



Date Issued: 3 October 2024

Engagements to strengthen VC vision

My maiden round table discussions with the Minister and other Vice-Chancellors

I had the extreme honour on Friday, 13 September to be part of a Ministerial stakeholder dinner where the honourable Minister of Higher Education, Dr Nobuhle Nkabane invited all university Vice-Chancellors to an engagement session. As one of the newest Vice-Chancellors, having taken office on 1 August 2024, I was privileged to be congratulated by the Minister. It was also a new beginning for our government and the Department of Higher Education and Training ministry. Minister Nkabane took office in July when President Ramaphosa announced his new cabinet after the national elections that took place at the end of May 2024. Strategic engagements like this one are always ideal for me to position MUT and seek opportunities to take the University to its next chapter. The USAf CEO, Dr Phethiwe Matutu was present, as well as NSFAS Administrator, Freeman Nomvalo who was available to address issues related to the student funding scheme.

Minister Nkabane emphasised that Vice-Chancellors need to share how best they could turn around their institutions and focus more on issues around curriculum review. She further highlighted important areas the country is grappling with that would require Higher Education Institutions to focus on: blue

economy, and renewable energy, which includes electricity and hydrogen economy. Minister Nkabane urged us to come up with mitigating strategies to address these issues.



Vice-Chancellor Professor Nokuthula Sibiya, left, and Dr Nobuhle Nkabane Member, MP

All Vice-Chancellors were given a platform to share with the Minister the major challenges that universities grapple with, which include student debt. Student debt keeps growing exponentially due to major socio-economic challenges that the country is experiencing. This situation impacts on the financial sustainability of the universities, governance issues such as regulation of Councils, unpreparedness of our students, student unrest at the beginning of the year due to the same issues around NSFAS and accommodation, and security and exponential rate of gender-based violence at our universities. The Minister committed to addressing these issues and she advised

the Deputy Directors-General to fast-track the process of one-on-one meetings with the Vice-Chancellors so that we finalise the Department of Higher Education and Training's five-year projections.

As we are at the tail-end of MUT strategy 2025 and working on the University strategic plan for the next five years, take-home nuggets from the Ministerial stakeholder dinner have enabled me to align our five-year plans to the national projections, while featuring in strategies to address the common challenges in the sector.

NRF visit reignites research rigour

My two months in office has been grounded on conversations with strategic stakeholders who enable the University to deliver its mandate of skilling the youth of South Africa and beyond. It was the start of many conversations when I hosted the Chief Executive Officer of the National Research Foundation (NRF), Dr

Fulufhelo Nelwamondo, and a delegation from different units within the NRF. As I have just started my term as Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University, it is very important to strengthen the working relationship with the NRF to support my vision for the University.



Seated, are left, Dr Fulufhelo Nelwamondo, and Professor Nokuthula Sibiyi, and MUT and NRF staff

The MUT-NRF engagements fit with my vision of growing MUT vertically so that we improve our PQM and introduce more master and doctoral programmes. Outlining the purpose of their visit, the NRF CEO stated it was about understanding the niche and posture of the University so that the NRF could customise the necessary interventions and offer differentiated support that fit the needs and strengths of MUT. Several immediate, short, and long-term gains for both organisations were identified. The availability of NRF infrastructure and laboratories for use by MUT's Nature Conservation students is an immediate gain for the University which we are fast exploring and will be taking on soonest. Other programmes will include joint programmes and joint appointments, staff secondments

and exchanges using the NRF model, as well as targeted funding modalities that will be customised, and guided by the needs of MUT.

Such partnerships require effective systems to be in place, that is why I have set a target to develop a retention strategy so that MUT does not lose top researchers and scientists. It has been a worrying trend at MUT that our rated scientists do not stay at the Institution for long because of our limited PQM and opportunities for postgraduate supervision. As part of the retention strategy, we have made progress with establishing a postgraduate office that will manage and coordinate postgraduate programmes.

SANEDI CEO visits his alma mater

MUT hosted a mini homecoming on 26 August 2024, when the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the South African Nation Energy Development Institute (SANEDI), Dr Titus Mathe, visited MUT as a follow-up on the groundwork done for the establishment of an EnergyWaterFoodClimate Leadership Centre of Excellence at MUT. Dr Mathe, a graduate of MUT, has come on board and committed R1.8m annually for the next three years to enable MUT establish a Centre of Excellence for EnergyWaterFoodClimate. This will ensure that MUT is fully functional, and this proposed centre benefits not only MUT, but also the community of eThekweni. Working together, MUT, SANEDI, and Siyacanda Energy, one of the University partners, will soon be establishing a centre committee which among others will develop business cases to attract more funders to invest in the centre, focusing on Just Energy Transition. The progress made with this multi-partner project that started with seed funding of R12m from GIZ, a German partner, is very exciting. Collaborating with an industry partner Siyacanda Energy, MUT has produced the first cohort of 15 students that have undergone an intensive six-month training on air pollution and mitigation. Through the centre, MUT and

its partners are building capacity of the next generation of climate change and air pollution specialists. The six-month programme started with the Faculty of Engineering and is now being rolled out to spread across the University. From humble beginning, the longer-term vision is turning the programme into a short course that will be open to everyone interested in acquiring knowledge about climate change mitigation.



Partners in developments! Seated, third from left is Dr Titus Mathe and forth from left, Professor Nokuthula Sibiyi with MUT and SANEDI staff, and Siyacanda Energy CEO, Dr Olu Ajayi, seated, left, during the SANEDI visit

Turning challenges into opportunities for the VC five-year vision

From 11 to 13 September 2024, MUT management had a lekgotla to lay a foundation as we plan for the University's new strategic plan. This gathering was necessitated by a need to reflect on how we are doing with the current strategy whose shelf life is about to come to an end. Together with management, we took a thorough introspection because to know where we want to go, it is important to know where we are and how we are doing. I was impressed when we reviewed our performance against our Annual Performance Plan (APP); we exceeded the targets, overachieving on 24 out of 32 performance targets. This constitutes a success rate of 75% which I greatly appreciate. However, as the Vice-Chancellor and Principal, I implore everyone to do better and thrive for 100%. The summary of the 2023 APP provided us with data to plan effectively for 2025.

Armed with this knowledge we are making steady progress with the development of strategy 2026 – 2031.



Professor Nokuthula Sibiyi foreground, right, with Dr Liile Lekena-Bayaga. Back, left, Rakash Jugernath, Director: Finance; and Professor Babatunde Bakare, Dean: Faculty of Engineering, at the lekgotla

EMC Resolution on the Workload Model

We are making progress with putting in systems to achieve goal 2 of the MUT strategy, which is Excellence in Research. The executive management has taken a resolution on a revised workload model that has been structured so that academics will have time to focus on research and community engagement. Research and community engagements are two of the three pillars of MUT; the other one is teaching. We have set a goal for our academic staff to produce the required 0.5 research units, therefore, to achieve this goal, the Acting Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Teaching and Learning is currently reviewing the model of employment to get research output growing.



Professor Nokuthula Sibiyi

Progress with strategic senior leadership appointments

I am happy to report that the University is on track to reach leadership stability, given the latest senior appointment developments. I am delighted to share with you that the recruitment process for all these positions will be concluded before the end of 2024. These are the results of the strides made by the Administrator in fast-tracking the process of the appointment of the senior management. As you know, I have been appointed as the Vice-Chancellor and Principal. This was one of the Administrator's terms of reference. My installation ceremony is scheduled for 1 November 2024. In September we conducted the interviews for the Senior Director: Operations and we anticipate that the incumbent will assume their position in November 2024. Shortlisting for the three Faculty Dean positions was conducted in September 2024. We have also concluded the process of filling the vacant position of Director: Supply Chain Management.



Professor Nokuthula Sibiya

My effort to improve MUT research rigour

Once a researcher, always a researcher. This statement is my motto that inspires me as take on the mammoth task of leading Mangosuthu University of Technology. I never see myself divorced from research. I regard it as a calling to me. Also as an NRF C2-rated researcher, I put effort every day to ensure that I retain my rating. It is for this reason that from 6 to 7 September 2024, Theo Davies, a Research Professor in the Faculty of Natural Sciences, and I facilitated a postgraduate supervision workshop for academic staff, researchers, and support services staff who aspire to either improve their postgraduate supervision skills, or to one day become postgraduate supervisors. The audience included seasoned as well as novice researchers which made it more exciting and interactive. A total of 30 staff members attended the two-day workshop which has equipped them with a wealth of skills to foster academic growth across the University.

As a seasoned postgraduate supervisor who has graduated several PhDs and Master's students – Professor Davies has his own sterling record, I designed the workshop delivery so that it equipped participants with the essential skills and knowledge required to effectively supervise postgraduate students, ensuring a high standard of academic mentoring and research guidance. Effective postgraduate supervision is very important for both the academic success of students and the professional development of supervisors. The workshop touched on challenges and best practices that supervisors need to prepare for such as managing the diverse needs of post-graduate students, who often come from varied academic backgrounds and have different levels of preparedness. At the centre of this workshop was promoting academic excellence at MUT, setting high standards for research quality, fostering an environment of continuous learning, and encouraging innovative thinking.



Seated, second and third from left, Professors Nokuthula Sibiyi and Theo Davies, and MUT staff that attended the postgraduate supervision workshop

SRC elections mark the level of maturity in our students

The month of September has been filled with a lot of activity and colour as the campus witnessed the build-up to the SRC elections. The annual election of the new student leadership is a very important event in the University calendar as this gives the entire student body a chance to elect among their peers those who will represent them during strategic engagements and important decision-making platforms of the Institution. The SRC elections are a true test of how mature our students are. In the past, elections were marred with disagreements and disruptions. I am extremely proud of all the students who were nominated to represent their organisations and those who contested as individual candidates.

In 2024, as MUT we used social media to drive awareness around the SRC elections. This has provided two-way engagement as students could not wait to read about the next stage and give their opinions and advice to the SRC candidates. SRC elections took place on 19 September 2024 and were declared by the electoral officer to be free and fair with no incidents reported. Portfolio allocation took place on 25 September 2024 at the Seminar Room, Student Centre. The newly elected President is Nkanyiso Mhlengi Ngubo, who together with other members was inaugurated on 1 October 2024. Delivering my address at the inauguration ceremony, I committed that I am going to have quarterly round table sessions with the



SRC members in black gowns and MUT management. Professor Nokuthula Sibiya is fourth from right

SRC and committed to having monthly meetings with the student leadership so that we work together to identify issues and find mitigation strategies. Working closely and in a structured

manner with the student leadership will allow me to pay attention to what is happening on the ground and be one with all stakeholders.

Let us connect again next month.



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