



Skills for a changing world: UNIVEN public lecture highlights importance of youth empowerment



Mr Mpho Motsei, National President of the Black Management Forum

On Wednesday, 18 June 2025, the University of Venda's Department of Youth Development, in collaboration with the Department of Student Affairs, hosted a public lecture in commemoration of June 16, a pivotal date in South African history. The event took place at Agric Two Flat Lecture Halls, Room 03, under the theme: "Skills for the Changing World: Empowering Youth for Meaningful Economic Participation."

This thought-provoking lecture offered a meaningful experience, leaving students, academic staff, and non-academic personnel reflecting deeply on the relevance of Youth Month and their individual roles in shaping a more equitable future.

The keynote speaker, Mr Mpho Motsei, National President of the Black Management Forum, delivered a powerful and engaging address. His speech focused on the pressing economic realities faced by South African youth and the critical need for proactive engagement in building a sustainable future. "When the economy is growing at 1% and the population at 1.5%, there is no balance," Motsei explained. "The issue of unemployment will persist unless the economy grows faster than the population."

He highlighted the urgent need for relevant skills acquisition, particularly in digital literacy and vocational training. "If you do not have digital skills, you'll be replaced by AI," he warned.

Motsei also underscored the roles of mentorship and entrepreneurship in youth empowerment. He cited inspiring examples of young innovators making a positive impact and advocated for the creation of an ecosystem that nurtures creativity and innovation. "Young people are naturally innovative; they just need the right environment to thrive."

He concluded by calling for stronger policy reforms and corporate accountability in addressing youth unemployment. Corporations should be held accountable for their role in youth economic emancipation.

The law is already pushing them to invest more in youth development," he asserted, urging South Africa to draw lessons from global success stories in youth development.



Prof Takalani Mashau, Deputy Dean Research and Postgraduate Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education

Prof Takalani Mashau officially welcomed attendees, emphasising the historical significance of June 16. He reflected on the bravery of the youth who fought against apartheid, posing critical questions about the current state of the country and the challenges facing today's youth. Prof Mashau encouraged participants to engage meaningfully in the discussion, suggesting that the guest speaker would address many of these pressing concerns.



Rito Mathebula, an Administrator: Student Governance

Rito Mathebula, Administrator in Student Governance, highlighted the importance of

seeing youth not only as future leaders but as active agents of change in the present. "It's crucial that we don't see ourselves as the future, but as the present because so much is happening now," he said.

He spoke passionately about youth unemployment and encouraged students to pursue entrepreneurship and innovation. Drawing from personal leadership experiences, Mathebula stressed the value of character and integrity. "Your values and character will speak for you, even in your absence," he advised.



Dr Mafemani Baloyi, Faculty Manager of the Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education

The event concluded with a vote of thanks by Dr Mafemani Baloyi, Faculty Manager of the Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education. He praised Mr Motsei for his insightful contribution and emphasised the importance of respecting human dignity and striving for continuous self-improvement. "We only compete with our yesterday so that we improve on our yesterday," he remarked.

Dr Baloyi extended his gratitude to all speakers, students, and organisers, encouraging attendees to apply the lessons learned during the event in their personal and professional lives.



Group photo of some of the attendees

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Empowering Tomorrow: UNIVEN's 2025 Research Open Day Sparks Bold Ideas and Collaboration



Some of the 2025 best poster award recipients

On 25-26 June 2025, the University of Venda (UNIVEN) hosted its annual Research Open Day to acknowledge and award researchers for their hard work. The 2025 Research Open Day took place at the University's Research Conference Centre. This two-day event brought together a vibrant and diverse group, including academics, postgraduate students, researchers, postdoctoral fellows, and strategic stakeholders from government departments, municipalities, research institutions, and national agencies such as the National Research Foundation (NRF), Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI), Agricultural Research Council (ARC), National Intellectual Property Management Office (NIPMO), Water Research Commission (WRC), the Limpopo Office of the Premier including Vhembe TVET College, and a community-based organisation Dzomo La Mupo (DLM).

The gathering served as a dynamic platform for collaboration and knowledge exchange, reaffirming UNIVEN's mission to drive innovation-led, impactful research that addresses societal challenges and contributes meaningfully to regional and global development.



Prof Jabulani Makhubele, Director of Research and Innovation, University of Venda

Prof Jabulani Makhubele formally opened the event by welcoming delegates and emphasising its strategic importance in showcasing the university's journey towards becoming an innovation-led, socially responsive African university. He underscored UNIVEN's commitment to themes such as African heritage, Indigenous knowledge systems, health, environment, and inclusive innovation, urging researchers to focus on real-world impact and ethical engagement.



Dr Sinah Sekhula, from the University of Venda's Directorate of Research and Innovation

Dr Sinah Sekhula reflected on the history and evolution of the Research Open Day Awards that began in 2014 and introduced formal recognition in 2022. She emphasised the non-monetary nature of the awards, designed to build institutional pride and cultivate a robust research culture, particularly among postgraduate students. She also addressed participation trends across faculties, highlighting the importance of fair competition, collaboration, and alignment with global research agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Day one was marked by the poster viewing and exhibitions where students were allowed to present their research projects to an adjudication panel, showcasing their academic creativity and practical innovation across all faculties. The day allowed judges and attendees to witness UNIVEN's research footprint in action, highlighting not only scientific breakthroughs but also social innovations.

Day two commenced with engaging information sessions led by UNIVEN's sponsors and partners, who provided valuable insights into the research funding application process. Presenters outlined key requirements, evaluation criteria, and considerations for securing financial support. Importantly, they also offered inspiring messages, assuring students that with the right mindset and determination, opportunities are within reach, regardless of their background. Sessions also touched on entrepreneurship and how research could open doors to innovative career pathways.

This session sparked meaningful dialogue, with students actively engaging in a question-and-answer segment, seeking clarity on funding procedures and exploring how to translate research into real-world impact.

The day culminated in an Awards Ceremony celebrating excellence in research posters and experimental designs. Students from honours to doctoral levels, representing various faculties at the University of Venda were recognised for their outstanding contributions. Award recipients were presented with certificates and prizes as rewards for their hard work, creativity, and dedication.



Prof Sylvester Mpandeli UNIVEN alumnus, an Adjunct Professor at the University of Venda, and Senior Research Manager: Water Use – Water Research Commission, encouraged researchers to work collaboratively and make a significant impact, stating that "publishing a paper alone is not a good thing, but if you do it as a team, you make a huge impact." He also emphasised the importance of focus and collaboration, noting that "as long as you are focused, you can make it."



Adjudication panelists viewing students' posters



National Research Foundation (NRF) delegates



Some of the attendees of the Research Open Day

Empowering Tomorrow: UNIVEN's 2025 Research Open Day Sparks Bold Ideas and Collaboration continued...



Prof Joseph Francis, Acting Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research and Postgraduate Studies

Bringing the event to a light-hearted but impactful conclusion, Prof Joseph Francis's closing remarks challenged researchers to rethink their approach to community engagement. He asked pointed questions about the role of intended beneficiaries in research, highlighting the need for more inclusive and participatory approaches. By reframing research as a covariation that honours both human and sacred perspectives, Prof Francis encouraged researchers to prioritise societal impact over mere citations. His call to action urged the next generation of scholars to be bold, speak truth to power, and conduct research that truly benefits communities.

The 2025 Research Open Day not only celebrated research excellence but also underscored UNIVEN's unwavering dedication to shaping a better future through knowledge, innovation, and collaborative action.



UNIVEN academic staff members and postgraduate students showcasing their experimental work

Leadership Team Reflects and Reviews Progress at Strategic Mid-Term Session

The University of Venda (UNIVEN) convened a Strategic Mid-Term Review Workshop from 19 to 20 June 2025 at the Radisson Safari Hotel in Hoedspruit. The session brought together members of Executive and Senior Management and key institutional stakeholders to evaluate progress on the current Strategic Plan (2021–2025) and chart a path forward for the upcoming 2026–2030 strategic cycle. Serving as a structured midpoint reflection, the workshop aimed to assess institutional achievements, re-evaluate strategic priorities, and ensure alignment with the university's long-term goals.



Dr Mutshinyalo Ratombo

Presentations by various university leaders and experts provided insights into specific strategic themes. Dr Mutshinyalo Ratombo, Director of Strategy and Risk, presented a four-year overview of strategic performance from 2021 to 2024. Consultant Dr Glen Barnes (IDSC) proposed measures for enhancing data management and strategic alignment through tools such as PowerHEDA.

In his opening address, Vice-Chancellor and Principal Prof Bernard Nthambeleni stressed the importance of collaboration, introspection, and maintaining momentum. He described the workshop as an invaluable platform to reflect on successes, acknowledge challenges, and recalibrate institutional strategies to remain on track. Core focus areas of the review included the assessment of progress using key performance indicators, identification of internal and external challenges hindering plan implementation, and fostering candid dialogue among senior leaders to explore innovation and performance improvement opportunities.

Key intended outcomes from the workshop included establishing baseline performance data to inform the 2026 strategy and APP metrics, identifying emerging strategic risks, particularly around data integrity and reporting, and drafting sub-strategies for the 2026–2030 Strategic Plan. Participants also reviewed institutional values, grant management systems, and areas requiring urgent attention, such as the implementation of reviewed Annual Performance Plan (APP) Technical Description Indicators (TIDs), improved performance record-keeping, and strengthened oversight mechanisms.



Dr Glen Barnes



Prof Joseph Francis, Acting Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research and Postgraduate Studies, highlighted key strategic

interventions aligned with the current plan, focusing on building research capacity, postgraduate student support, and innovation. He also emphasised the university's rural development mandate and its vision to transform Thohoyandou into a dynamic University Town.



Prof Sebi Lekalaka-Mokgele, Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Teaching and Learning, shared a reflective overview of the 2021–2025 strategy centred on student success, inclusive transformation, and innovation. Her presentation outlined a strengths-based, student-centred approach supported by frameworks like Appreciative Inquiry, Design Thinking, and the Psycho-Social Model.



University Registrar, Dr Joel Baloyi provided a detailed account of the Registrar's Division performance between 2021 and 2024.

Notable achievements included surpassing key targets in student affairs interventions and committee administration, as well as the digitisation of over 56,000 institutional records. Looking ahead, the division's 2026–2030 strategy, informed by the Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, Results (SOAR) framework, will focus on student-centred academic systems, digital advancement, compliance, and stronger stakeholder engagement.



Mrs Mavis Madzhie



Mrs Uanda Ndou

In further sessions, Mrs Mavis Madzhie, Director of Financial Management and Reporting, presented the university's financial sustainability strategy with an emphasis on third-stream income generation and governance. Mrs Uanda Ndou, Director of Human Resources, discussed strategies for talent acquisition and retention.

Leadership Team Reflects and Reviews Progress at Strategic Mid-Term Session continued...



Dr Phyllia Vukea, Director of Grants Management, delivered a comprehensive strategic review of DHET earmarked grants, infrastructure and efficiency grants (IEG), and the University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP), identifying both progress and ongoing challenges in grant management.

On the second day, Prof Nthambeleni presented the draft Strategic Plan 2026–2030,

aligned with Vision 2040. The proposed plan aspires to position UNIVEN as an entrepreneurial, research-driven, and community-engaged institution that serves as a catalyst for societal change. Rooted in the unique Vhembe Biosphere context, the strategy emphasises innovation, student-centeredness, environmental sustainability, and international partnerships. It is structured around four strategic thrusts: student success, entrepreneurship, people and environment, and internationalisation, with clearly defined, measurable outcomes.

Dr Baloyi also presented the Registrar's governance strategy for 2026–2030, which will focus on strengthening ethical leadership, oversight, and institutional accountability. Drawing from global standards such as ISO 37000/37004 and the OCEG GRC model, the strategy prioritises improved governance capabilities, risk and compliance systems, data quality, cybersecurity, and legal compliance, all while reinforcing stakeholder engagement and long-term sustainability.



Prof Barwa Kanyane

Executive Dean of the Faculty of Management, Commerce and Law, Prof Barwa Kanyane, provided a comprehensive recap of the workshop. He commended Executive Management for aligning operational activities with strategic goals and encouraged the submission of outstanding

inputs to the Director of Strategy and Risk. He also reinforced alignment with Limpopo Provincial Government priorities, especially in mining, agriculture, and the hydrogen economy, and emphasised the importance of evidence-based performance, robust data governance, and a culture of appreciative enquiry. He called for improved internal grant management capacity, reduced reliance on consultants, and greater accountability, including mandatory executive sign-off on grant reports.

In his closing remarks, Prof Nthambeleni praised the depth of engagement and consensus achieved on the institution's strategic thrusts, outcome indicators, and refined core values. He called for continued momentum in achieving 2025 performance targets and finalising divisional contributions to the 2026 APP. The next steps include a consolidation workshop in July and Council submission of the finalised 2026–2030 Strategic Plan by September 2025.



Group photo of the participants



Breaking Ground in Agriculture: Takalani Khorombi's Path from Backyard Roots to Global Impact

Takalani Isaac Khorombi's tale is a remarkable one of passion and perseverance and has emerged as a beacon of hope for rural farmers. Khorombi, a young man who is still in his prime youth, graduated with a Master of Science in Agricultural Economics (Cum Laude) from the University of Venda during the 2025 Autumn graduation, and his academic journey is a testament to his unwavering commitment to transforming agriculture and uplifting communities.

Inspired by his father's backyard farming, Khorombi's passion for agriculture was ignited early on. His vision? To bridge the gap between subsistence farming and commercial agriculture, empowering smallholder farmers to thrive in a challenging landscape. His master's dissertation, titled *Determinants of Commercialisation Among*

Smallholder Vegetable Cash Crop Farmers in Thulamela Municipality, tackles the critical barriers and opportunities for farmers striving to achieve commercial success. By addressing these challenges, Khorombi's work lays the foundation for enhanced food security and improved livelihoods across rural communities.

Khorombi's academic journey is nothing short of extraordinary. Throughout his master's programme, Khorombi published an impressive eight research outputs, including six journal articles and two conference proceedings. His work earned global recognition at the 10th International Conference on Business and Management Dynamics in 2024, where he was named the Best Postgraduate Presenter. As a testament to this achievement, he was awarded the 9th

edition of *Research Methods for Business Students* by Mark N.K. Saunders, Philip Lewis, and Adrian Thornhill, presented by the lead author, Prof. M.N.K. Saunders from the University of Birmingham Business School, United Kingdom.

Reflecting on his achievements, Khorombi credits his success to the unwavering support of his family, friends, especially his mentor, Dr Mpho Tshikororo. "This milestone is not just mine, but it belongs to everyone who believed in me and supported me along the way," he said with gratitude.

Now as a PhD candidate, Takalani Isaac Khorombi continues to pave the way for agricultural transformation, proving that from humble beginnings, one can cultivate change that resonates far beyond the fields.

Global Science Awareness for Sustainable Development: UNIVEN GTCI leads the Mandela-UNIVEN Science Outreach and Awareness Initiative

The issue of the representation of scientists and women in science needs to be critically examined to promote South Africa's progress towards its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the implementation of district development models. The Green Technology Confucius Institute (GTCI) led the Nelson Mandela University and the University of Venda on the 4th annual Science Outreach and Awareness Initiative in the Vhembe East and West Education districts of the Vhembe District Municipality. The engagement was based on the Science, Technology, Engineering, Artificial Intelligence, Coding and Robotics, Career guidance, and Mathematical sciences. This engagement took place from 12-16 May 2025 and benefited over 3000 learners and educators in the FET band from 31 schools. These schools include Silemale Secondary School, Luvhivhini Secondary School, Mbilwi Secondary School, Thengwe Secondary School, and Mphephu Secondary School.

The Vhembe District includes many rural schools and annually produces a high percentage of top matric learners in mathematics and science. On average, several scientists in South Africa are from the district, as it is well known nationally for its annual performance of science and mathematics in the grade 12 results. The event is expected to cover the last schools and circuits in the border area of South Africa and Zimbabwe.



The two university teams were accompanied by many exhibitors, including the Robotics team from the University of South Africa (UNISA) Science Centre mobile lab and the Penreach's Shalamuka Science Centre, an NGO dedicated to educational excellence in rural communities, among others.

The Vuwani Science Resource Centre conducted various Science experiments and demonstrations for Grades 10 to 12 learners. Facilitators, including staff members from various institutes and postgraduate students, successfully engaged the learners through interactive discussions and presentations

designed to spark an interest in science and educate them about 'science for society' as part of the outreach activities throughout the week.

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Promoting science literacy and representation in rural districts like Vhembe is not just an educational imperative – it is central to South Africa's progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals

Global Science Awareness for Sustainable Development: UNIVEN GTCI leads the Mandela-UNIVEN Science Outreach and Awareness Initiative continued...



Professor Eric Maluta, Director of Green Technology Confucius Institute at the University of Venda and Professor Tshentu Zenixole, the Acting Executive Dean of the Faculty of Science at Nelson Mandela University have reached an agreement to continue with the global science awareness initiative. These engagements take place in schools throughout the country, as the country is deeply concerned about the decreasing number of students studying mathematics and science at South African universities. The majority of students abandon these subjects due to the widespread belief that mathematics and science are challenging. This is a hurdle that we need to overcome together as a nation, just as we have to overcome the problem in many of South Africa's rural areas where learners trying to study science do not have laboratories.



Prof Eric Maluta appointed as Chair Judge for Global Undergraduate Awards in Mathematics and Physics



The University of Venda's Professor Nnditshedzeni Eric Maluta has achieved a remarkable milestone by being nominated as the Chair Judge for the Mathematics and Physics category in the prestigious Global Undergraduate Awards (GUA) 2025 cycle.

Regarded as the world's leading undergraduate awards programme, the Global Undergraduate Awards celebrates outstanding academic work by students across the globe, connecting young scholars across disciplines and cultural boundaries. The programme champions the values of innovation, collaboration, ambition, impartiality, and inclusiveness, with a strong focus on empowering students to harness

their potential to make meaningful change in the world.

Professor Maluta's appointment underscores his deep expertise and dedication to advancing excellence in science education. As Chair Judge of the Mathematics and Physics category, he will oversee the rigorous multi-stage online judging process that evaluates long-form essays submitted by undergraduate students from around the world. This category encompasses a wide array of disciplines, including Astrophysics, Geophysics, Theoretical Physics, Mathematical and Computational Physics, Complex Theory in Mathematics, and Differential Equations, among others.

His leadership in this global academic forum is a testament to the high regard in which he is held within the international scholarly community. It also reflects the significant contribution of African academics to global knowledge production.

The judging process, described as a "labour of love" by the GUA team, culminates in a celebration of excellence at the 2025 Global Undergraduate Awards Ceremony, to be held in Dublin, Ireland, in December.

Professor Maluta's role not only brings honour to the University of Venda and country but also sets a powerful example for young African scholars aiming to make an impact on the global academic stage.

Professor Maluta's appointment as Chair Judge affirms the global impact of African scholarship and the power of academic excellence to transcend borders

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