

UJ Council Awards Dinner

Remarks By Frans Baleni on behalf of the Council of the University during UJ Council Awards Dinner

Opening and Acknowledgments

Thank you MC.

Good evening guests, members of the University Council, the Vice Chancellor, Executive Leadership of the University of Johannesburg and your guests, and most importantly, tonight's award recipients and their loved ones.

Accomplishments of UJ in 2024

As we reflect on the year 2024, it is evident that the University of Johannesburg continues to set the standard for academic excellence, innovation, and social impact—not just in South Africa but globally. I know that the Vice Chancellor will highlight some of this later, but it is appropriate that I touch on some of this from a Council perspective.

The role of the Council is one of oversight, ensuring that the University remains steadfast on its path, and aligned to its vision. Perhaps most importantly, Council considered and approved the Strategic Plan 2035 which lays the path for the next 10 years; this plan was launched earlier this year. There is clarity the path is known, the destination has been determined. We are building the future now!

Higher education institutions has, at their core, several strategic imperatives. These are academic excellence, research impact, and student success, and all of these come about because of visionary leadership. Moreover, and in the face of the recent COP 29 meeting in Azerbaijan, sustainability remains key.

♠ **Academic Excellence:**

Academic excellence is the cornerstone of any world-class university. UJ has firmly cemented its place among the top universities globally, a testament to the dedication of our staff and students. This year, we have seen significant advancements in key disciplines. Our reputation as the leading University driving fourth industrial revolution is well-cemented, and is being built on. We have been very successful in marrying fourth industrial revolution to societal impact under the leadership of the Vice Chancellor Prof Mpedi, and this vision has resulted in key projects such as the 3-D printing of houses, the virtual moot court, and the societal villages in the Limpopo Province, to name but a few.

These accomplishments underscore UJ's commitment to staying ahead in a rapidly evolving academic landscape. Our strong rankings are not just numbers; they are reflections of the talent and effort that fuel our Institution's progress.

♠ **Research Impact:**

UJ's researchers are breaking new ground and making invaluable contributions to addressing some of the world's most pressing challenges. I should pause to acknowledge that UJ is, for the second year running, the highest contributor to knowledge production in South Africa. This year, we have seen extraordinary progress in areas that affect the very fabric of our society.

In the fight against the climate crisis, our research teams are developing innovative technologies to reduce carbon emissions, conserve biodiversity, and support sustainable agriculture. A notable project this year involves renewable energy storage solutions that have the potential to make clean energy more accessible to under-resourced communities. The University is also on track with the development of an institutional ESG Strategy that will serve before Council in 2025.

Social justice remains a pillar of our institutional values. Our academics are working to dismantle systemic inequalities, whether through policy analysis, community engagement, or education reform.

These groundbreaking efforts are reflected in our global recognition, as UJ publications continue to appear in top-tier journals and conferences. The University's research is not only academic; it is transformational, shaping the world around us.

♠ **Student Success:**

At the heart of UJ's mission is our students, and their success is our greatest reward. This year, I am proud to report that we witnessed a record number of graduates. These are not just numbers—they are stories of perseverance, resilience, and triumph.

What is particularly inspiring is that a significant proportion of these graduates come from previously disadvantaged backgrounds. Their achievements serve as powerful evidence of UJ's commitment to transformation and inclusion. Our efforts to provide financial aid, mentorship programs, and holistic support services, have played a crucial role in levelling the playing field for all students.

We have also introduced innovative programs designed to enhance employability and entrepreneurial skills, ensuring our graduates are equipped to thrive in a dynamic global economy.

Our students are not just succeeding academically—they are also excelling as leaders and innovators. Many have initiated projects addressing community challenges, from launching sustainable business ventures to organizing campaigns promoting mental health awareness. They embody the spirit of UJ: bold, compassionate, and future-focused.

♠ Sustainability Leadership:

UJ's role as a sustainability leader is gaining traction. In an era where the call for environmental stewardship is louder than ever, UJ has answered that call with conviction and action.

Our campuses have reached new milestones in renewable energy utilization, with solar installations now powering a significant portion of our operations. These initiatives not only reduce our carbon footprint but also set an example for institutions across Africa and beyond.

Beyond our campuses, we are driving meaningful change through community projects focused on environmental education. This year, UJ partnered with local schools and NGOs to promote sustainable practices, from waste management to water conservation. These programs are empowering young people to become environmental champions in their communities.

These accomplishments affirm our commitment to being a University that is not just in Johannesburg but truly of Johannesburg and for the world. UJ is at the premier league and position one in the league of its peers.

Purpose of the Ellen Khuzwayo and Dignitas Awards

This evening, we pause to honour excellence and celebrate the profound impact our University and its community members have on society. Specifically, we honour two remarkable individuals through two prestigious awards that embody the spirit and vision of our institution:

- ♠ **The Ellen Khuzwayo Award** celebrates individuals who have made extraordinary contributions to education and human development in South Africa.

- ♠ **The Dignitas Award** recognizes UJ alums who exemplify the highest standards of excellence in their respective fields. These recipients not only distinguish themselves professionally but also embody the values of leadership, integrity, and service that lie at the heart of a UJ education.

Linking the Awards to UJ's Vision

Both awards are deeply aligned with the University of Johannesburg's vision of being an inclusive, future-focused institution that drives change through innovation and leadership.

These awards remind us that UJ's mission is not confined to lecture halls or laboratories; it extends into the world, shaping lives and advancing humanity.

In conclusion I studied in this University, then it was called RAU, now it is UJ.

I have now served for 15 years in the Council of this excelling University.

Thank you UJ for permitting an opportunity to serve in one of the best Universities.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude for the valuable lessons I have learned from all of you.

“If you are brave enough to say goodbye, life will reward you with a new hello”

(Paulo Coelho)

Goodbye UJ.

I thank you! Ke a leboha! Ro livhuwa!