**Former President Kgalema Motlanthe Acceptance remarks for the Honorary Doctoral Degree from the University of Johannesburg Faculty of Humanities on Tuesday, 18 March 2025.**

* The Chancellor Dr Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka;
* The Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of Johannesburg, Professor Letlhokwa Mpedi;
* Executive Dean of the Faculty of Humanities, Professor Kammila Naidoo;
* Esteemed Members of the Academia;
* Students & Graduates.

In this period of celebration for many graduates here at University of Johannesburg and across our country, we must pause and offer our full acknowledgement and gratitude to all the faculties, lecturers, mentors, students, families and communities, all who have been instrumental in their contribution to the academic achievements of so many.

The staff and students of an academic institution are often tested on countless levels that other citizens might not have to contend with. This dedication to a journey of edification is carried with meaningful purpose for not only the individual student, but that of the student’s family, community, peer group, and goals.

It is my singular honour and privilege to be part of this graduation ceremony, and I express my deepest appreciation for the conferment of Honorary Doctoral Degree from the University of Johannesburg Faculty of Humanities. This occasion is an opportunity to recognise the values of intellectual pursuit, inquiry, and courage that this institution upholds.

More than that, it is a reminder of the vital role that universities play in shaping minds to be informed, as well as deepening their conviction to engage better with the world.

We draw vital energy from the unending passion of young minds who serve as an inspiration to renew the spark of curiosity. It is their prerogative to be radical and to question the underpinnings of institutions, norms and standards transmitted from generation to generation, that we may rediscover the essence of intellectual courage.

It is fitting, then, that we gather today at a university committed to shaping independent thought, to reflect on what lies at the heart of leadership and human progress.

We meet at a time when the world’s conversations have become louder, but not necessarily wiser. The modern era bombards us with a flood of narratives, half-truths, and algorithmic manipulation, shaping what we see, hear, and even believe. We witness conflicts raging on, with warzones in our region and battlefields extending even to microchip laboratories.

However, without the discipline to cultivate a clear and independent mind, we risk becoming passive recipients of distraction rather than engaged thinkers with the ability to discern and create meaning beyond the noise.

History reveals that knowledge, intellectual independence and policy courage are survival tools for progress and resilience. While challenges exist, we are in an era where these qualities should be actively cultivated and embraced, where intellectuals have the power to challenge dominant narratives, and policymakers have the opportunity to lead with principle over hesitation.

This moment calls for less caution in holding back on ideas, and more conviction, bold thinking and the courage to shape a future with clarity and purpose. This means shifting from a mindset of dependency to one of strategic self-determination. It means recognising that while the challenges we face are real, so too are our capacities for innovation, governance, and progress.

Intellectual courage calls for questioning inherited assumptions and embracing bold, future-focused strategies that serve the continent’s long-term development rather than short-term external validation.

For instance, the idea that mass entrepreneurship will be the engine of economic transformation is flawed. While entrepreneurship is valuable, relying solely on it, without addressing the structural economic realities of South Africa, is misleading.

**Why does this narrative persist?**

It persists because it creates an illusion of inclusivity, even in systems that lack the necessary conditions for real entrepreneurial success.

Research and the lived experience of many, reveal that what is often called "entrepreneurship" in the form of spaza shops in South Africa is, in reality, informal, insecure labour, a survival mechanism rather than a driver of sustainable growth. Similarly, economic policies promoting self-employment also fail to acknowledge the necessity of industrialisation, infrastructure, and stable employment structures.

Yes, all the talk about the township economy should be driven by encouraging entrepreneurship, but only while acknowledging the urgent necessity of industrialisation, infrastructure, and policy reform as complementary forces rather than opposing ones.

Whereas intellectual courage means questioning economic conventions, policy courage requires making informed choices in the face of financial constraints.

An example of this challenge is South Africa’s rising national debt and shrinking fiscal space, which limit the country’s ability to pursue the structural economic changes it so urgently requires.

As outlined in the 2025 Budget Speech, South Africa’s gross government debt has risen with debt servicing costs consuming over 20% of government revenue. This means that a significant portion of the national budget is allocated to servicing the public debt.

This reality underscores an important truth about **sovereign debt**; that is t**he State has to annually pay its creditors a certain amount of interest for the capital borrowed from them.**

**In this case, the creditor cannot recall his investment from his debtor, the State, but can only sell his claim, or his title of ownership. The capital itself has been consumed, that is, expended by the State, it no longer exists.**

This challenge is heightened in South Africa’s financialised economy, where capital is often diverted from industrial investment into speculation, further limiting job creation and economic diversification.

Policy courage is thus essential; a nation cannot borrow its way to prosperity without a clear strategy for industrialisation and investment in production rather than consumption. Beyond piecemeal economic interventions, we need clear policymaking and implementation strategies, as well as the political will to rethink economic priorities.

As I conclude, universities, places of research, inquiry, and critical engagement, should be at the forefront of redefining economic discourse.

Asking the difficult questions of prevailing economic myths and cultivating the intellectual prowess to propose alternative models based on our own realities.

However, intellectual courage cannot exist in isolation.

It must be supported by civil society and institutions that are committed to open debate and independent thought, acting as a critical and supportive force to government and business.

This advocacy should be informed, strategic, and proactive, rather than shaped by foreign aid and donor-driven agendas.

We convey our heartfelt congratulations to the University of Johannesburg on attaining this milestone of turning twenty years old. At twenty, it is a youthful university and therefore tomorrow belongs to it, as indeed tomorrow belongs to all our youth.

May this university remain a beacon of independent thought, a place where difficult questions are welcomed and where the courage to think loudly, shapes the next generation of national and global leaders.

Once more, thank you for your kind attention.