

Mandela's alma mater disputed

Written by Matshelane Mamabolo

Monday, 23 December 2013 08:55 - Last Updated Monday, 23 December 2013 09:18



“Madiba got a degree from Unisa but was a student here. A true Witsie.” These are words uttered by Prof. Mamokgethi Phakeng during a memorial for Nelson Mandela at Wits University. She is someone who could end this brewing contest in one fell swoop. Prof. Mamokgethi Phakeng is as much a Unisan as she is a Witsie. She is a full Professor as well as Vice Principal: Research and Innovation at Unisa and moonlights at Wits as an Honorary Professor: Mathematics Education. She will be President of Convocation at Wits University until 2015. Prof. Phakeng has clearly picked a side in this debate.

The opposing side of the debate consists of current, former and aspirant Unisa students who are inspired by Nelson Mandela’s association with Unisa. One of them is Law student Kgaogelo Mkhondo (@kaageeee on twitter) who proudly cites Mandela’s LLB as an encouragement considering the odds that Mandela confronted during the liberation struggle. Sandile Nkosi (@taxbuddyz on twitter) goes as far as suggesting a name change from Unisa to Mandela African University as a “lifetime dedication to him”. These two and those who share their view only see Mandela as a Unisa alumnus, to the exclusion of all other institutions because it is Unisa that awarded the degrees that he earned through study to him.

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Despite the great hardships a stoic Nelson Mandela acquired all his degrees, BA Law (1942) and LLB (1948) from Unisa and in 2012 consented to being a recipient of the Unisa Robben Island Alumnus Award. It gets convoluted though. Nelson Mandela began his studies for a Bachelor of Arts degree at University College of Fort Hare. Tata Mandela was also enrolled at the Wits Law Faculty for six years (between 1943 and 1948). Wits University also awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Laws to Mandela in 1991. Those are the facts.

The difference of opinion regarding which institution has a greater claim to the global icon hinges on whether one perceives education as physical evidence in the form of a degree certificate or the campus experience (for those who can afford it). It's also about which of the two you value most. You decide.

Nelson Mandela (1918-2013), a selfless and dedicated leader, died on December 5 at the age of 95.