

STUDENT MATTERS



Dr Naledi Pandor, MP, and MUT Chancellor, Ms Lindiwe Sisulu, MP, unveiling the plaque at the new residence

Opening of Student Housing Phase 1

The long wait for Student Housing Phase 1 came to an end with the official opening of the residence on 25 August 2018 by Dr Naledi Pandor, Minister of Higher Education and Training. She was assisted by fellow MP and MUT Chancellor, Lindiwe Sisulu, and the MUT founder, Prince Mangosuthu Buthelezi. It was an electric moment enhanced by the long-standing connection between the three leaders.

When the newly inaugurated Vice-Chancellor, Dr Malaza, welcomed guests at the opening of Student Housing Phase 1, he acknowledged the enormous contribution made by Prince Buthelezi. He said, "You should be proud of the seed you planted at MUT. Since the first R5 million donation, MUT has grown exponentially in your lifetime. Today, we are opening a multi-million-rand residence to house some 640 students, a far cry from the first 15 students we had in 1979 when the University opened. It is indeed a proud moment for you as the founder, Prince Buthelezi."

In opening the Student Housing Phase 1 project, Dr Pandor reminded the audience that:

"DHET's vested interest is to ensure that students graduate and have a good student experience while at university. It is for this reason that we have residences designed to encourage communal living, with accommodation rooms grouped together and easily accessible 'shared spaces'. These structured areas will encourage students to socialise and network, creating environments that will foster friendships and lasting relationships."

During the new residence walkabout, it was clear that it met the standards expected of a modern residence. Each floor has sufficient ablution facilities, a fully equipped kitchen and a lounge. On top of that, there are also washing machines. Today's residences are a far cry from those of yesterday where one would just hide one's head; they are a home away from home.

The University is looking forward to launching Student Housing Phase 2 in the near future.

A long, hard road to Student Housing Phase 1

From now onwards the Department of Higher Education and Training will ensure that greater support is planned for all infrastructure projects. This stems from the numerous problems encountered by universities receiving the infrastructure grant. In MUT's case, a grant approved in 2009 finally bore fruit in 2018 due to challenges faced by the University that were beyond its control.

In a detailed analysis during the launch of the Student Housing Phase 1, former acting Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Professor Nokwethemba Ndizi, outlined the challenges faced in completing the project:

"Minister Pandor, you have come full circle regarding this project. You approved the initial funding of Student Housing Phase 1 within the Infrastructure and Efficiency Grant on 12 March 2009. The original amount approved was R105 million, with the DHET contributing R49 million and MUT to contribute R56 million through a loan. The first challenge at that time was securing the loan. The first financial house presented conditions that were not suitable for the University, resulting in retendering for the financial service. A new loan was only finalised early in 2012 and earthworks commenced in September of the same year. The costs had by that time escalated to R156 million.

The second glitch experienced was at the stage of appointing the main contractor. Some bidders challenged the tender process, and as a result it took more than a year to finally engage a contractor. Ultimately, on 18 February 2014 Liviero Building commenced with the actual construction of the building, with the completion date set for the end of July 2015.

There were challenges during the course of that year, such as strikes by employees in the steel manufacturing and engineering sector; but the straw that broke the camel's back was the work stoppages by the local business forums that occurred in January 2015."

Work could only resume after Liviero agreed to give subcontracting work to some members of the forum. These delays resulted in the practical completion date being revised to 30 September 2015. This date was also not met, due to on-site conflicts, whether it was between Liviero and subcontractors, or general workers and the local community. Ultimately, Liviero started lodging a dispute against the University, complaining of what they referred to as sub-standard work by the subcontractors that was impacting progress negatively, and the disruptions which they regarded as no fault of their own.

The dispute extended to the beginning of 2016. When no resolution was forthcoming, Liviero abandoned the site and MUT took occupation on 11 April 2016. At this stage the building was above 80% complete. It was after this period that the debate of whether to continue with Liviero or to get a new contractor to complete the building ensued at MUT. This debate lasted for more than a year, until September 2017 to be precise. For this decision I thank the new Council of MUT for correctly playing their role and allowing Management to manage the operations.

Costs had also escalated. While the University had been able to afford to provide R22 million towards the claim by Liviero in 2016, an additional R25 million was further required for the settlement. We are grateful to the DHET for their resolution in seeing MUT through this hurdle. The DHET granted us the required R25 million and instructed that the building be completed urgently. After Council's green light, we went back to the drawing board. The site was handed over to Liviero in November 2017 and work was resuscitated.

The greatest challenge was that, due to a prolonged state of idleness, the integrity of some of the features had been compromised. There had been incidents of vandalism as well and most importantly, some of the specialised subcontractors were no longer keen on coming back to the project. At this point I thank Liviero, the MUT Infrastructure Team, Luven Naidoo and Dumisani Madela, who joined MUT only last year but gave this project their best. The Student Housing Phase 1 project is now complete."



The new 640 bed residence