



Daily News

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## DHET visits UNIZULU for progress update on funded infrastructure projects



The new Department of Engineering building on the Richards Bay Campus is nearing completion. | James Thwala

NOMVELO XULU

THE Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) recently visited the University of Zululand (UNIZULU) to inspect the progress of various infrastructure projects sponsored by the department. These included the Department of Engineering building at Richards Bay Campus and the Madiba student residence on KwaDlangezwa Campus.

The DHET delegation was warmly welcomed by Professor Vuyokazi Nomlomo, Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Teaching and Learning. Professor Nomlomo expressed her appreciation to the DHET for their investment in building state-of-the-art facilities at the university. She highlighted the importance of infrastructure as a key strategy in UNIZULU's vision; essential for providing quality programmes that align with the university's strategic goals.

"We need infrastructure – good infrastructure, quality infrastructure – in order to have programmes of quality so that we can realise our vision as the University of Zululand. And, within our strategic goal vision, infrastructure is one of the key strategies. By assisting us, we will be able to realise our vision," she said.

Following the welcome address, the first leg of the programme involved an

oversight inspection of the Richards Bay and KwaDlangezwa campuses.

Located on the picturesque Richards Bay Campus, the Department of Engineering building is nearing completion – and promises to be a game changer for students pursuing careers in engineering. The building boasts a premier chemistry laboratory, equipped with cutting-edge equipment and technology.

Dr Ncedo Cameron Xhala, Executive Director: Infrastructure, acknowledged that there were challenges during the construction process, but emphasised that funding had not been an issue thanks to DHET's support. He added that the building's proximity to the Richards Bay industrial area is expected to foster collaboration between the university and industry partners – providing students with valuable practical experience and exposure.

"The building is one of the best in KwaZulu-Natal universities, and its completion is a testament to the DHET's commitment to providing the best educational facilities," said Dr Xhala.

After visiting the Richards Bay Campus, the delegation proceeded to Bay Lodge, a student residence sponsored by the DHET. The university has since renovated this building and it now features

an engineering laboratory, classrooms and study areas, all of which are designed to make education more accessible and convenient for students.

The Madiba residence is another impressive infrastructure project sponsored by the DHET. It will provide students with a comfortable and secure living environment, complete with modern amenities and facilities. Dr Xhala took a moment to express his gratitude to the construction company for delivering a high-quality project on time.

Following the site inspections, the delegation moved back to the Council Chambers at KwaDlangezwa Campus for a session on UNIZULU's Infrastructure and Efficiency Grants (IEG) projects. This segment was facilitated by Mduzuzi Tshabangu, Director of Institutional Planning, who guided the meeting through presentations on the ongoing projects and their strategic importance. Vaschel Pillay, Acting Project Manager for Infrastructure at UNIZULU, presented detailed updates on the projects. The final segment focused on the DHET's AI & Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) programme, and the session concluded with an engaging discussion between the delegates and interns who participate in the programme.



The Madiba residence will provide students with a comfortable and secure living environment, complete with modern amenities and facilities. | James Thwala

Donald Kubayi, the DHET representative who oversees infrastructure projects at public universities, was impressed with the progress made on the UNIZULU infrastructure projects. "What I have observed so far is high-quality construction – and these projects will enhance this institution's academic progress," Kubayi added. The visit was also attended by delegates from the National Treasury.

## UNIZULU alumnus to conduct research in Spain through MSCA postdoctoral fellowship

NALEDI HLEFANE

THE University of Zululand (UNIZULU) is celebrating with its alumnus Dr Malik Dilshad Khan, who has accepted the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) postdoctoral fellowship to conduct research in Spain.

MSCA funds outstanding research and innovation. It equips researchers at all stages of their careers with new knowledge and skills through mobility across borders and exposure to different sectors and disciplines. The MSCA postdoctoral fellowships are designed for researchers who aspire to conduct their research activities abroad, acquire new skills and develop their careers. They help researchers gain experience in other countries, disciplines and non-academic sectors.

"This fellowship represents a pivotal milestone in my career and I am delighted to accept the offer", said Dr Khan. "Out of 8 040 project proposals submitted across all disciplines, only 1150 were funded – and my project ranked among the top 6% with a score of 97.8%. As a graduate of UNIZULU, it is also a tremendous honour for the institution to have an alumnus achieve

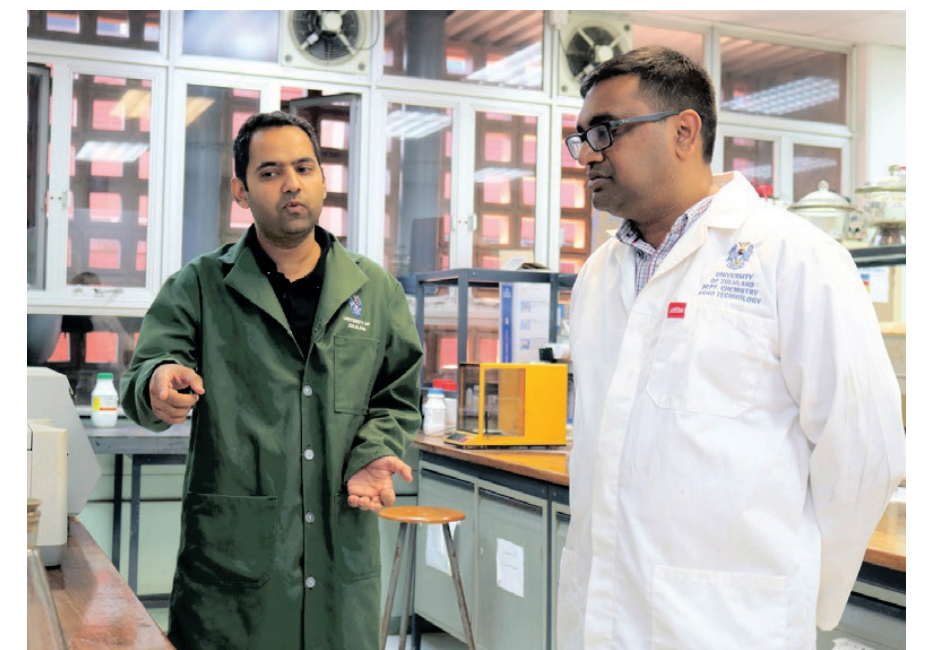
such recognition."

Khan obtained his doctoral degree in 2018, supervised by seasoned researcher and lecturer in the UNIZULU Chemistry department, Professor Neerish Revaprasadu. He has since worked alongside Prof Revaprasadu on multiple research and book projects.

"Over the past 10 years, I have been privileged to contribute to UNIZULU's research ecosystem, co-supervising impactful projects from NIPMO, SAQuTi, SASOL, and DHET; and recently designed the scientific part of the upcoming chair proposal. Currently, I am co-supervising the research projects of two PhD and two MSc students," added the scholar.

When he received his PhD, Dr Khan already had 26 publications under his belt. His academic profile has improved significantly since then – with about 80 publications, an H-index of 30, more than 2 000 citations, book chapters, a patent, editorial experience, project supervision and securing funded proposals.

Although beginning a new chapter in his life, Dr Khan said he is eager to continue contributing to UNIZULU's research excellence in any capacity.



Dr Malik Dilshad Khan with Professor Neerish Revaprasadu, a senior professor in the Department of Chemistry at UNIZULU. | Samkele Sokhela

## Mashapa Sekome's journey of transforming economics education in KZN

NOMVELO XULU

MASHAPA Sekome, a dedicated lecturer in the University of Zululand's (UNIZULU) Department of Economics, was recently presented with the prestigious "Best Train the Trainer" Award by iLembe District Municipality.

The recognition is in honour of his unwavering commitment to capacitating economics teachers in identified northern KwaZulu-Natal high schools, with the overall goal of improving the economics pass rate in these schools.

Sekome's unfaltering dedication to teacher training has earned him multiple accolades in the past – and he hopes to continue extending his winning streak.

Born and raised in Limpopo Province, Sekome grew up witnessing the challenges faced by teachers in rural areas. "I saw how teachers struggled with the curriculum, and it inspired me to want to make a difference," he recalled. This early exposure to educational inequities fuelled his passion for teaching and led him to pursue a career as an economics lecturer.

His journey as a trainer began in 2020 after the King Cetshwayo District reached out to UNIZULU for assistance. The district was grappling with poor performance in the economics subject, and teachers lacked the necessary training to effectively deliver the curriculum.

Soon after, iLembe District joined the initiative, and a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed between the



Award-winning Economics lecturer, Mashapa Sekome. | Xolani Ncube

districts and UNIZULU's Faculty of Commerce, Administration and Law (FCAL).

The project started small, focusing on training teachers in King Cetshwayo and iLembe districts. However, its impact was immediate and profound. By 2024, the initiative had expanded to include the uMkhanyakude District, and there are plans to extend to Zululand District in the future.

The journey has not been without its challenges. Balancing his responsibilities as a lecturer and a trainer requires meticulous planning and resourcefulness. "I create a weekly timetable for my responsibilities to make sure that time is used efficiently and productively," Sekome explained.

Another significant challenge is that the project is highly demanding, which

often leaves him working on his own. "Lecturers are committed to other projects – and as a result, I end up training the whole district alone," he admitted.

This has propelled him to recruit post-graduate students to assist in training teachers, and thereby ensure the project's sustainability. To further streamline his efforts, Sekome leverages technology. He created a YouTube channel called Sekonomics where he teaches economics courses.

The results of Sekome's efforts are evident. Both iLembe and King Cetshwayo districts have consistently achieved over 80% pass rates in economics since the project began, and their rankings have improved significantly.

Reflecting on his journey, the lecturer emphasised the importance of perseverance and community support. "The journey began with a word of encouragement from Professor Irrshad Kaseeram, who strongly motivated me to join the people who were chosen to train teachers at UNIZULU. I received encouragement from both FCAL leadership and District leadership," he said.

For Sekome, winning these awards is more than a personal achievement – it is a reflection of the values of *Ubuntu*.

Through his dedication, innovation and unwavering commitment to education, Sekome has not only transformed the lives of countless teachers and learners, he has also cemented UNIZULU's strategic position in community engagement.



PROFESSOR Byron Brown, Director of Research and Innovation at the University of Zululand (UNIZULU), has been awarded the Senior Research Management Professional (SRMP) designation by the International Professional Recognition Council. This recognises his exceptional competence as a leader within research management and his proven record of influence and impact that extends beyond UNIZULU. | Samkele Sokhela

PROFESSOR Nontuthuko Rosemary Ntuli, Head of the University of Zululand's (UNIZULU) Department of Botany, has raised the UNIZULU flag high after being awarded a senior fellowship in the Plant Systems Biology Group. The senior fellowship is a special programme of the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB), in partnership with the South African Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI) that aims to develop capacity and build synergies with historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs). Prof Ntuli is among nine excellent scientists from various HDIs in the fields of life sciences, human healthcare and industrial or agricultural biotechnology to be awarded short-term fellowships in 2025. She started her fellowship in January and is due to complete it at the end of February. | Samkele Sokhela

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