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Co-Creating the Future Through the Division of Research and Postgraduate Studies Inclusive Strategy Workshop



The University of Venda (UNIVEN) convened a three-day transformative strategic workshop for the Division of Research and Postgraduate Studies (DRPS) from 16–18 July 2025 at The Ranch Resort, Protea Hotel in Polokwane. The event was designed to co-create a visionary roadmap that will guide postgraduate education, research, community engagement, engaged scholarship and innovation at UNIVEN from 2026 to 2030.

Aimed at aligning with UNIVEN's institutional mission to produce locally relevant and globally competitive graduates, the workshop brought together Executive and Deputy Deans, Directors, academics and support staff, postgraduate students, and strategic partners.

Facilitated through inclusive methodologies such as Appreciative Inquiry, Design Thinking, Participatory Action Research and Psychological Safety Framework, the sessions focused on crafting impactful, inclusive and innovative strategies to solidify UNIVEN's position as a rural-based, globally connected institution.

Strategic Thrusts and Enablers

Four strategic thrusts anchored the workshop, namely:

1. Postgraduate Student-centredness: Focused on creating a supportive ecosystem for Honours, Master's and Doctoral students, with emphasis on holistic development and psychological safety.

2. Research, Innovation and Entrepreneurship: Aimed at translating research into practical societal solutions through transdisciplinary collaboration and integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems, while aligning with global development agendas such as the SDGs and AU Agenda 2063.

3. People, Health and Environment: Adopting the One Health and Eco Health paradigms to address health and environmental challenges through community-driven approaches.

4. Internationalisation and Partnerships: Strengthening global and local partnerships to address transnational challenges and enhance knowledge exchange.

In addition to these thrusts, several enabling pillars were outlined: advancing African Heritage and Indigenous Knowledge Systems as niche areas; upholding Research Ethics and Integrity; effective Resource Mobilisation; strengthening Community Engagement and Engaged Scholarship; enhancing visibility through effective Communication and Social Marketing; and breaking down within university silos through cross-divisional collaboration. Robust conversations also centred around Servant Leadership, Social Cohesion, and Psychological Safety as foundational enablers of success.



Opening Address by Prof Joseph Francis

Prof Joseph Francis, Acting Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research and Postgraduate Studies, welcomed participants by framing the

DRPS as a catalyst for transformative change. Using humour and inclusive language, he set a collaborative tone, calling on all stakeholders to help shape a shared vision for research and postgraduate excellence.

He outlined five core objectives of the workshop:

- Co-creating strategies aligned with global and institutional goals.
- Strengthening cross-Faculty collaboration.
- Promoting innovation and enhancing psychological safety.
- Aligning with development imperatives such as the Limpopo Provincial Development Plan 2025-2030, NDP 2030, SADC Indicative Strategic Plan 2020-2030, Agenda 2063, and SDGs.
- Developing appropriate planning tools for implementation.

Prof Francis also introduced the strategic planning tools, urging participants to shift from a culture of perpetual complaining to one of constructive engagement and collective ownership. In his closing reflections, he praised the workshop's outcomes, including a 56-page strategic reference document, and emphasised

the importance of sustaining the momentum and ensuring the strategy is widely adopted and implemented.

Planning Tools and Engagement Frameworks

Prof Jabulani Makhubele, Director of Research and Innovation, introduced the key conceptual tools or “lenses” to guide the planning process. These included:

- **5D Cooperrider Appreciative Inquiry Approach:** A strength-based approach centred on shared aspirations.
- **Psychological Safety Framework:** Encouraging respectful, open engagement and participation.
- **Design Thinking Model:** A human-centred method for empathy-driven innovation.
- **Participatory Action Research:** Ensuring institutional inclusivity and shared accountability.
- **Socio-Ecological Systems Theory:** Viewing the university as a complex ecosystem requiring holistic planning.



Prof Jabulani Makhubele, Director of Research and Innovation

He concluded with a compelling call to “define, discover, dream, design and deliver together,” encouraging all to take ownership of the DRPS vision.

On Day One, participants were divided into six reflection circles, each led by a senior academic, to draft thematic strategies. Prior to the breakaway sessions, Mr Rendani Nematswerani (Executive Secretary in the Directorate of Community Engagement, Entrepreneurship,

Inclusive Innovation and Commercialisation) facilitated a self-reflection session that centred around the use of a Mentimeter to explore individual participant perspectives on “The University of Venda of My Dreams”.



Workshop Sessions and Deliverables

Day Two focused on refining the strategies, reviewing the ARISE Value Chain Model for Postgraduate Studies, and drafting the University 2026 Annual Performance Plan (APP). Presentations by Dr Mutshinyalo Ratombo (Director Strategy and Risk) and Mr Kholofelo Shaku provided valuable input on planning and implementation.

Outcomes

The workshop produced a comprehensive strategic framework integrating postgraduate education, research, innovation and community engagement with measurable KPIs and clear timelines.



It fostered cross-divisional collaboration, embedded stakeholder voices, including students and proposed innovations such as AI-powered supervision tools and rural innovation hubs. The strategy is rooted in psychological safety, servant leadership and ethical integrity, reinforcing UNIVEN's identity as a rural-based, impact-oriented institution.

Reflections from participants

Prof Francis applauded the unity, clarity and shared vision that emerged from the workshop. He called for:

1. Finalisation of the implementation-ready strategies.
2. Automation of postgraduate processes.
3. Creation of a consolidated strategy booklet for the Division, which he emphasised, should serve as a "Business One Stop Shop."
4. Development of positioning statements and summaries of the core businesses of each entity of the Division.
5. Embarking on ongoing relevant storytelling and generating the workshop newsletter for wider sharing.

below are some thoughts of workshop participants:



- **Mr Mpfariseni Ligudu** (Deputy Registra): Commended the collective spirit and commitment to progress.



- **Mr Rudzani Mamphweli** (Community Engagement Officer): Emphasised the need to build on this momentum in the next phase.



- **Mr Kholofelo Shaku** (Strategy and Risk): Highlighted the value of active participation and inter-departmental support.



- **Mr Takalani Tshidada** (HR): Advocated for unified institutional strategy ownership.



- **Mrs Beauty Mutheiwana** (Director, Supply Chain Management and Expenditure):

Appreciated and called for sustaining the inclusive planning demonstrated and reminded international travellers to engage with the Supply Chain Directorate.



- **Mr Tsundzuka Hakamela** (International Relations and Partnerships): Appreciated the platform's insights and collaborative potential.



- **Ms Humbulani Nemudzudzanyi** (Executive Secretary: Directorate of Research and Innovation): Applauded the shared commitment to strategy formulation and implementation.



- **Prof Barwa Kanyane** (Executive Dean, Faculty of Management, Commerce and Law): Praised the participatory model and collective discipline, pointing out this was the first time a workshop of this nature had been held.



- **Prof Lutendo Murulana** (Deputy Dean Research and Postgraduate Studies, Faculty of Science, Engineering and Agriculture): Urged implementation to match the strength of the strategy documents.



- **Dr Mamotse Mokabe** (Postdoctoral Research Fellow): Appreciated the inclusive platform and called for stronger accountability.



- **Mr Shilo Mudzanani** (Chairperson, Postgraduate Students Committee): Supported the model for fostering meaningful student inclusion and transparency.



- **Mr Alugumi Ndou** (Institutional Researcher): Emphasised alignment with university goals.



- **Dr Mercy Mushwana** (Faculty of Health Sciences): Valued the focus on psychological imperatives and the collaborative approach that was so evident throughout the workshop.



- **Prof Takalani Mashau** (Deputy Dean, Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education): Called for integration across academic and support divisions.



- **Prof Jethro Zuwarimwe** (Institute for

Rural Development): Highlighted the value of diverse perspectives and unity.



Closing remarks by Prof Natasha Potgieter

Prof Natasha Potgieter, the Executive Dean of the Faculty of Science, Engineering and Agriculture, delivered the closing remarks, highlighting the workshop as a meaningful step toward dismantling institutional silos and fostering cross-functional unity.

She acknowledged that while the university has made significant progress over the past five years in transitioning to integrated, Faculty-based structures, real transformation requires personal accountability from all staff members. She emphasised the need for ongoing collaboration, open communication between Faculties and support units, and a shift from resistance to cooperation.

Prof Potgieter also voiced concern about systemic challenges such as limited infrastructure, staffing shortages and the increasing burden on researchers, all of which hinder operational effectiveness. Nevertheless, she urged colleagues to remain positive, solution-focused and committed to creating a healthy and supportive environment.

Drawing on nearly three decades of her experience in the sector, she reaffirmed her belief in UNIVEN's potential and encouraged staff to value one another, care for their well-being, and work collectively to realise the strategic vision developed during the workshop.



Organising committee



GROUP NAME: IGWE	
STRATEGY TAGLINE	NUMBER OF SEEDS
OPT 1: ROOTED IN COMMUNITY, DRIVEN BY KNOWLEDGE, CONNECTED TO THE WORLD.	20
OPT 2: EMPOWERING MINDS, INNOVATING FUTURES, SUSTAINING LIFE, CUMBERING WORLDS.	10
OPT 3: EMPOWER INNOVATE, SUSTAIN, UNITE	5
OPT 4: LEAD WITH KNOWLEDGE. INNOVATE WITH PURPOSE. PARTNER FOR CHANGE.	15
* SPECIAL NOTES	

STRATEGY TAGLINE	NUMBER OF SEEDS
OPT 1: TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP & GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS FOR A RESILIENT KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY	7
OPT 2: CATALYSING INNOVATION & INCLUSION FOR A RESILIENT KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY	2
OPT 3: PIONEERING TRANSFORMATIVE KNOWLEDGE & PARTNERSHIPS FOR SUSTAINABLE FUTURES.	18
* SPECIAL NOTES Cross-Cutting to our Strategic thi	
Speaks to	





University of Venda
Creating Future Leaders

TECHNOLOGY



SECURITY



CONSERVATION



QUALITY



FACILITIES MANAGEMENT



CONTINUITY



MAINTENANCE



REAL ESTATE



ENVIRONMENT

ARCHIBUS

INTEGRATED WORKPLACE MANAGEMENT
SYSTEM (IWMS)

IS NOW LIVE

Innovation in Action: UNIVEN Automates Facilities Management for Staff

The University Uses The Archibus System For Facilities Management/Maintenance. You Can Log A Service Request For Repairs, Maintenance, Waste, Cleaning, And Other Enquiries Which Is Then Directed To The Facilities Management Team.

HOW TO LOG A CALL



SCAN ME

Simply scan the QR code to access Archibus and log your maintenance request in moments. It's quick, easy, and ensures our team can respond promptly to keep things running smoothly.



Log in via your web browser using Chrome:
<https://archibus-prd.univen.ac.za:9000/archibus>



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