

NEWS RELEASE

UP Chancellor's Medal awarded to Nonkululeko Gobodo, SA's first black woman chartered accountant



Chancellor's Medal awardee, Nonkululeko Gobodo waits on the graduation stage while Prof Morris Mthombeni reads her citation

PRETORIA - "Wherever you are and whichever job or profession you are in, do your part!"

These are the words of Nonkululeko Gobodo who, in 1987, became the first black woman in South Africa to qualify as a chartered accountant (CA).

Gobodo was recently awarded the Chancellor's Medal by the University of Pretoria's (UP's) Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS) during its autumn MBA graduation ceremony on 16 April.

"South Africa is our country and we all have to do our part in achieving the country we want," she said in a recent interview. "If you are in the municipality, are you doing your part to run things well? If you are the owner of a business, are you doing your part to offer the best service?"

Formative years

Gobodo was nominated by GIBS Dean Professor Morris Mthombeni, who explained that as a schoolgirl, in Mthatha in the Eastern Cape, she had helped her father with the bookkeeping for his panel-beating shop. “She had a natural flair for figures and was inspired by WL Nkuhlu & Co, the firm that audited her father’s accounts. It was owned by Professor Wiseman Nkuhlu, the first black male chartered accountant in South Africa. Gobodo decided that she, too, wanted to become a chartered accountant. It is particularly fitting that she is awarded the Chancellor’s Medal, as Prof Nkuhlu was the longstanding Chancellor of UP, from 2007 to 2022.”

In the late 1970s Gobodo enrolled at the University of Transkei (now Walter Sisulu University) for a BCom degree and then pursued her CA ambitions.

There were very few black CAs in the 1980s and early 1990s, but she drew on her courage and leadership skills to establish her own accountancy firm, Gobodo Incorporated, in 1992, after turning down a partnership offer from KPMG. She says this remains one of the proudest moments in her life.

Gobodo was subsequently instrumental in the 2011 merger of Gobodo Incorporated with SizweNtsaluba VSP to form SizweNtsalubaGobodo (SNG, now SNG Grant Thornton), South Africa's largest black-owned accountancy firm, and one of the ‘Big Five’ largest accounting firms in southern Africa.

The SNG merger process was not easy, with challenges including blending different corporate cultures.

“At this level, qualifications remain important, but the role demands more than these, and as leaders we are not always prepared for the huge task of leading people,” Gobodo explains. “We think we are, but people see the world differently and bring different gifts and talents to the table. It takes maturity to appreciate this and find ways of working together to avoid company and boardroom conflicts.”

She says this type of leadership starts with “understanding and leading yourself first, so that you can understand and lead others”. She has put considerable effort into this and says the more she understands herself, the more she appreciates the different ways in which other people work.

Gobodo served as executive chair of SNG until 2015. In 2016 she co-founded Nkululeko Leadership Consulting (NLC), which she was CEO of until 2021. She is now CEO of Awakened Global, which she established in 2021 to address ongoing prejudice and racism experienced by women in the workplace. She also continues to sit on several boards. Her autobiography, *Awakened... to my true self*, was published in 2022.

She says she had to forgive herself for parts of her life she cannot change. “I ask myself, would the market have waited for me if I had slowed down and been around more for my children? But the answer is ‘no’. I had to pursue my ambitions. My children are all adults now and they are fine, and if I had not done what I did, I would not have been able to offer them the education and life I have been able to do.”

She says women often second-guess themselves about whether they should pursue their ambitions, as this would impact their family time. “I say, you will always make time for your family, but don’t miss the moment – women need to seize this time to get where we should be in all forms of leadership.”

Still, she cautions young people not to get ahead of themselves. “People who are in their second year of articles come up to me and ask me how they can get onto boards, and they don’t mean in a few years’ time, they mean now. They are simply not ready for this, and they need to put in a lot of hard work before they are.”

Gobodo says she has reached a stage where she is satisfied that she has achieved her goals. “I am finally more relaxed, and I can appreciate life and witness my children on their journeys. I can also choose which boards I want to sit on. I’m not rushing anywhere.”

Still, Awakened Global has a large mission, with Gobodo at the helm: “There’s a whole new world waiting for us once we awaken to who we truly are, and once we believe we can achieve anything we set our sights on,”

she says. “And I’m talking about everyone in every field. We can establish our own firms and grow them. We can do whatever we want to do, but whatever we do, we must do our part.”

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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 [2024 Times Higher Education subject rankings](#) placed UP first in South Africa in the fields of Law, Veterinary Science, Accounting and Finance; Agriculture and Forestry and Electrical and Electronic Engineering. 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