



Spring Graduation Ceremony-Special Edition | 09 September 2025

UNIVEN Celebrates Academic Excellence and Research Leadership at September 2025 Graduation



PhD Graduates posing for a group photo

The University of Venda (UNIVEN) hosted its September 2025 Graduation Ceremony on Friday, 05 September 2025, at the University Auditorium. Presiding over the ceremony, the Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Prof Bernard Nthambeleni, welcomed dignitaries, students, staff, parents, and guests to what he described as a “momentous occasion to celebrate resilience, hard work, and the transformative power of education.” The event brought together all faculties in a single session, where 469 students were conferred with certificates, diplomas, and degrees. This figure adds to the 2 713 graduates who were celebrated during the May 2025 ceremonies, bringing the total for the year to 3 182.



Prof Nthambeleni highlighted that 58% of the graduating class were women and 42% men, reaffirming UNIVEN's role in empowering female scholars and contributing to gender transformation in higher education. He emphasised that education is more than personal

achievement; it is a societal tool for transformation. “Your unique perspectives and talents can inspire change, foster understanding, and build bridges across divides,” he told the graduates, urging them to use their knowledge and skills to improve communities and tackle global challenges.

A defining feature of this graduation was the awarding of 49 doctoral degrees, which was the highest academic honour, alongside 144 master’s and 19 honours degrees. Among the PhD cohort, 24 were females and 25 were males, reflecting balanced representation in advanced scholarship.



Some of the UNIVEN staff members who were awarded PhD doctorates

L-R: Dr Manyuma Duppy and Dr Tshifhiwa Ranwaha

Prof Nthambeleni proudly noted that three UNIVEN staff members were also awarded doctorates: Mr Rinae Ratshikombo (PhD in Chemistry), Mr Tshifhiwa Ranwaha (PhD in Physics), and Mr Manyuma Duppy (PhD in Public Health).

The PhD research contributions spanned critical disciplines including Nursing, Public Health, Education, Science, Agriculture, Environmental Studies, Gender Studies, and Social Sciences.

Notable research findings included:

- **Healthcare and Nursing Sciences:** Studies developed aftercare guidelines for rehabilitated substance abusers, strategies to enhance staff safety in psychiatric wards, programmes to improve nursing supervision, and frameworks

to reduce maternal and neonatal mortality.

- **Public Health and Community Well-being:** Innovative interventions targeted substance abuse among adolescents, improved health-seeking behaviour among men, and addressed barriers to HIV service utilization. Others proposed strategies for refugee healthcare access and improving the efficiency of village health workers.

- **Education and Curriculum Studies:** Research focused on instructional leadership in underperforming schools, resilience during COVID-19 teaching, and enhancing learner performance in Geography, Mathematics, and English Language Teaching.

- **Science, Technology and Environment:** Several graduates made strides in microbiology, zoology, physics, chemistry, and environmental sciences — from exploring new antibiotic-producing microorganisms and tackling drug-resistant TB, to promoting sustainable agriculture through insect-based waste management and phytoremediation of mining sites.

- **Agriculture and Rural Development:** Groundbreaking work in climate-smart farming, food security, and genetic improvement of underutilised crops such as pigeonpea offered solutions to rural livelihoods and sustainable food production.

- **Gender and Social Sciences:** Research unpacked gender dimensions in entrepreneurship, rehabilitation of offenders, maternal mental health, and the impact of e-hailing services on youth and women’s empowerment.

Prof Nthambeleni praised these achievements as evidence of UNIVEN’s growing stature as a research-intensive university. He noted that between 2018 and 2022, UNIVEN’s PhD-qualified staff increased from 135 to 209, and today, 243 staff members hold doctoral degrees. This positions the institution on course to contribute meaningfully to the National

Development Plan's target of 75% PhD-qualified staff in higher education by 2030.

Honouring Resilience and Confronting Challenges

While the day was filled with celebration, the Vice-Chancellor and Principal also reflected on the sombre loss of first-year student, Ms Vhulondo Nevhukalanga, who was tragically stabbed to death by her alleged boyfriend in August. Calling for a moment of silence, he urged the university community to take a stand against gender-based violence (GBV) and dismantle patriarchal norms that perpetuate abuse. "Universities must be environments that foster learning, uphold dignity, and ensure the safety of all individuals and not places of violence," he said. His remarks pointed out UNIVEN's commitment to creating safe, inclusive spaces and leading efforts to confront GBV both within higher education and society at large.

Creating Future Leaders



In his closing message, Prof Nthambeleni reminded graduates of UNIVEN's motto, Creating Future Leaders, noting the university's alumni who have risen to leadership in government, the judiciary, and beyond, including Minister Ronald Lamola and several deputy judge presidents. He urged graduates to carry forward not only their academic credentials but also the values of resilience, service, and social justice instilled during their studies.

A congratulatory message was delivered by the Vice-Chancellor of Kabarak University in Kenya, Prof Henry Kiplangat, who visited the university

during the week of graduation. Professor Henry Kiplangat congratulated the graduating class of 2025, expressing gratitude for the invitation and celebrating the partnership between African universities as a path to continental renewal.



He highlighted the importance of collaboration, research rooted in African realities, and education as a cornerstone of progress. Acknowledging the sacrifices of families and the dedication of faculty, he reminded graduates of their responsibility to their communities, countries, and the continent. Emphasising unity ("umoya") as a guiding principle, he encouraged seizing opportunities for innovation and academic cooperation before extending an invitation to further strengthen institutional ties.



The September 2025 graduation reaffirmed UNIVEN's dual mission of producing globally competitive graduates and conducting research that addresses pressing societal challenges. With women leading the way, making up the majority of graduates, and doctoral research driving solutions for health, education, sustainability, and governance, the ceremony stood as a testament to UNIVEN's enduring role in shaping South Africa's future.



From Unexpected Detours to a Doctorate: The Inspiring Journey of Dr. Phumudzo Gift Munyai-Matshotshi

The Spring 2025 Graduation Ceremony at the University of Venda marked a historic milestone for Dr. Phumudzo Gift Munyai-Matshotshi, who proudly crossed the stage to receive her PhD in Environmental Sciences (Geology). Her groundbreaking research, titled "Phytoremediation of Metals from Klein Letaba Gold Mine Tailings Limpopo Province, South Africa," offers sustainable solutions to one of the country's pressing environmental challenges, rehabilitating mine waste in an eco-friendly, cost-effective manner.



Her study highlights the potential of native vegetation to remove and stabilise metals from mine tailings. The findings not only contribute to South Africa's efforts toward sustainable mining waste management but also position phytoremediation as a viable strategy for addressing environmental impacts of mining activities both locally and globally.

Yet, behind this remarkable achievement lies a deeply personal journey of resilience, sacrifice, and the power of perseverance. Geology was not Dr Munyai-Matshotshi's first love. Her passion as a young learner was Electrical Engineering, and she was accepted into the University of Cape Town to pursue it. However, an administrative error in her matric year in 2004 delayed the release of her results. By the time they arrived in mid-February 2005, the programme had already reached full capacity. At this crossroads, her father offered life-changing advice, gently suggesting, "Why not consider Mining and Environmental Geology?"

Reluctantly, she enrolled at the University of Venda, stepping into an unfamiliar world where rocks, minerals, and geological formations seemed alien. "The first year was the hardest," she recalls. "I had no background in Geography or Earth Sciences, so everything felt impossible." But slowly, through perseverance and determination, things began to change. By her second semester, concepts clicked, confidence grew, and her interest in geology deepened.

What began as an academic detour turned into a calling. She completed her degree in record time, earning a distinction for her mini dissertation. "That was the moment I realised that life's unexpected turns often lead us to remarkable opportunities," she says with a smile.

Her academic journey was powered by an unwavering passion for environmental conservation, community-centred research, and sustainable strategies for the future. Sponsored by DSTI-NRF CIMERA, she pursued both her Master's and PhD, gaining opportunities to share her work at national and international platforms.

She won the Best Overall Presentation Award from the Council for Geoscience in 2022, had her research featured in Mining Weekly, and presented at the annual CIMERA Colloquiums.

Her crowning professional achievement came in 2025 when she was invited as a panel speaker at the Investing in African Mining Indaba, participating in the Disruptive Session on Tailings: Launch of the Global Tailings Management Institute. This platform allowed her to engage with industry leaders and policymakers, firmly positioning her as a thought leader in sustainable mining practices.

Reflecting on her journey, she offers this advice to aspiring geologists: "Approach geology with curiosity and an open mind. Be robust and flexible, because this field is full of challenges, but also incredible opportunities."

For Dr Munyai-Matshotshi, this PhD is far more than an academic achievement; it is a deeply personal tribute to her late father, Mr Mboniseni Samuel Munyai who eagerly awaited this proud moment, and though he is no longer here, his love, encouragement, and unwavering support continue to guide her through life's challenges and triumphs "I dedicate this doctorate to my beloved father, who always believed in me. His faith, love, and wisdom remain my greatest source of inspiration. I only wish he were here to witness this success. All is well."

"This achievement would not have been possible without the invaluable support, insightful guidance, and expert counsel of my supervisors, Dr Humbulani Rejune Mundalamo and Professor Jason Samuel Ogola, both from the Department of Earth Sciences in the Faculty of Science, Engineering and Agriculture. Their expertise, critical feedback, and steadfast mentorship have not only shaped the direction of this project but also played a pivotal role in my academic and professional development. I am profoundly grateful for their unwavering support throughout this journey," she emphasised.

Dr Munyai-Matshotshi currently serves at the Institute for Rural Development as an Innovation Champion for Local Economic Development, a position that enables her to bridge academic research with real-world applications, delivering tangible benefits to local communities.

Mashila's Graduation Marks a New Chapter in Educational Reform

On Friday, 5 September 2025, the University of Venda celebrated its 2025 Spring Graduation ceremony at the University Auditorium, marking a significant milestone for graduates, including Mr Khwathisani Mashila, who earned his master's degree in educational management. As a distinguished alumnus, Mashila's academic achievements and dedication to improving the quality of leadership in schools make him a notable figure in the education sector.



Mr Mpfariseni Ligudu, Deputy Registrar, placing a Master's hood over Mr Khwathisani Mashila's shoulders, a Chief Administration Officer

Mashila's academic journey is rooted in his passion and commitment to education as a tool for liberation and transformation. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Education from the University of Venda (1995), a Bachelor of Education Honours in Educational Management and Leadership from the University of Johannesburg (2008), and a Bachelor of Arts Honours in History from UNISA (2010). His LLB qualification from UNIVEN (2019) and admission as an Attorney of the High Court of South Africa (2024) have further enhanced his expertise.

As the Chief Administration Officer of Governance in the Department of Governance, Ethics and Compliance (GEC) at UNIVEN,

Mashila has made significant contributions to the institution, influencing policy discussions and developing strategies to enhance staff and student performance. His research interests focus on Educational Management, specifically the effects of conflicts of interest on the appointment of principals. "My research aims to contribute meaningfully to the development of South Africa's education system," he says.

Mashila's commitment to community engagement is evident in his work with the UNIVEN Law Clinic, where he served as a community engagement champion. "If not us, then who?" he asks, reflecting on the need for collective action to drive positive change. He believes that education leaders should create systems that enable learners to succeed and communities to thrive.

Mashila's experience at UNIVEN has reinforced his belief in education as a tool for transformation, not only for individuals but also for entire communities. He has learned the art of balancing multiple responsibilities and the power of perseverance. "There were times when challenges seemed overwhelming, but with determination and motivation, even from the highest Office in the University, they became opportunities for growth," he notes.

Mashila's future plans include growing into leadership positions where he can influence policy and drive meaningful institutional transformation. He advises students pursuing a degree in Educational Management to approach their studies with dedication and a clear sense of purpose. He believes that success in this field requires resilience, problem-solving skills, and the ability to collaborate with diverse stakeholders. "Key skills include time management, research capability, and ethical decision-making," Mashila concluded.

Tendani Marageni Transforms Passion into Academic Excellence and Cultural Impact

Tendani Marageni's journey is a powerful testament to the transformative power of education, cultural pride, and unwavering determination. In 2025, she celebrated a major milestone by earning her Master of Arts in Tshivenda from the University of Venda. Her thesis, titled "Kushumisele kwa Luambo lwa Tshivenda kha muzika wa VEN RAP", explores the intersection of language and music, reflecting her deep commitment to preserving and promoting Tshivenda culture.



Tendani's academic path began at Makwarela Primary School and continued through Mbilwi Secondary School, known for its excellence in science. Though many expected her to pursue a science-related career, she boldly followed her passion for language and culture. She studied Media Studies at the University of Venda before specialising in Tshivenda, completing both her Honours and master's

degrees in the field.

Her decision to embrace her cultural roots has not only shaped her academic focus but also positioned her as a role model for those seeking to align personal passion with professional purpose.

Currently serving as an Intern in the Advancement Unit within the Department of Marketing, Branding, and Communication at the University of Venda, Tendani applies her research and communication skills to support institutional growth. Her role involves: Conducting strategic research on organisations with active CSI and SCR pro-grammes, identifying potential partners aligned with the University's goals, supporting initiatives in education, community development, infrastructure, innovation, and student support.

Through this work, she contributes to the University's sustainability and visibility, helping forge partnerships that drive long-term development. Tendani views her academic achievements not just as personal success but as a platform to inspire others. She believes education is the key to unlocking potential and remains committed to using her skills to uplift communities and encourage future generations to pursue their dreams.

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