

## Message from the President of Convocation



**On the picture: Mr Sylvester Motadi, President of Convocation**

Dear Alumni,  
As we conclude the first quarter of 2025, it is with great honour that I address you through our first publication of the UNIVEN Alumni News Newsletter of 2025. This platform represents not just a reflection of our achievements but also an evolving space to celebrate the lifelong connection we share as a community of convocation members and also as alumni in general.

Over the last 42 years, our alumni have consistently exemplified the values of resilience, leadership, and innovation—qualities that continue to inspire current students and the broader university community. While the university leadership comes and goes, you remain a lifelong member of the university. Your accomplishments, both professional and personal, are the heartbeat of our institution's legacy.

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# Message from the Advancement Unit Manager



**On the picture: Percy Ngobeli, Advancement Unit Manager**

The recognition of their work, both locally and internationally, reflects the high caliber of graduates that University of Venda produces. This edition will shine the spotlight on some of our trailblazing alumni.

As we embrace this new year, I encourage all alumni to remain actively involved in shaping the future of our institution. Your role in strengthening the UNIVEN community is invaluable.

Let us continue to work together to unlock new opportunities, inspire change, and ensure that UNIVEN remains a beacon of excellence for generations to come. I wish you all the best in your endeavours.

As we enter 2025, I am excited to reflect on the remarkable achievements and milestones that have shaped our journey over the past year. This edition of UNIVEN Alumni News celebrates the dedication, resilience, and contributions of our alumni, staff, and students in advancing the legacy of our institution.

First and foremost, I want to express my heartfelt gratitude for your support and active engagement in alumni initiatives. Your commitment to the university's vision through mentorship, research and community development continues to strengthen our network and reinforce UNIVEN's standing as a center of academic and professional excellence.

I am proud to announce that the University of Venda is expanding its influence not only through academic achievement but also through strategic growth. The recent establishment of the UNIVEN Advancement Unit Office in Gauteng marks a significant milestone in strengthening partnerships, securing third-stream income, and increasing our national presence. Our alumni have also demonstrated outstanding leadership in various sectors, from Healthcare, Natural and Environmental Sciences, as well as Management and Commerce. Socio-economic sectors, Politics, Law, and Indigenous knowledge advocacy to global academic collaborations.



# Breaking Barriers and Building Legacies: Dr. Mdhluli's Inspiring Journey from Rural Roots to Academic Excellence



**On the picture: Dr. Mdhluli**

Dr. Tsetselelane Decide Mdhluli's remarkable journey from Allandale Village, Bushbuckridge, to becoming an esteemed scholar in African Studies and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) is a reflection to her hard work. Raised in a supportive Christian family, she was instilled with the values of love, unity, and the belief that education is the key to success. Her parents, Lucas, and Jenesy Mdhluli, despite their modest means, emphasised the importance of learning—a philosophy that became the foundation of her academic pursuit. A powerful phrase echoed in her home, "Vukati bya Nwana I xikolo" ("A girl's true guarantee in marriage is education"), served as a guiding mantra throughout her career.

From her early education at Sabeka Primary School and Mahuvo High School to obtaining multiple degrees at the University of Venda—including a BA in International Relations, an Honours degree in Gender Studies, a Master of Arts in African Studies, and ultimately a Ph.D. Dr. Mdhluli's academic journey has been extraordinary. Her research in IKS has positioned her as a leading expert, advocating for the preservation and advancement of traditional knowledge. Notably, she became the first individual from her village to earn both a BA and a Ph.D., a milestone that has inspired many.

As a senior lecturer and IKS Coordinator at the University of Limpopo, Dr. Mdhluli has played a crucial role in shaping the academic landscape. She has been instrumental in developing the Bachelor of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (BIKS) curriculum, publishing extensively on African philosophy, heritage studies, intellectual property, and traditional health systems. Beyond academia, she founded the Fletcher-Lucas Academy, an institution dedicated to education and employment development in her community. Her influence extends beyond the classroom, ensuring that Indigenous knowledge is preserved and integrated into modern academic discourse.

## Navigating Success: Dr. Mdhluli's Advice for Young Alumni



**On the picture: Dr. Mdhluli**

Dr. Mdhluli passionately advised young alumni to embrace perseverance, diligence, and lifelong learning. "The road to academic and professional excellence is seldom linear or effortless," she explains. "However, those who demonstrate resilience and adaptability will distinguish themselves in their respective fields." She urged graduates to see challenges as opportunities for growth and emphasised that persistence through setback is key to long-term success.

She highlighted the value of all academic disciplines: "Every field, whether humanities, sciences, or others, fosters critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills that are essential across industries." She encouraged young professionals to embrace their academic experiences, remain flexible in their career trajectories, and leverage the skills they have acquired for future success.

Dr. Mdhluli also stressed the importance of intellectual curiosity and interdisciplinary learning. Reflecting on her journey, she shared, "My path led me to Indigenous Knowledge Systems—a niche I might not have anticipated—but my openness to diverse academic frameworks equipped me to navigate this field effectively." She believes a growth mindset enhances professional adaptability and a deeper appreciation for interconnected knowledge. Giving back is another pillar of success. "Alumni should uplift their communities through mentorship, knowledge-sharing, and collaborative initiatives," she emphasised. "One person's success can catalyze collective progress, inspiring future generations to pursue their aspirations with confidence." She further encouraged young graduates to actively contribute to professional and academic networks, reinforcing that by doing so, they strengthen their careers while fostering a culture of shared achievement. Moreover, she highlighted the significance of networking, conference participation, and engagement with industry leaders. "Building meaningful professional relationships open doors to opportunities, facilitates knowledge exchange, and creates a strong support system for growth," she advised.



**On the picture: Lindelani Maraganedzha**

Mr. Lindelani Maraganedzha's story is one of resilience, perseverance, and the transformative power of education. Born and raised in the rural village of Ha Magidi, he faced numerous challenges growing up in a large polygamous family. He spent much of his childhood in Mangondi Ha Jim Kone, where life was difficult, and resources were scarce. However, Mr. Maraganedzha learned early on that survival was not just about getting by, but about overcoming adversity, sharing what little they had, and pushing forward.

He said, "The lessons I learned during my childhood were shaped by hard work, responsibility, and the will to thrive despite limited opportunities. Like many children in rural areas, I spent my days tending to animals, playing soccer, and swimming in the Luvuvhu River, all while being aware of the dangers it harboured." Despite the hardships, his parents, especially his father, placed a strong emphasis on education. He recalled, "Even though we lived in a financially struggling environment, my father never wavered in his commitment to ensuring we went to school. Education was the key to breaking the cycle of poverty, and my parents did everything they could to make that possible."

Mr. Maraganedzha attended Mangondi Primary School from 1999 to 2005 and completed his matric at Thase Secondary School in 2010. After finishing school, his father encouraged him to find work, leading him to a job at Jet Stores in Johannesburg. Yet, he knew there was more in store for him. "Deep down, I felt destined for something greater. I refused to let my circumstances define my future," he said.

In 2011, he enrolled at Johannesburg Central College, but in 2013, he received an acceptance letter from the University of Venda, marking the beginning of a new chapter. Though his initial dream was to become a Geologist, he found himself in the School of Environmental Sciences, a decision that would shape his future in ways he never imagined. He earned a BSc in Environmental Sciences and later an Honours degree in 2016.

At UNIVEN, Mr. Maraganedzha realized that education was not just about obtaining a degree, but about building a foundation to create a lasting impact. He stressed, "My time at UNIVEN was not just about personal growth. It was about using education to create a better future for myself and those around me." In his second year at UNIVEN, he co-founded the Universal Greening Organisation (UGO), a movement that now spans across borders, reaching young environmentalists and change-makers worldwide. Reflecting on his achievements, he shared, "The challenges I faced as a child shaped my purpose in life. The recognition I have received is not just about me; it's about empowering others."

Among his proudest accomplishments are founding Delta Racklers Farm, a sustainable farming initiative, and being awarded the 2023/2024 Mail & Guardian 200 Young South Africans Award in the Rural Development category. In 2025, he also won the WESSA Individual Award for his contributions to environmental conservation. More than just personal milestones, Mr. Maraganedzha has worked tirelessly to help others. He has mentored over one hundred young professionals and helped more than 5,000 young people secure employment opportunities. His international work includes taking thirty individuals on their first international trip to Botswana, hosting delegations from six countries at UNIVEN, and accrediting fifty young Africans to attend CoP16 in Saudi Arabia in December 2024.

Mr. Maraganedzha currently employs over 70 young people with majority being females across South African under Universal Greening Organisation. His organisation has footprints abroad, including Maryland in the United State of America, Tanzania, Nigeria, Zimbabwe Botswana, Saudi Arabia, Colombia, and South Korea. Throughout his journey, Mr. Maraganedzha has stayed connected to his alma mater, UNIVEN, which remained a central pillar in his work. "UNIVEN has been instrumental in helping me achieve my dreams. The university's support allowed me to create impactful projects that extend beyond South Africa," he said. He emphasised the importance of alumni giving back. "As alumni, we have a responsibility to invest in the future of the university, especially by helping financially struggling students," he noted.

In 2024, he contributed to the Thoho Ya Nzie Social Welfare Initiative, which assisted over 201 students with settling their outstanding debts, ensuring they could continue their education. Mr. Maraganedzha urged fellow alumni to act. "Our success is not just for ourselves. It's an opportunity to uplift others, invest in our alma mater, and create lasting change." Looking back, he said, "I want to be remembered not just for my achievements, but for the opportunities I created for others. I want to be remembered as a global citizen who used my struggles to empower others, as a mentor who believed in the potential of young people, and as someone whose legacy inspired future generations."

His message to young people everywhere is simple yet powerful: "Success is not defined by where you come from, but by where you are determined to go. No matter where you start, use what you have, and make it count. Never stop pushing"





**On the picture: Ms Mukovhe Rammela**

# From Adversity to Advocacy: Mukovhe Rammela's Journey of Transforming Healthcare

Ms Mukovhe Rammela, a Quality Improvement Officer in Johannesburg District, is not just a health care professional but a beacon of hope to her patients. Her remarkable journey from being a sick baby to a healthcare professional is a testimony that dreams are valid.

Mukovhe grew up in Thohoyandou Block J (Muledane): A Nurturing Family Environment Shapes a Life of Unity and Determination. Growing up in the close-knit community of Muledane, her family emphasised the importance of education and hard work. Surrounded by supportive siblings and parents, she learned the value of unity and determination, attributes that have shaped her life. "My parents instilled values in us that we still carry today," she shared. "We spent a lot of time together, enjoying traditions and supporting each other's dreams."

Her educational journey began at Muledane Primary School, followed by Mahwasane Primary School, where she received a solid academic foundation. Continuing her studies at Dimani Agricultural High School, she discovered a passion for Science and Mathematics and matriculated in 2011. A pivotal moment in her journey came during a career exhibition at the University of Venda where she realised, she was interested in studying for a Nursing degree. The career exhibition had a profound impact on her decision.

## A Calling Inspired by Personal Experience

Her early health struggles and frequent hospital visits left an impression, as nurses provided compassionate care. This experience inspired Mukovhe to pursue a career in Nursing, with a desire to help others the way she was helped. "The nurses left a lasting impression on me," she said. "They showed me the positive impact a nurse can have on a patient's life."

She pursued a nursing degree at the University of Venda where she gained extensive knowledge of patient care, nursing procedures, and healthcare ethics. 2017 marked a change in her career path when she enrolled in a master's degree programme in public health at the University of Venda. She is nearing completion of her doctoral studies in Public Health.

## Championing Healthcare Quality and Equity

Becoming a quality improvement officer was a dream come true. Driven by a desire to become a manager in the health field, overseeing teams and ensuring the delivery of quality care. She is driven by a passion for health equity and a desire to provide holistic care for underserved communities. She strives to address the social determinants of health that contribute to the prevalence of TB/HIV, advocating for better resources and policies to improve patient outcomes and enhance the healthcare system. "It's not just about treating diseases," Mukovhe said.

Her recipe for success involves a combination of hard work, perseverance, and continuous learning. She stated that it is essential to stay adaptable and embrace challenges as opportunities for growth. Additionally, maintaining a positive mindset and surrounding herself with supportive individuals has significantly contributed to her success. In her moments of relaxation, she finds comfort in reading motivational books or watching motivational videos on YouTube.

## A Call to Action for UNIVEN Alumni

Ms Rammela encouraged alumni to participate in the University of Venda's academic activities, such as conferences, research symposiums, and student debates. She said is essential for fostering intellectual growth, networking with peers and experts, and enhancing critical thinking skills. These experiences contribute to a well-rounded education and prepare students for future professional challenges.



# UNIVEN Expands Its Footprint: Gauteng Office Opens to Strengthen Strategic Partnerships and Secure Sustainable Growth



**On the picture on top: The university's Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Prof. Bernard Nthambeleni, proudly accepted the Title Deed and keys to the property**



**On the pictures on top: UNIVEN Gauteng Office**

The University of Venda has taken a bold step towards expanding its national presence and advancing its institutional goals by establishing its new Gauteng Office. Officially inaugurated on 13 December 2024, the office strategically located at ERF 181, 56 Florence Street, Colbyn, Pretoria marked a significant milestone in the university's commitment to strengthening stakeholder relations, increasing visibility, and securing sustainable third-stream income.

The university's Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Prof. Bernard Nthambeleni, proudly accepted the Title Deed and keys to the property, underscoring the importance of this acquisition. The office officially commenced operations on 6 January 2025 and is set to serve as a critical hub for advancing UNIVEN's partnerships with key national and international organisations.

"This office is a game-changer," said Prof. Nthambeleni. "For a long time, we have recognised the need for a physical presence in Gauteng, not only to reduce the logistical strain of frequent travel but also to ensure that UNIVEN is well-positioned to engage effectively with stakeholders such as the Department of Higher Education and Training, the National Research Foundation (NRF), the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), and the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), among others."

The Gauteng Office is set to house the UNIVEN Advancement Unit, a key driver in the university's pursuit of sustainable funding. The unit's mandate is to enhance fundraising efforts, build strong donor relationships, and mobilize external resources for infrastructure development, scholarship programmes, and other strategic initiatives that will propel the university forward.

Beyond financial sustainability, this new office will offer a professional space for the University Executive Management and other staff members when in Gauteng, facilitating seamless operations and hosting both local and international partners. Equipped with modern boardroom facilities, it will also serve as a venue for council meetings and strategic engagements.

"Our university continues to grow, attracting interest from various international organisations. Having a base in Gauteng allows us to effectively welcome global partners, expand our reach, and solidify our standing as a competitive institution in the higher education sector," added Prof. Nthambeleni.

With this strategic move, UNIVEN is set to unlock new opportunities, forge stronger collaborations, and reinforce its reputation as an institution committed to academic excellence, innovation, and sustainable development. The establishment of this office is not just about physical expansion, it is about positioning the university for a future of unlimited possibilities.



# The Inspiring Journey of Machaka Mathole Jimmy: A Defender of Rights, A Product of UNIVEN Excellence



**On the picture: Machaka Mathole Jimmy**

Born and raised in the rural village of Botlokwa in Limpopo Province, Mr. Machaka Mathole Jimmy's journey is one of perseverance, service, and unyielding determination. At 37, he reflects with humility and pride on a life that began in modest circumstances but blossomed into a purpose-driven career in law and public service. Jimmy is the third-born in a family of six. His upbringing was shaped by the resilience of his mother, a clerk at Botlokwa Hospital, who carried the weight of caring not only for her children but also for her extended family. "We grew up in a poor household, but my mother's dedication and sacrifice instilled in me the drive to change our circumstances," he recalled.

His early education journey was shaped by movement across different schools and villages. He started primary school at Metz Lower and Mamahlola Secondary School in Metz Ga-Sekororo, his father's hometown. He then attended Ramatau High School, Kharahara High School, and finally matriculated from Phala High School in Bochum. Despite the frequent changes, Jimmy's determination never wavered.

It was the social injustices he witnessed in his community that fueled his passion for justice and led him to pursue a career in law. He enrolled at the University of Venda in 2006 and completed his LLB degree in 2010. Inspired by his uncle, a practicing lawyer, and his student activism, Jimmy saw the legal profession as a powerful platform to advocate for the voiceless.

His time at Univen was transformative. As a student leader, he served in the SRC Parliament and was elected Speaker of the SRC. He also held the position of Branch Secretary of the South African Students Congress (SASCO). His leadership was defined by a commitment to justice and a refusal to be intimidated. "I never allowed myself to be bullied, not even by lecturers. I believed in dialogue, persuasion, and justice."

However, his academic journey was not without challenges. Financial difficulties once forced him to consider dropping out, but the timely intervention of then Vhembe District Executive Mayor Philemon Falaza Mdaka, who paid his fees from his account despite not knowing him, was a life-changing moment. This act of kindness reaffirmed Jimmy's belief in the power of community and leadership.

Today, Jimmy is an admitted attorney of the High Court and serves as the Director of Legal Services at the Limpopo Department of Economic Development, Environment and Tourism. He is also completing his pupillage at the Limpopo Society of Advocates, aspiring to join the Bar as an advocate.

"Practicing law allows me to stand for the rule of law and protect the rights of others," he says. For Jimmy, success is rooted in discipline, patience, and the ability to adapt quickly to new environments. His advice to aspiring legal professionals is simple yet profound: "Your background doesn't define your future. Stay focused and believe in your journey."

Beyond his professional life, Jimmy is a devoted family man. He finds balance and joy in spending time with his wife and children and unwinds by watching movies and enjoying leisure activities with loved ones.

Looking ahead, Jimmy hopes to be remembered as someone who stood for justice, both as a student leader and a professional. "I want my legacy to be about courage, service, and the power of independent thinking. I was never a passive citizen; I stood up for what was right."

Jimmy remains closely connected to his alma mater and believes that alumni have a crucial role to play in shaping current students' experiences. He advocates for regular engagement between past and present students and calls for initiatives that foster mentorship and inspiration.

Reflecting on his journey, he shared, "If I could go back, I would approach student activism with more constructive dialogue. But I have no regrets. The University of Venda shaped who I am today, and I will always be proud to have been one of its students."

# Breaking Barriers in HR: A Univenian's Journey to Purpose and Empowerment (Miss Veliswa Forgive Tshabangu)



On the picture: Veliswa Forgive Tshabangu

Raised between the rural warmth of Agincourt village and the vibrant community of Thulamahashe in Bushbuckridge, Mpumalanga, Miss Tshabangu grew up under the loving guidance of her mother and late grandmother. Her family life, rooted in strong values, discipline, and spiritual grounding, shaped her into the woman she is today. "My mom ensured we lacked nothing; she gave us the best education possible and taught us the importance of prayer and church," she reflects.

Her educational journey began across several primary schools before she completed her foundation at Mpithi Primary School and matriculated at Metropolitan Private College. Inspired by her mother, a master's degree holder from the University of Limpopo, education was never a choice but a calling. "She motivated me daily to study hard and never compromised when it came to education." Though her upbringing didn't force her into a particular career path, a spark was lit in Grade 10 when she chose commercial subjects. Her fascination with business was fuelled by her teacher, Mr. Baloyi, and the portrayal of Thandaza (played by Sindi Dlathu) in the TV drama Muvhango. "I saw myself sitting in that CEO's chair one day," she smiles. It was this vision that eventually led her to the University of Venda in 2007, where she initially enrolled in a BCom in Business Management. But in 2009, she discovered her true passion, Human Resource Management, and never looked back, earning her undergraduate degree in 2012.

Today, she stands at the helm of her firm, Majela Human Resource and Labour Consultant, as Director. After the end of her contract in December 2020, she embraced the leap into self-employment, entering a niche field few Black South Africans have ventured into. "I'm proud to be part of the HR consulting space, especially as it's not traditionally familiar in our communities," she shared. "Consulting is my passion; I love helping organisations align with labour laws and empowering individuals with workplace knowledge."

Her academic achievements include not only her undergraduate but also her postgraduate qualifications in HR. She considered breaking into HR consulting and mentoring others as her greatest milestones. "I want to be remembered as someone who didn't give up, someone who inspired hope in others, especially in the world of employment."

She described her recipe for success as a combination of a positive mindset, worthy goals, and inspired action. "And above all," she adds, "a teachable spirit. We may leave university with theory, but the real world demands a willingness to learn."

Relaxation comes through reading, research, spending time with loved ones, and attending church, a balance that keeps her grounded. As a proud UNIVEN alumna, she continues to engage with former classmates, many of whom are now successful business partners and clients. Miss Tshabangu encouraged fellow alumni to build these relationships and invest back into the institution that shaped them. "UNIVEN created us. We owe it to the next generation to share our experiences and open doors for them."

Looking ahead, Miss Tshabangu hopes the university enhances collaboration with industry stakeholders to create more on-campus recruitment opportunities. "UNIVEN produces top-tier graduates in every field. With more support, they can soar even higher."

"If given the chance to do it all over again, she wouldn't change a thing. 'Everything about my time at UNIVEN was special. I don't regret a single moment of being a Univenian,' said Miss Tshabangu."



# "Leadership in Action: Tsundzuka Hakamela's Continued Commitment to UNIVEN's Excellence"



The University of Venda announced the permanent appointment of Mr Tsundzuka Hakamela as International Students Administrator in the Directorate of International Relations and Partnerships, which took effect on 1 March 2025. His outstanding leadership, steadfast commitment to academic excellence, and remarkable personal journey have established him as a highly valued member of the University community.

Mr Hakamela holds a Bachelor's degree in Development Studies from the University of Venda, which provided the foundation for his passion for development and international relations. He completed his Master's degree in Political Science at UNIVEN in the 2025 Autumn Graduations, he continues to demonstrate an unwavering dedication to personal and professional growth. A well-known figure in the UNIVEN community, Mr Hakamela previously served as SRC President, where he earned a reputation for his exceptional work ethic, dedication, and unselfish commitment to student welfare. His contributions have not gone unnoticed, as he was recently recognized by the Green Technology Confucius Institute (GTICI) for his outstanding efforts in fostering global collaboration.

During his internship in the Directorate of International Relations and Partnerships, Hakamela gained experience in international student recruitment, admission processes, visa applications, and cultural integration programmes. He played a crucial role in developing and implementing internationalisation strategies, fostering partnerships with global institutions, and facilitating collaborations and exchanges. His coordination of various international organisations including the South Africa-Sweden University Forum, the University of Venda International Students Union, and the South Africa BRICS Youth Association further demonstrated his capability in global networking and institutional growth.

## On the picture: Tsundzuka Hakamela

Among students, Hakamela affectionately earned the nickname "Mr. Food" due to his commitment to student welfare, ensuring that meals were provided at his events. His ability to connect with and support students has been a defining trait throughout his journey at UNIVEN.

Reflecting on his experience, Hakamela advised students to embrace humility, curiosity, and perseverance: "As a student, remain humble and agitated, learn, and explore opportunities that come with being a student. Never stop asking questions and seeking knowledge hard work always pays off." In his new role, Hakamela will oversee the administration of international students, providing essential support in admissions, registration, and student life. He will also be responsible for fostering relationships with international partners and stakeholders, further elevating UNIVEN's global presence.



On the picture: Tsundzuka Hakamela with Professor Bernard Nthambeleni shortly before his inauguration

Expressing his gratitude and excitement, Hakamela stated, "I am deeply humbled and honored to take on this new role. I look forward to utilising my skills and experience to make a meaningful impact on the lives of international students at UNIVEN."

Mr. Sylvester Motadi, President of the UNIVEN Convocation, commended Hakamela on his appointment: "We have watched Hakamela grow into a resolute leader, always raising the UNIVEN flag higher. His hard work and commitment to the University are commendable, and we are confident that he will continue to make a positive impact."

As Hakamela embarks on this new chapter, his passion, experience, and leadership will undoubtedly contribute to the continued success of UNIVEN's internationalisation efforts. His appointment reflects the University's commitment to excellence in global engagement, ensuring that international students receive unparalleled support and integration within the UNIVEN community.

# Talifhani Tshitwamulomoni : A Call to Action from the Heart of Limpopo: One Man's Quest for Sustainability and Community Empowerment



**On the picture: Talifhani Tshitwamulomoni**

In the heart of Limpopo Province lies the small, vibrant village of Vondo, where the story of Talifhani Tshitwamulomoni began. Born and raised in this village's close-knit community, Talifhani's early life was deeply intertwined with the natural environment. The lush landscapes and the stark reality of environmental degradation he witnessed during his childhood planted the seeds of a lifelong commitment to sustainability and community empowerment.

His upbringing in Vondo village was marked by strong values instilled by his parents. His mother, Avhafunani Nelufule, an entrepreneur who ran a spaza shop, taught him the importance of hard work, resilience, and community support. Meanwhile, his father, Shumani Tshitwamulomoni, a builder, provided him with an understanding of innovation and creativity, as he was heavily involved in assisting his father in constructing residential homes for various individual homeowners. These early lessons in entrepreneurship and responsibility would later become the cornerstone of his endeavours.

His academic journey began at Tshanowa Primary School. He then went to Luphai Secondary School, where he excelled and developed a keen interest in environmental issues. His passion for making a difference led him to the University of Venda (UNIVEN), where he pursued his studies with determination and passion. It was at UNIVEN that his transformative journey truly began. Witnessing the environmental challenges faced by his community, he founded the Universal Greening Organisation (UGO) while still a second-year student. What started as a simple tree-planting initiative quickly evolved into a powerful environmental movement, combining academic knowledge with practical community engagement.

His work through UGO, an organisation he founded to promote sustainability and community empowerment, was recognized by Forbes Africa, which included him on their prestigious 30 under 30 list. This honour not only acknowledged his impactful work but also provided him with a valuable opportunity to champion environmental conservation at a global level, further amplifying his mission and extending his influence beyond the Vhembe District.

He is dedicated to making environmental sustainability a reality for all through Universal Greening's innovative solutions, like solar-powered trash compactors and community-based conservation projects. He envisions a future where these solutions are implemented globally, transforming urban and rural landscapes. His goal is to be remembered as a pioneer who brought sustainable technologies to the forefront, making sustainability practical and accessible for all.

He is committed to making a lasting impact on the world, and he sees his collaboration with UNIVEN as a key part of this. He believes in the power of education and community collaboration, and through his work with the university, he aims to inspire and empower future leaders to continue his work in environmental stewardship and innovation. His relationship with UNIVEN exemplifies the powerful impact that can be made when academia and industry work together towards a sustainable future.



# From Ha-Vhangani to Global Impact: The Journey of Professor Victor Mmbengwa



**On the picture: Professor Victor Mmbengwa**

Professor Victor Mmbengwa's life is a remarkable tapestry woven with threads of hardship, resilience, transformation, and triumph. Born in the humble village of Ha-Vhangani, an extension of Sinthumule in Limpopo, he grew up in a single-parent household led by a devoted mother who worked as a domestic worker. His father, though once a prominent polygamous businessman, played no active role in his upbringing, leaving Victor and his three siblings to rely almost entirely on their mother and maternal grandparents.

It was his grandparents, the agrarian, small-scale farmers, who introduced Victor to the rhythms of the land. They planted maize and vegetables and kept livestock like indigenous chickens, pigs, and goats. Their dedication to farming not only sustained the family but also sparked a deep and lasting interest in agriculture for young Victor. Though the family faced financial and social hardships, it was in those very fields that the foundation of a future professor's passion was laid.

Victor began his schooling at Vhangani Primary School in 1978 and completed it in 1984. He went on to study at Mudinane Secondary School from 1985 to 1990. His mother, though uneducated, was a pillar of encouragement. Her unwavering wish was to see her son educated, and her belief in him lit the path that would eventually lead to academic excellence.

In 1991, Victor enrolled at the University of Venda to pursue a Bachelor of Science in Agriculture (Animal Science), graduating in 1996. At that time, he dreamed of becoming a veterinary surgeon, but the lived experience of growing up on a farm coupled with academic exposure slowly began to shape a new trajectory in Agricultural Economics.

Throughout his journey, Victor drew inspiration from strong mentors. One such person was Professor Jan Groenewald, a revered scholar from the University of Free State and former Head of the Department of Agricultural Economics at the University of Pretoria. Despite warnings about Victor's strong-willed nature and politically active background, Professor Groenewald welcomed him without bias. Their relationship evolved into one of mutual respect and intellectual exchange, transcending race and politics. Their debates were often spirited but always grounded in learning and mutual admiration.

Victor's academic record is extraordinary. He holds two doctoral degrees in distinct fields and has authored more than 100 peer-reviewed scientific papers. Today, he serves as a Professor of Agricultural Economics at the University of Limpopo, is a research associate at both UNISA and the University of the Free State, and works as a consultant in agribusiness while training youth in econometrics. For him, guiding the youth to academic success is not just a duty it is a passion. Through teaching, research, and community engagement, he continues to leave a lasting impact. His path, however, was not without detours. At one point, he battled alcohol addiction and underwent a 30-day rehabilitation programme, sponsored by the University of the Free State. The attempt, though well-meaning, failed. It wasn't until he attended an outreach service led by the late Apostle Pastor Tshifhiwa Irene in Pretoria that he found healing. Through prayer, Victor experienced a profound spiritual transformation that freed him from alcohol entirely. Today, he stands as a living testament to both academic and personal redemption. Victor's philosophy of success is strategic and spiritual. He believes that with faith, research, a clear vision, and disciplined execution, any dream is attainable. He studies his goals, identifies gatekeepers and obstacles, and designs strategies that he implements with diligence, constant learning, and reflection. When he's not in lecture halls or writing papers, you'll find him watching soccer, attending church, or spending quiet moments with his family.

Among his proudest personal achievements is building a stable and supportive family. Professionally, he is proud to have been the President of the UNIVEN SRC, where he helped lead the establishment of the Faculty of Agriculture. He is the first professor from his village and among the few who have transitioned from Animal Science to Agricultural Economics with ease and success. He is also the founder of Dihwai Food, Agriculture and Cultural Services (DFAS Centre Pty Ltd) and the African Youth Agribusiness Development Association (AYADA), organisations focused on youth empowerment and food sustainability.

UNIVEN continues to play a pivotal role in Professor Mmbengwa's life. It is not just the institution where his academic journey began; it is the foundation of everything he has become. As the Deputy Chairperson of the Agricultural Alumni, he remains actively involved and passionate about contributing to the university's growth. He encourages alumni to stay engaged, to share their knowledge, and to uplift current students through mentorship and opportunity.

To young alumni and students, he offers this wisdom: "Believe in yourself, and act deliberately toward your goals. Learn from failure, stay positive, create an environment for success, and associate with people who challenge you to grow. Above all, trust in the gifts God has given you and use them to impact the world." Professor Mmbengwa hopes to be remembered not just for his academic accomplishments but for the humility, love, and service he offers to his family, students, and community. His story, rooted in rural soil and lifted by divine grace, is one of the most inspiring ever to emerge from the halls of the University of Venda.

# Rising Beyond the Odds: Dr. Shadreck Muchaku's Journey from Rural Roots to Global Academic Impact as a UNIVEN Champion



**On the picture: Dr. Shadreck Muchaku**

Born at Saint Mary's Hospital in Seke, Zimbabwe, alongside his twin, Dr. Shadreck Muchaku's journey is a compelling testament to resilience, purpose, and the power of education. Growing up in a humble rural village where family and community were the cornerstones of life, Dr. Muchaku learned early the value of determination and service. His academic journey began at Saint Kizito Primary School, followed by Chiguhune High School in Gutu District, Masvingo, and later Wedza for his Advanced Level studies. Guided by the unwavering support and sacrifice of his parents, he and his twin brother navigated school without ever missing a class due to financial constraints- an achievement he attributed to his parents' deep-rooted belief in education as a vehicle for transformation. Their sacrifice instilled in him an unshakable commitment to education and personal growth.

Dr. Muchaku credited his late uncle, David, a manager at the Grain Marketing Board (GMB), as his role model. "I admired his humility, professionalism, and balanced approach to leadership," he shared. These qualities would later serve as a compass in Dr. Muchaku's career, inspiring his people-centered approach to leadership and research.

Motivated by his upbringing in an underserved rural area, Dr. Muchaku developed a passion for rural development. Witnessing firsthand the limitations in accessing basic services inspired his pursuit of a career that could make a tangible difference in the lives of those in similar communities.

He later enrolled at the University of Venda, where his academic ambitions flourished. Despite academic pauses, personal loss, and the global challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, he triumphantly earned his PhD in 2020. During his academic journey, he had the privilege of benchmarking at the University of Virginia, an experience that broadened his perspective and reinforced his commitment to global impact.

From the beginning, he envisioned working with NGOs and community-based programmes. This vision remains central to his work today as Mr. Muchaku now serves as a researcher in Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH), working on transnational projects in Zambia, Botswana, and Japan. He is also an Adjunct Professor at the University of Venda, continuing to give back to the institution that helped shape his career. Beyond academia, he is a proud changemaker, having once served as the first Chairperson of the postgraduate student body at UNIVEN. His leadership helped bring about meaningful improvements on campus, from the introduction of common-room TVs to influencing decisions on certificate formats, showcasing his commitment to student welfare and institutional growth. Dr. Muchaku finds joy in engaging with communities, creating solutions that reflect their realities, and seeing meaningful, real-world impact through his work.

Through personal tragedies, including the loss of his parents and partner during crucial exam periods, Dr. Muchaku found resilience that now anchors his work. His mantra? "When life gets tough, push harder." That mindset, coupled with his humility, has made him a respected leader and mentor of this generation.

His legacy is already in motion: a leader who broke barriers, a scholar driven by community, and an advocate for positive change. For young alumni and students alike, his advice rings true: stay humble, persistent, and never stop knocking on doors. The path to purpose may be long, but it is paved with determination, service, and an unshakable belief in one's mission. Reflecting on his time at UNIVEN, he shared that he wished he had a better balance between his academic and social life, having been quite active in campus festivities. "It's important to enjoy student life, but finding balance is key," he advised.

Dr. Shadreck Muchaku continues to play an active role within the UNIVEN community, exemplifying the spirit of giving back. His journey inspires future generations, highlighting the power of talent, resilience, and determination. To fellow alumni seeking to reconnect, Dr. Muchaku encourages engaging with UNIVEN's social media platforms, sharing opportunities, and participating in alumni initiatives. He advocates for building a strong, supportive network that prioritises professional development over internal politics.

Today, UNIVEN continues to be a vital part of his life. As an adjunct professor, Dr. Muchaku remains deeply engaged, contributing to the institution that helped shape his career and identity. His legacy is one of service, resilience, and advocacy, and he hopes to be remembered as someone who fought for progress, stood for others, and inspired change.



# UNIVEN To The World: Prof Azwinndini Muronga's Journey



**On the picture: Prof Azwinndini Muronga**

Azwinndini Muronga grew up in the villages of Vhembe District, Limpopo Province, South Africa. His introduction to formal education was rather modest - classes in the primary school in his rural villages of Lwamondo took place under trees. However, from these humble beginnings, a lifelong love of learning was born. Once he had completed grade 10, he was taken under the wings of his uncle, who was then a high school teacher. Together with financial support from his beloved late grandmother, in the form of her meager old-age government grant, he went on to attend the last two high school classes at Mbilwi High School, which is rated the top mathematics and science school in South Africa despite being in rural areas.

After high school, he wanted to study medicine; however, financial constraints led him to enroll for a BSc degree at the University of Venda instead. On completion of his BSc, family pressure for financial assistance led him to enroll for a University Education Diploma (UED) at the University of Venda, where he received professional teacher training for one year. Instead of going into school teaching, he decided to follow his passion for science and enrolled for Honours in Physics at the University of Cape Town (UCT). Since Azwinndini's undergraduate studies had been completed at a historically black university, he was only allowed to do his Honours degree over a period of 2 years instead of the usual 1 year. His Honours degree in Theoretical Physics was awarded first class. He then enrolled for an MSc in Theoretical Physics at UCT, which he completed effectively in one year and was awarded with distinction.

The late Professor Jean Cleymans, an all-time NRF A-rated scientist, supervised his MSc thesis. With the success of his MSc, he was invited to apply for a PhD programme in the USA. He enrolled at the University of Minnesota under the supervision of Professor Larry McLerran. However, just as he was to start his PhD project, Professor McLerran left the University of Minnesota to lead the theoretical physics group at Brookhaven National Laboratory. Professor Joseph Kapusta then supervised Azwinndini's PhD studies. He graduated with a PhD in Theoretical Physics in 2002 and was awarded the Aneesur Rahman Award by the School of Physics and Astronomy at the University of Minnesota in 2003. The award is given every year to graduates who have made significant scientific contributions while still PhD students. On completion of his PhD studies, Azwinndini was invited to take up a post-doctoral research position with the Institute for Theoretical Physics at J.W. Goethe University in Frankfurt, Germany. His host was Professor Dirk H. Rischke. At the end of his post-doc position in Frankfurt, he got a second post-doctoral position with the Theory Group of GSI Laboratory in Darmstadt, Germany. This was, however, cut short when he was invited to return to South Africa to take up a position as a senior lecturer at the University of Cape Town in February 2005, which he held until September 2010.

In October 2010, he took up a position of Associate Professor in the Physics Department at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) and concurrently a position of Director of UJ Soweto Science Centre. He established the UJ Soweto Science Centre with the aim of assisting the Soweto youth in STEM fields. The Soweto Science Centre model has now been adopted by many science centres across South Africa. In April 2016, he took up a position of Executive Dean of the Faculty of Science at Nelson Mandela University with campuses in Gqeberha (formerly Port Elizabeth) in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, and in George, Southern Cape, South Africa - a position he held until 30 September 2024. On 01 October 2024, he was appointed Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research, Innovation, and Internationalisation at Nelson Mandela University, a role in which he continues to champion institutional strategy for impactful research, global partnerships, and innovation ecosystems. Azwinndini's own research field lies at the intersection of nuclear physics, particle physics, astrophysics, and cosmology. He studies the nature and properties of matter under extreme conditions in heavy ion collisions and astrophysics. He has been studying the properties of a new state of matter (known as the quark-gluon plasma or QGP) produced during heavy ion collision experiments at large particle accelerators such as the Relativistic Heavy Ion Collider (RHIC) facility in Brookhaven National Laboratory, New York (USA), and the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) at the European Organisation for Nuclear Research known as CERN in Switzerland. Such state of matter is believed to have existed just for a microsecond at the beginning of the universe after the Big Bang about 13.8 billion years ago and might also exist in the deep interior of compact stars such as neutron stars.

Recently, his research interests include studies in Complexity Science - also known as Complex Systems Science - with a focus on facing the twenty-first century challenges with a new kind of science. Azwinndini has made outstanding contributions to theoretical physics.

His thesis work on causal second-order viscous relativistic fluid dynamics was seminal; it has been cited more than 800 times and is now incorporated in large state-of-the-art computer codes written around the world to model collisions between nuclei at high energy. His work has been integrated in experiments done in various locations from Long Island to Geneva at facilities at the billion-dollar to ten-billion-dollar levels. Apart from his own research interests, Azwinndini is also an outstanding and recognized science educator, with a strong passion for, and interest in, taking science to society, particularly to rural and disadvantaged communities. He received the 2013 Distinguished Leadership Award for Internationals; and the 2013/2014 NSTF-BHP Billiton Award for his outstanding contributions to science education and leadership.

In 2015, he was elected as President of the South African Institute of Physics (SAIP) - a position he held for a term of 2 years until 2017 when he was elected Immediate Past President of SAIP with the responsibility of International Liaison portfolio on the SAIP Council. In 2019 SAIP made a joint appointment of Azwinndini and Prof David Wolfe, an IOP (UK) Africa Volunteer, as joint ambassadors for the Teacher Development and the Outreach & Public Understanding of Physics Projects of the SAIP. In 2023, the SAIP Council appointed Azwinndini as Chairperson of the Task Team to establish the SADC Regional Physical Society. In 2018, he was appointed by the Minister of Higher Education, Science, and Innovation to serve on the Board of the South African National Space Agency (SANSA) (2018-2022) and reappointed for the second term (2022-2026). He was appointed by the Minister of Higher Education, Science, and Innovation to serve on Council of the South African Council for Natural Scientific Professions (SACNASP) (2021-2025). He served on the Board and Steering Committee of the National Institute for Theoretical Physics (NITheP) from 2012-2021. In 2018, he was invited to participate in the Expert Working Group which worked on the reconfiguration of NITheP into the National Institute for Theoretical and Computational Sciences (NITheCS) (2018-2021). From 2023 to present he is the head of the Eastern Cape and Free State NITheCS node, which is to be housed at Nelson Mandela University. He serves on the International Advisory Committee (IAC) of the African Strategy on Fundamental Physics and Applications (ASFAP). From 2017-2021 he represented South Africa and Africa on the C11 Commission on Particles and Fields at the International Union of Pure and Applied Physics (IUPAP). From 2021-2024 he has been elected Vice-Chair of the C11 Commission at IUPAP.

Representing the Africa and Middle East region, he served on the International Advisory Group at the U.S. Particle Physics Community Planning Exercise (a.k.a. Snowmass) organized by the Division of Particles and Fields (DPF) of the American Physical Society from 2020-2022. The US Community Study on the Future of Particle Physics (Snowmass 2021) was a grassroots study to plan for US particle physics in the decade 2025-2035 with an eye towards the following decade. He is a reviewer of exams, theses, and dissertations, project proposals, and journal articles. He is also a judge of science competitions nationally and internationally. Since 2016, he has chaired the judging panel for the Mathematics and Physics category of the international Global Undergraduate Awards (UA). In his current role as Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research, Innovation, and Internationalisation at Nelson Mandela University, Professor Muronga provides strategic leadership across the university's research, innovation, internationalisation, and library and information services portfolios. He is responsible for advancing the institution's Vision 2030 strategic priorities by fostering a vibrant, inclusive, and high-impact research environment; building transformative innovation ecosystems that translate knowledge into societal value; and expanding the university's global footprint through Africa-centred and globally engaged internationalisation. His portfolio drives transdisciplinary collaboration, cultivates emerging research talent, promotes engaged scholarship, and positions innovation as a catalyst for sustainable development and strategic partnerships. Through this role, he seeks to establish Mandela University as a continental leader in research, innovation, and internationalisation for a better world.



## UNIVEN ALUMNUS ON THE SPOTLIGHT: DR MMBONENI MUOFHE









Dr. Mmboneni Muofhe is an experienced public servant with over 25 years in the science, technology and innovation system. He has occupied various roles, initially as a scientist, then in management of science, technology and innovation programmes at the National Research Foundation (NRF) as well as development and implementation of various science, technology and innovation policies and strategies at the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (DDSTI) where he currently serves as Deputy Director-General for Socio-Economic Innovation Partnerships. Dr. Muofhe serves in Boards of companies and entities such as Biovac and Council for Geoscience and internationally, as the co-chair of the Group on Earth Observations (GEO), and member of Steering Committee for the World Health Organisation/Medicine Patent Pool's mRNA Vaccine Technology Transfer Hub. Dr Muofhe also serves in the Advisory Board of Digital Earth Africa and Strategic Advisory Board of the daVinci Institute for Technology Management. As part of his job, Dr Muofhe also has oversight responsibilities for two of the DSTI entities, namely the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC).

Academically, Dr Muofhe holds a BSc degree (UNIVEN), BSc (Hons), MSc (UCT), MBA (UP), and PhD in Management of Technology and Innovation (daVinci Institute), and has done an Executive Public Leaders Programme with Oxford University in the UK.




# Positioning the University of Venda for Impact, Relevance, and Shaping the Future: University of Venda Forthcoming Events and Strategic Collaborations

The University of Venda remains committed to driving innovation, academic excellence, and impactful collaborations. As we look ahead, UNIVEN is set to host and participate in key events, conferences, and partnerships that align with its mission to foster knowledge-sharing, research excellence, and sustainable development. These upcoming engagements will not only strengthen our global footprint but also create new opportunities for students, alumni, and stakeholders to contribute to transformative change. Stay informed and be part of the journey as we continue shaping the future together.

-  Vice-Chancellor's Golf Tournament
-  4 July 2025
-  University of Venda
-  Mobilising Resources for Financially needy students
  
-  Mandela Day Celebration
-  18 July
-  University OF Venda
-  UNIVEN Honours Philanthropists (Those who give freely)

## Thoho Ya Nzie Social Welfare Initiative: Transforming Lives, Empowering Futures



Support needy students by donating to the Thohoyandzie Social Welfare Programme

# THOHO YA NZIE

## Social Welfare

The Advancement Unit is on a campaign to raise R200 000 which will be used to buy food parcels and personal care products for unfunded needy students.

We are calling on all students, staff, service providers and the public to donate a minimum of R200 towards this good cause. To date, the programme has managed to feed hundreds of needy students.

**•HOW TO DONATE:**  
DEPOSIT FUNDS INTO THE UNIVERSITY OF VENDA ABSA ACCOUNT:  
1000 000 538

**•REFERENCE: "THOHOYANDZIE"**

**TOGETHER, CREATING FUTURE LEADERS. FOR MORE INFO:**

Ms. Tshililo Muthadzwi  
082 868 1988  
tshililo.muthadzwi@univen.ac.za

Ethics Hotline number:  
080 021 2755

The University of Venda remains committed to ensuring that no academically deserving student is left behind due to financial constraints. Through the impactful efforts of the Advancement Unit and the Thoho Ya Nzie Social Welfare Initiative, over 201 students were helped in settling their outstanding student debt in 2024. This initiative has not only alleviated the financial burden for these students but has also reignited their academic aspirations, allowing them to focus on their studies without the fear of exclusion due to financial hardship.

For many students, the weight of student debt is an overwhelming challenge, often determining whether they continue their academic journey or abandon their dreams. Thanks to this initiative, students who once faced uncertainty now can complete their studies, graduate, and contribute meaningfully to society. The impact of this initiative is immeasurable, as it directly fosters academic excellence, personal growth, and the cultivation of skilled graduates who are ready to drive change in their communities and beyond.

This is more than just financial aid; it is an investment in the future. As an institution dedicated to transformation and development, UNIVEN calls on its alumni to join this noble cause by contributing to the Thoho Ya Nzie Social Welfare Initiative. Your support can profoundly affect the life of a student who is on the brink of success but is hindered by financial limitations.

By giving back, alumni not only strengthen their bond with their alma mater but also play a vital role in shaping the next generation of leaders, innovators, and changemakers. Let us unite to ensure that every deserving student can achieve their academic dreams, uphold UNIVEN's legacy of excellence, and drive sustainable progress for our nation.