties and institutes, UJ is already producing dynamic, exciting and relevant research.

The recent 3D printing project that has been rolled out at UJ in collaboration with the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI) is a prime example of how we can leverage the technology of the 4IR and posit sustainable solutions that benefit local communities. The 3D printer at UJ can complete a house in one day. The finished house is stronger, can handle fire better, and is better insulated than conventional houses. It demonstrates the ability of technology to address some of our glaring deficits and gaps, particularly in response to the issue of homelessness in our city. Another example is the fleet of electric buses that have been unveiled, which produce much lower carbon emissions while offering a smooth ride even on steep routes.

This has been made possible by our shift to renewable sources of energy, which currently comprise 15% of our energy at UJ. To allude to the words of the World Economic Forum (WEF) founder Klaus Schwab, these are examples of how we strike a balance between the promise and peril of technology. We must continue to emphasise addressing these broader challenges through our research and act quickly – this is how we ensure that our approach to the 4IR speaks to societal impact. We are certainly seeing our commitment in this sphere pay off! Just last week, UJ improved its global standing in the latest results of the 2024 Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings.

UJ is now ranked among the top 500 universities globally in the 401 – 500 band. This is an all-time high for our University! We have climbed up two bands, from the 601-800 band in which we had consistently been placed for seven years since debuting in 2016. This year, UJ is ranked 4 in South Africa and Africa. In June, the fifth instalment of the Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings saw UJ once again improve its global ranking at position 46 in the world. UJ climbed by 23 places from position 69 in the world in last year’s 2022 edition to be included in the top 50 Universities in the world.

For the 17 individual SDG impact rankings, UJ has been ranked in the top 100 universities in the world for 7 SDGs with a phenomenal first place in the world for SDG 1: No Poverty and sixth place in the world for SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth. There were also a number of exciting developments in May. To draw your attention to a few: UJ is now ranked among the top 3.1% of universities worldwide, at position 628 globally. This is according to the latest 2023 global ranking from the Center for World University Rankings (CWUR). Since its debut in position 951 six years ago, UJ has consistently climbed these rankings. For the 2023 edition of this ranking, 20 531 institutions were assessed, making it the largest academic ranking of global universities.

Of those universities evaluated, only the best 2 000 made the final cut and attained a ranking placement in the published list. UJ's latest ranking is a noteworthy achievement demonstrating our commitment to excellence and its dedication to providing high-quality education and research. Moreover, just a week after the release of the CWUR, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) announced that UJ is now the top producer of research outputs in South Africa out of the 26 universities in the country that produce research that advances knowledge with the potential to benefit humanity. UJ has achieved the number 1 position in South Africa with 2753.4 research output units.

This represents a remarkable increase of 18.8% compared to the previous year (the average annual increase over the last 3 years being 8.4). Over 96% of the journal articles submitted were listed on international journal indexes, with 78% being indexed in the prestigious Scopus international publication and citation database.

What is even more pleasing is that the per capita research publications output for UJ is also increasing and is among the top three in the country for 2021 publications. There is a burgeoning of ranking systems but there are some notable achievements I will speak to from the last year. The QS World University Rankings indicated that UJ is ranked second nationally and on the continent.

This is a marvellous achievement and recognition for UJ, considering that 2462 institutions were analysed and 1422 institutions were ranked in the 2023 edition. UJ improved its global ranking yet again, having been ranked at position 412 in the world, an all-time high, climbing 22 places from position 434 in the world in last year's 2022 edition. According to the 2022-2023 edition of the US News & World Report Best Global Universities Rankings (BGUR), UJ has again been ranked among the top 500 universities in the world, at position 421, down only four places from 417 the year before.

In the new QS Sustainability Rankings, UJ is ranked in the 171-180 band in the world and at number 2 in South Africa, joint with the University of Pretoria (UP) behind the University of Cape Town (UCT). As these impressive feats demonstrate, UJ's future looks to burn even brighter! We are currently crafting a strategic plan, which will take us to 2035 that speaks to this vision. As we reimagine and reinvent what the future could possibly be, I am cognisant that we are in an age of angst as we are besieged with challenges that plague our current society but the future will come and as history has shown, despite circumstances, Universities and societies will forge ahead. You too will be part of this revolution.

I remind you today of your inextricable link with our University. You are a living testament to the legacy and values of our institution. By maintaining a strong network with you, we tap into a pool of potential collaborators, mentors, and advocates who can significantly contribute to our vision. I remind you that one of the most tangible ways alumni contribute to our university's growth is through their generous support, both financially and otherwise. This support plays a critical role in advancing research, funding scholarships, and enhancing infrastructure, creating a more conducive environment for teaching, learning and innovation. Moreover, you are the bridge between academia and the professional world.

The University has six strategic objectives that speaks to our goals of providing a learning and living experience that is enriching for our students. However, we also bear the responsibility of managing our national and global reputation. We cannot succeed in this sphere without you. By engaging with you, our students gain insights into real-world challenges and opportunities. Collaborative projects, internships, and mentorship opportunities facilitated through this network provide us with a distinct advantage. This is not a road we can travel without you. As we walk into the future, I am certain we will reimagine and reinvent the status quo together to make a tangible difference. Just as I began, I must end, with an African proverb.

As it is said, “with a little seed of imagination you can grow a field of hope”. That possibility certainly rests with you today.