

A warm welcome for the MUT team at Hulammin PMB

The alumni relations team that visited alumni at Hulammin PMB was so warmly welcomed that it seemed as though the alumni had never left MUT. At Hulammin there is a community of MUT graduates who have made it their business to mentor and guide one another as the company takes on more and more graduates from the various MUT engineering departments.

Steven Mhlongo, a control and instrumentation expert at Hulammin, is like a father to the younger graduates. Steven graduated at MUT in 1997 with a diploma in Electrical Engineering (heavy current). He chose MUT because it was a better option for him financially as he could stay with a relative and walk to lectures and back. He said, "The background from MUT made it very easy for me to transition from being an ordinary high school learner to fitting into the instrumentation sector. At MUT it is not all about being a bright student, but about commitment and knowing your dream."



Steven Mhlongo, (middle) with Khaye Mathonsi, (left) and Zinhle Mbongwa. All are MUT Alumni

Steven's own experiences as a learner from a rural school showed him that the major challenge for learners is access to information. He has made it his business to visit schools and give them valid information that will guide them in preparing for tertiary education. He schedules three to four sessions a year, taking his younger colleagues along with him to speak to learners and provide them with information relating to the different sectors within the engineering field. His main message to the learners is that not only people from rich families go to university and become engineers; it is possible for learners from all walks of life to access education and change the livelihoods of their families.

MUT is the "number one" institution Steven speaks of. He is such a loyal brand ambassador and believes that MUT bridging programmes have transformed the lives of many young people from rural schools who may not have earned immediate access to mainstream qualifications. Steven is passionate about personal growth and earlier this year he graduated with a Bachelor of Business Administration to support his engineering background with business management knowledge.

A well-rounded graduate, thanks to her lecturer

Most academics are completely unaware of the impact they make on the lives of the many learners who stream in and out of their lectures. Phila Mtetwa, a lecturer in the Department of Electrical Engineering, is a super-hero in the eyes of her former students, especially female students.



Zinhle Mbongwa

Zinhle Mbongwa, one of Phila's students who is employed in the male-dominated environment of Hulammin, pays tribute to Phila for revealing the bare truths of the engineering industry - especially the many forms of gender-based injustices that females have to deal with. "Phila taught us independence and the need to defend ourselves against male dominance. In this industry you constantly have to deal with chauvinistic colleagues who pass derogatory comments, undermine you, or even refuse to work with you just because you are a woman. The best strategy is to prove your worth through the quality of your work," said Zinhle.

Zinhle says the three years spent at MUT taught her exactly what is practised in industry. "What is practised in class and in the labs is very similar and very relevant to what I am working on. This includes drawings, panels, grooming and plant etiquette," she said.

HR graduate makes it big in a mining firm

An impressive car of German origin has been parked at the University Clinic parking area for almost 24 hours. Those who know anything about this car will see it in a different light. It is a symbol of determination, loyalty, focus, foresight and all the positive sentiments one can think of. It belongs to Mxolisi Ngwenya, an HR graduate. He drove all the way from Richards Bay, in the north of KwaZulu-Natal, for two reasons - for an interview with the scribe of the story, and to find himself at MUT once again. This is a place that 'found' him four years ago and gave him love, support and most importantly, knowledge.

Now Mxolisi is dealing with grown-up issues at Rio Tinto's Richards Bay Minerals site. Rio Tinto is the second largest mining company in the world after BHP Billiton. Richards Bay Minerals mines minerals in the form of zircon, rutile, ilmenite and pig iron from the sand dunes at Richards Bay. Forty percent of the world's ilmenite comes from the RBM site.

"Men my father's age are calling me 'Mr' just because I work at the Human Resources Department. One of them gave me a lift to the mining site and I commented on his poor driving. He almost lost control of the car when I told him I was from HR. He apologised profusely. Many people are under the impression that HR represents the company, which seems to frighten them," said Mxolisi. Because Mxolisi is so young, he decided to grow a beard in order to look a little older.

The former Pinetown Boys' High learner, whose family originated from Mtubatuba in the north of KwaZulu-Natal, attributes his position and stature at RBM to the good decisions that he took at MUT. Firstly, he decided to prioritise his studies. "I studied to know, not to pass. I also decided to join Enactus, which moulded me into what I am today.



Mxolisi Ngwenya

I was able to do a well-received presentation in Canada in April 2018, thanks to the skills I learnt while I was a member of Enactus. I appeal to students to join any social club on campus as they will learn from it," he said.

Mxolisi recruits graduate engineers for the metallurgical department on the two-year Excellence Path programme. At this stage they are already employed full-time, and they stand a chance of promotion within two years. Mxolisi has employed four graduates so far. One is Thandeka Mthiyane, a Chemical Engineering graduate with a B.Tech from MUT, who competed with other graduates with B.Sc.s in Chemical Engineering. "She did so well, they had to hire her," said Mxolisi. Thandeka reports to another former MUT student, Sbuji Mbuyazi, who is a Principal Advisor in the metallurgical department.

Mxolisi handles all HR issues for this department, which comprises over 260 of the mining site's 4,000 employees. Mxolisi could be promoted in the next three months and become an HR Advisor in the same department. His employment band will change, and so will his pay package, besides the number of people that will report to him. But for now, he is still enjoying looking after his large staff, even though it's hard work.

His biggest challenge so far has been handling different personalities on account of the age difference. "The managers are very demanding," he said. "It's important to manage the relationship well." But the training he received at MUT prepared him for such challenges. "Although I worked at MUT for less than a year, the experience prepared me for such challenges. I am often called in as a translator and have a good relationship with elderly guys. They used to see HR as protectors of the company. Now they have someone who communicates with them in their language and their culture."

Mxolisi also gives great credit to MUT's Department of Human Resources where he studied, and to the Department of Student Affairs where he worked before securing his current position. He said that at Student Affairs he learnt how to deal with people who have different perspectives; for instance, students from different political formations and unions with different views. This prepared him for what he now has to deal with at RBM.

Unfortunately, he has also had to dismiss people on account of misconduct. "That breaks my heart, but I have to do it. I recently fired a man who had been working for the company for over 15 years. He made a comment about a colleague of ours that passed away in a Rio Tinto company in Canada. When someone passes away, all Rio Tinto companies have to observe a minute's silence. While colleagues were doing so, this man said, 'Oh, he was just a white man!' Any form of racial discrimination is not tolerated in our company," said Mxolisi.

Mxolisi has some advice for anyone who wants to study at MUT. "Grab the chance with both hands. Don't get lost in the murky world. Carry out careful research on your chosen career field. Do something that excites you. Study to gain as much knowledge as you can. This is what I did, and why I ended up writing a letter to my former HOD, Ms Kotelana. I love what I do. It's fun."