

## NEWS RELEASE

### University of Pretoria confers honorary doctorate on science leader and visionary Dr Khotso Mokhele



*From left to right: Dr Khotso Mokhele and Prof Sunil Maharaj.*

PRETORIA - The University of Pretoria (UP) has awarded one of South Africa's most distinguished science leaders, Dr Khotso Mokhele, an honorary doctorate in recognition of his extraordinary intellectual and leadership contributions to science, higher education and innovation in South Africa and globally.

The honorary degree was conferred during the [Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences'](#) graduation ceremony at UP. At this ceremony, 298 students – including 16 PhD candidates – graduated across a range of disciplines within the faculty. The ceremony formed part of UP's Autumn 2025 graduation season, which runs from 2 to 29 May and will see over 12 000 students graduate.

"I am immensely honoured by this recognition," Dr Mokhele said. "The University of Pretoria has demonstrated what is possible when knowledge is harnessed in service of society. In a world facing complex challenges, science

must always be about people – empowering them, solving real problems, and creating new opportunities for future generations.”

Dr Mokhele obtained a BSc degree in Agriculture from the [University of Fort Hare](#) in 1979, where he won the Massey-Ferguson award for the best student in his field. He received the [Fulbright-Hays](#) Scholarship for his postgraduate studies at the [University of California](#), Davis, where he completed an MSc in Food Science in 1981 and a PhD in Microbiology in 1986. He went on to receive postdoctoral fellowships at [Johns Hopkins University](#) (1986–1987) and the [University of Pennsylvania](#) (1990–1991), before returning to South Africa to take up lecturing posts at the University of Fort Hare (1987–1989) and the [University of Cape Town](#) (1991–1992).

In 1992, he was appointed Vice-President of the Foundation for Research Development (FRD) – later renamed the [National Research Foundation](#) (NRF) – by its then President, the late Dr Rein Arndt. Dr Mokhele transformed the FRD into a funding agency capable of supporting a more inclusive and impactful higher education system in South Africa. He initiated several research funding programmes focused on building human capital, particularly for those previously excluded from the science system.

“Dr Mokhele’s outstanding skills as a leader, manager and communicator made him an obvious choice to become the next President of the FRD in 1996,” said [Prof Barend Erasmus](#), Dean of the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences at UP. “At the helm of the organisation, he continued to transform the foundation into a powerful force in the South African science and development and higher education landscape, becoming the founder President and CEO of the National Research Foundation in 1999, a role he served in until 2006.”

Reflecting on his early work, Dr Mokhele said, “I have always believed that investing in people, especially young researchers and students, is the most important investment we can make for the future of this country. Institutions like the NRF were built not just to fund research, but to enable South Africans from all backgrounds to become creators of knowledge and drivers of development.”

During his term as President and CEO of the NRF, Dr Mokhele contributed to the drafting of the *Green Paper for Science and Technology: ‘Preparing for the 21st Century’*, which set the scene for the creation of the National System of Innovation (NSI). “Its influence reverberates to this day in the science and innovation landscape of South Africa,” Prof Erasmus said.

Dr Mokhele also played a key role in securing government and international support for the [Southern African Large Telescope](#) (SALT) and laid the groundwork for South Africa’s successful bid to host the majority share of the [Square Kilometre Array](#) (SKA), one of the largest radio astronomy projects in the world.

His long-standing relationship with UP has also left a lasting impact. For the past 15 years, Dr Mokhele has served as an advisor to the leadership of the [Forestry and Agricultural Biotechnology Institute](#) (FABI), supporting the development of its Avocado Research Programme. This led to the creation of a Research Chair at UP, funded by the Hans Merensky Legacy Foundation, which Dr Mokhele chairs.

“Dr Mokhele serves as Chairman of the Board of Directors of Hans Merensky Holdings, Chairman of the Board of [Westfalia Fruit](#) International and Chairman of the Board of the Hans Merensky Legacy Foundation. As Chairman of the Foundation, he has played a pivotal role in transforming the foundation into a major financial contributor to science and development in South Africa,” Prof Erasmus said.

Under Dr Mokhele’s guidance, the Hans Merensky Legacy Foundation has funded Research Chairs at UP, [Stellenbosch University](#) and the [University of the Free State](#). “He has taken a personal interest in the development of all these Chairs, particularly focussing on the scientific and academic development of their leaders, as well as the students that make up their research teams,” Prof Erasmus explained.

Internationally, Dr Mokhele served on the Executive Board of [UNESCO](#), was Vice-President for Scientific Planning and Review of the International Council for Science (ICSU), and helped steer the merger between the ICSU and

the International Social Science Council to create the [International Science Council](#), now the largest global science body. He has also represented South Africa on several high-level scientific governance and policy platforms.

Prof Erasmus concluded: “Dr Mokhele has received honorary doctorates from eight other South African universities, as well as [Rutgers University](#) in New Jersey, USA. It is therefore fitting that the University of Pretoria also pays tribute to and acknowledges the monumental achievements of a truly great South African.”

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>> [Watch Dr Mokhele’s graduation speech here](#)

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## ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on its Hatfield Campus in Pretoria. This 115-year-old institution is also one of the largest producers of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the [Gordon Institute of Business Science](#) (GIBS). It is the only university in the country with a [Faculty of Veterinary Science](#), which is ranked the best in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 56 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes. It has the most academic staff with PhDs (70%), NRF-rated researchers (613).

The 2025 Times Higher Education subject rankings placed UP first in South Africa in the fields of [Accounting](#) and [Finance](#); [Architecture](#); [Electrical and Electronic Engineering](#); Law; Sport Science; and Veterinary Science. UP’s Faculty of Law has been ranked as the top law school in Africa for a remarkable eighth consecutive year.

Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) ranked the University among the top five in Africa, as part of their [2024 World University Rankings \(WUR\)](#). UP was the only South African university featured in the [2023 World University Rankings for Innovation \(WURI\)](#), falling within in the 101-200 range of innovative universities.

For more information, please go to [www.up.ac.za](http://www.up.ac.za)