

# 'I hold a degree' and you can do nothing about it

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**'I hold a bachelor's degree in arts.'** What a strange way to start your defence in court when your life literally hangs in the balance.



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*Photograph by: Times LIVE*



*Nelson Mandela after being awarded an honorary doctorate of law at the University of Galway in Ireland*  
*Photograph by: PAUL MCERLANE/REUTERS*

**" That statement expresses both an achievement and an ideal worth striving for"**

Of all the things Nelson Mandela could invoke to kick off his 10699-word defence in the famous Rivonia Trial, he told the judge about his highest educational achievement.

Having introduced himself as Accused Number 1, why would the statement "I hold a degree" matter? To even begin to understand the import of these remarkable words you have to place yourself within the context. It was 1964. In that year only 298 Africans passed "matric" with university entrance and a mere 98 were awarded bachelor's degrees in the previous year. Even today holding a first degree would distinguish a young South African from disadvantaged communities; in the 1960s such an achievement would have been stupendous.

It was not just any degree - "I hold a bachelor's degree in arts".

I hope that settles the narrow debates among contemporary youth about the utilitarian value of a humanities degree.

Here you have it. The man who arguably made the most profound contribution to our struggle for freedom is a humanities graduate.

I am not sure what the legal arrangements or political intentions might have been for Accused Number 1 to declare his education in this remarkable statement from the dock, but its broader significance cannot be missed.

I can only wonder what must have gone through the mind of Judge Quartus de Wet as he sat there, no doubt overcome by the powerful oratory and incisive logic of this young attorney who had opened offices in Johannesburg with Oliver Tambo. I know for sure a few stereotypes about black people must have been dealt a blow and that some of the arguments in English might well have gone over his head. This was an educated man. This was an educated black man, and never before had De Wet been ambushed by such a speech.

"I hold a degree." There is something special about that phrase.

Mandela was at pains to point out in his long speech how the nationalist government had done everything in its power to frustrate the ideals and ambitions of black people, beating them into the ground until they had nothing left but to resort to sabotage as a form of political resistance.

Stripped of both material well-being and human dignity, here was something no white man or white government or white judge could confiscate; the man's education.

"I hold a degree", and there's nothing you can do about it, is how I prefer to interpret his claim.

Of course, it was not easy. While pursuing the BA degree through the University College of Fort Hare, he was expelled for his political activities. Mandela then completed his degree through Unisa and in 1943 went back to Fort Hare for graduation. Somewhere in this period he worked as a mine security officer and then met an estate agent named Walter Sisulu who introduced him to a man named Lazar Sidelsky who helped him complete his articles with a firm of attorneys that included the Sidelsky name. Through all these hardships he survived and could proudly claim before a judge operating under political instruction: "I hold a degree."

It constantly surprises me how many of the loudest voices in our local and national politics are those of demagogues who proudly display their lack of educational achievement. It has almost become a badge of honour in some circles, that you can get ahead without education.

"I hold a degree" expresses both an achievement and an ideal worth striving for.

It was his experience of a solid education at Healdtown in a parochial school and at university in the distinguished College of Fort Hare that enabled Mandela to devote insightful passages from his speech that day to education. What remains striking from that statement are his insights into not only the withdrawal of feeding schemes or low school attendance or differential education spending as sources of inequality but the very quality of education itself.

His measure of quality - the number of African matric passes (only 362 in 1962, according to a source cited by Mandela) - was a respectable indicator at that time. He could, in other words, speak with considerable authority about education based on the claim "I hold a degree".

If the speech started with an unusual statement about his education, it ended with a moving declaration of commitment to his ideals: "I am prepared to die."