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# Leadership

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MPUMALANGA



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MPUMALANGA

## Prof Thoko Mayekiso

Vice-Chancellor at the University of Mpumalanga takes us on a journey of excellence

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Ralph Staniforth sat down with Prof Thoko Mayekiso, vice-chancellor at the University of Mpumalanga to discuss what is to come in 2025.

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# Leadership

## More than just teaching and learning

The University of Mpumalanga (UMP) heads into 2025 in fine shape, thanks in large part to the stalwarts who are putting in the hard yards to not only make the tertiary institution a place of greatness, but the province as a whole, too.

In this Leadership Special Edition, we take an in-depth look at the staff who are ensuring a prosperous future for students, as well as the students-turned-lecturers who have benefited from the many programmes UMP run.

Long-serving Vice-Chancellor, Prof Thoko Mayekiso, opens up about leadership and its many lessons, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, Innovation, and Internationalisation Prof Aldo Stroebel gives us some insight into how he is shifting perceptions and hauling the tertiary institution into the future, while Dean of Agriculture and Natural Sciences Prof Ndiko Ludidi details how UMP is able to produce graduates of the highest ilk.

We also learn about the inspiring story of Vuyelwa Magagula, who has come full circle at the university and is now in a position to repay the faith shown in her by giving back to those who stand where she once stood.

The fantastic stories in this edition of drive, determination, and genuine care inspired us and we are sure it will do the same for you.

I hope you enjoy the read.

Sincerely,  
Prof JJ Tabane  
Editor

## Editor's Note



ONKGOPOTSE JJ TABANE  
Editor

*Prof Onkgopotse JJ Tabane is the author of 'Let's Talk Frankly' and is a TV and radio talk show host. He holds a PhD in Media Studies from Wits University and a Master's Degree in Political Economy from Nelson Mandela University. You can follow him on Twitter; @JJTabane.*

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- ✓ Bachelor of Arts Honours in siSwati
- ✓ Bachelor of Arts Honours in Archaeology

# Meet the team giving Mpumalanga a boost

The University of Mpumalanga (UMP) has a wealth of experience at its disposal when it comes to academics. In this special edition, you will hear from some of the important voices who strive to push UMP to greater heights, but first, let's meet them...

## Prof Thoko Mayekiso: Vice-Chancellor

Prof Thoko Mayekiso is the first Vice-Chancellor of the University of Mpumalanga, with effect from 1 November 2014. She obtained a BA, BA honours, and MA in psychology from the University of Fort Hare. She furthered her studies at the Free University of Berlin in Germany, where she obtained her D Phil (cum laude) in psychology. She also holds a higher education diploma (PostGraduate) from the University of South Africa. She is a registered clinical psychologist with the Health Professional Council of South Africa (HPCSA). In her sterling academic career, Prof Mayekiso has held positions of senior lecturer, associate professor, professor, head of department, and vice-dean at the then University of Transkei.



## Dr Paul Maminza: Dean of Students

Dr Paul Maminza has held the position of Dean of Students since January 2015. Dr Maminza holds a PhD (Curriculum Studies) from the University of Stellenbosch; a Post Graduate Diploma in Rural Development Planning from the Weitz Centre in Israel; a STD in Technical Education (Electrical Engineering) from Technikon Northern Transvaal; a NDip in Electrical Engineering from Technikon Northern Transvaal; and BTech and MTech degrees from Technikon SA. His area of interest is in post school education, rural development, student leadership, and engagement. Dr Maminza is a recipient of the UNESCO/MASHAV fellowship.

## Prof Moses Mbewe: Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Postgraduate Studies, Engagement, and Planning

Prof Moses Mbewe has been in his role of Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Postgraduate Studies, Engagement, and Planning at UMP since July 2023. Prof Mbewe holds a BSc in Biology from Texas Southern University in the USA. He completed his postgraduate studies (Masters and PhD) at the University of Cambridge, Department of Genetics, in the UK from 1991 to 1994 in Microbial Genetics and Molecular Biology. He went on to become the Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in Microbiology at the University of Cape Town from 1995 to 1996.

## Prof Aldo Stroebel: Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Research, Innovation, and Internationalisation

Prof Aldo Stroebel is the inaugural Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Research, Innovation, and Internationalisation at UMP, appointed on 1 July 2023. Prof Stroebel holds BSc and Honours degrees from the University of Pretoria; Masters in International Agricultural Development from University of Ghent, Belgium; PhD in Sustainable Agriculture through a joint programme between the University of the Free State and Cornell University, USA; Postdoctoral research from Wageningen University, The Netherlands; and has completed professional training courses in Research Management in Australia, Gender Programming in The Netherlands, Diversity Leadership in the USA, and Corporate Governance in South Africa.

## Prof Mashudu Davhana-Maselesele: Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Teaching and Learning

Prof Mashudu Davhana-Maselesele took on the role of Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Teaching and Learning in January 2024. She holds a PhD in Programme Development from the University of Johannesburg, as well as a BA(Cur) in Nursing Education and Community Health Nursing Science from UNISA; Honours BA(Cur) in Nursing Education from UNISA; Diploma in Primary Health Care from the University Johannesburg with cum Laude; and a Masters in Nursing Education from UNISA. Additionally, she pursued postdoctoral studies at the University of California in Los Angeles, USA with a focus on trauma research, specifically Gender-Based Violence.

## Prof Vusi Gumede: Dean of Economics, Development, and Business Sciences

Prof Vusi Gumede holds a PhD in Economics (2003), MCom in Economics (1999), and a Postgraduate Diploma in Policy (2009), among his higher qualifications. For eleven years, he held various senior government positions before joining academia. He has worked for various South African universities and has been affiliated to numerous institutions as a board member, advisor, director, fellow, associate, reviewer, facilitator, panel member, trustee, and honorary professor. Prof Gumede has been in the role of Dean of Economics, Development, and Business Sciences at UMP since 2020.

## Prof Hilda Israel: Dean of Education

Prof Hilda Israel holds a Master of Science in Education from Baylor University, Texas, USA and was one of six South African women chosen to complete the Higher Education Research Support (HERS) Programme for Women Managers in Higher Education in Philadelphia, USA. Prof Israel is the Chair of the UMP Institutional Forum, which advises the Council on the formulation of policy, and the suitability for appointment of candidates for Executive Management positions, among other matters. She is also the Acting Chair of the UMP Teaching and Learning Committee of Senate.

## Prof Ndiko Ludidi: Dean of Agriculture and Natural Sciences

Prof Ndiko Ludidi has been in his role as Dean of Agriculture and Natural Sciences at UMP since January 2024. As a member of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) in 2024, Prof Ludidi holds incredible research experience and brings a wealth of knowledge to his faculty. He served as a Professor of Biotechnology at the University of the Western Cape before joining UMP.

## Confidence Ndlovu: Associate Lecturer

Confidence Ndlovu is an Academic Talent Stewardship Programme (ATSP) Fellow and Associate Lecturer in the School of Development Studies at UMP. She is the university's first Masters graduate and is currently pursuing a PhD in Development Studies. Taking full advantage of UMP's opportunities, Ndlovu's journey included trips to the UK, personal development tours, and leadership roles. In 2020, as President of ENACTUS UMP, she led the team to win \$5 000 in Ford competitions for the sustainable community project, REFUEL.

## Vuyelwa Magagula: Associate Lecturer

Vuyelwa Magagula is a former and first female Student Representative Council (SRC) President. She has evolved into an Associate Lecturer under the Academic Talent Stewardship Programme (ATSP) in Development Studies. Currently pursuing her Masters degree, Magagula's research delves into the Sustainability of Women-owned Home-based Businesses in the era of load shedding and the significance of addressing challenges faced by women entrepreneurs during power outages, contributing to broader goals of sustainability and gender equality. ▲



# Breeding excellence at the University of Mpumalanga

Prof Thoko Mayekiso is more than just a Vice-Chancellor at the University of Mpumalanga; she is a heroine providing a bright future for all who walk through the halls of the tertiary institution. Ralph Staniforth sat down with the stalwart of education to chat about what's to come in 2025, how she was able to make an impact in 2024, and how her leadership skills have been tested throughout her 14 years in the job.



**A**s we begin to tackle 2025 at full tilt, the general feeling at the University of Mpumalanga (UMP) is one filled with optimism, accompanied by a mood that is positive.

This is the sentiment of the tertiary institution's stalwart, Prof Thoko Mayekiso, who has held the position of Vice-Chancellor since 2014; making massive strides to take UMP forward ever since.

The feeling of optimism stems from the growing trends that UMP is noticing in all respects as it moves forward in its second decade of operations, while the mood of positivity is inspired by the overall excellent performance of the institution as a whole in 2024 and the years prior.

"The celebration of the Decade of Excellence in 2023 since the establishment of the University in 2013 and the Closing Ceremony in 2024 provided us with an opportunity to reflect on the journey travelled over the past 10 years since the establishment of the University," Prof Mayekiso says.

"The positive reflections on the pioneering journey, 'luhambo lwemhlahlandlela', have left us inspired to continue the excellent

performance in 2025 and beyond. We celebrated the decade of excellence with evidence on the ground that the opportunity to pioneer was fully embraced and optimally embarked upon."

The key areas of focus for UMP in 2025 are informed by its strategy of Vision 2030 titled, "To be an African University leading in creating opportunities for sustainable development through innovation".

Vision 2030 works in conjunction with the mission of UMP, which is 'to offer high-quality educational and training opportunities that foster the holistic development of students through teaching and learning, research and scholarship, and engagement, in collaboration with strategic partners'.

Prof Mayekiso explains that in order to continue adhering to the strategy and mission in 2025, three key areas will be focused on, namely: teaching and learning; research; and engagement.

"In line with the vision and mission of UMP, we are focusing on both growth and consolidation. We are expanding the academic programmes on offer and the Programme Qualification Mix to include the Health Sciences and Accounting programmes, amongst others," she says.

### Prof Thoko Mayekiso's journey

Professor Thoko Mayekiso is the first Vice-Chancellor of the University of Mpumalanga, with effect from 1 November 2014. She obtained a BA, BA honours, and MA in psychology from the University of Fort Hare. She furthered her studies at the Free University of Berlin in Germany, where she obtained her D Phil (cum laude) in psychology. She also holds a higher education diploma (Postgraduate) from the University of South Africa. She is a registered Clinical Psychologist with the Health Professional Council of South Africa (HPCSA). In her sterling academic career, Prof Mayekiso has held positions of senior lecturer, associate professor, professor, head of department, and vice-dean at the then University of Transkei. She practiced as Honorary Clinical Fellow at the Greenwood Institute for Child Health, University of Leicester and simultaneously served as Clinical Psychologist in the Department of Medical Psychology, Leicester General Hospital in the United Kingdom.

The South African University Vice-Chancellors' Association and the American Council on Education awarded her a fellowship which was tenable at the University of Washington, Seattle. She then joined the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg in 2001 where she served as head of school, chair of psychology, deputy dean, and then acting dean in the faculty of humanities. She proceeded to Nelson Mandela University in 2007 as an executive dean in the faculty of arts, and then deputy vice-chancellor (research and engagement) in 2009. She is a C3 rated scientist by the National Research Foundation. She has published a number of articles in accredited journals, written book chapters, and supervised 26 master's students and 12 doctoral students. She is a member of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) and is also a member of the ASSAf Steering Committee on the establishment of the Forum on Just Transition. She is the chairperson of the USAf Research and Innovation Strategy Group. She is a board member of Higher Health. In 2024, Prof Mayekiso was honoured with the Public Service Visionary Award at the BBQ Awards.

"In 2025, we will be offering 75 programmes ranging from Higher Certificate to Doctoral Degree. Our enrolment target for 2025 is 11 800 for both undergraduate and postgraduate students. We are focusing on access with success. Our pass rate over the years has ranged between 80% and 85%.

"We will also be continuing with the construction and maintenance of the iconic buildings, state of the art facilities, and ICT infrastructure."

One of the highlights for 2025 is the University Incubator Consortium 2025 Africa-Asia Roundtable Discussion, which will be hosted by UMP on 12 and 13 February 2025. The theme for this discussion is 'Policy Advocacy for Collaboration between African and Asian Universities on Research, Innovation, and Entrepreneurship'.

### UMP's place in the tertiary landscape

"Lessons learned and wisdom earned come from taking heed of feedback," a philosophical Prof Mayekiso states.

This feedback is informed by the overall customer experience, which includes quicker service, shorter waiting times, and issues being handled only once, both effectively and efficiently.

Ensuring this set of non-negotiables is deeply entrenched within the UMP operations has contributed massively to the overall standing and perception of the tertiary institution.

As a result, UMP enjoys respect and recognition within the South African university landscape, while UMP's leadership has been recognised, acknowledged, validated, and celebrated through a number of national awards and profiling.

"There is acknowledgement that UMP has done exceptionally well during the 11 years of its existence. Benchmarking teams from well-established South African universities coming to our campus speaks to our university being seriously taken.

"We are taken as an institution to emulate—in terms of the iconic infrastructure and state of the art facilities, a reputation for empowering both staff and students, and providing a conducive ecology in which to teach, learn, research, and innovate," Prof Mayekiso explains.

In terms of the recognition UMP continues to receive, their research performance has been recognised by the National Research Foundation (NRF), while in 2022, UMP received the NRF Excelleration Award, which



There is acknowledgement that UMP has done exceptionally well during the 11 years of its existence



recognises the most improved institution in research performance.

In 2023, UMP received the NRF CEO's Special Recognition Award for an institution which previously won the Excelleration Award and has continued its progress and commitment to excellence in research performance, as measured against a selection of critical indicators.

Also in 2023, UMP received the Built Environment Award from the Council of the Built Environment in the Category of State-Owned Entities that completed the construction of buildings timeously.

"We have also received ten consecutive unqualified audit opinions from the External Auditors every year since inception. We are on the right track and fully adhering to the value of excellence," Prof Mayekiso says with pride.

While all involved at UMP are doing their utmost to propel the tertiary institution forward, there is no denying that external support is needed to create a strong holistic approach to creating the leaders of tomorrow.

Prof Mayekiso believes that there is a collective wisdom that emerges when universities and the private sector work together in a context of mutual respect, so she is urging the private sector and industry partners to support in any way they can to help create a better tomorrow for South Africa.

"The generation of knowledge and the application of knowledge should be seen as a virtuous circle. Sharing insights, exchanging experiences, and working collaboratively have shown this as the reliable trajectory to follow. There is a reciprocal sharpening and refining of insights so as to be continuously better at what we shape together," Prof Mayekiso explains.

### Prof Mayekiso on what is key to reaching true equality in South Africa

"We need to be deliberate about what we do and not leave anything to chance. Creating opportunities for dialogue and robust engagement should be the order of the day. The plan to help women reach equality should be: empower, educate, revise, and advocate. Equality will not be given on a platter. We should be intentional and systematic in how we work. Gathering empirical evidence and speaking up where we see inequality rear its ugly head, is the way to go. We should educate the younger generation of men, who are our own sons, to commit themselves to the goals and objectives of equality. Eradicating patriarchy and chipping away at it daily should be our mantra."

### Prof Thoko Mayekiso on the current state of tertiary education in South Africa

"The tertiary sector is awake to its huge mandate to improve access and contribute to the transformation agenda of the country and this access translating to success. The limitation of funding and the challenge of not being able to accommodate all who apply remains real. To produce graduates who are creative, innovative, and entrepreneurial, while also addressing the human capital needs of the country, are realities to contend with and resolve."



"We have mutually beneficial relationships that are characterised by reciprocity with the various industry partners. UMP works closely with the hospitality and tourism industry and the agricultural industry. These are the two main industries where our students do Work Integrated Learning, Internships, and Learnerships. They also employ a number of our former students. Some of the industry partners participate as members of the Advisory Boards where they make valuable insights towards the education and training of our students."

### A tenure of immense success

As already mentioned, Prof Mayekiso has been with UMP for over a decade—a feat which is unheard of in the modern days of work, let alone within the education space.

She believes that her longevity in the position is down to the fact that she was the Founding Vice-Chancellor of the university, which in many ways makes her responsible for the continued success of the institution—much like a mother and her child.

"My tenure at UMP as the Founding Vice-Chancellor is very special and has been an amazing pioneering journey, 'luhamba

lwemhlahlandlela'. The general tendency out there is for leaders to find established institutions. To start a university from scratch is an experience I will always cherish. There will always be one Founding Vice-Chancellor and this is a humbling experience. The realisation contributes to one's sense of humility and rootedness," Prof Mayekiso reveals.

"It has deepened my insights into human functioning generally and bolstered my own resilience and mental toughness as a person. It provided opportunities for me to express more fully a number of my traits and attributes. When I was leaving the Nelson Mandela University in 2014, where I held the position of Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research and Engagement, the many colleagues I worked with described me as an 'inspirational, visionary leader who possesses integrity in abundance, initiator, innovator, impeccable, influential, energetic, motivator and mentor'.

"My tenure as Vice-Chancellor of a newly established institution provided me with ample opportunity to express my traits and attributes fully.

"It was evident that one would need to approach the task of being at the helm of the

new institution with unfettered imagination and compassion. The challenge to leave not only footprints but prints on the hearts as well, was as exciting as it was daunting."

In 2024, Prof Mayekiso was honoured with the Public Service Visionary Award at the BBQ Awards; an award which could not have gone to a more deserving individual.

Ask anyone she has ever worked with and they will tell you the same thing: Prof Mayekiso has always been a bastion of hope for the institutions she has served and education at large in South Africa.

However, when you ask the Vice-Chancellor herself about her journey, she will tell you that her achievements would never have been possible without the help of those around her; proving that not only is she exceptionally talented at her job, but she is also incredibly humble.

"My colleagues continue to reinforce lessons learnt and wisdom earned in earlier years that none of us is an island. We are as strong or as weak, as the teams in which we find ourselves. Effective teams were required to navigate the complex and multi-layered challenges and opportunities. Building, cultivating, and



nurturing deeply experienced and committed teams is a lifelong mission. This was achieved at UMP,” Prof Mayekiso says.

“The quest to empower students—especially female students—has taken pride of place in all of my endeavours. I have learned not only to work harder, but also to work smarter. The coalescence of my purpose and passion has resulted in greater impact at UMP.”

When it comes to her longevity in the role and how she manages to stay motivated to keep pushing the boundaries of what is possible, the UMP Vice-Chancellor believes it is important to stay true and dedicated to what you have been tasked with.

“Longevity comes from realising at the outset that one is a steward; given the opportunity to build something that will have an enduring

value. Also realising that this is a part I can play for posterity is truly humbling. Not many academics get the unique chance of being at the helm of a new institution. I believe determination is a driving force towards excellence and in order to work tirelessly at something, one needs perseverance,” she explains.

Determination and passion are incredibly important, too.

“Determination is about putting your heart, mind, and soul into what you want to achieve and about pursuing your goals relentlessly. It is about rising above all odds. Over and above determination, one should have passion for what one does,” she adds.

“It is important to keep in touch with one’s personal values and vision and constantly ask oneself, ‘What am I doing here? What is my

purpose?’. It is absolutely crucial to be in touch with one’s beliefs and principles. The privilege of starting a new University has been a source of positive energy and motivation for me as the Vice-Chancellor. I am grateful to the University Council for the confidence they bestowed upon me for this crucial role.”

Under Prof Mayekiso’s leadership, UMP has introduced a number of projects and initiatives over the years, with a few highlighted below:

- The Vice-Chancellor Scholarship Programme which covers full tuition, accommodation, meals, learning material allowance, laptop, monthly stipend, and a Personal and Leadership Development Programme. Exceptionally performing students are awarded this scholarship during the first or second year and continue to be funded until doctoral degree subject to good performance. To date, UMP has awarded 220 scholarships starting from 2016.
- The Academic Talent Stewardship Programme in which top performing students who already hold an Honours degree or Postgraduate Diploma, who show passion for the academy, are appointed as Academic Talent Stewardship Fellows and Associate Lecturers for three years. At the end of the three years, they are confirmed as permanent lecturers. These are UMP’s proverbial timbre,

produced as in ‘Grow Your Own Timbre’. They also serve to inspire other students to realise that the ethos of possibility is alive and kicking at UMP. To date, the tertiary institution has appointed 20 Academic Talent Stewardship Fellows and Associate Lecturers. Four have already been confirmed as Lecturers.

- UMP has established the Centre for Entrepreneurship Rapid Incubator to nurture and foster the entrepreneurial mindset in students, alumni, staff, and members of the community.
- UMP has established a state of the art, four-star Tfokomala Hotel and Conference Centre. The hotel provides experiential learning to students enrolled for the Diploma in Hospitality Management and the Diploma in Culinary Arts. The students get a sense of what it feels like working at the coal face of a hotel.

#### Dealing with leading at UMP

Prof Mayekiso believes that she made a difference to both the academic project and the operations at UMP in 2024. With her hands on the steering wheel, she provided UMP with a steady and firm ride throughout the year.

“This steadiness comes from the considerable experience I am able to bring, coupled with exposure to national, continental, and international experiences. The networks that I have built over the more than three decades ensured that I led from an informed and competent space,” she says.

“My training in Clinical Psychology and applying perspectives from that discipline made it easier for me to motivate and inspire both staff and students. The mental health of staff and students prompted me to start with mastery of self and leading by example.”

But while she made a success out of 2024, her leadership skills were put to the test from time to time.

She believes that decisiveness, strategic thinking, galvanising teams, consequence management, and accountability are just some of the skills that were frequently put in practice in terms of her leadership journey in 2024.

Empathy, active listening, and appreciative inquiry also proved crucial.

But with all that is going on, how does she manage to alleviate the stress which comes with running such a massive operation? For Prof Mayekiso, she is able to draw upon her

experience as a Clinical Psychologist and apply the techniques that are recommended for stress management.

“I challenge any negative automatic thoughts that come to mind. I apply different forms of relaxation exercises including breathing exercises. Exercising regularly, listening to music, reading, and watching most sporting codes on TV are some of the ways that I use to disengage,” Prof Mayekiso reveals.

“Another way of dealing with stress is the understanding and acceptance that we are all fallible and, therefore, we make mistakes. This acceptance of one’s fallibility makes it possible for one to accept the fallibility of others. This self-acceptance of fallibility allows us to understand that we are not perfect. Therefore, we make mistakes.”

Absorbing and appreciating the scenic beauty of Mpumalanga, known as the ‘Place of the Rising Sun’, also helps when stress starts to creep up on her, with its balmy weather and lush vegetation the perfect setting to recharge the mind and revive the soul by taking walks and feeding all her senses.

In closing, Prof Mayekiso imparted her knowledge on what is key to being a responsive Vice-Chancellor.

Listening, learning, and leading.

The challenge, however, is to balance the act of listening and learning with acting. Leading by example and holding oneself to the highest standards have been lessons learned by Prof Mayekiso.

“Leading self first is key, before one can lead others. The ability to listen, the deepening of one’s empathy, and the ability to connect the dots certainly helps. Treating others fairly and respectfully whilst holding them accountable is a fine balancing act.

“Firm and fair is how many who I have led have described me. An added dimension is the ability to have difficult conversations with errant staff and students; to talk assertively, yet respectfully.

“Each student is unique, so too is each staff member. Allow the expression of uniqueness whilst also taking into account that there is common purpose and a greater good. This calls for an analytical mind and a caring heart on my part as a leader,” she concludes.

And here’s to your next decade at the helm of the University of Mpumalanga. ▲

*Ralph Staniforth is a freelance journalist.*



#### Prof Mayekiso's Timeless Attributes of a Leader

To have the ability to listen and engage

To have high levels of empathy

To be able to solve problems

To have the courage to engage in difficult conversations

To be resilient

To have an uncanny knack at engendering trust

To be comfortable in your own skin

To be willing to embrace change

To be able to think outside of the box

To be innovative and creative



# Taking Research, Innovation, and Internationalisation to the next level

**Prof Aldo Stroebel is the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, Innovation, and Internationalisation at the University of Mpumalanga, where he is shifting perceptions and hauling the tertiary institution into the future.**

**A**s the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, Innovation, and Internationalisation, Prof Aldo Stroebel is responsible for providing strategic leadership for all aspects related to research, innovation, and internationalisation at the University of Mpumalanga (UMP), as well as executive oversight of the Research Management and Technology Transfer Offices, Library and Information Services, and Institutional Centres and Institutes.

In 2023, UMP confirmed its commitment to strengthening research leadership by inaugurating the portfolio, sharpening the focus on advancing UMP's research agenda, promoting innovation, and fostering international collaborations to achieve research excellence and maximise research impact.

The portfolio also directs seven institutional research themes in biodiversity conservation, postharvest management and food security, ICT for development, early childhood development, governance and ethics, youth development and empowerment, and environmental and socio-economic sustainability. These themes have strategically been invested in to advance

the capacity of research and research excellence at UMP, promote multidisciplinary and postgraduate education, and are viewed as a collective set of strengths within which to advance the institution, cognisant of its geographical location.

"For these themes to function optimally and to the benefit of UMP, it is critical that they are adequately positioned, made aware of opportunities at all times, and provided with a system of support to develop and expand in those and other areas," Prof Stroebel explains.

"The university recognises that its role extends beyond traditional education. By focusing on strategic research and innovation priorities, UMP not only positions itself as a relevant player in an increasingly competitive landscape, but also aims to make a lasting and meaningful impact on society, industry, and the global knowledge economy."

A strong focus on internationalisation enhances the research focus, with innovation and thought leadership, global reach and visibility, and Pan-African impact.

"Key focus areas such as research-led teaching, strategic partnerships, and cross-cutting interdisciplinary research strengthen the internationalisation efforts," he adds.

## **The importance of research, innovation, and internationalisation**

The world is characterised by rapid change and interconnectedness, and universities have to respond to global challenges and societal needs for economic and social development.

South Africa's national system of innovation has made significant progress since 1994, including the expansion of the research and innovation system, a multi-fold increase in the number of publications, a considerable growth in the participation of black people and women in the research and development workforce, and a significant increase in doctoral graduation rates.

The investment in and rapid growth of the national system have escalated South Africa as a highly competitive global stakeholder, illustrated by world-leading research in inter alia public health and pharma, astronomy and space sciences, biodiversity and natural resources, technology innovation, and many other areas.

However, Prof Stroebel believes the system is not yet fully inclusive, and the country's innovation performance—products and patents—is not growing fast enough. This is where UMP is doing the most to assist.

"The National Development Plan has identified science, technology, and innovation (STI) as primary drivers of economic growth, job creation, and socio-economic development, and includes significant foci on inter alia rapid technological advancement in the 21st century, re-industrialisation, service delivery, modernising the agricultural sector, and mitigating environmental degradation—all of which are relevant to and within the sphere of influence of higher education research and innovation," Prof Stroebel explains.

"The UMP strategy provides aspirational goals and a supportive framework to achieve the priorities outlined in its Vision 2030, advancing the university towards research excellence and increased impact, closely aligned with national and international development frameworks. Through this strategy, the university is dedicated to harnessing its strengths to foster impactful, multi-, inter- and transdisciplinarity, and globally relevant research that transforms the institution, empowers communities, and drives sustainable development."

STI has a fundamental role to play in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), clearly evident from the well-formulated and relevant institutional research themes through which UMP contributes significantly to South Africa's development.

South Africa's future is "inextricably linked to that of the rest of the African continent", and "therefore the potential of STI for African development and continental integration needs to be advanced", Prof Stroebel states.

"It is clear that research, innovation, and internationalisation are critical to South Africa's future, given the country's complex socio-economic challenges and its aspirations to become a more competitive, sustainable, and an inclusive player on the global stage.

"For a country like South Africa, which is heavily reliant on sectors such as mining and agriculture, innovation can lead to diversification into high-value industries like renewable energy, biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and advanced manufacturing."

## **Strategic imperatives**

Prof Stroebel and his department's goals for 2025 are based on a number of opportunities aligned with UMP's vision. These goals were established during the past two years. In terms of initiatives for the year, these include the careful selection of new research chairs that



*Prof Aldo Stroebel*

will be announced alongside funding support, the formalisation of UMP's first Technology Transfer Office (TTO), and continuous implementation of UMP's first Intellectual Property Policy. The TTO will be financially supported by the National Intellectual Property Management Office (NIPMO) and will house significant support mechanisms for innovation, commercialisation, funding from industry, and a broader applied research approach.

"Research is managed holistically, through a pipeline approach starting from undergraduate to postgraduate level to established researchers. In this regard, the first undergraduate research hub will be established that will link closely to other areas of academic development," Prof Stroebel explains.

"Negotiations are well advanced to establish the first joint laboratory in freshwater ecology with the South African Institute for Aquatic Biodiversity, and the University will host the National Global Change Conference in November 2025, and the African Young

Graduate and Scholars Conference in collaboration with the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and PASGR in March 2025.

"UMP is one of only two universities in South Africa that will host the science stream of the G20, under the SA Presidency, during May 2025. This provides the opportunity for input into this critical forum for the world's major economies to build mutual understanding and foster collaboration in the face of global challenges."

In addition, Prof Stroebel reveals that part of the strategic planning for 2025 will be implementing the first research strategy, as well as an innovation framework, including, amongst other elements, significant strengthening of UMP's international linkages, advancing the agricultural research-teaching-extension nexus in the province—with the ARC, the University Pretoria, and the provincial Department of Agriculture, introducing a strengthened Postdoctoral Research Fellows Programme, increasing the number of NRF-rated researchers, and



outputs with real-world needs, drive impact, and secure resources.

“By intertwining research-led innovation, entrepreneurship, and stakeholder engagement, the UMP approach positions innovation as a transformative force that advances knowledge, addresses societal challenges, and contributes to economic and social progress,” Prof Stroebel avers. “Innovation has become an important priority for universities worldwide as a critical pathway to extend the impact of research. Publicly funded universities such as UMP, are expected to develop new knowledge, find answers to key challenges, and contribute to the common good.

“Innovation is one of the strategic mechanisms through which UMP’s research translates into tangible developmental impact, including innovation for sustainable socio-economic development, climate change, future-proofing education and skills development, re-industrialisation, and energy innovation.”

As a result, a multipronged approach will be implemented by UMP, which includes research-led innovation to leverage research and scholarly inquiry to develop new ideas, solutions, technologies, or processes that address real-world challenges and create value.

This approach is already bolstered by the strong scholarly and research base of the university, and will be advanced to integrate rigorous academic investigation with practical applications, where innovation is grounded in evidence, discovery, and the systematic generation of new knowledge.

“We are cognisant of the fact that not all research necessarily leads to innovation, and not all innovation is research-led. At UMP we distinguish between new knowledge and innovation—new knowledge expands the boundaries of what we know, while innovation transforms knowledge into action and value. Both are interconnected but serve different roles in advancing society,” he states.

“Secondly, UMP focuses on institutional innovation—to improve how the institution conducts its activities to advance efficiencies and performance, as well as inclusive innovation for the implementation of sustainable products and services for and by those who have been excluded from the development mainstream. For example, this is where solutions are found with the poor and marginalised, not for them.

“The university is engaged with and cognisant of its environment, and conducts

significant development-orientated, social, and economic research that speaks to inclusive innovation.”

UMP also places emphasis on entrepreneurship, highlighting the importance of opportunity identification, business development, self-employment, and venture creation. Students, researchers, and academic support staff are encouraged to embody an entrepreneurial mindset—seizing opportunities that drive innovation and the design of new products and services, exemplified by the very prominent Centre for Entrepreneurship Rapid Incubator, established in 2022.

“Over time, UMP will become known as a knowledge partner that can foster, drive, and successfully implement social and technological innovations,” Prof Stroebel adds.

#### Foundations for the future

The Research, Innovation, & Internationalisation portfolio has made significant progress, with advancements in the research office, library, and information services, resource mobilisation, systems strengthening, and a number of strategic initiatives to enhance research and innovation at the university.

This has led to an increase in external research funding, and outstanding achievements in the form of recognition and partnerships of the university’s research and innovation capabilities.

Prof Stroebel’s efforts to more effectively market and communicate the research and innovation achievements and opportunities for collaboration are showing success, meaning UMP will be able to continue to bolster its value proposition as a partner of choice.

For the immediate future, strengthening and expanding the UMP Institutional Research Themes will remain a priority to contribute towards advancing and sustaining a reputation for innovation, relevance, and research and teaching linkages.

Rolling out the UMP Innovation Framework and implementing the Research and Innovation Strategy will be priorities for advancing excellence and efficiency towards global recognition.

New areas of investment, including innovation in agricultural education and training, food systems, and the Just Energy Transition will be advanced during 2025.

From a capacity development perspective, a dedicated focus remains the fostering of a well-prepared corps of next-generation researchers

through supportive approaches to postgraduate training and early career development, and to build a critical mass of motivated and inspiring research leaders and mentors who are well-supported by research services.

The ultimate goal is to support each researcher to be research active, and to contribute in a diverse way to the academic project. By 2026, the university would have doubled its number of National Research Foundation (NRF)-rated researchers, which highlights the evolving basis of excellence, support, enablement, and opportunities provided by the university.

“From 2025 onwards, significant effort will be placed on renewing and forging international partnerships; well-aligned with the university’s growing ambition, research prowess, and impact-orientation. The development of an Internationalisation Strategy, complementing the Research and Innovation Strategy, will be

informed by a broad and strong base of partnerships developed since the establishment of UMP 11 years ago,” Prof Stroebel concludes.

“By internationalising education, UMP has started to develop globally competitive students and researchers, while also benefiting from knowledge exchange programmes, enhancing both academic and professional standards.

“For South Africa to secure a prosperous future, it needs to focus on fostering research, innovation, and internationalisation. These elements are essential for building a resilient, competitive, and sustainable economy, as well as for improving the quality of life for its citizens.

“Universities, as central hubs of knowledge, innovation, and collaboration, are critical to driving this transformation and ensuring that South Africa remains an active player in the global economy.” ▲



partnering with the CSIR to launch a Big Data Hub. “These are extraordinary opportunities to be implemented this year, guided by the embracing and cultivation of research and innovation as a core function of the university, at this early stage of its existence,” he adds.

#### Innovation at UMP

UMP’s strategic plan—Vision 2030—articulates an ambition to be an African university leading in creating opportunities for sustainable development through innovation.

The university has embarked on the formalisation of an Innovation Framework which acknowledges and values the innovation process from the point of conceptualisation to impact.

Innovation is inclusive of the process of creating, developing, and applying new ideas, methods, technologies, or approaches to address real-world challenges and generate tangible benefits for society.

UMP’s Research and Innovation Strategy identifies ‘achieving steady growth in technological and social innovations that contribute to development and financial sustainability’ as one

of six strategic objectives to address real-world challenges and generate value.

For UMP, this includes a process-focused approach—bridging the gap between knowledge generation and its practical application to create transformative societal benefits; multidisciplinary collaboration—incorporating diverse contributions from all disciplines to drive both technological and social advancements, and equal participation opportunities for inclusivity; and a focus on research-led innovation—leveraging scholarly inquiry and evidence-based approaches to develop impactful solutions grounded in rigorous investigation.

In addition, central to the approach, is the integration with entrepreneurship—focusing on opportunity identification, business development, and practical implementation to translate new ideas into marketable solutions and economic growth; creating an enabling environment—a supportive institutional setting that fosters creativity, interdisciplinary collaboration, and critical thinking; and diverse stakeholder engagement—academia and external stakeholders such as government, industry, and society to align research

# There's a lot more to it than just teaching and learning

**When it comes to ensuring that both staff and students are excelling at the University of Mpumalanga, Prof Mashudu Davhana-Maselesele, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Teaching and Learning, is in charge of making the magic happen.**

**A**s Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Teaching and Learning at the University of Mpumalanga (UMP), Prof Mashudu Davhana-Maselesele plays a crucial role in shaping the academic vision of the tertiary institution, which is to be an African university that leads in creating opportunities for sustainable development through innovation.

In alignment with the vision, Prof Davhana-Maselesele's role is to ensure that UMP commits to upholding African epistemology by embracing the unique nature of knowledge, as well as the diverse ways of gaining and validating knowledge.

UMP's programmes are designed to celebrate and reflect Africanness, fostering pride and

alignment with African values and worldviews—it's Prof Davhana-Maselesele's job to drive that point home.

“My role involves providing both strategic leadership and operational oversight to ensure excellence in all aspects of Teaching and Learning. A key part of my mandate is to drive the intellectual and strategic agenda for academic initiatives, aligning them with the university's strategic goals and the National Plan for Higher Education. My focus is on enhancing the quality of the academic project, thus increasing the success rate of UMP graduates,” Prof Davhana-Maselesele, who holds a PhD in Programme Development from the University of Johannesburg (UJ), explains.

“The university is growing at a fast pace and in support of the growth that is taking place,

my role is to facilitate the conceptualisation, development, and launch of new academic programmes. I also oversee the implementation thereof, ensuring that there is alignment of new academic programmes with the university's vision and that they meet the evolving needs of our students and country.

“Through these efforts, I facilitate the development of an academic plan that defines UMP's future size and shape.”

#### Providing the right footing for all

To ensure that lecturers have the right tools and conditions to foster a top class environment of learning, Prof Davhana-Maselesele says that UMP is committed to creating an institution where staff can thrive and grow, fostering both personal and professional development.

To achieve this, UMP provides targeted training opportunities through workshops and seminars, collaborates with experts while valuing the expertise of their own team, and encourages participation in relevant teaching and learning conferences. UMP also offers financial support to help staff enhance their knowledge base and skills.

To promote teaching excellence, UMP actively supports their academic staff in pursuing the Post-Graduate Diploma in Higher Education. This qualification is designed to empower lecturers with a deep understanding of higher education pedagogy, equipping them with both the theoretical foundation and practical tools needed to excel in teaching and learning.

In terms of the strategic imperatives under Prof Davhana-Maselesele's watch, the following are the most important in getting the job done:

- Enhancement of innovation in teaching methods, such as blended and online learning approaches.
- Establishment of frameworks for continuous professional development for academic staff.
- Development, implementation, and monitoring of initiatives which promote the scholarship of teaching and learning across faculties.
- Provision of guidance and leadership in the development, approval, and implementation of new academic programmes.
- Development, support, and monitoring of progress of curriculum initiatives, which is a response to transformation imperatives in the university and wider society.
- Establishment of collaborations with industry and other strategic partners to enhance learning opportunities, especially with regards to Work Integrated Learning (WIL).
- Facilitation of the development of tutorship and mentorship programmes through the Academic Support Services Division in consultation with faculties.
- Establishment of proactive measures to identify and support students at risk.
- Monitoring of compliance with accreditation and quality assurance bodies.
- Monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning.
- Oversight of resources required for the effective delivery of teaching and learning, including infrastructure and information and communication technology services.
- Strengthening graduate attributes to ensure that graduates are equipped with skills for employability, entrepreneurship, and global citizenship.

“We also develop initiatives to foster critical thinking, problem-solving, and lifelong learning in students as we expose them to different extracurricular activities,” Prof Davhana-Maselesele, who trained as a nurse and midwife at the then Venda Nursing College, adds.

“We also acknowledge outstanding teaching through awards and incentives, while providing our lecturers with modern teaching technologies like smart class rooms within the iconic, state-of-the-art infrastructure we have at the university,” she states.

The same line of thinking is afforded to students at UMP, where Prof Davhana-Maselesele says they create a safe, inclusive, and welcoming learning environment where all students feel valued, respected, and empowered to excel.

“We inculcate the values of the university to our students. UMP's values are excellence,

inspiration, relevance, adaptability, collaboration, diversity, and integrity. Our commitment to holistic student development extends beyond academics. Through our Academic Support Services Division, we offer programmes like tutorship and mentorship to support students' academic success. We believe in keeping students engaged and creating opportunities for them to thrive in all aspects of university life,” she reveals.

Student involvement is central to UMP's philosophy. As a result, UMP actively encourages participation in the various decision-making processes, including curriculum development

and campus initiatives, through the Student Representative Council (SRC), which serves on key university committees.

“Our graduate attributes serve as a guiding framework. These are introduced during orientation and reinforced throughout their journey at UMP. These attributes include: displaying critical-thinking knowledge and skills; being resourceful, responsive, and responsible; showcasing innovation, entrepreneurship, and adaptability; showing confidence and effectiveness in communication; and proving to be ethically and socially aware change agents,” Prof Davhana-Maselesele, who completed post-doctoral studies at the University of California in Los Angeles, USA, explains.

“To enhance their learning experience, we provide access to cutting-edge technology for teaching and learning, ensuring students receive training on its effective use. Our well-equipped libraries and computer laboratories further support their academic endeavours, creating an environment where every student can reach their full potential.”

#### Setting strong goals for 2025

In 2025, Prof Davhana-Maselesele's primary focus will be on expanding and enhancing professional qualifications to meet the evolving needs of South Africa and its workforce.

Specifically, the aim is to prioritise the development of qualifications in critical areas such as health and accounting, which will assist in addressing national skills shortages and supporting economic growth.

Additionally, Prof Davhana-Maselesele says that UMP remains committed to the advancement of postgraduate qualifications, “ensuring that our programmes are rigorous, relevant, and aligned with both academic excellence and industry demands”.

“Furthermore, we plan to strengthen partnerships with industry stakeholders and professional bodies to ensure that our qualifications are aligned with market requirements.”

As we move deeper into 2025, Prof Davhana-Maselesele says that upon reflection on the year 2024, she carries with her a number of valuable lessons which will strengthen not only her own standing, but that of the university's as well.

“One of our key takeaways is the value of strong stakeholder engagement, as our partnerships with industry and community organisations proved instrumental in aligning our programmes with market needs,” she says.



“My role involves providing both strategic leadership and operational oversight to ensure excellence in all aspects of Teaching and Learning”

“Moving forward, we will deepen these collaborations to enhance the relevance and impact of our offerings through their continual participation as advisory boards. The pace at which the university is growing warrants us to fundraise more rigorously to ensure that our iconic infrastructure meets the demands of students.”

**A leader with a strong vision for UMP**

When asked to describe her leadership style, Prof Davhana-Maselesele was quick to use the words “collaborative, visionary, and adaptive”.

She believes that by using this trio of attributes, she is enabled to inspire and guide teams effectively, while at the same time fostering an environment where innovation and excellence can thrive.

“I believe in empowering others by valuing their input and expertise. Through open communication and active engagement, I encourage teamwork and collective decision-making. This approach has allowed me to build strong relationships with stakeholders, creating a shared sense of purpose and fostering trust across the institution,” Prof Davhana-Maselesele, who holds a Postgraduate Diploma in International Research Ethics in Southern Africa (IRENSA) from the University of Cape Town (UCT), avers.

In an ever-changing higher education landscape, adaptability is crucial. That is why Prof Davhana-Maselesele remains open to learning, responsive to feedback, and proactive in addressing emerging trends.

“I lead with resilience, ensuring that teams are equipped to navigate uncertainty and capitalise on new opportunities,” she concludes.



*Prof Mashudu Davhana-Maselesele*

“In summary, my leadership style balances vision with collaboration and adaptability, ensuring that I can effectively navigate the complexities of my role while empowering those around me to excel. This approach has been instrumental in driving

innovation, fostering a culture of excellence, and advancing the institution’s teaching and learning goals.”

And we look forward to seeing just how far you can take both the staff and students of UMP in the future. ▲



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- ✓ Postgraduate Diploma in Hospitality Management
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- ✓ Bachelor of Commerce Honours in Economics
- ✓ Bachelor of Commerce Honours in Business Management
- ✓ Bachelor of Commerce Honours in Organisational Psychology
- ✓ Bachelor of Science Honours (General)
- ✓ Bachelor of Science Honours in Geology
- ✓ Bachelor of Science Honours in Entomology

- ✓ Bachelor of Science Honours in Geography
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For more information visit: [www.ump.ac.za](http://www.ump.ac.za)



# Ensuring a prosperous future for Mpumalanga's students



**Dr Paul Maminza is the man charged with ensuring that the University of Mpumalanga's student body is equipped to create a bright future for themselves—and ultimately South Africa.**

**T**he Student Affairs Division at the University of Mpumalanga (UMP) is a vehicle through which the tertiary institution is able to ensure the holistic development of its students by providing them with a vibrant student life experience.

This is achieved through four main focus areas, namely: Student Housing; Sports and Recreation; Student Health Services; and Student Governance and Development.

UMP strives to provide students with appropriate student accommodation that allows for them to continuously engage with their academic and social life, even when they are in residence.

This is done through, amongst others, the promotion of living and learning activities in the residences that are coordinated and managed by the Residence Student Assistants.

UMP's on-campus accommodation facilities provide iconic infrastructure and state-of-the-art facilities such as common rooms, study spaces,

and recreational and games rooms for their resident students.

The majority of students stay in the accredited private accommodation facilities that are found in and around the city of Mbombela, while the accreditation of these facilities involves an adherence to strict criteria in order to ensure that the facilities are of good standard and provide all the required basic services and amenities for students.

"The vibrant student life at UMP is provided through the provision of, among others,

sporting, cultural, and recreational activities. The university currently has over 12 different sporting and cultural codes, teams, and clubs that students participate in, ranging from soccer, rugby, netball and tennis to volleyball, cricket and many others. On average, four teams are sent to participate and represent UMP in the USSA tournaments annually," explains Dr Paul Maminza, UMP's Dean of Students.

"The provision of health services and support for students is also of critical importance and takes centre stage in the provision of adequate support for students in our university. UMP has a campus clinic that is managed by a professional nurse in both our Mbombela and Siyabuswa campuses. We also have a student counsellor who is a clinical psychologist to provide the much-needed counselling services to students. The clinical psychologist is assisted

by registered counsellors who are based in each of the clinics."

UMP has committed itself to the holistic development of students. In order to achieve this, the tertiary institution provides a number of development programmes and workshops for students, including personal development programmes, academic support programmes, and skills development programmes such as financial literacy, particularly for first year students. There are also over twenty different student societies focusing on a number of areas of interest. Student societies provide platforms for student development activities and opportunities. Some of the student societies have represented the university at national events and competitions, winning along the way.

"Another area of student development relates to the promotion of effective student leadership and governance. The members of the Student Representation Council (SRC) and the Campus Representative Councils (CRCs) attend a number of leadership development programmes and workshops during their term of office. These interventions ensure that our student leadership plays an effective leadership role," Dr Maminza adds.

"The Student Affairs Division provides all the necessary development programmes and other student-related support services in order to ensure the delivery of the academic project of the university. We ensure that students are in a good state of mind and in good shape to engage and participate successfully in their academic journey while at UMP."

#### A tenure filled with highlights

UMP completed its first decade of existence in 2024, with the 10-year journey dubbed the 'Pioneering Journey—Luhambo Lwemhlahlandlela'.

As the first Dean of Students at UMP, Dr Maminza has had to pioneer the establishment of the Student Affairs Division and put in place systems and processes that made it possible for the division to grow and mature to what it is today.

A number of highlights come to mind for Dr Maminza, with a big one being the Decade of Excellence and Creating Opportunities, which involved promoting a fair and democratic SRC.

"The university has successfully, and this happens every year without fail, held peaceful and democratic elections of the SRCs. This is worth noting if one takes into account the

challenges that SRC elections usually pose in other institutions nationally," Dr Maminza says with pride.

"UMP has always managed the election processes with success. This can be attributed to the decision that management took in earlier years to promote continuous engagement between management and the student leadership. The continued engagement results in timeous and effective ways to attend and deal with issues that the student leaders may have. It also led into the promotion of a good working relationship between management and the student leaders."

During the year 2021, the university saw its first and only female SRC President elected. The election of Vuyelwa Magagula was a result of the development programmes that UMP has been offering its students. Magagula participated in the Vice-Chancellor Female Students Leadership Programme which targeted female students who had leadership potential.

"I must hasten to mention that Ms Magagula was, and continues to be, an example to our students at UMP. She is currently one of the Academic Talent Stewardship Programme (ATSP) Fellows at UMP," Dr Maminza adds. The good news stories don't stop there.

"One of our student societies, the UMP ENACTUS Team, which was established in 2016, succeeded in 2017 and made it to the final ENACTUS National Competition held in Johannesburg. The team did not only make it to the final but won a number of awards and brought home six trophies. Our team also came in position five overall out of 21 participating universities," he continues.

"We must remember that by July 2017, UMP was only three years old. More importantly, it is to note that our team never looked back. They continued with this excellent achievement every year after 2017. In 2022 and 2024, they achieved position two overall as runners up to the winners. To date, our team has brought home over 30 trophies from the annual National Competitions of ENACTUS."

The Siyabuswa soccer team has also made UMP proud. In 2019, they came top of Dr JS Moroka, Nkangala Regional League as the winners of the 2018/19 league and were promoted to the SAB League for the 2019/20 season. Additionally, UMP's choir has flown the institution's flag high at national competitions.



Dr Paul Maminza

I have realised that students are embracing the values of the university and, therefore, it is necessary to continuously find approaches and means to promote the values to our students so that they continue to live them,” he explains.

In 2023 and 2024, the choir participated in the Dr JS Khosa Choral Music Competitions that were held in Giyani. In 2023, the choir secured top spot in the Standard Choir Category and were also crowned the overall winner of the Standard Choir Category—as well as the Best Dressed Choir of the third Dr SI Khosa Choral Music Eisteddfod.

The choir also participated in the Battle of Municipalities (BOM) Choral Music Competition held in East London, Eastern Cape in September of 2023. In a competition that sees many prominent national choirs participating, UMP’s choir finished in the top ten for the Standard Choir Category—Western Song, obtaining eighth spot. In the Standard Choir Category—African song, the choir took sixth position.

“Our choir also participated in the solo tenor, represented by Mr Kulani Mashimbye, and obtained position number three. In 2024, the choir returned to the Dr JS Khosa Choral Music Competition and defended its title for position one in the Standard Choir Category. The choir has grown over the

years and continues to perform in most of the events at the university,” Dr Maminza reveals.

Since 2016, the university has continued to promote excellence in the performance of students in co-curricular activities by acknowledging and rewarding students who have excelled each year.

This, Dr Maminza says, has been done through hosting the Co-curricular Excellence Awards Gala Dinner to honour deserving students.

“We have seen an increase in students’ performance every year. Students who have done well during the year win trophies and get awarded certificates for their achievement,” Dr Maminza says.

“Another milestone is the promotion of the Love My Campus Campaign which we started in 2017. Students and staff members have embraced this campaign and have continued to participate in the campaign which promotes the love for the university facilities, grounds, infrastructure, and image. Through this campaign, we have been able to ensure that members of the UMP community take pride in their university and, thus, take care of its buildings, facilities, and equipment.

“New staff and students are provided with ‘Love My Campus’ T-shirts which are worn every third Friday of the month. We have seen the benefits and positive impact of this campaign in that our campuses are clean and well looked after. This campaign is very important in ensuring that our new iconic infrastructure and state-of-the-art facilities are looked after and kept in good condition. We have also seen students come up with projects that promote the Love My Campus campaign over the years.”

#### What 2025 holds for Dr Maminza

Dr Maminza says that he has learnt valuable lessons from what the university has been able to achieve in the past decade.

As a result, he believes that it is vitally important to start the next decade of UMP’s existence with a solid foundation, starting in 2025.

“The promotion of effective engagement and dialogue between the student leadership and management remains top on my agenda, since this is a very delicate task that must be assured of success, otherwise there could be challenges that may lead to unacceptable consequences,” he says. “As a division, we have taken a decision last year that we need to promote and support staff in Student Affairs to focus on, among other

things, conducting research on their areas of work as practitioners in different areas of interest. The promotion and support for staff in undertaking research projects is also up on my agenda for the year.

“I also plan to enhance the work of the division to align more towards supporting the delivery of the academic project of the university. In other words, activities and programmes that are run in Student Affairs should embrace, promote, and take an academic posture. Our activities should not be aloof and stand-alone from academia. This is an approach that one wants the Student Affairs division to take and promote.”

As UMP is a values-driven institution, Dr Maminza plans to continue to promote the UMP values of excellence, integrity, diversity, collaboration, adaptability, relevance, and inspiration to both staff and students.

“I have realised that students are embracing the values of the university and, therefore, it is necessary to continuously find approaches and means to promote the values to our students so that they continue to live them,” he explains.

“We are also going to continue in prioritising our zero-tolerance to any behaviour that seems to be GBVF inclined. And also, to deal with mental health-related issues that our students may present. We have put systems and approaches in place to ensure that our students are effectively supported and assisted.”

#### An immensely proud leader

Dr Maminza takes great pride in the fact that UMP is making such a big impact on the local community in Mpumalanga. He believes that the tertiary institution is the “best singular gift that our people and communities in Mpumalanga have been given”.



His feelings are based on the fact that his fellow Nkomazi community members are being given a platform to shine—and that can only be a good thing for the future of the province and this country.

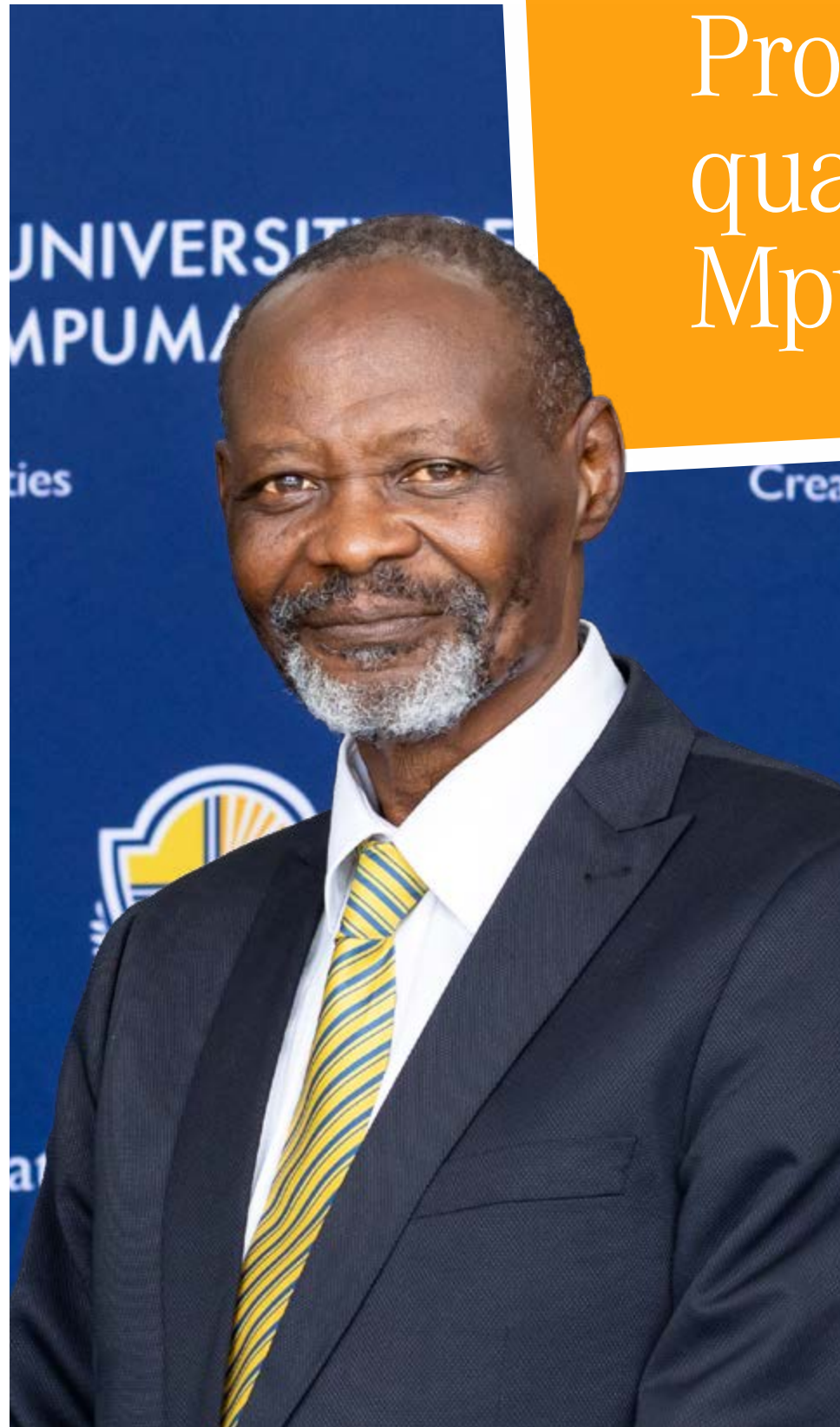
“I happen to come from the Nkomazi area in the province. I know students who are studying at UMP doing their master’s and PhD studies who come from Nkomazi. I get so proud when I talk to people in my community and mention these individual students who are achieving these higher levels of education due to the existence and the work of UMP,” he says with immense pride.

“The fact that UMP is providing over 75 academic qualifications, including 18 Masters and five PhD qualifications shows that the leadership of UMP knows what they are doing for the people of Mpumalanga and, ultimately, South Africa as a whole.”

As a leader, Dr Maminza is driven by his need and desire to be committed to his work and as inspirational as possible to others. That commitment to his work and the university as a whole has seen him dedicate his energy and life to the success of UMP.

“I have, over the years, participated and contributed to the university’s growth and development in many ways. And as a member of the university’s management, I have had the opportunity to contribute to the strategic development and direction of the institution.

“As a leader, I believe that I also have to be an inspiration to those that I lead and motivate them to grow in their areas of work as well as their personal development and life improvements. I am pleased that I have seen the growth of some of my colleagues in the division which one can attribute to one’s contribution and motivation to the colleagues,” he concludes. ▲



Prof Moses Mbewe

# Producing quality in Mpumalanga

**Prof Moses Mbewe is making huge strides as he looks to further cement his legacy within the role of Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC): Postgraduate Studies, Engagement and Planning at the University of Mpumalanga (UMP).**

**F**or all strategic matters pertaining to postgraduate students, engagement and relationship management with internal and external stakeholders, graduate placement, alumni and convocation, continuing education, and planning at the University of Mpumalanga (UMP), the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC): Postgraduate Studies, Engagement and Planning is responsible.

Prof Moses Mbewe is that responsible person and has been putting his years of experience to the test in the role for nearly two years.

While he admits that it has not been an easy task to date, the fruits of his and his staff's labour are realised when the finished product leaves UMP ready to make a difference in the world, in a manner which is befitting of the tertiary institution.

"It is not an easy task, but if one produces a better prepared graduate, the product sells itself through graduate attributes and develops a reputation in the job market," Prof Mbewe, who holds a BSc in Biology from Texas Southern University, USA, and a PhD in Microbial Genetics from the University of Cambridge, United Kingdom, explains.

"The advice that I impart is to be knowledgeable in your field of study and be able to demonstrate that. Read to know and not just to pass."

To produce the best possible graduates, a lot of work goes on behind the scenes, not just in the lecture halls or practical areas.

Prof Mbewe believes that a UMP graduate is therefore afforded the chance to enter the job market with a holistic education that will make them a top choice for employers both nationally and globally.

"I want to build a community of postgraduate students that are aware of the world around them, but are also very good in their area of expertise by virtue of the linkups that we built within the country, with industries and other universities, so that the student is really enriched," he adds.

#### Stakeholder relations

When it comes to the challenges faced in his role, Prof Mbewe points to the need to convince "some of the stakeholders to prefer quality rather than quantity" and "trying to convince people to prefer long profitable goals instead of short term gains" with respect to both the academic and graduate sides of the university.

His message to the private sector in terms of further supporting UMP in its endeavours has to do with the upskilling of students in order to even better prepare them for the world of work.

Working together in this regard will help in continuing to produce world class talent at the tertiary institution—providing further opportunities for the South African economy to grow in the process. "A partnership of student training with the private sector in the form of work integrated

learning placements (WIL) will go a long way towards achieving the goal of relevant and well trained students for industry with competence for day one. Forming partnerships in this area will be appropriate and appreciated," the former Dean of Agriculture and Natural Sciences at UMP says.

In closing, Prof Mbewe let us in on his most proud moment to date at UMP and, you guessed it, it has to do with the conduct of students and their ability to prove their skills to the nation—in a winning manner.

"My proudest moment is seeing our students demonstrating UMP graduate attributes on stage at the ENACTUS national competition... and winning," he concludes.

And we hope to see more of these winning moments in the future. ▲



The advice that I impart is to be knowledgeable in your field of study and be able to demonstrate that. Read to know and not just to pass

# ‘Inspiring’ only touches the surface with Vuyelwa Magagula

The journey Vuyelwa Magagula has gone on at the University of Mpumalanga is the stuff of dreams—and she’s far from done.

**B**eing a pioneer in any role can be daunting, as there is no reference point to draw on as you look to forge your own path.

For Vuyelwa Magagula, while becoming the first—and only to date—female President of the University of Mpumalanga’s (UMP) Student Representative Council (SRC) in 2021 was challenging and daunting, it was a role she accepted with open arms and a mind full of ideas as she looked to make a tangible difference.

“My time as SRC President at the University of Mpumalanga was transformative, teaching me the true essence of leadership as a service to others,” she explains with pride.

“One of the most profound lessons was the importance of listening deeply to the needs of the student body and translating their concerns into actionable solutions. I learned the value of accountability, as the role required me to not only represent but also uplift and inspire the students I served.”

When she started to serve as SRC President, Magagula was in her third year of Development Studies. Balancing academics with her leadership responsibilities was difficult at first, but it taught her the importance of time management and discipline.

“This experience significantly contributed to my academic excellence, and I proudly graduated with my Honours and Masters degrees, both awarded cum laude,” she continues.

“Collaboration was another key takeaway. I discovered how critical it is to work with

diverse groups—from university management to external stakeholders—in addressing challenges. Through this role, I honed my ability to mediate, negotiate, and advocate for solutions that enhance the student experience.

“Lastly, the experience instilled in me resilience and adaptability, as leading during a time of significant institutional growth required innovative thinking and unwavering commitment.”

## What it meant to be President

Magagula says that being the SRC President provided her with a solid foundation for achieving her goals. It taught her how to lead with integrity and purpose; a skill she now considers invaluable in her academic and professional journey.

“This role sharpened my problem-solving skills, as I had to tackle complex issues under pressure while ensuring inclusivity and fairness in decision-making,” she explains.

“Additionally, the leadership skills I developed have fueled my passion for research and advocacy. Having represented a diverse student body, I’ve grown confident in taking on leadership roles that require strategic thinking and collaboration—qualities that align perfectly with my long-term academic and professional goals.”

To other women aspiring to lead and follow in her footsteps, Magagula’s message is simple: “You are capable, and your voice is needed. Leadership is not about being perfect; it’s about being courageous, determined, and true to your values. Never let societal norms or doubts define your potential.”

A big part of her success can be traced back to the inspiration provided by UMP’s Vice-Chancellor, Professor Thoko Mayekiso.

The Prof’s commitment to empowering women and fostering an inclusive academic environment has been instrumental in shaping Magagula’s leadership journey—as well as many others along the way.

“Her example has shown me that women leaders can drive transformation, break barriers, and create lasting impact. To the women following in my footsteps, I urge you to embrace the responsibility of leadership, knowing that you have the power to inspire and pave the way for future generations,” Magagula insists.

## Magagula the Academic Talent

**Stewardship Fellow and Associate Lecturer**  
Following her immense success as the SRC President, Magagula has gone on to become an Academic Talent Stewardship Fellow and Associate Lecturer at UMP, where her role has seen her take a multifaceted shift to blending teaching, research, and mentorship.

She is actively involved in designing and delivering engaging lectures, supporting students in their academic development, and contributing to impactful research.

These responsibilities demand both academic rigor and a deep commitment to fostering a supportive learning environment—which she has had no issues in tackling head on.

“This role has shaped me by sharpening my ability to engage with diverse perspectives, which has strengthened my teaching

and research capabilities. It has also deepened my sense of purpose in academia, particularly in advocating for gender equity and creating opportunities for underrepresented groups,” she avers.

“Through this role, I have grown as a leader and educator, continually inspired by the potential I see in my students.”

Professionally, Magagula believes her strengths lie in her ability to lead with vision and empathy; excelling in fostering collaboration and building inclusive environments where everyone feels empowered to contribute.

Her strong communication and analytical skills allow her to articulate complex ideas effectively, whether in a lecture hall or a leadership setting.

Personally, Magagula is deeply resilient and adaptable. “I approach challenges with determination and a growth mindset, always striving to learn and improve. Empathy is at the core of who I am, enabling me to connect with others and build meaningful relationships,” she explains.

## The UMP difference and what the future holds

UMP combines a commitment to academic excellence with a nurturing environment that values individuality and community. Its strategic location in Mpumalanga, surrounded by the region’s natural beauty and cultural heritage, makes it a uniquely inspiring place to learn.

For Magagula, UMP is more than just an institution of higher learning, “it is a beacon of transformation and opportunity.”

“UMP is also the institution that granted me life-changing opportunities, including a study abroad programme at FH Joanneum University of Applied Sciences in Austria. During this time, I came out top of my class and had the privilege of traveling to over eight countries, including Spain, Italy, France, and Germany. These experiences broadened my global perspective and enriched my academic and personal growth,” she adds.

UMP’s dedication to creating opportunities such as these for its students is a testament to its commitment to excellence and holistic development. Under the visionary guidance of Prof Mayekiso, the university has prioritised inclusivity, women empowerment, and creating pathways for success for students from all backgrounds.



Vuyelwa Magagula

## Dr Paul Maminza, UMP’s Dean of Students, on Magagula’s impact

“During the year 2021, the university saw its first and only female SRC President elected. The election of Vuyelwa Magagula was a result of the development programmes that UMP has been offering its students. Magagula participated in the Vice-Chancellor Female Students Leadership Programme which targeted female students who showed leadership potential. I must hasten to mention that Ms Magagula was, and continues to be, an example to our students at UMP. She is currently one of the Academic Talent Stewardship Programme (ATSP) Fellows at UMP.”

“UMP is not just a place where you earn a degree—it’s where you grow holistically, both as a professional and as a person,” Magagula insists.

In terms of what the future holds, Magagula envisions herself as a leading academic and thought leader in the field of gender equity and climate adaptation.

She aims to complete her PhD and contribute to shaping policies and frameworks that address the intersection of energy transitions, gender, and social justice.

“I also aspire to take on greater leadership roles in academia, continuing to mentor and inspire young women to pursue their ambitions fearlessly. Beyond academia, I hope to collaborate with global organisations to drive

impactful initiatives that uplift marginalised communities and advocate for systemic change. My ultimate goal is to be a catalyst for transformation, ensuring that education and leadership remain accessible and inclusive for all,” she concludes.

And we can’t wait to see just how far you can go in the future. ▲

# Taking Agriculture and Natural Sciences to the next level

**As the Dean of Agriculture and Natural Sciences at the University of Mpumalanga, Prof Ndiko Ludidi is determined to produce graduates who are not only ready to make their mark on the world of work, but who are ready to help change South Africa's fortunes.**



Prof Ndiko Ludidi

**T**he faculty of Agriculture and Natural Sciences at the University of Mpumalanga (UMP) consists of four schools, namely the School of Agricultural Sciences, School of Biology and Environmental Sciences, School of Chemical and Physical Sciences, and School of Computing and Mathematical Sciences.

The schools are strategically structured to cover agriculture, science, technology, and mathematics education, offering higher certificate, diploma, advanced diploma, bachelor, honours, masters, and doctoral qualifications.

The Dean of Agriculture and Natural Sciences, Prof Ndiko Ludidi, is at the helm of this important faculty, with his emphasis firmly on offering students the platform to go on to do great things in the world of work.

“We ensure that in-depth theoretical coverage of programme content is strongly backed by practical and hands-on training through laboratory and field-based work to equip our students with the skills required for the workplace,” Prof Ludidi explains.

“We have enjoyed rapid but carefully managed growth over the past 10 years, driven by the evident quality of our programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels of study.

“We align our academic programmes with the mission, vision, and values of UMP because we place emphasis on these as the basis for producing graduates equipped with the UMP graduate attributes.”



**Looking back on 2024 and the goals for 2025**

The year 2024 was a success for Prof Ludidi's faculty. In addition to a commendable student throughput in various programmes in the face of high assessment standards—as exemplified by feedback from external evaluation of UMP's assessments—several academics received significant research funding.

“This funding facilitated high quality research outputs wherein our postgraduate students played a key role alongside our collaborators. This meant that an impressive number of these academics received NRF ratings indicative of their excellent standing in research and postgraduate training,” Prof Ludidi says with pride.

As a result, the aim for 2025 is to elevate these successes further by maintaining the high level of provision of targeted academic support to undergraduate students, while at the same time increasing the supervisory capacity on offer for postgraduate students.

Another goal relates to expanding the module and programme offering within the faculty.

Examples offered by Prof Ludidi include new modules in UMP's BSc programme, the introduction of an Honours degree in Information and Communication Technology, and the application for accreditation of new qualifications which include a PhD in Computing, Bachelor of Statistics and Data Science, and Bachelor of Science in Agricultural Economics and Agribusiness Management.

“We are paying specific attention to increasing the number of NRF-rated academics in the faculty and the already excellent footprint of the faculty in the South African and international research space through carefully targeted research support systems and collaborations that will increase research funding acquisition

and publications in high impact journals,” Prof Ludidi explains.

“We aim to enhance the translation of our research findings into visible solutions to challenges faced by our society, through partnership with relevant stakeholders internally and externally; this is why we align our academic research with the Institutional Research Themes, since these speak to several of the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations and Agenda 2063 of the African Union.”

**Ensuring UMP produces the right quality**

As Prof Ludidi's faculty covers a broad range of qualifications, there are often questions around ensuring quality graduates are produced for the world of work.

Therefore, how does Prof Ludidi ensure that the standard of teaching is of the highest quality?

“We rely on ensuring that our academic content is designed to the highest possible standards by continuously keeping abreast of academic developments in each programme and linking these with monitoring our curriculum against the requirements of the Council for Higher Education,” Prof Ludidi insists.

“We benchmark our content and its delivery against the other academic institutions nationally and use international comparisons as a point of reference while keeping curriculum relevant to the African context.

“These are coupled with implementing feedback that we receive from our peers and industry stakeholders through moderation reports and programme reviews, and we are increasingly incorporating advisory boards as a tool to ensure quality.”

Prof Ludidi also explained that UMP ensures that in-depth theoretical coverage of programme content is strongly backed by practical and

hands-on training through laboratory and field-based work, in order to equip students with the skills required for the workplace.

Constant interaction with external stakeholders—both private and public enterprises in the industrial sphere in which disciplines covered by the faculty's academic programmes have a bearing—ensures that Prof Ludidi and his team are able to maintain relevance when it comes to the academic programmes they offer and what the industry needs.

**Supporting South Africa and leading from the front**

The programmes UMP offer are designed to address the needs of the country in terms of upskilling students in critical areas that drive the economy and development of South Africa.

This is underscored by the crucial role that the faculty plays in providing the human resource base required to drive agricultural sustainability—which is the backbone of a developing country—and the scientific and technological advancements on which economic growth relies. As recently outlined by the Minister in the Department of Science, Technology, and Innovation (DSTI), Blade Nzimande, the strategic focus of the DSTI for 2025 has been placed on Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI) to drive education, society, and industry forward.

“The faculty embraces this strategic focus and aligns its academic activities with this STI strategic focus,” Prof Ludidi states.

As a leader at UMP, Prof Ludidi admits to have learned some very valuable lessons along the way, which have helped to strengthen both the man himself and his faculty.

His most valuable lessons, however, come in the shape of collaboration and an openness to learning from others—both of which have led to resilience across the board.

“Being open to new ideas and constructive criticism as a tool to learn from others, while paying due attention to organisational policies and regulations, yet allowing space for their periodic review to accommodate changing environments, and working collaboratively with peers, contributes to a successful organisation and its resilience. This, for me, is one of the most important lessons which I have adopted into my armoury as a leader,” he concludes.

And we wish you nothing but the best as you look to make a mark on South Africa's economic needs in the years to come. ▲

# The embodiment of UMP excellence

**Meet Confidence Ndlovu, a University of Mpumalanga student-turned-lecturer who has experienced exactly what it means to be supported and developed with dedication and intention by the tertiary institution.**

**C**onfidence Ndlovu has been through quite the journey at the University of Mpumalanga (UMP) and is the embodiment of what the tertiary institution is trying to achieve for the people of both the province and South Africa at large.

Ndlovu is a former recipient of the Vice-Chancellor Scholarship; former Academic Talent Stewardship Fellow; former recipient of the Abe Bailey Travel Bursary; former President of UMP Enactus; current Associate Lecturer; and is the first masters graduate at UMP.

Her list of achievements are testament to her hard work and dedication to creating a brighter future. She is a true inspiration to the university and her community at large.

“When I joined UMP in 2016 to pursue a bachelor’s degree in Development Studies, it marked a significant milestone not just for me but my community in Bushbuckridge. For that reason, pursuing a masters degree at the time felt like an unattainable dream, but my passion for learning and personal growth deepened over the years, fueling my determination to further my education,” Ndlovu explains.

“In 2020, I embarked on the life-changing journey of pursuing a masters degree as part of the first cohort in Development Studies. This decision coincided with the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced a transition from the supportive campus environment to remote study under the difficult realities of rural life.”



*Confidence Ndlovu*

Despite the challenges, Ndlovu was driven by the belief that this qualification would unlock opportunities, bring her closer to independence, and enable her to support her family financially—a major driving force.

“Through resilience, I achieved my goal and graduated in 2021 for my masters degree completed in just one year, becoming UMP’s first masters graduate. This milestone represents what is possible through determination and perseverance.

“I hope my legacy inspires others to dream big, take bold steps toward their goals, and believe that they, too, can overcome barriers in their lives. It is also a testament to the opportunities UMP offers to students dedicated to pushing themselves,” she adds.

### The definition of UMP excellence

Ndlovu formed part of the first cohort of the Academic Talent Stewardship Programme (ATSP) and was appointed as an Associate Lecturer in the Faculty of Economics, Development, and Business Sciences in May 2021. ATSP is one of the prestigious programmes run by UMP. It recognises and awards academic excellence with a primary goal of developing UMP excellence.

After successfully completing the ATSP in May 2024, Ndlovu was officially appointed as a permanent lecturer in the School of Development Studies.

Ndlovu admits that serving as a lecturer at UMP has been an intellectually enriching and transformative experience, significantly contributing to her personal and professional growth.

“In this role, I have the privilege of shaping critical thinkers and nurturing future leaders capable of addressing complex societal challenges. My work aligns seamlessly with UMP’s core values of excellence, relevance, and collaboration, enabling me to cultivate a classroom environment that fosters innovation, inclusivity, and intellectual curiosity,” she explains.

“Beyond teaching, I have been actively involved in initiatives such as the First-Year Experience Programme. This initiative focuses on mentoring and supervising student mentorship activities, helping students navigate their transition into university life while promoting academic and personal development.”

This opportunity has profoundly influenced her leadership style, enhanced her understanding of effective pedagogy, and reinforced



her commitment to academic excellence and community development.

“Overall, being a lecturer at UMP is rewarding, intellectually stimulating, and fosters impactful engagement. I look forward to continuing to contribute meaningfully to the university’s mission and the broader academic community,” she adds.

As a recipient of the Vice-Chancellor Scholarship, Ndlovu’s academic journey was made a little bit less stressful thanks to the financial relief that it brings.

However, her story does not start with the scholarship, and she admits that it took hard work and dedication to secure funding for her academic adventure.

“I was not funded when I began my academic journey and because of that I faced financial challenges. Determined to change my circumstances, I actively sought funding opportunities and learned about the Vice-Chancellor’s Scholarship later in 2016. This prestigious scholarship is awarded to academically excelling students with leadership potential,” she explains.

“Through my hard work and good grades, in April 2017 I was awarded the scholarship, marking a turning point in my academic career and my family’s future. The scholarship

provided vital financial support and opened doors to invaluable training opportunities in leadership and personal development.”

Ndlovu was funded by the Vice-Chancellor’s Scholarship from her second year of study through to the completion of her masters degree. The mentorship she received honed her skills in strategic planning, teamwork, and communication.

This foundation enabled her to excel in leadership roles, including serving the Enactus Executive Committee as the President in 2020, where she led a team in developing sustainable, community-driven projects.

“Under my leadership, the team achieved significant success at the Enactus 2020 National Competitions, including winning \$5 000 in the Ford C3 Building Communities Project Partnership category. Not only did the scholarship shape my leadership skills, but it also fueled my aspiration to work for UMP one day, allowing me to give back to the institution that played such a pivotal role in my journey,” Ndlovu says.

In 2017, Ndlovu was fortunate to be afforded the opportunity to travel to the United Kingdom for the Enactus World Cup, thanks to the support of the Vice-Chancellor and the leadership of UMP.



“UMP has provided me with a platform to grow and inspired me to contribute to the institution’s development while empowering the next generation of leaders,” a proud Ndlovu explains.

“UMP is a place of countless opportunities, development, and transformation. Whether you’re a student looking to shape your future or a professional seeking a dynamic environment, UMP offers a platform for success.

“It is a supportive environment in which academic excellence meets real-world impact. I encourage prospective students and staff to seize the opportunity to be part of a community that values diversity, innovation, and leadership. At UMP, you will not just learn or work, you will thrive and make a significant difference in your life and others.”

While she has achieved so much already, Ndlovu has a firm eye on what she wants to achieve next—with UMP very much a continued part of that journey.

“My immediate goal is to complete my PhD in Local Food Systems by the end of 2025. Additionally, I hope to pursue a second doctorate in entrepreneurship on a global scale, expanding my knowledge and contributing to international research,” she concludes.

“Long-term, I aim to be a renowned researcher and expert in food security and entrepreneurship, both nationally and internationally. I hope to conduct impactful research, influence policy, and mentor future leaders, leaving a legacy in academia and the communities I serve.”

And we look forward to seeing just how far you can go and the difference you can make along the way. ▲

This experience broadened her horizons and fueled her desire to explore the world further for personal and leadership development.

Later in 2018, Ndlovu applied for the prestigious Abe Bailey Travel Bursary, which funds a three-week educational tour of the United Kingdom and Ethiopia. The bursary’s main objective is to broaden students’ horizons while fostering leadership and cultural exchange.

“Soon after a rigorous selection process that included interviews with UMP management and the Abe Bailey Trust, I was recommended for the bursary. This was life-changing experience that deepened my understanding of global leadership, cultural diversity, and development. It also allowed me to establish meaningful connections with young leaders across South Africa and internationally,” she says with pride.

“Through a network of brilliant minds, I have engaged in collaborations that continue to foster innovation and impactful project development. Today, I serve in various panels selecting new Abe Bailey recipients, contributing to the programme’s mission of identifying and supporting South Africa’s future leaders.”

**The UMP difference and lasting impact**

UMP has very clearly been instrumental in shaping Ndlovu as an academic, leader, and changemaker. Her humble nature stems from the journey she has walked with the institution, from Secretary of Enactus UMP in 2017/18 to President in 2020, and now as a Co-Faculty Adviser since 2021.

These roles reflect the university’s commitment to nurturing leadership and personal growth.

Currently, Ndlovu coordinates the Student Women Economic Empowerment Programme and serves as the Business Development Manager at UMP’s Centre for Entrepreneurship and Rapid Incubator.

These roles have enhanced her analytical, critical-thinking, and problem-solving skills, along with a passion for fostering innovation and creating opportunities for others.

“UMP has provided me with a platform to grow and inspired me to contribute to the institution’s development while empowering the next generation of leaders,” a proud Ndlovu explains.

# Should we be worried about Artificial Intelligence?

**Prof Aldo Stroebel, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, Innovation, and Internationalisation at the University of Mpumalanga, shares his views on Artificial Intelligence and what it could mean for the education and work landscapes going forward.**

**I** am a firm believer that Artificial Intelligence’s (AI) rapid integration and development across various sectors, including academia, presents both opportunities and challenges for all involved.

The majority of higher education institutions are compelled to consider AI’s impact on the educational environment, including on how research and innovation is conducted, and how students are educated, in the context of rapid digital transformation.

South Africa and our neighbours are being led by countries from Northern Africa in terms of the extent of structured AI programmes offered in universities across Africa, followed by nations from East Africa.

Globally, more than one billion jobs will be transformed by AI technology in the next 10 years, emphasising that universities need to prepare students (and staff) for this revolution well ahead of time.

The University of Mpumalanga (UMP), as a way to be proactive, has developed a framework to guide its research, teaching, and learning for the responsible use of AI and AI-based learning tools, considering specific research and practice foci to be conducted by its highly regarded School of Computing and Mathematical Sciences. This strategic direction addresses the rather urgent need to provide guidance and direction with regard to capacity building in AI. This capacity will also consider potential new curriculum for AI aimed at meeting the growing demands for potential use-cases for AI,

concentrating on challenges facing the likes of agriculture, infrastructure, water, social development, and communication on the continent.

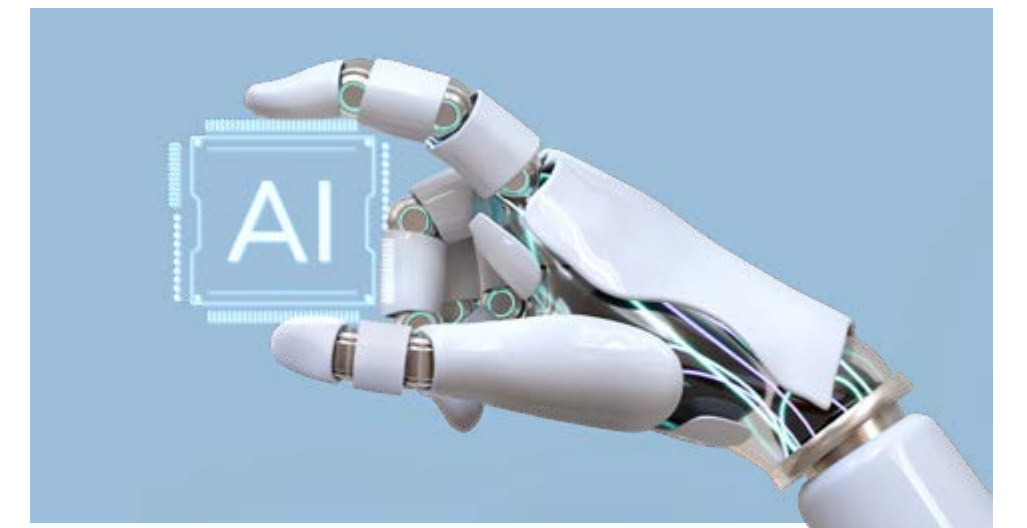
The transition to a digital economy will certainly bring significant challenges, phased over periods as the transition takes place. However, this emphasises the proactivity and urgency required from a multiplicity of stakeholders for a positive future for us all.

For instance, the youngest global population is in Africa, with 70% of the population of Sub-Saharan Africa under 30 years of age. It is projected that AI will contribute \$15.7 trillion to global GDP, and that the contribution to Sub-Saharan African countries could be up to \$136 billion. It is therefore realistic to project that there could be a significant positive impact on the job market, cognisant that universities

should be enabled and positioned to develop adequate skills to support the growth in the AI sector.

The years ahead will see a major transformation in higher education, and the educators of the future will be those who understand that technology works best when it strengthens, and not replaces, human relationships and the ability to connect on a human level. As these tools are being adopted, there should be a deliberate intent to protect elements of the teaching and learning experience, and of postgraduate students when it comes to research experience.

Therefore, we must ensure the right balance is and continues to be a significant focus for higher education over the next decade and beyond. ▲



# Providing education in South Africa with a boost

**Prof Hilda Israel is the Dean of the Faculty of Education and her role is to ensure that the University of Mpumalanga plays its part in helping to shape the minds of young South Africans.**

**T**he focus of the Faculty of Education at the University of Mpumalanga (UMP) is on preparing student teachers to become professionals, with a focus applied on teachers for the Foundation Phase level; Grade R to Grade 3.

At under-graduate level, UMP emphasises mother tongue education, where each student specialises in one African language, namely: Ndebele, Sepedi or Siswati. Roughly 400 students are currently working on their B Ed degree.

At post-graduate level, UMP offers a B Ed (Hon) in Teaching and Learning, Masters in Education, and, new in 2025, a PhD in Education. Around 30 students are enrolled per year at post-graduate level.

At the helm of this faculty is Prof Hilda Israel, whose full title is the Dean of the Faculty of Education.

"In the last five years, my focus for the faculty has been on establishing all organisational, leadership, and management systems; introducing the honours, masters, and PhD programmes; and ensuring the academic integrity and rigour of our B Ed modules. Quality assurance through it all has been imperative," Prof Israel explains.

"Over the next five years, the introduction of more under-graduate programmes will be a priority. This has already started with the development of the B Ed in Intermediate Phase Teaching.

"My long-term dream for the faculty is for it to become a division of Under-Graduate Studies, Post-Graduate Studies, and Continuous Education Studies—each being reinforced by academically motivated lecturers in greater numbers. These are lecturers who meet the demands of 21st century teaching and learning needs, lecturers who are productive as researchers and who directly serve the Siyabuswa and Mpumalanga community through sustainable engagement projects."

## The current landscape of South African education

Prof Israel is of the belief that alignment between teacher supply and demand needs to be finely tuned. While the number of teacher graduates produced per year should be increased, these graduates simply have to meet the needs of the South African education system, first and foremost.

In addition, the skills needed to grow South Africa's economy largely depend on the subjects being offered at schools and on teachers who are

qualified to teach those subjects. More teachers are needed in the STEM subjects, which will ultimately determine the career paths of matriculants and the type of impact future generations will have on the economy.

"At UMP, we produce about 100 B Ed graduates per year, but not all are appointed at schools for various reasons within the DBE—one of which is the lack of alignment between supply and demand," she states.



Prof Hilda Israel

"The PG Teacher Education Programmes at UMP provide insight into how education can be improved, because research conducted gives feedback to the local site of the study, as well as to the higher authorities and decision makers. Research informs where improvement is needed.

"I also sit on the Executive Committee of the National Education Deans' Forum, where all Deans listen to and provide information to the DHET and DBE. Interaction at this level provides an opportunity for UMP to share what we are doing; our successes and our challenges in terms of the education system."

Following the signing into law of the BELA Bill, there has been much debate around the subject of mother tongue education.

Prof Israel believes that mother tongue education is imperative, as it provides the foundation for basic learning in the classroom and a continuation of what is taught at home.

In the South African context, she says that it is essential for learners to comprehend basic concepts in the language in which they are most competent. This enables transfer of various important concepts to other languages.

"Being part of a global society, and acknowledging the role of English as a common international language, it is expected that SA learners will have to gradually progress into bilingualism and multilingualism. Comprehension of concepts from mother tongue to any other language is supported by mother tongue basic education," Prof Israel explains.

"The BELA Bill has good intentions in that it promotes mother tongue education, with the purpose of ensuring that educational standards are uniformly met across the country. It ensures the compulsory inclusion of Grade R learners by age five years.

"However, the potential removal of single-medium instruction within provincial schools has sparked controversy. Also, implementation and monitoring of the Bill, and related funding, have yet to be resolved."

## What makes a good teacher?

"To teach is to lead."

That phrase is something Prof Israel believes wholeheartedly in, as being a teacher is a calling, not just a career path.

Prof Israel also believes that a teacher needs to be ethical and practise integrity at all times, under any and all circumstances.

"I also strongly believe that respect for one's self as a teacher, as well as respect for the learner one is leading, are qualities that should be inherent in the character of a teacher," she insists.

## In addition, Prof Israel lists the other important characteristics of a strong teacher:

Being professionally qualified and competent in content knowledge and different teaching methodologies;

Being highly organised and prepared before entering a classroom;

Always being punctual; and

Acknowledging the individual learner amidst the class group and providing for the different aptitudes of learners. Both the differently abled learner and the gifted learner should be recognised and taught accordingly.

As it is evident that it takes a special type of person to become a truly valuable teacher, this could lead to apprehension in some students looking to secure the right career path for themselves.

While Prof Israel admits that teaching is not for everyone, if you believe you have what it takes, it is a decision which will not only change your life forever, but those of the learners you help to shape.

"If you know that you would enjoy being a teacher, and that you can patiently lead a learner in the process from 'I don't know' to 'I know', then consider being a teacher," she avers.

"If you want to change the world, change society, change a community, change your neighbourhood, then the way to do so is through teaching and learning. A teacher is the starting point for the development of every career. Every good teacher is remembered by their learners for all of their lives.

"To be a teacher is the most rewarding profession one can have, but it requires hard work, commitment, and dedication."

## Leading the next generation of teachers

As the Dean of the faculty, and more specifically, the founding Dean, Prof Israel says she has always tried to live the motto of "To teach is to lead".

This is important to her as her staff and student teachers need to see that she is doing both at all times. By humbly respecting her role and visibly respecting her colleagues and their roles, her leadership style comes to the fore.

"My leadership style incorporates having many different qualities and adapting them to each context as it arises. One has to be a transformative change agent, intentionally working within the vision, mission, and values of UMP. For example, one has to integrate knowledge of UMP policies, South Africa laws, programme development, and the application of such into the faculty context," Prof Israel concludes.

"Together with this, one has to facilitate change management and its impact; to positively process conflict management and to know and understand the personalities and career aspirations of staff members, as well as their personal contexts. Being able to deliberately listen to the needs of individuals, and to speak to their contexts in a friendly, professional manner has helped me to work with my staff in together developing our faculty to where it is now. We are a forward-looking faculty that teaches and leads as we grow."

And we look forward to seeing more progress and success coming out of your faculty in the years to come. ▲

# A leader pushing to shape lives and minds

**Prof Vusi Gumede is a leader who believes that a settled faculty of Economics, Development, and Business Sciences will have long term benefits for all who participate in its operations.**

The faculty of Economics, Development, and Business Sciences at the University of Mpumalanga (UMP) is home to 27 undergraduate and honours programmes, including a higher certificate, two diploma programmes, an advanced diploma, and a postgraduate diploma.

Within the faculty are three schools, namely: School of Development Studies; School of Social Sciences; and School of Hospitality and Tourism Management—all of which strive to produce well-rounded graduates who are ready to not only tackle the world of work, but thrive.

At the helm of the faculty is Prof Vusi Gumede, a dedicated professional who is constantly looking at ways to innovate within his area of expertise to ensure the goal of producing outstanding graduates continues for years to come. For 2025, Prof Gumede has set very clear goals to align with his vision. One such goal is the aim to introduce additional programmes which will work to ensure articulation from undergraduate to doctoral level.

Two diplomas—one in entrepreneurship and the other in logistics—are among the planned programmes, in addition to a bachelor of tourism management. Another important goal is that of the Mpumalanga-in-Context Common Course, which he believes should gradually be offered to all first-year students at the university in order for them to fully grasp the context they are learning within. Delving deeper into the human side of the faculty, for Prof Gumede, key to the success of both lecturers and students within his faculty is the ability to understand why you are in the position you are in. It is then important to undertake to commit to the end goal.

“One of the key messages for a faculty that houses both commerce and management, as well as social sciences, humanities, and law, is that analytical and problem-solving skills are critical, not only in the job market but also in entrepreneurship and other endeavours,” Prof Gumede insists.

“As a faculty that is growing relatively fast, as the university grows—at least in terms of the student population and staff members, an area of attention is to ensure that academics are committed and understand that the main reason we are in the academic sector is to serve students. It is important that people who decide to join the academic sector acknowledge that a university exists because of students,” he adds.

## Lessons learned, leadership, and the future

“An important lesson for me has been that leadership is about taking decisions, even when the decisions are difficult or may come across as unfair to some people. Linked to this, is that it is critical that a leader should lead by example,” Prof Gumede explains.

This lesson has helped shape Prof Gumede as a leader. While he admits to usually combining various styles of leadership to form his armoury, he is one to generally use a participative and/or transformative approach to leadership guided by thought leadership.

“In other words, with a full understanding of the issue at hand, I apply a leadership approach that I consider appropriate for a particular context. I think this approach has somewhat helped in assisting that we deliver on what is expected of our faculty,” he states.

In terms of what Prof Gumede hopes to see happen with the faculty of Economics, Development, and Business Sciences in the future, it all boils down to leading a settled environment which is populated by the right people who are ready to shape lives.

“In the long term, all critical programmes for a faculty like ours should be in place. In addition, having a team that is fully committed and has a good work ethic will ensure that the faculty contributes effectively to the vision and mission of the university,” he concludes. ▲



Prof Vusi Gumede



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