



Special Edition: 2026 Graduation highlights continues | 27 May 2026

## Graduation Triumphs that Defined UNIVEN 2026

The University of Venda's 2026 Autumn Graduation ceremonies celebrated more than academic qualifications; they honoured stories of resilience, perseverance, innovation, and transformation. From municipal leaders to media professionals, cleaners, and students from rural communities, graduates demonstrated how education continues

to change lives and shape communities. Their journeys reflected determination against adversity, commitment to excellence, and the growing impact of research and leadership in addressing societal challenges.

### LEDET MEC Tshitereke Baldwin Matibe Earns Doctorate at UNIVEN



The University of Venda proudly celebrated the achievement of Limpopo MEC for Economic Development, Environment and Tourism, Dr Tshitereke Baldwin Matibe, who graduated with a Doctor of Philosophy in Public Administration during the institution's first graduation session on 19 May 2026.

Dr Matibe's study focused on the effectiveness of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts (SCOPA) in promoting financial oversight and accountability within the Limpopo Provincial Government. The research found that although SCOPA contributed positively toward accountability and audit outcomes, several challenges continued to limit its effectiveness, including political interference, limited authority, and incomplete implementation of resolutions. The study recommended strengthening SCOPA's operational independence, enforcing consequence management, and improving implementation mechanisms.

In a groundbreaking contribution, Dr Matibe also proposed a model for measuring the effectiveness of Public Accounts Committees, potentially laying the foundation for a universally accepted oversight framework. His achievement reflected the University of Venda's commitment to producing leaders whose research contributes meaningfully to governance and public administration.

## Triumph Beyond Limits: Nicolette Sithembile Zulu Inspires at UNIVEN Graduation

Session 6 of the University of Venda's 2026 Autumn Graduation ceremonies erupted with cheers, ululations, and applause as Nicolette Sithembile Zulu proudly walked across the stage.

Originally from Bushbuckridge in Mpumalanga, Zulu graduated with a BA Honours in Psychology after previously obtaining a Bachelor of Social Work qualification.

Her academic journey was marked by resilience,

courage, and determination as she navigated life as a wheelchair user while overcoming accessibility challenges and societal stereotypes.

Despite facing constant underestimation from others, Zulu remained focused on her goals and committed to her studies. She credited her success to the support of her family, faith, discipline, and surrounding herself with positive and goal-driven individuals. Zulu encouraged students facing similar challenges to use available support systems and seek assistance whenever needed.

Her graduation became more than a personal achievement; it stood as a powerful symbol of hope, perseverance, and the reminder that disability is not inability. The University of Venda's 2026 Autumn Graduation ceremonies showcased stories that extended far beyond academic success. Each graduate embodied resilience, vision, and the transformative power of education in changing lives and uplifting communities. Whether advancing research, strengthening governance, preserving Indigenous knowledge, or overcoming personal hardship, these graduates demonstrated that determination, discipline, and purpose remain key drivers of excellence and social progress.



## Academic Excellence Drives Nemasetoni's Digital Communication Journey



Hard work, determination, and academic excellence paid off for University of Venda Schools Liaison Officer, Mphinyana Nemasetoni, who graduated with a Master's degree in Communication and Media during the institution's 2026 Autumn Graduation ceremonies. Attached to the Department of Marketing, Branding and Communication, Nemasetoni has played a key role in promoting the university's academic programmes, strengthening stakeholder relations, and advancing student recruitment initiatives. His latest achievement adds another milestone to his growing professional journey.

Having previously obtained a Media Studies degree from the University of Venda and an Honours degree in Advanced Corporate Communication from North-West University, Nemasetoni said the rapidly evolving digital landscape inspired him to pursue postgraduate studies.

"Postgraduate studies bridge the gap between

creative strategy and technical execution, allowing one to adapt proactively to modern communication trends," he said. Remarkably, he completed his Master's degree within one year and with distinction while balancing research, work responsibilities, and personal commitments. He credited his success to discipline, determination, family support, and the guidance of his supervisor, Prof Tendai Chari.

His research, titled *The Efficacy of Digital Media Marketing in Student Recruitment in Higher Education: The Case of a Rural-Based University*, explored how digital marketing strategies can strengthen student recruitment and institutional visibility, particularly in rural universities.

The study highlighted the importance of audience understanding, adaptability, data-driven decision-making, and the strategic use of digital tools and analytics. It also underscored the growing role of artificial intelligence and technology in enhancing institutional engagement and communication. As part of sharing his findings, Nemasetoni presented a paper at the 2026 Teaching with Technology Summit hosted by Mangosuthu University of Technology under the theme: *Technology for Success: Using AI, analytics, and digital tools to enhance engagement and outcomes*.

Reflecting on his journey, he described the qualification as more than an academic achievement. "It reflects perseverance, growth, and the commitment to becoming better in my field. I am proud of the consistency, self-belief, and determination it took to complete this journey within a year and with distinction," he said.

Nemasetoni encouraged staff members aspiring to further their studies to remain focused and determined. "It is not an easy road, but it is possible. Furthering your studies is an investment in your personal and professional growth," he added.

## Beyond the Microphone: The Academic Journey of Mpho Rathando

Mpho Rathando, Manager of Communication and Events at Makhado Local Municipality, recently added another remarkable achievement to his academic journey after graduating with a Master of Public Management at the University of Venda.

As his second Master's degree and fifth qualification overall, the achievement reflects years of dedication, growth, and commitment to leadership, governance, and public service. While widely recognised for his background in journalism and media, Mpho's career has steadily evolved into governance and public administration.

Driven by a desire to deepen his understanding of leadership and public sector management, Mpho viewed education as a lifelong journey rather than a destination. His academic background already included qualifications from the University of the Witwatersrand, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, and Stellenbosch University. He is also completing the remaining modules of his LLB through UNISA.

Balancing postgraduate studies with professional and personal responsibilities demanded discipline, resilience, and careful time management. He credited the support of family, mentors, and academic supervisors for helping him remain focused throughout the journey.

His research focused on the role of effective leadership in enhancing municipal service delivery. The study found that transformational and people-centred leadership plays a crucial role in improving accountability, institutional performance, and service delivery in municipalities.

Mpho believes his research contributes valuable

insights toward strengthening local government performance and improving service delivery in South African communities.

Reflecting on his transition from media practitioner to governance scholar, Mpho said understanding systems of governance became essential in addressing societal challenges effectively.

Today, his journey stands as a testament to resilience, ambition, and lifelong learning. He encouraged young people to remain disciplined, persistent, and confident in their abilities, emphasising that education remains one of the most powerful tools for empowerment and transformation.



## Cleaner by Night, Graduate by Dream: Mafunise's Inspiring Journey

Ms Mafunise Winnie recently celebrated one of the most significant milestones of her life after graduating with a Bachelor of Education in Foundation Phase Teaching during Session 6 of the University of Venda's 2026 Autumn Graduation ceremonies.

Her achievement became a powerful testimony of resilience, sacrifice, and determination after years of balancing demanding night shifts, motherhood, and academic commitments. Born and raised in Murangoni village, Mafunise had long dreamed of pursuing higher education. However, like many young people from rural communities, financial constraints and limited opportunities delayed her aspirations.

In 2012, she joined an internship programme in tourism and hospitality at Khoroni Hotel Casino and Convention Resort, where she gained experience across several departments before securing permanent employment as a cleaner. Rather than allowing her circumstances to define her future, Mafunise continued investing in her education. She obtained her driver's licence in 2014 and later completed an Educare diploma in 2019 while working full-time.

Her breakthrough came in 2022 when she was finally accepted to study at the University of Venda. As a cleaner working night shifts from 11 pm to 8 am, Mafunise often left work and went directly to lectures. Balancing work, studies, and family responsibilities became emotionally and physically exhausting, but she remained determined to create a better future for herself and her children.

She drew inspiration from her siblings, three of whom are graduates, as well as community leaders who encouraged education and self-development. Despite sleepless nights and overwhelming pressure, Mafunise remained disciplined and focused. She revised during work breaks and managed assignments around her demanding schedule. Support from supervisors and colleagues also helped her attend lectures when needed.

Years of sacrifice finally paid off when she proudly graduated with a Bachelor of Education in Foundation Phase Teaching. For Mafunise, graduation symbolised proof that one's current circumstances do not determine one's future. Her story now serves as an inspiration to workers and young people who may feel discouraged by their situations.



## Dr Rabinda Breaks New Ground in Cryptocurrency and Stock Market Research

Dr Aluwani Malvin Rabinda made history at the University of Venda after graduating with a PhD in Economics specialising in Econometrics, becoming the Department of Economics' first PhD graduate since 2016.

Supervised by Dr Azwifanelwi Nemushungwa and co-supervised by Dr Mbulaheni Dagume, Dr Rabinda's doctoral research explored the relationship between cryptocurrencies and stock market performance in South Africa using advanced econometric modelling.

## Driving Municipal Innovation Through Research Excellence



His study introduced the pioneering Asymmetric Nonlinear Interaction Framework (ANIF), integrating behavioural finance concepts with nonlinear market dynamics to better understand digital asset behaviour in emerging markets. The research identified Litecoin as a significant driver of South African stock market movements, contributing valuable context-specific insights to the growing field of cryptocurrency and financial market studies.

Reflecting on his journey, Dr Rabinda encouraged struggling PhD candidates not to lose hope. "There were moments when I felt like giving up, but persistence, prayer, and believing in myself kept me going. Your current struggle does not mean failure; it is preparing you for your breakthrough," he said.

Dr Azwifanelwi Nemushungwa described the achievement as a historic milestone for the Department of Economics. "Dr Rabinda's success demonstrates that with determination, hard work, and proper mentorship, our students can produce globally relevant research that contributes meaningfully to society and the academic community," he said.

Dr Shilenge Risenga Richard, Municipal Manager of Collins Chabane Local Municipality, graduated with a Doctor of Philosophy in Public Administration during the University of Venda's 2026 Autumn Graduation ceremonies.

His doctoral study, Optimising Services Through an Effective Financial Resources' Mobilisation Framework in Vhembe District Municipalities, focused on strengthening local governance and improving service delivery.

The study revealed that municipalities within the Vhembe District remained heavily dependent on government grants and faced challenges accessing alternative funding opportunities due to capacity constraints and weak financial management systems.

In response, Dr Shilenge developed a Four-Step Framework aimed at improving financial resource

mobilisation, strengthening governance, diversifying municipal revenue streams, and enhancing infrastructure investment.

His research contribution has already produced three articles in DHET-accredited journals, with more publications expected. As both a municipal leader and scholar, Dr Shilenge's achievement highlighted the growing importance of research-driven leadership in transforming municipalities and improving communities.

## Tshaulu Herd Boy Achieves Master's Degree in Media Studies

Mr Takalani Thabo, affectionately known as "T-Squared," graduated with a Master of Arts in Communication and Media Studies during the University of Venda's 2026 Autumn Graduation ceremonies.

Born and raised in the rural village of Tshaulu, Takalani's childhood included herding cattle while dreaming of a future in media and broadcasting.

Determined to change his life through education, he pursued Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University, where he honed his storytelling and broadcasting skills. He later became Kovsie FM's first Venda presenter while studying at the University of the Free State, earning recognition for proudly representing his language and culture on air.

Over the years, Takalani built an impressive broadcasting career at stations including Phalaphala FM, UNIVEN FM, and Choice FM, becoming known for his engaging personality and strong connection with audiences.

His Master's research explored the use of social media platforms as marketing tools in higher

education institutions, focusing on the University of Venda.

Now serving in the Department of Marketing, Branding, and Communication at UNIVEN, Takalani continues contributing to the university's branding and communication initiatives.

Reflecting on his journey, he said: "Success does not come from where you start in life, but from your willingness to keep moving forward despite challenges. Education remains one of the most powerful tools for transforming lives and inspiring others."



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