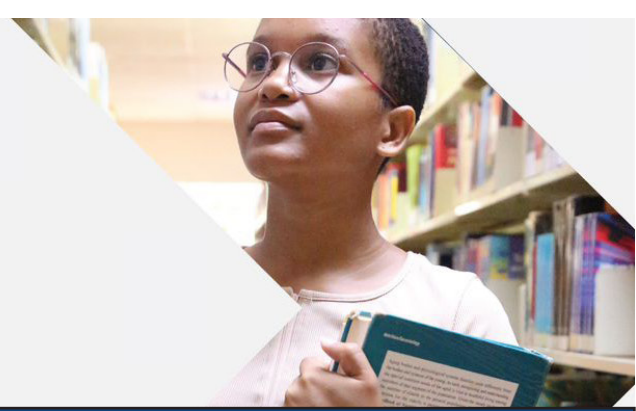




University of Venda  
Creating Future Leaders

# UNIVEN Weekly e-Newsletter



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## Celebrating Excellence: University of Venda Awards Recognise Outstanding Contributions in Research, Teaching, and Community Engagement

At the heart of academic institutions lies the commitment to fostering an environment of growth, innovation, and impact. The University of Venda (UNIVEN) has long upheld these values, striving not only to provide quality education but also to contribute positively to the surrounding communities. In line with this, the University of Venda Vice-Chancellor Excellence Awards were introduced to celebrate and highlight the exceptional accomplishments of its staff in research, teaching and learning, and community engagement, Entrepreneurship, Inclusive Innovation and Commercialisation. The Excellence Awards aim to recognise staff members who have demonstrated an unwavering dedication to their professional roles and have gone beyond expectation in contributing to the university's goals.

Whether through groundbreaking research, transformative teaching methods, or impactful community involvement, these awards celebrate those whose efforts embody the core values of UNIVEN. The University of Venda 2024 Vice-Chancellor Excellence Awards were held at the Premier Hotel in Thohoyandou on Friday, 04 October 2024.

Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Professor Bernard Nthambeleni celebrated the outstanding achievements of researchers at the University of Venda, emphasising the importance of research in advancing knowledge and shaping human progress. He highlighted the university's continued commitment to fostering innovation and scholarly excellence, exemplified by the recognition of exceptional researchers.



**On photo:** Awardees posing with the University Management after receiving their well deserved awards

Prof Nthambeleni also acknowledged the global impact of innovation, citing historical breakthroughs like electricity, the airplane, and the telephone, as well as local South African contributions to medical advancements. The Vice-Chancellor and Principal explored the concept of creative destruction, where technology evolves rapidly, and stressed the importance of addressing global challenges such as climate change, health crises, and inequality through research.

He commended the researchers' contributions to the 4th Industrial Revolution and their work on sustainable development goals, social justice, and healthcare. Five researchers with significant output were specifically recognised with awards in April 2024. Prof Nthambeleni said any researcher who publishes more than seven units will be eligible to receive this same reward, as soon as the publication output report is released by DHET.

Prof Nthambeleni concluded with a call to continue pushing boundaries and advancing knowledge, expressing pride in the university's scholars and their transformative work.

In her welcoming remarks, Professor Nosisi Feza, Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research and Postgraduate Studies, expressed gratitude to attendees, including the Mayor of Thulamela Local Municipality, Cllr Sarah Rambuda, Principal of Vhembe TVET College and representatives from various institutions. The Deputy Vice-Chancellor highlighted that the University of Venda (UNIVEN) fosters a research culture centered on relevance, impact, and engagement, addressing real-world challenges and driving societal change. The university emphasises interdisciplinary collaboration, stakeholder involvement, and policy integration to ensure its research is practical, actionable, and transformative. She pointed that the key pillars of UNIVEN's research culture include interdisciplinary collaboration, stakeholder engagement, policy influence, a problem-driven approach, sustainability, ethical practices, and adaptability, emphasising that UNIVEN is committed to creating meaningful societal impact through inclusive, collaborative, and long-term solutions aimed at building a more equitable and resilient future.

Prof Sebie Lekalakala-Mokgele, Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Teaching and Learning, delivered a heartfelt message celebrating the recipients of the Vice-Chancellor's Excellence Awards. She praised the award recipients for their dedication, intellectual curiosity, and perseverance, highlighting their contributions to scholarship, teaching, and leadership. Awardees were recognised for their groundbreaking research addressing global challenges and for their impactful community engagement initiatives. Prof Lekalakala-Mokgele emphasised that these awards represent not only individual achievements but also a collective commitment to institutional excellence. She expressed pride in their work and encouraged them to continue making meaningful contributions to academia, research, and society, while also acknowledging the support systems behind them.

Dr Mboneni Muofhe, Deputy Director-General of the Department of Science and Innovation, emphasised that a university's value extends beyond its management—it is its researchers who truly define its impact. He highlighted the crucial role that researchers play in addressing the pressing challenges we face today. Dr Muofhe also encouraged those who have not yet received awards to remain focused, noting that they are on the right path, and that their research is already making a meaningful impact. He further stressed the importance of engaging with communities as knowledge holders, recognising that collaboration with local communities can enrich research outcomes and contribute to solving real-world problems.

The Vice-Chancellor's Excellence Awards honour outstanding contributions across three core pillars that define the university's mission and impact: Directorate of Research and Innovation; Community Engagement, Entrepreneurship, Inclusive Innovation and Commercialisation, and Teaching and Learning.

39 NRF Rated Researchers were also recognised during these Excellence Awards.

Dr Robert Martin, Deputy Vice-Chancellor Corporate Services thanked those who were honoured, acknowledged their vital role in the university's success. He reflected on the challenge of recognition, which sets new expectations while celebrating past accomplishments.



Dr Martin highlighted the university's mission to create a meaningful impact on society, drawing parallels between entrepreneurship and research as both seek to address societal needs. Quoting philosophers, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor emphasised the importance of purpose in work and concludes with a quote from Nelson Mandela, encouraging everyone to push boundaries and inspire others.

In a time where the role of universities is evolving to meet the needs of a rapidly changing world,

these awards reaffirm UNIVEN's commitment to fostering an environment where excellence is both recognised and cultivated. As the university continues to grow and innovate, the Excellence Awards will undoubtedly remain a key mechanism in encouraging staff to deliver their very best, driving the institution towards an even brighter future. With such a focus on excellence, UNIVEN is well-positioned to continue its pivotal role in shaping not only the minds of its students but also the communities it serves.

## A Day of Devotion: The University of Venda Community Come Together on a Solemn Prayer Day



The University of Venda (UNIVEN) held a Prayer Day on Wednesday, 02 October 2024, bringing together students, staff, religious leaders, and community members to reflect, worship, and seek divine intervention for the university community, particularly in response to ongoing challenges such as grief, depression, violence, and suicide. This event was part of a broader multi-faceted approach, which includes both spiritual and psychological support, to address the mental health and well-being of students.

The gathering took place at the University Stadium and featured speeches from university leaders, religious figures, and other stakeholders.



**Photo:** Prof Bernard Nthambeleni, Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of Venda

The Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Professor Bernard Nthambeleni, highlighted the importance of prayer and spirituality in the university's mission to support students and promote their success. He emphasised the university's commitment to enhancing student well-being and addressing both academic and non-academic barriers. He also spoke about societal issues such as inequality, gender-based violence, and mental health, underlining the university's role in promoting unity, equality, and support for students in difficult times.



The MEC for Social Development, Ms Florence Radzilani, offered encouragement to students as they were preparing for exams and highlighted the importance of combining hard work with faith. She also spoke about societal challenges impacting youth, including gender-based violence and substance abuse.

In addition, psychological and therapeutic interventions were discussed. Dr Morongwa Takalani, a Clinical Psychologist, emphasised the significance of mental health and encouraged students to seek help for mental health struggles before these challenges could impact their academic performance.

The day included performances by gospel artists, such as Minister Lufuno Dagada and Rofhiwa Manyage, offering spiritual and emotional upliftment.

## Masters student from Faculty of Science, Engineering and Agriculture attending a comprehensive agricultural-related training in China



Mr Tebogo Ferdinand Molepo is a Masters student in the Department of Agricultural Economics and Agribusiness in the Faculty of Science, Engineering, and Agriculture and an intern at Fruit South Africa. He was selected by the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform, and Rural Development to participate in the training course on Technologies of Agricultural Mechanisation to ensure Food Security Under the Global Development Initiative for Developing Countries. The Chinese Academy of Agricultural Mechanisation Sciences (CAAMS) hosted the course from 23 August to 12 September 2024. The primary objective of the training was to enhance knowledge and practices regarding agricultural technologies that could significantly contribute to food security,

Faith leaders like Dr Godfrey Thivhafuni and Dr Nkhangweleni Nemukula also addressed topics such as grief, mental health, and how faith communities can support victims of abuse and oppression. Dr Nemukula encouraged faith leaders to create safe spaces for survivors and promote healing, justice, and care.

The event concluded with a powerful prayer for healing and divine intervention led by Apostle Dr William Madzinge, who reminded attendees of God's mercy and readiness to help, even in times of difficulty. This collective day of worship and reflection sought to strengthen the spiritual and emotional resilience of the UNIVEN community.



Overall, the Prayer Day at UNIVEN exemplified a united effort to address the university's challenges through spiritual and emotional support, fostering a sense of hope, healing, and guidance for both students and staff.



*UNIVEN SRC President, John Ndaka appreciating the collaboration of students, university management, pastors and the surrounding communities in prayer*



especially in developing countries. The comprehensive training covered various subthemes with the sampled, including aspects of Global Development Initiative and Sustainable Agricultural Development, Overview and Trends of Global Food Production, The Development Process and Promotion System of Agricultural Technology in China, Application and Promotion of New Water-Saving Irrigation Technologies,

Rural Energy Technology and Equipment, Smart Agriculture and Management Plan, Cold Chain Logistics Technology for Agricultural Products, and Typical Models and Approaches for Sustainable Agricultural Development. The Department and Faculty of Science, Engineering, and Agriculture at large expressed gratitude to Mr Molepo for a fruitful training, which significantly enhanced his knowledge and skills essential for modern agriculture.

## AI for the People: An Ubuntu Approach to Transforming Health, Education, and Economic Landscapes



*On photo L-R front row: Prof. Susan Brigham, Prof. Modimowabarwa Kanyane, Ms Kay-Ann Scott, Prof Fulu fhelo Nelwamondo, and Prof Rachel Tsakani Lebese*

*L-R back row: Prof Lufuno Makhado, Dr George Frempong, Mr Randy Headley, Prof Tshilidzi Mercy Mulaudzi, and Dr Thingahangwi Cecilia Masutha*

The 2024 Ubuntu Africentric Conference, a global gathering, was held at the Skukuza Rest Camp in Kruger National Park from 26-28 September 2024. This significant event explored how African philosophies, particularly Ubuntu, can guide the ethical development and application of artificial intelligence (AI). Organised by the University of Venda (UNIVEN) in partnership with the University of Pretoria (UP) and the Delmore “Buddy” Daye Learning Institute (DBDLI), the summit’s theme, “AI for the People: An Ubuntu Approach to

Transforming Health , Education, and Economic Landscapes,” attracted educators, technologists, policymakers, healthcare professionals, and social scientists from all corners of the globe.

Dr George Frempong, Director of Research at DBDLI, emphasised the importance of aligning AI systems with Ubuntu ideals by promoting diversity, human dignity, and mutual care. He discussed the development of Ubuntu-aligned GPT models, such as the ChatGPT - Ubuntu Research Guide, designed to integrate Ubuntu values into AI technology.

Dr Frempong stressed that AI should advance technological capabilities, respect humanity, and ensure inclusivity.

Throughout the conference, various breakout sessions addressed AI's awe-inspiring, transformative potential when grounded in Ubuntu principles. Topics ranged from AI in healthcare and human collaboration to education and economic empowerment. Experts like Prof Mulondo Seani Adreana, Prof Sepeng Nnombulelo, Ms Nyandeni Sinothemba, and Ms Scott Kay-Ann led discussions on how AI can serve as a revolutionary tool to uplift communities while adhering to the values of equity and connection.

Dr Blackwood's presentation explored how AI can help bridge cultural and linguistic divides, highlighting innovations like LelapaAI, a tool designed to reduce language barriers across Africa. Prof Fulufhelo Nelwamondo, CEO of South Africa's National Research Foundation (NRF), urged African nations to lead in shaping AI's future, urging Africa's youth to prepare them with the necessary technological skills to avoid being left behind in the AI revolution.

Prof Vukosi Marivate, Chair of Data Science at the University of Pretoria, focused on the challenges of developing AI systems for African languages, many of which are low-resource languages. He advocated for community-led efforts to ensure that Africa's linguistic heritage is included in AI development, preventing the marginalisation of African cultures in the global AI landscape.

Cultural festivities added a special touch to the summit, with a traditional Boma Dinner featuring marimba performances. The Ubuntu Living Legend Awards honoured Prof Racheal Lebeso, Prof Fhulufhelo Mavis Mulaudzi, and Ms Nkhensani Khosa for their contributions to Ubuntu. Guest speaker Prof Modimowabarwa Kanyane, Executive Dean of the Faculty of Management, Commerce and Law (FMCL) highlighted the significance of colours in Ubuntu, saying, "Green represents healing, health and fertility, while red symbolises, passion, courage, creativity and strength." This insightful lecture set the tone for the evening, with Prof Tshilidzi Mercy Mulaudzi and Prof Jabulani Makhubele also in attendance.

Student debates on the pros and cons of AI further engaged participants, showcasing the potential of Africa's youth in shaping the future of AI. The conference highlighted the need for continued collaboration between African institutions and the global AI community to ensure that AI development remains human-centred and inclusive.



In closing, Prof Lufuno Makhado, the conference chair, indicated, "The conference has been a platform for exchanging groundbreaking ideas and a testament to the power of community, collaboration, and shared humanity. We have explored how AI, grounded in Ubuntu's wisdom, can serve as a powerful tool for equity, justice, and empowerment, focusing on ensuring that technology uplifts rather than divides and serves humanity rather than undermines it."

The organising committee for the Ubuntu Africentric AI Summit featured a diverse team of experts from various institutions. Led by Prof Lufuno Makhado as Conference Chair (UNIVEN), and co-chaired by Mr Randy Headley (DBDLI) and Prof Fhumulani Mercy Mulaudzi (UP), the committee included members from UNIVEN, the University of Pretoria, and the DBDLI. Other notable members included Dr Thingahangwi Cecilia Masutha, Prof Tshilidzi Mercy Mulaudzi, and Ms Sylvia Parris, ensuring a collaborative and well-coordinated event.



**L-R:** Prof Leepile Sehularo, Ms Olebogeng Tladi, Dr Shonisani Tshivhase, Dr Bumani Solomon Manganye, and Prof Lufuno Makhado