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Opinion editorial, Professor Rushiella Songca

Reimagining MUT as a Research Powerhouse A Call to Action

By Professor Rushiella Songca

“When I hosted our very first Research Imbizo at the MUT Students’ Centre, on 14 April 2026, as part of my 100-Day Engagement Plan, my main goal was to share with you a research plan that has worked in my previous life and align it with what has worked at MUT research to and to listen to you to see how we could elevate our research agenda.

I am grateful for the warm buy in into the plan by the executive and the researchers. I was also humbled by the researchers’ openness about where the challenges may be. What I heard was both eye-opening and inspiring. It reinforced for me that MUT’s future will be shaped by our dreams and what we are willing to do together to make those dreams a reality.

We are at an exciting point in our journey as an institution. If we truly want to position MUT as a leading University of Technology, we need to place research at the heart of who we are. Our goal is clear: we want to move from the margins to the top 15, and eventually to the top 10 universities in the country within the next few years. This means we need to act with urgency, commitment, and teamwork.

Research is the lifeblood of a vibrant university. It is how we create new knowledge, tackle real-world issues, and make a positive impact on society.



Professor Rushiella Songca

For MUT, nestled in the heart of Umlazi and closely connected to our communities, research needs to be meaningful and relevant. It should resonate with the realities of our people while also placing us in global discussions.

During the Imbizo, I made it clear that everyone here has a role in research. This is not about ticking boxes; it is about taking pride in our work. It is about finding our academic voice and showing that excellence can come from anywhere when it is supported. To support this, we are establishing solid systems to monitor and encourage research activities across the university.

Our deans will be crucial in leading this effort within their faculties, ensuring that we not only produce research outputs but also sustain and enhance them over time. We are also working to strengthen our postgraduate pipeline, helping colleagues with master's degrees to pursue doctoral studies and become the next generation of mentors and scholars. One of the first stop gap measures I proposed was that we allow every researcher that is at the terminal point of their research be allowed to work from home every Friday so they may have at least three days (Friday through Sunday) to focus on their research.

Importantly, we are putting our money where our mouth is by committing R2 million to research and development, especially to help first-time researchers get started. And this is thanks to the generosity of our Council, who have provided this seed funding. This investment will thrive

on transparency, collaboration, and a collective sense of purpose.

We plan to launch a multidisciplinary research journal and aim for accreditation within three years. Through our "MUT in Research" initiative, we are inviting everyone to take the lead on new projects, share ideas, and help shape the future of our institution.

As we move forward, we must also address the inequalities that exist in academia. We cannot talk about excellence in research without making sure everyone has a place, especially women in research. We need to create a nurturing environment where emerging scholars can grow and succeed, mentoring one another along the way. Our focus should be on supporting growth, not creating barriers.

The road ahead may have its challenges. It will challenge us to rethink our workflows, our collaborations, and our measures of success. But I truly believe that MUT has the talent, the strength, and the potential to rise. The Research Imbizo was just the start of our conversation, a kick-off for a larger movement.

If we think boldly, act with discipline, and unite in our purpose, we will redefine what is possible for universities like ours that are deeply rooted in their communities."

"Let's build together, MASAKHE, now is the time!"



Professor Rushiella Songca, middle, with MUT staff that attended the Research Imbizo

Research directorate lays the ground for research excellence

Following the momentum of Professor Rushiella Songca's Research Imbizo, the Research Directorate led by Dr Anette Mienie has set the tone for a renewed culture of accountability and excellence when it convened a series of off-campus workshops aimed at strengthening research integrity and institutional capacity. Against a backdrop of increasing regulatory demands and a growing emphasis on ethical scholarship, the Directorate positioned these engagements as both a strategic intervention and a call to action for the university community.

On Tuesday, 5 May 2026, academics and professional support staff gathered for an immersive session titled *"Responsible Research in Practice: Ethics, Supervision & REC Reviews."* The workshop, facilitated by Leonie Louw from University of South Africa, moved beyond theory to engage participants in practical, real-world scenarios. Discussions unpacked the complexities of the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), highlighting the responsibilities of researchers in safeguarding personal data in an increasingly digital research environment.

Through case studies and interactive dialogue, participants explored ethical decision-making processes, reflecting on the nuanced challenges that arise in supervision and collaborative research. Particular emphasis was placed on the critical role of the Research Ethics Committee (REC), not merely as a compliance structure, but as a cornerstone of credible, socially responsible scholarship. The session encouraged a shift in perception, from viewing ethics as a procedural hurdle to recognising it as integral to research quality and societal trust.

What emerged from the workshop was a shared understanding that research integrity is a collective responsibility, requiring alignment between institutional frameworks and individual practice.

As the university works towards becoming a research-intensive institution, initiatives like these show a clear commitment to building a strong and ethical research environment, one that can handle modern challenges while maintaining public trust and academic credibility.



The MUT staff made valuable contributions during the workshop. Leonie Louw is left, seated

MUT honoured at national leadership awards for advancing future-ready education

Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT) earned national recognition for its role in shaping a skilled, future-ready workforce, following its success at the 2026 South Africa Leadership Awards, held on 13 April 2026 in Sandton, Johannesburg.

Professor Rushiella Songca, interim Vice-Chancellor, was honoured with an invitation from Dr RL Bhatia, CEO of the World Education Congress, to accept the certificate on behalf of MUT. During the ceremony, her impressive professional background was shared with the audience, emphasising her leadership journey and the notable impact of MUT, especially its transformative influence in Umlazi Township and the surrounding areas. This recognition acknowledged the university's commitment to excellence and highlighted its vital role in promoting inclusive, community-focused higher education on a national level.

The award comes at a pivotal time, as Professor Songca is actively driving a renewed institutional vision. Currently undertaking a 100-day engagement journey. She has been working closely with internal and external stakeholders to reshape perceptions

of MUT, strengthen its brand, and position the University as a dynamic, responsive, and forward-looking institution.

Responding to the award receipt, Professor Songca said, "It is an honour for me to receive this award on behalf of my university. We are based in a Township, and as such, most of our students come from other townships other than Umlazi Township, as well as from rural areas. We therefore strive to ensure that we produce graduates with the relevant skills required by the world of work. And we are guided in achieving this by our Academic Identity document, which, among other things, places greater emphasis on graduate attributes".

The selection process was rigorous and research-driven, drawing on an in-depth analysis of institutional performance, public-facing content (on the website and social media), and leadership impact. Professor Songca shared the stage with other award recipients from the University of Limpopo, Stellenbosch University and the Retail Institute of South Africa, as the only universities selected in this category.



Professor Rushiella Songca (Second from the left) at the 2026 South Africa Leadership Awards

Beyond the recognition itself, the awards platform created valuable opportunities for MUT to engage with key stakeholders across sectors, including industry leaders, government representatives, state-owned entities, and non-profit organisations. These engagements have strengthened the University's visibility and opened pathways for future collaboration.

This milestone affirms MUT's strategic direction and reinforces its role as a university that not only responds to societal needs but actively shapes them. Professor Songca was accompanied by Dr Xolile Ngubane, senior director in the Office of the Vice-Chancellor and Mbali Mkhize, senior director, Marketing and Communications.

MUT Council fills in executive positions

One of the commitments made by MUT's Council Chair, Dr Mosidi Makgae at the introductory meeting of Professor Rushiella Songca was that critical positions needed to be filled to stabilise the University.

Between April and as of the beginning of this month, at least two new executives: Professor

Bhekisipho Twala interim Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Resources and Planning and Professor Mncedisi Maphalala, Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research, Innovation and Internationalisation have joined the university. These appointments mark the efforts of Dr Makgae to ensure accountability and organisational effectiveness.



Professor Mncedisi Maphalala



Professor Bhekisipho Twala

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Another feather in the cap as MUT signs an MoU with a university in Rabat, Morocco

The growing confidence in Brand MUT continues to gain momentum, as Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT) signed a new Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in April with the International University of Rabat (UIR), one of Morocco's most internationalised higher education institutions.

Located in Rabat, UIR is recognised for its strong partnerships with leading European and global universities and its multilingual approach to teaching, with programmes offered in English and French. The institution's academic strengths span key fields such as engineering, political science, business, and international relation, all areas that align closely with MUT's strategic ambitions under its IGNITE 2030 vision.

Mbali Mkhize, Senior Director, Marketing and Communications, said, "The collaboration marks a significant step in MUT's ongoing efforts to expand its global footprint and deepen international collaboration. It also reflects renewed stakeholder trust in the university's direction, positioning MUT as an increasingly attractive partner within the global higher education landscape."

Reviewing the MoU, Professor Rushiella Songca, interim Vice-Chancellor and Principal at MUT, welcomed the collaboration, emphasising its strategic value. "I am pleased to see that we are entering into partnerships with quality universities, as this has the potential for us to be linked with other globally strong universities. This is the strategic direction that I would like us to take as a university," she said.

Professor Songca further underscored the importance of translating partnerships into tangible outcomes. "What I would like to see now, as far as these partnerships are concerned, are strategic programmes in action that will enhance our research, learning and teaching, as well as research collaborations. I also want to use these partnerships as a gateway toward our students' international experience," she added.

The MoU is set to unlock opportunities for joint research initiatives, staff and student mobility, and collaborative academic programmes. It also signals MUT's commitment to ensuring that its students benefit from international exposure and to making it an essential component in preparing graduates for a competitive and interconnected global economy.

As MUT continues to build partnerships with globally recognised institutions, this latest agreement with UIR reinforces its position as a university on the rise, one that is actively shaping its future through meaningful, high-impact collaborations.



MUT staff that attended the conference that was hosted by the International University of Rabat (UIR). Department of Marketing and Communications' Zama Sishi, second from left, and Mbali Mkhize, right, facilitated the signing of the MOU. With them are Professor Xolile Mkhize, left, and Dr Thobeka Makhathini

MUT interim Vice-Chancellor and Principal inspires the Class of 2026

The air was electric with anticipation at the Mangosuthu University of Technology as the sun rose on the momentous day, 21 April 2026. Over three thrilling days, the University transformed Umlazi Township into a vibrant celebration of achievement and hope as families and friends gathered to witness a historic occasion, the graduation of its ingenious trailblazers, the class of 2026!

Amidst the cheers and the waves of colourful and black gowns, interim Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Professor Rushiella Songca took the stage to deliver her inaugural graduation speech, a moment that would etch itself into the hearts of everyone present. Her powerful address resonated with warmth as she welcomed families, academics, and distinguished guests, creating an atmosphere of camaraderie and shared pride.

Professor Songca, filled with humility, spoke passionately about MUT's unwavering commitment to principled leadership, urging graduates to cultivate integrity, courage, and accountability as essential tools for creating change in a world yearning for innovators and leaders of purpose.



Professor Rushiella Songca

Central to her heartfelt message was the true essence of courage, which she described as the determination to act in the face of fear. She said, "As we reflect on our journey of yesteryear and brace ourselves for the unknown, we must reflect on the road travelled and the choices we made and congratulate ourselves on our choices and the courage we had to master to be where we are today."



MUT Graduation 2026

It was the iVC's use of the personal pronoun: 'we' that encapsulates the sincerity of her message to the graduates and guests, and this is also what captures the essence of her newsletter, 'Masakhe'. She is on a mission to rebuild MUT not alone, but with the MUT Council, the executive, staff, students, the community and the graduandi, soon to join Convocation. It is this approach of advancing the community that defines her approach to leadership.

For the audience, they were captivated by her words: "The world is now a competitive space in all areas, and talent alone will not ensure success. You now must ensure that your skill and talent are translated to success and, more importantly, you empower others to ensure that they succeed and contribute to a society that we can all be proud to call our own"

Professor Songca's call to action is a powerful reminder that education is a lifelong journey. "Learning does not stop here," she proclaimed. It is a commitment that stretches far beyond these walls!" She encouraged the graduates to remain intellectually curious and ethically grounded as they ventured into new territories.

She reminded graduates of the need be "courageous in the work that you do but always be mindful of the dangers that may lack some way. My advice to you as the future leaders of this country is, however, never be afraid of what others think of your opinions but also never discard any opinion simply because it conflicts with your own. Sometimes a conflicting option is there to help you consider your actions and determine their ability to help or hinder."



MUT Graduation 2026

Interim VC reignites the spirit of gratitude

Before ending her graduation speech, Professor Songca said to the graduates, “I want you to look over to the parents, friends and other caregivers that have brought you here today. I want you to acknowledge that despite their fear, they are the ones who showed unmeasured courage to ensure that you got where you are today, where you will now be a graduate, a person who can walk courageously into the future without fear.”

As the graduates stood proudly, one could see a mix of excitement and responsibility as they recognised that this graduation was just the start of an important journey. The class of 2026 is ready to shape and own their futures with determination and a desire to make a difference in the world.



Professor Rushiella Songca

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MUT Council Chair urges Class of 2026 to “Stand on the shoulders of giants”

At the graduation ceremony of Mangosuthu University of Technology on 21 – 23 April 2026, Dr Mosidi Makgae, Chairperson of the Council, inspired the class of 2026 to “stand on the shoulders of giants” as they enter the world after university.

Dr Makgae reminded graduates that excellence at MUT extends far beyond graduation. She highlighted that across the institution, both staff and students continue to achieve remarkable milestones, strengthening the university’s reputation and impact.

Among those celebrated was Professor Xolile Mkhize, who has been nominated for the 2025 Best Mentor Award by the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation and the Human Sciences Research Council. Dr Makgae described this recognition as a testament to the critical role mentorship plays in shaping future scholars and leaders.

She also applauded the dedication of student athletes, including Nduduzo Ndebele, a first-year student who represented South Africa in Spain, and Maxwell Nxumalo, who competed internationally in Saudi Arabia. Their discipline and commitment, she noted, “reflect the spirit of excellence that defines the MUT community.”

Dr Makgae also specially recognised Nokukhanya Thembane, who received the 2025 Health Researcher of the Year Certificate for her outstanding contribution to healthcare research in Africa. In addition, MUT’s electrical engineering academics were commended for publishing a book on artificial intelligence and smart systems with Springer, an achievement that strengthens the university’s research footprint in emerging technologies.

Dr Makgae further highlighted the global reach of MUT through the selection of Ayanda Bulose, Sthembile Maphumulo-Ndlovu, and Dr Melvin Mothoa for the prestigious DAAD-Dialogue on Innovative Higher Education Strategies Internationalisation Fellowship. Their participation, she said, underscores MUT’s growing role in international academic collaboration.

The university’s progress, she noted, is also supported by valued partners. She expressed gratitude to the Finance and Accounting Services Sector Education and Training Authority for donating high-end laptops to students, and to Carl Zeiss South Africa for contributing advanced microscopy equipment, both, investments that enhance teaching, learning, and research capacity in line with the university’s IGNITE 2030 vision.

Dr Makgae also took pride in the institution’s recent national recognition, noting that MUT was honoured at the South Africa Leadership Awards 2026 with the Skill Development Leadership Award. The accolade affirms the university’s role in producing graduates equipped to lead, innovate, and contribute meaningfully to society.

Turning her attention directly to the graduates, she reminded them that they leave MUT not only with qualifications but as ambassadors of the institution. He urged them to carry the university’s name with pride, dignity, and integrity, and to remain committed to making a positive difference in their communities.

“The world you are entering will not always be easy,” she cautioned, “but it rewards those who persevere, who remain true to their purpose, and who dedicate themselves to uplifting others.”



MUT Council Chair, Dr Mosidi Makgae

Graduation stage party pays tribute to Chonco's resilience as student success drive gains momentum

The Vice-Chancellor and the graduation stage party paid tribute to Student Representative Council (SRC) President Mdumiseni Chonco, whose remarkable academic achievement has been hailed as a powerful example of student resilience and success.

Chonco graduated for the second time with an Advanced Diploma in Accounting while serving in one of the most demanding student leadership roles at the University. His journey aligns with the Vice-Chancellor's broader vision of empowering students to excel academically while developing leadership capacity.

Commending his achievement, the Vice-Chancellor described Chonco as a reflection of the institution's commitment to nurturing well-rounded graduates. "Mdumiseni Chonco embodies the kind of student we aspire to develop, resilient, disciplined, and purpose-driven. His success demonstrates that with the right support and determination, our students can thrive even under pressure," she said.

Balancing academic responsibilities with the demands of leading the SRC required discipline, careful planning, and perseverance. Chonco maintained a structured schedule to manage

lectures, assignments, and assessments, while remaining fully engaged in addressing student needs, including issues related to accommodation, allowances, and academic support.

Despite facing intense pressure and long working hours, Chonco said, "I remained focused on his goals. Through teamwork within the SRC, I was able to delegate responsibilities effectively and maintain stability during critical periods."

Originally from KwaZulu-Natal, Chonco attributes his success to strong values of hard work and discipline instilled from a young age.

Reflecting on his journey, Chonco said the achievement represents more than a qualification. "This is a symbol of resilience and purpose. It shows that leadership and academic excellence can go hand in hand."

As the University continues to drive its student empowerment agenda, stories like Chonco's stand as a testament to what is possible when determination meets institutional support—reinforcing the Vice-Chancellor's commitment to building a culture of excellence, leadership, and opportunity for all students.



SRC President Mdumiseni Chonco



Nature conservation graduates rush for pictures with lecturers

Amid the formal proceedings and celebratory atmosphere of graduation day at Mangosuthu University of Technology, one moment stood out for its warmth and authenticity, lecturer Dr Refiloe Ntoi surrounded by her students, capturing joyful photographs that reflected far more than a milestone; they revealed a relationship built on trust, mentorship, and genuine care.

Each photograph told a story of late-night consultations, words of encouragement during difficult moments, and a shared commitment to success. For many of her students, this was a celebration of a relationship that had shaped their academic and personal growth.

Her passion for student development was evident in every interaction. She embraced her students with pride,

celebrating their resilience and determination that brought them to graduation day. It was clear that for Dr Ntoi, teaching extends beyond the classroom, it is about nurturing potential, building confidence, and guiding students toward becoming the best versions of themselves.

This spirit of connection reflects the broader vision of Professor Rushiella Songca, interim Vice-Chancellor, who has emphasised the importance of strengthening relationships between students and lecturers as a cornerstone of the university's future. For the graduates who stood beside her, smiling for the camera, these were the lasting reminders of a lecturer who believed in them, invested in them, and helped them reach this defining moment.



Nature Conservation graduates with their lecturers. Dr Refiloe Ntoi is third from right