

Commendable progress by UNIZULU on DHET-funded projects

NALEDI HLEFANE

THE University of Zululand (UNIZULU) has been lauded by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) for making commendable progress on its DHET-funded projects.

This transpired during the department's recent visit to the institution where it sought to gauge the development of projects funded by six grants: Sibusiso Bengu development grant, university capacity development grant (UCDG), clinical training grant, foundation provision grant, infrastructure and efficiency grant (IEG), and the presidential youth Employment programme (PYEP).

The two-part visit entailed a hybrid meeting and walkabout at the KwaDlangezwa Campus with DHET representatives Bhekithemba Mlambo, Chief Director, and Donald Kubayi, Deputy Director, both from the Infrastructure Unit.

Professor Xoliswa Mtose, UNIZULU Vice-Chancellor and Principal, opened the meeting and conveyed her gratitude to DHET for their ongoing support of the University through various earmarked grants. Dr Shaheeda Essack, Acting Chief Director for Higher Education Policy Development and Research Support, who chaired the meeting, said it was normal procedure for the department to conduct oversight visits for its earmarked grants.

"The purpose of this engagement is to engage in-depth on earmarked grants so as to understand the current stages of each grant in the universities. It is also to establish what has been achieved and what is currently in the process of implementation and to reassure the university of the department's continuous commitment towards earmarked grants and where necessary, provide guidance and support that might be required by the university," she explained.

She reiterated DHET's commitment to supporting Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs) – and said that the development of such institutions is one of the minister's long-standing priorities. "HDIs, in the South African university landscape, account for a specific portion of students enrolled for university studies,



A recent oversight visit to UNIZULU revealed that the institution is performing well on its DHET-funded projects.

which constitutes a considerable amount of historic capital investment and could play an essential role in producing both graduates and new knowledge and can contribute to socioeconomic development in local, regional, national and international context as anchor universities – thus making them an instrumental part of the national higher education landscape," she added.

Prior to UNIZULU's presentation on the implementation, progress, challenges, expenditure and completion dates of funded projects, representatives of the six DHET grants briefly reported on the university's performance and expenditure thus far. From these reports, it emerged that the institution was still

on the right track.

Presenting on the projects funded through the various earmarked grants, Mduduzi Tshabangu, Director of the Institutional Planning Directorate, who also co-chaired the session, expressed total satisfaction with the progress made in terms of project implementation and expenditure. In his opening statement, Tshabangu reported a notable improvement in the execution of programmes funded by various earmarked grants during the 2022 academic year at UNIZULU. Additionally, he conveyed that UNIZULU had implemented proactive strategies to ensure the swift execution of projects and the proper utilisation of allocated funds. "These measures have yielded positive

results, as evidenced by the audited reports submitted to DHET in May 2023," he added.

Among the highlights were the UCDG which funds 17 projects allocated in three focus areas: student development, staff development and curriculum development. Tshabangu shared that the spending progress for the 2023/24 financial year was sitting at 61%, with the intent to complete funds by the end of the current financial year.

Another highlight was the IEG funded projects which include the construction of student housing, student ablution facilities and the engineering building, among other. These funded projects were also reportedly on a positive trajectory.

UNIZULU academic awarded best paper presentation at international conference

PRECIOUS SHAMASE

UNIZULU academic Professor Kevin Naidoo won the Best Presentation Award at the third International Conference on Media and Social Sciences: Metaverse and Future Communication (iCOMS 2023).

Prof Naidoo is the Acting Deputy Dean: Research, Innovation and Internationalisation in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. He presented a paper titled *A Post-Covid-19 Perspective on Technology Advances in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, which was well-received – earning him acknowledgement as the best presenter in social science, humanities and cultural studies.

Hosted in the city of Malaka, Malaysia by the Faculty of Communication and Media Studies within Universiti Teknologi Mara, iCOMS 2023 was attended by more than 50 scholars, researchers and professors in the field of communication and media who discussed their research papers, shared findings and results at the conference. In addition, they were able to exchange knowledge and broaden their opportunities for future cross-collaboration.

Prof Naidoo was one of the plenary speakers and spoke on "the effects of higher education teaching and learning in the Metaverse". He was also joined by Nazri Noran, CEO of Media Prima Audio in Malaysia and Sridhar Sunkad, regional director of Porter Technologies Asia.

His award-winning presentation focused on how digital communication was swiftly embraced during the Covid-19 lockdown to salvage the academic calendar. "Now that the world is out of lockdown, it is imperative that technological gains are continued with usage expanded as we advance with artificial intelligence (AI) and the new educational disruptor – the



Professor Kevin Naidoo – Acting Deputy Dean: Research, Innovation and Internationalisation in UNIZULU's Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Metaverse," elaborated Prof Naidoo.

Reflecting on the conference and its theme of "The Metaverse and the Future of Communication," Prof Naidoo said that it had provided a great platform for collaboration with academics from Malaysia, Indonesia, China, India, Singapore and South Africa. There were robust discussions on current trends and how digital technology will play a pivotal role in transforming higher education.

The conference has also attracted key stakeholders from the media and educational support industries; complementing the conference. Discussions were held on how AI was used to create a radio presenter and could seamlessly run a complete radio show. He added that Noran mentioned that the adoption of AI had created three additional jobs.

Sunkad unpacked how the metaverse is being used for educational purposes, with higher education rapidly embracing this technology – ensuring the continuation of cutting-edge research and teaching.

UNIZULU student succeeds at BRICS Future Skills Challenge

NALEDI HLEFANE

THE young generation, commonly referred to as the future of the world, is arguably the best group from which to seek solutions to some of the world's critical issues.

This is the notion that the BRICS Future Skills Group, one of the nine working groups of the BRICS Business Council, has embraced and by which it is driven in its initiatives. The group seeks to engage the youth through its annual BRICS Future Skills Challenge. This project sees hundreds of young university students and various industry specialists from Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa contest to pitch their proposed solutions to expert judges regarding today's most pressing challenges – the lion's den style.

This year's challenge was recently held over four days at the Expo Centre in Johannesburg. Among the strong competitors was Tshepang Radebe, a UNIZULU final-year student in the BSc Computer Science and Applied Mathematics programme. Radebe stood out as one of the top three representatives of team South Africa, and the sixth best candidate in the overall challenge. He received a bronze medal and data science certificate.

Ahead of contesting in the challenge, first he had to compete against fellow South Africans on a data science skills challenge. His excellent performance in this round earned him a spot in the top 10 who subsequently repre-

sented the country in the international round.

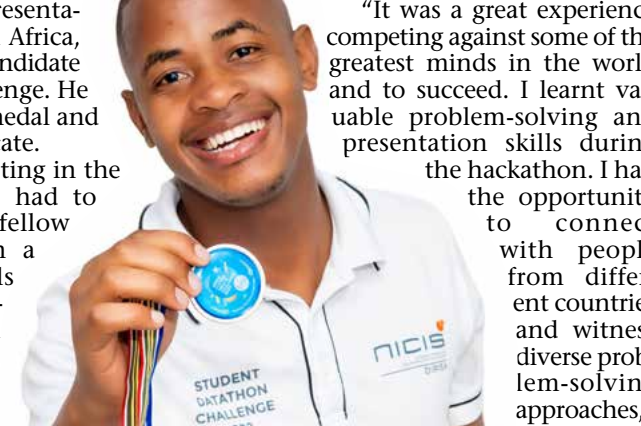
"We then competed with students from various universities and professionals from the industry, during days one and two at the Expo Centre in Johannesburg. During this phase, Team SA competed among themselves in the top 10 and with representatives from other BRICS countries," said Radebe.

Thereafter, the top six individuals from each country proceeded to the final stage of presenting their solutions to the judging panel.

"During the awards ceremony, I found myself as the sole student representative remaining in Team SA. It's worth mentioning that in South Africa, the top position went to a data scientist specialist, while the second position was secured by a data engineer. In South Africa, I achieved third position and among the BRICS nations, I secured the sixth position," he said.

This experience, he added, evoked in him a fighting spirit by which he was propelled to the finish line.

"It was a great experience competing against some of the greatest minds in the world and to succeed. I learnt valuable problem-solving and presentation skills during the hackathon. I had the opportunity to connect with people from different countries and witness diverse problem-solving approaches," said Radebe.



SARChI Chair, Professor Thulani Makhalanyane was the keynote speaker at the Agriculture Department's annual postgraduate symposium.

PRECIOUS SHAMASE

THE Agriculture Department within UNIZULU's Faculty of Science, Agriculture and Engineering recently hosted its annual postgraduate symposium at the university's Science Centre in Richards Bay.

The faculty-wide symposium was themed "Tackling emerging global change challenges to achieve Sustainable Development Goals through smart science". It provided a platform for the interdisciplinary sharing, demonstrating and disseminating of postgraduate research expected to tackle and answer pertinent questions in relation to emerging global change challenges, among other societal challenges.

In her opening address, Faculty Dean, Professor Khoboso Lehloenyane encouraged all attendees to actively participate, share their insights, and engage in meaningful conversations.

"We should also utilise this platform to identify potential collaborations to strengthen interdisciplinarity, which is the cornerstone of scientific progress. By working together, we can turn ideas into actions, theories into innovations, and challenges into opportunities," Lehloenyane said.

The first keynote speaker was SARChI Chair, Professor Thulani Makhalanyane, from the University of

Pretoria. He emphasised the importance of microbial communities achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs) and indicated that they play a vital role in soil health and nutrient cycling. Makhalanyane made inter-linkages with SDGs where he highlighted that SDG 1 (no poverty) can be addressed through the consumption of microbial-based products. As the population continues to grow exponentially, microbial-based products can assist in food-related challenges.

Moreover, he discussed the work currently being carried out in the southern ocean. The southern ocean plays a role in nutrient cycling in the global ocean and regulates the climate. The work being carried out will help in understanding ecological impacts at a global scale. They take water samples for sequencing, which helps in understanding microbial ecology in the southern ocean.

The southern ocean has a limitation of trace elements such as iron. This work will show how the limitation affects microbial diversity and evolution, and ultimately how nutrient cycling is affected.

Prof Edwin Madala, an analytical biochemist from the University of Venda's Faculty of Science, Engineering and Agriculture, was another keynote speaker.

Students were given an opportunity to present their research findings during the symposium.

SARChI Chair, Professor Thulani Makhalanyane was the keynote speaker at the Agriculture Department's annual postgraduate symposium.

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