



On The Move 2026

Special Edition - Autumn Graduation 2026



*Father's legacy
inspires daughter to
pursue medicine at
the University of
Limpopo*

*Blind graduate
completes BA in
Political Studies
from his wheelchair*

*Small Business helps Nare
Letlhaka fund Medical
Science degree*

*PhD research cracks
the secret to stronger
eggs*

*Silent pollution in the
Olifants River raises
alarm over food safety
and community health*



Finding solutions for Africa



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You are equipped to solve Africa's challenges, shape the continent's future

Chancellor urges graduates to drive African-centred development and economic transformation

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Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma
Chancellor, University of Limpopo.

Chancellor of the University of Limpopo (UL), Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, says the university's 2026 Autumn Graduation ceremonies are more than a celebration of academic success; they signal the emergence of a new generation equipped to confront Africa's most pressing socio-economic challenges and shape the continent's future through innovation, self-reliance, and inclusive development

"As we congratulate the Class of 2025, we recognise that each graduate represents both personal achievement and a strategic investment in the future of South Africa and the African continent.

"At a time when youth unemployment, inequality, and structural economic challenges persist, the role of graduates has never been more critical. You are not only entering the workforce, you are entering spaces where solutions are urgently needed," she notes.

While encouraging graduates that education is the only thing that is truly theirs and that "nobody can take it away from you," she reflected on the importance of applying that knowledge. "Education is an enduring asset that equips individuals with the capacity to think critically, act responsibly, and lead change. However, its true value lies in its application. As graduates, you are called upon to use your knowledge to uplift communities, stimulate economic participation, and contribute to sustainable development, particularly in underserved areas."

She says beyond South Africa's borders, Africa stands at a defining moment. "We must move towards self-reliance by strengthening our skills base, advancing agriculture, and developing our own technologies. It is imperative that we take ownership of our resources and ensure they benefit our people."

In her view, inclusive development remains central to this vision. "The meaningful participation of women and young people is essential in unlocking the full potential of our continent. Initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) provide an opportunity to deepen economic integration and strengthen intra-African trade," she explains.

Dr Dlamini-Zuma reiterates that UL produces highly competitive graduates and that the university remains steadfast in its commitment to producing graduates who are not only academically capable, but also socially conscious and responsive to the needs of society. She urges UL graduates to "remain resilient, embrace lifelong learning, and approach the future with confidence

and purpose", and she characterises their success as not only a personal achievement but as intrinsically linked to the collective progress of their country and continent.

"Once again, I congratulate you on this remarkable accomplishment. May your journey ahead be guided by knowledge, integrity, and a commitment to making a meaningful difference," she adds.

“Education is an enduring asset that equips individuals with the capacity to think critically, act responsibly, and lead change. However, its true value lies in its application.”

Graduates rise to strengthen South Africa's future

University of Limpopo produces 56 medical doctors and 29 PhDs at a go to support national development priorities

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Dr Jeffrey Mabelebele
Vice-Chancellor and Principal
University of Limpopo.

The University of Limpopo proudly celebrates the graduation of 4 694 students during its 2026 Autumn Graduation ceremonies, including 56 newly qualified medical doctors and 29 doctoral graduates who are poised to make a meaningful contribution to South Africa's healthcare system, research landscape, and broader economy

"This is a moment of great pride for the university, your families, and the nation at large. Your achievement reflects dedication, perseverance, and a commitment to excellence," says Dr Mabelebele, highlighting that at a time when the country faces critical shortages in healthcare professionals and high-level skills, these graduates are a vital response to national development challenges.

He adds: "The newly qualified medical doctors will play an essential role in strengthening healthcare delivery, particularly in underserved and rural communities, while our doctoral graduates will contribute to advancing research, innovation, and evidence-based solutions to societal issues."

Dr Mabelebele says graduates need to bear in mind that the milestone is not an endpoint but the beginning of a deeper responsibility to apply

knowledge in ways that uplift communities, reduce inequality, and drive sustainable development. "As you enter a complex and rapidly evolving world, you are called upon to lead with integrity, adapt with agility, and contribute meaningfully to society," he adds, urging graduates to remain committed to lifelong learning, to embrace innovation, and to work collaboratively in shaping a better future.

He says the university continues to position itself as a catalyst for transformation by aligning its academic programmes with the needs of society and the economy. "Through this approach, we are not only producing employable graduates, but also nurturing ethical leaders, critical thinkers, and active citizens who are equipped to shape South Africa's future."

"Go forth with confidence, purpose, and integrity. Your success is not only your own, it is a reflection of the collective progress we seek as a nation. Once again, congratulations on this remarkable achievement."

GRADUATION OVERVIEW

Undergraduate Degrees: 3 074
Postgraduate Certificates: 187
Postgraduate Diplomas: 110
Honours Degrees: 1 037
Master's Degrees: 258
Doctoral Degrees: 29

"The newly qualified medical doctors will play an essential role in strengthening healthcare delivery, particularly in underserved and rural communities, while our doctoral graduates will contribute to advancing research, innovation, and evidence-based solutions to societal issues."

Father's legacy inspires daughter to pursue medicine at the University of Limpopo

Inspired by a family rooted in medicine and guided by compassion and mentorship, Nazifa Bhuiyan has fulfilled her dream of becoming a medical doctor

By Reuben Maake – reuben.maake@ul.ac.za

For Nazifa Bhuiyan, graduating with a Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MBChB) from the University of Limpopo (UL) during the 2026 Autumn Graduation ceremonies represents far more than a personal achievement, it stands as a profound continuation of a legacy cultivated at home



Nazifa Bhuiyan, graduating with a Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MBChB) from the University of Limpopo (UL) during the 2026 Autumn Graduation ceremonies, credits her success to the inspiration of her father, who is also a medical practitioner.

Following in the footsteps of her father, Dr Mirza Bhuiyan, a medical doctor and lecturer at UL's School of Medicine, and her mother, Dr Merzi Bhuiyan, also a medical practitioner, Nazifa's journey into the medical profession was inspired years before she set foot on campus.

Born in 2001 in Polokwane, Nazifa attended her basic education at Northern Muslim School before embarking on a path she describes as a natural progression rather than a difficult choice.

"Growing up, I watched my father dedicate his life to helping others. Seeing his passion and commitment planted a seed in me from a very young age," she says.

That early exposure to the profession provided clear direction, transforming childhood admiration into a dedicated calling, one rooted in purpose, discipline, and compassion. "When you grow up seeing someone succeed in a field, it becomes easier to believe that you can also walk that path," she reflects. "My father's journey made medicine feel like a natural fit for me."

However, her transition to university life in 2020, during the Covid-19 period, was not without challenges. Moving from a small school environment to a large and diverse institution required adjustment.

"It was a big shift, both academically and socially, but my classmates and support system helped me adapt," she says.

The experience took on a unique dimension when her father served as one of her lecturers during her second year, teaching the gastrointestinal module.

"It felt strange at first," she admits. "But we both maintained a strict standard of professionalism in an academic setting, he was my lecturer, and at home, he was my father."

Despite this overlap, Dr Bhuiyan ensured that academic boundaries were maintained. Nazifa notes that in other years he stepped back and allowed other lecturers to teach, a move she credits for fostering her independence and growth.

Beyond the classroom, their shared profession strengthened their bond. Studying together became a meaningful part of their relationship. "We used to study together, and those moments became some of my favourite memories. It turned what could have been pressure into something special."

Nazifa describes obtaining her medical degree as a surreal moment, the result of years of sacrifice, faith, and perseverance.

Her perspective on medicine was further refined during her recent clinical exposure at Steve Biko Academic Hospital in Gauteng, where she engaged in patient care during her internship.

"That experience made me realise the true impact of this profession, being there for people in their most vulnerable moments. It gave my journey a deeper sense of purpose." While she is still exploring her future specialisation, Nazifa is resolute about the standard of care she intends to provide.

"Patients do not only need skill, they need compassion. Making people feel heard, understood, and cared for is just as important as medical knowledge."

She admits that having a father who is both a doctor and lecturer initially brought pressure.

"It was nerve-racking at first because I felt I had big shoes to fill," she says with a smile. "But over time, that pressure became motivation."

“We used to study together, and those moments became some of my favourite memories. It turned what could have been pressure into something special.”

Nazifa Bhuiyan (middle), who graduated with a Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MBChB) from UL during the 2026 Autumn Graduation ceremonies, credits her success to the inspiration and support of her parents, who are both medical practitioners — Dr Mirza Bhuiyan (father, right) and Dr Merzi Bhuiyan (mother, left).



Reserve B village in KwaZulu-Natal celebrates first medical doctor

At 37, a UL graduate from a rural village in Bergville has made history as the first doctor in her community, opening doors for those who will follow behind her

By Reuben Maake – Reuben.maake@ul.ac.za

Nothando Mhlanga is making waves as the first medical doctor from her rural village of Reserve B in Bergville, within the Okhahlamba Local Municipality in KwaZulu-Natal, after graduating Cum Laude with a Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MBChB) from the University of Limpopo (UL)



Nothando Mhlanga steps onto the stage during the 2026 Autumn Graduation ceremonies to receive her degree, marking not only a personal triumph but also a proud milestone for her village, where she has become the first person from her community to qualify as a medical doctor.

Having enrolled in her early 30s, at a stage when many are already established in their careers, she is now graduating at the age of 37. Her achievement marks a significant milestone not only for her family as a personal victory, but also as a beacon of hope for an entire community that has long faced limited access to healthcare and educational opportunities.

Raised in Reserve B, a small rural area in Bergville, her upbringing was shaped by both strong family support and the realities of limited resources. Growing up in an extended family under the care of her grandparents and uncle, she says their support fuelled her dreams.

"Growing up in an extended family, I was always encouraged to strive for the best," she recalls.

Her journey took a significant turn when she received a bursary from the South African National Defence Force, and the Safety and Security Sector Education and Training Authority, enabling her to pursue her MBChB degree at UL in 2020.

"The bursary allowed me to focus fully on my studies without financial stress. Coming from a rural village like Reserve B motivated me to work even harder and make the most of every opportunity."

Despite this support, the journey was far from easy. Mhlanga faced moments of self-doubt, academic pressure, and the demanding workload of medical school.

"I am proud because I know how much I sacrificed and how many times I doubted myself, but I kept going."

Her first year proved particularly challenging, especially in subjects such as chemistry and physics, which required additional effort.

"It had been a long time since I had done those subjects, so I had to put in extra effort to catch up," she explains.

Through perseverance, discipline, and consistency, she overcame these challenges. Rather than relying on complex study methods, Mhlanga focused on understanding concepts, revising consistently, and engaging in group discussions. Classical music became her companion during long study sessions, helping her stay calm and focused.

Graduating Cum Laude came as both a surprise and a deeply emotional reward.

"I am proud because I know how much I sacrificed and how many times I doubted myself."

Mhlanga is currently serving as an intern at 1 Military Hospital in Pretoria under the South African National Defence Force, continuing her journey in medicine.

Looking ahead, Mhlanga is considering specialising in anaesthesia, drawn to the precision and responsibility the field demands.

"The idea of rendering someone unconscious and safely bringing them back is incredibly important. Every decision matters, and that challenge motivates me," she says.

Blind graduate completes BA in Political Studies from his wheelchair

Despite physical and accessibility challenges, Thandolwethu Ngubeni persevered with the support of his family and UL's state-of-the-art facilities to proudly earn his degree

By Jostinah Mamabolo – ulpublications@ul.ac.za

Visually and physically impaired, Thandolwethu Ngubeni refused to let his circumstances define his future, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in Political Studies from the University of Limpopo (UL)



Thandolwethu Ngubeni proudly graduates with a Bachelor of Arts in Political Studies.

His journey, however, was far from easy. His arrival at UL in 2022, after completing Grade 12 at Prinshof School in Pretoria, a specialised institution for visually impaired learners, was met with the natural anxieties of navigating a new environment that demanded a high degree of independence and resilience.

"I was excited, but at the same time, I was scared," he recalls. "I was transitioning into an entirely new environment that required me to develop a higher level of independence."

Although Ngubeni initially aspired to study Psychology, limited space led him to enrol in Political Studies, a decision that would ultimately shape his professional purpose in unexpected ways.

Originally from Nelspruit, Mpumalanga, and raised in Midrand, Gauteng, Ngubeni grew up in a close-knit family of five. He credits his academic success to a strong family support system.

"Not everyone with a disability has the kind of support I have," he says. "My family believed in my potential and sustained me during moments of self-doubt."

"I was born blind and physically disabled, but I can walk using crutches. My disability did not define me; rather, it became a catalyst to prove my capabilities."

Beyond his family, the Reakgona Disability Centre (RDC) at UL served as a vital institutional support structure, creating an inclusive environment that enabled him to focus on his studies.

"The university made things easier for me," he explains. "The facilities were accessible, and the staff were always willing to assist. RDC became my safe space."

One of his biggest challenges was adapting to technology. With limited computer skills at the outset, Ngubeni initially relied on braille for assessments, a process that was both slow and demanding.

"I struggled a lot with computers at first, but I knew that if I wanted to succeed, I had to learn."

With determination and institutional support, he gradually developed the technological competencies required. "It took time, patience, and practice, but I eventually became confident. That changed everything for me."

Beyond his academic pursuits, Ngubeni's daily life presented its own challenges. As a visually and physically impaired individual, he frequently encountered accessibility barriers and social biases, most notably situations where people addressed those around him instead of speaking to him directly.

"Sometimes people assume you cannot speak for yourself," he notes. "But I learned not to let those moments define me."

Instead, he chose to rise above these challenges with resilience and quiet strength.

While his field of study was initially a second choice, it soon became a passion. Through Political Studies, Ngubeni developed a deeper understanding of global issues, governance, and democracy and found his voice.

"It became far more than just a qualification," he reflects. "It helped me understand the complexities of society and my place within it."

Whenever the journey became overwhelming, he leaned on his support system — family, friends, and his faith.

"There were difficult days, but I was never alone," he says. "Encouragement from the people around me kept me going."

Now a graduate, Ngubeni reflects on his journey with a sense of accomplishment.

"The path was demanding, but it was also rewarding," he says. "Every obstacle served as a valuable learning opportunity."

“

I was born blind and physically disabled, but I can walk using crutches. My disability did not define me; rather, it became a catalyst to prove my capabilities.

”

Small Business helps Nare Letlhaka fund Medical Science degree

Despite financial difficulties, the loss of funding and personal setbacks, a young scholar from Mokamole Village has earned academic distinction at UL

By Lesego Maaba- ulpublications@ul.ac.za



At just 21, Nare Letlhaka celebrates earning a BSc in Medical Science from the University of Limpopo, marking a hard-won academic milestone shaped by resilience and determination.

Nare Letlhaka has earned a BSc in Medical Science from the University of Limpopo (UL) after overcoming significant financial challenges

As he walked across the stage during UL's 2026 Autumn Graduation Ceremonies, the moment symbolised not only the completion of his degree in record time, but also the triumph over years of financial hardship and personal sacrifice.

Born and raised in Mokamole Makekeng village, just outside Mokopane in Limpopo, Letlhaka grew up in a middle income household. With only one stable income, supporting the family proved to be an ongoing struggle.

"It wasn't easy, but I chose not to rely on my parents' financial support," he recalls. "My mother works as a clerk at a local hospital, and my father takes on odd jobs. Together, they provide a modest but steady income that covers the family's needs."

He adds that his brother was unemployed at the time of his studies, while his younger sibling is still in high school, which deepened his sense of responsibility to stand on his own. "There were weeks when the pressure weighed heavily, yet giving up was never an option. I wanted to prove to myself that I could build my path without relying on inheritance or family resources."

During his third year, Letlhaka encountered a serious setback when his funding was discontinued. Faced with this major obstacle, he refused to let it derail his plans.

Instead, he turned to entrepreneurship. From his student room, he began selling snacks to fellow students to afford basic necessities.

"That experience instilled discipline in me, financial literacy, and the importance of planning ahead," Letlhaka reflects. "It moved beyond mere survival, it was about finding a way to keep my dream alive."

Despite these challenges, he maintained an unwavering focus on his studies. While his peers enjoyed the social side of university life, Letlhaka prioritised his academic commitments.

"There were moments of self-doubt, especially when things did not go according to plan," he admits. "At times, it felt like I had to work ten times harder than everyone else."

In 2025, Letlhaka was recognised as one of the university's top three academic achievers in his school, a testament to his persistence and disciplined commitment.

Initially, he did not pursue a BSc in Medical Science out of passion, but as a strategic pathway towards studying medicine. Along the way, however, the journey sparked a strong interest in genetics.

This newfound passion opened up new possibilities, particularly in the field of Genetic Counselling. Drawing inspiration from pioneers such as Barry Shingwenyana, South Africa's first Black male Genetic Counsellor and a fellow UL alumnus, Letlhaka found a career path that resonated deeply with him.

"I realised that sometimes your purpose finds you along the journey," he reflects.

Driven by this vision, he is determined to help bridge healthcare disparities by introducing Genetic Counselling services in Limpopo and advocating for the establishment of a Genetic Counselling programme at UL.

Beyond his academic success, Letlhaka credits his family and community as the driving forces behind his journey.

"They reminded me of my roots and my responsibility to succeed," he says. "I want to prove to young people from rural villages that their background is not a ceiling, but a foundation."

“

There were weeks when the pressure weighed heavily, yet giving up was never an option. I wanted to prove to myself that I could build my path without relying on inheritance or family resources.

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Tanzanian graduate commends UL for shaping her pharmacy journey

International student overcomes academic, cultural and administrative challenges to secure a Pharmacy degree at UL

By Jostinah Mamabolo – ulpublications@ul.ac.za



Originally from Tanzania, Ansila Mdee is proud to have successfully earned her Bachelor of Pharmacy, realising her long held professional ambition.

For Ansila Mdee, relocating from Tanzania to South Africa at a young age became a turning point. This blessing in disguise introduced her to the University of Limpopo (UL), where she enrolled for a Bachelor of Pharmacy in 2022 and graduated during the University's 2026 Autumn Graduation Ceremonies

Mdee says her decision to pursue a career in pharmacy was driven by a clear purpose, to make a meaningful contribution to the healthcare sector.

Fuelled by a passion to help others and a strong interest in medicines that heal, she aimed to position herself where she could offer immediate, expert guidance to those in need, recognising that pharmacists are often the first point of contact for people seeking medical assistance. Her passion also sparked a deep curiosity about research and development in the pharmaceutical field.

"Pharmacy is more than a career; it is a dedicated commitment to public service and improving lives," she says.

Her decision to study at UL was strategically motivated by the institution's longstanding reputation in health sciences. Securing a place at UL was, for her, both a significant achievement and an opportunity to pursue her dream in a supportive academic environment.

Despite her early integration into the basic education system in South Africa after arriving from Tanzania, the transition to tertiary education at UL required a significant shift in mindset.

"The biggest shift was understanding that setbacks are not failures, but opportunities for growth," she reflects.

With determination and guidance from lecturers, mentors, and peers, she overcame these challenges and successfully completed her Bachelor of Pharmacy.

Academically, she developed a strong interest in Industrial Pharmacy Practice. Learning how medicines are developed, from raw materials to finished products deepened her appreciation for the field. Visits to manufacturing facilities in Gauteng further enriched her understanding by bridging theory and real-world application.

Being part of UL's multicultural environment also shaped her experience. Despite potential isolation due to language and cultural differences, Mdee found a welcoming and inclusive community where she could grow and thrive.

Beyond the technical aspects of pharmacy, Mdee also developed essential life skills. Group assignments strengthened her teamwork abilities and exposed her to diverse perspectives, while regular presentations helped build her confidence and communication skills.

Like many international students, her journey included navigating complex administrative and social challenges, particularly around registration processes and immigration documentation. With strong support from her family, friends, and university structures such as ULISO and the SRC, she successfully overcame these hurdles. Being part of UL's multicultural environment also shaped her experience. Despite potential isolation due to language and cultural differences, Mdee found a welcoming and inclusive community where she could grow and thrive.

Some of her most cherished memories stem from trips organised for international students, where she explored South Africa's rich cultural heritage and formed lasting friendships with peers from across the continent.

Looking ahead, Mdee is eager to continue learning and contributing to the healthcare sector. She holds a keen interest in pharmaceutical manufacturing and aims to play a role in developing medicines that improve lives.

From bike deliveries to graduation: Sithole turns hustle into hope

Balancing books and business, a UL graduate leveraged entrepreneurship to fund his studies and shape a future in agriculture

By Rinae Manenzhe – ulpublications@ul.ac.za



Sithembiso Sithole, who funded his studies through small businesses, has obtained a Bachelor of Science in Plant Production (Horticulture) from the University of Limpopo.

Sithembiso Sithole reflects on his journey to earning a Bachelor of Science in Plant Production (Horticulture) at the University of Limpopo (UL) with a clear sense of purpose. For him, success was not born from comfort, but forged through long days, sleepless nights and fierce determination

Born in Tafelkop in Sekhukhune, Limpopo, Sithole has grown from a student into a determined young entrepreneur. He describes himself as humble, focused and eager to learn.

While studying for his degree, he started different businesses to support himself financially. These included a poultry business specialising in layers, selling goods around Mankweng, and running a bike delivery service.

"I have always loved bikes. Seeing others making deliveries around Turf inspired me to turn my passion into a source of income."

He explains that during his studies, his father was the only one working as a teacher and had to support the whole family, including his siblings.

"Before I started my hustle, he carried all the financial responsibilities at home. Because of where I come from, asking him for money was never easy for me," he says.

He adds that he often turned to his mother when financial difficulties arose. "She was the easiest person to talk to, and she would go out of her way to make sure I was okay."

This pushed him to start his own hustle so that he could support himself while studying. What started as a side hustle in January 2025 soon became an important source of income. With support from his family, Sithole used his delivery business to cover daily expenses and reduce the financial pressure that many students face.

Balancing business and academics was not easy. After spending the day in class, he would work for hours on his bike and put in even more time over weekends.

"Honestly, making money while studying is incredibly tough. There were days when I was completely exhausted, but I knew that income was the only way to keep myself in school."

To keep up with his studies despite the long hours, he often relied on recorded lectures whenever his schedule became too demanding.

"There were moments when I considered quitting school," he reflects. "But my family's support kept me going and reminded me why I started."

"There were days when I was completely exhausted, but I knew that income was the only way to keep myself in school."

Like many young entrepreneurs, Sithole learned through trial and error, navigating common business challenges such as lending money that was never repaid. Yet, these setbacks only strengthened his resolve.

Today, his ambitions extend far beyond graduation. He plans to grow his poultry and delivery businesses while pursuing a career in agriculture, with the ultimate goal of building a legacy for his family.

"I want to invest while I'm still young and build something enduring," he says.

"Balancing a hustle with academics is achievable," he advises. "But you must remain disciplined and remember your ultimate purpose in the classroom."

"Both my parents are alive, but my father was the only one working as a teacher to support the entire family, including my siblings. Before I started my hustle, he carried all the financial responsibilities at home. Because of where I come from, asking him for money was never easy for me," he said.

He added that he often turned to his mother when financial difficulties arose. "She was the easiest person to talk to, and she would go out of her way to make sure I was okay."

He said this pushed him to start his own hustle so that he could support himself during his studies.

Mabunda overcomes vision challenges, loss of sister to earn an LLB degree

Born with albinism and visual loss, the Soweto-born graduate navigated stigma and academic pressure to realise her legal dreams with the support of UL facilities

By Lesego Maaba – ulpublications@ul.ac.za



Matimu Mabunda, LLB graduate, overcame visual impairment and personal loss to achieve her law degree at the University of Limpopo.

Born and raised in Soweto, Gauteng Province, Matimu Mabunda's path to a Bachelor of Laws (LLB) from the University of Limpopo (UL), was defined by courage, resilience, and an unshakable belief that she was destined for more

Born with albinism, a condition that affects both pigmentation and vision, Mabunda experienced the world through a different lens. Bright light was harsh, her eyesight was limited, and everyday tasks required extra effort. Regular hospital visits at Baragwanath became part of her routine, a constant reminder that she would have to work harder than most.

As the youngest of three children, her parents worked tirelessly to provide opportunities they never had. Her mother, Joyce Nkuna, managed a home business, while her father, a former railway driver with no formal education, held firmly to one belief: his children would one day graduate. Mabunda carried that dream like a touch, even as life presented challenges from the very beginning.

School, however, was not always a safe space, as she was often teased. While institutions like Sibonile Primary School and later Filadelfia Secondary LSEN in Soshanguve provided the technical tools to help manage her visual impairment, the social environment was often harsher. Growing up, she faced teasing and hurtful comments from peers in the neighbouring area who did not understand her condition.

"Living with albinism made my journey harder, but I refused to let it define me. I kept going, even when it felt impossible."

"It affected my confidence. There were moments I felt different, and not in a good way."

Through every trial, her mother remained her unwavering pillar, protecting her, and affirming her worth when the world did not.

However, the family's resolve was tested by a devastating tragedy, the passing of her sister while Mabunda was still in Grade 6. As the firstborn and a pillar of strength in the family, her absence made everyday life heavier, both emotionally and mentally.

Yet instead of letting grief derail her, she chose to push forward. Determined to honour her family's sacrifices, she excelled academically, completing matric with a Bachelor's pass and two distinctions.

In 2022, Mabunda enrolled at UL to pursue a Bachelor of Laws (LLB), entering a demanding field that would test her resilience to its limits. Adapting to university-level study while managing her visual impairment was overwhelming at times. Reading extensive legal material, adjusting to digital platforms, and keeping pace with lectures required constant effort and discipline.

"There were times I questioned myself. I wondered if I had chosen the right path," she admits.

However at UL, she found more than just an academic institution; she found a community. Through accessible learning resources, assistive technologies, and dedicated support structures such as the Reakgona Disability Centre (RDC), the university created an enabling environment for students living with disabilities to thrive. The residence community also provided a sense of belonging, creating a home away from home where she felt supported and encouraged.

As she found her rhythm, her hard work translated into academic excellence with several distinctions. A defining moment arrived in her final year when she participated in mediation training at the Mankweng Magistrate Court as part of her Alternative Dispute Resolution elective. Stepping into the court room, Mabunda did not just see the law in books, she saw her future.

“Living with albinism made my journey harder, but I refused to let it define me. I kept going, even when it felt impossible.”

Media Studies graduate's vision was always bigger than her eyesight

Losing her eyesight at a young age, Witness Makofane found her passion in the media industry and chose not to let blindness determine the course of her life

By Jostinah Mamabolo- ulpublications@ul.ac.za



Witness Makofane, BA Media Studies graduate, overcame vision loss at age 10 to pursue her passion for storytelling at the University of Limpopo.

Resilience is often defined by the ability to rebuild, and Witness Makofane exemplifies this strength. After losing her eyesight at the age of 10, she is now a graduate of the University of Limpopo (UL), having obtained a Bachelor of Arts in Media Studies

Originally from Shakung village in the Fetakgomo-Tubatse Local Municipality, Makofane grew up in a cultural environment where storytelling was integral to everyday life. However, her journey took an unexpected and life-altering turn when she lost her vision.

For Makofane, this transition in 2010 introduced profound psychological and practical challenges, forcing her to navigate life in ways she had never imagined.

"Losing my sight at the age of 10 changed my world, but it never took away my dreams, I chose to rise, adapt and keep going."

"It was difficult to accept," she reflects, recalling moments of confusion and frustration when everything felt uncertain.

Everyday activities such as reading, writing and moving through spaces became demanding tasks. Simple things that many take for granted now require courage, adaptation and patience. Yet even in her darkest moments, giving up was never an option.

In the face of these challenges, she chose to fight.

Her journey of rebuilding led her to Setotolwane Secondary School, a special school for learners with visual impairments. In this supportive environment, she began to regain her confidence and rediscover her sense of purpose. It was here that her love for storytelling deepened, inspired by the power of stories to shape perspectives and unite people.

This passion led her to UL in 2020, where she enrolled for a Bachelor of Arts in Media Studies, a field many might consider out of reach for someone living with blindness.

But Makofane saw it differently.

"For me, it was never just about obtaining a qualification," she says. "It was about understanding how media works and how I can use it to make a difference."

University life proved to be a rigorous test of resilience. From the demands of coursework to navigating the physical environment of the campus, each day required determination. There were moments of frustration, times when she felt misunderstood, and days when the burden felt overwhelming.

With the help of assistive technologies such as screen readers, support from UL's Reakgona Disability Centre, and lecturers who believed in her potential, Makofane found ways not only to cope, but to excel.

She gravitated towards her passion for radio production and digital storytelling, where her voice became her greatest strength. Through sound, creativity and storytelling, she found freedom.

"Blindness does not mean I cannot tell stories," she says. "It simply means I experience them differently." Now pursuing her Honours degree, Makofane is determined to transform how disability is portrayed in the media. She is no longer just a student, she is an advocate for inclusive, authentic and impactful storytelling that challenges stereotypes.

“

Losing my sight at the age of 10 changed my world, but it never took away my dreams, I chose to rise, adapt and keep going.

”

After years of struggle, Mahlodi Mabina earns Media Studies, Law qualifications

Despite years of delays, doubt, and determination, she turns a difficult academic journey into a story of triumph

By Nyeleti Nyathi - ulpublications@ul.ac.za



Mahlodi Mabina, celebrates earning her LLB from the University of Limpopo after a journey marked by setbacks, resilience and determination.

At 28, Mahlodi Mabina graduated from the University of Limpopo (UL) in 2026, earning her Bachelor of Laws (LLB) after completing her first degree in Media Studies in 2019

She describes her journey towards these two qualifications as one filled with setbacks, self-doubt, and perseverance.

Originally from Sekgosese within the Greater Letaba Local Municipality, and later attending boarding school in Haenertsburg, Mabina once dreamed of a life in front of the camera as a television presenter. However, as her perspective matured, she developed a desire to make a deeper impact, to advocate for justice and fairness. That calling led her to pursue an LLB.

Mabina's academic journey began with a Bachelor of Arts in Media Studies at UL, where she struggled to balance academic demands with social and personal commitments. These challenges resulted in her repeating a year, extending her three-year degree into four.

The 2019 graduation season was particularly difficult. While her peers celebrated, she grappled with the emotional weight of being left behind. "I felt embarrassed; I couldn't even bring myself to attend," she recalls.

Rather than allowing this moment to define her, she used it as an opportunity for a fresh start.

What followed was a demanding six-year journey, instead of the expected four years, due to failed modules. The period was marked by missed assignments, academic setbacks, and distractions that prolonged her studies.

"There were moments I felt completely overwhelmed," she admits. "I questioned whether I was on the right path."

"There were times I wanted to give up, but something in me kept saying, 'Try again.'"

As mounting pressure began to erode her confidence, giving up would have been easier. Instead, she chose to ask for help.

"That was my turning point," she says. "I realised I couldn't do it alone."

With support from academic resources and professional guidance, Mabina began to rebuild herself step

by step. She spent more time in the library, recommitted to her studies, and practised positive affirmations.

"Small steps made a big difference, I had to relearn discipline and believe in myself again."

When she finally completed her LLB, it was more than just a qualification, it was a victory.

Graduating with a distinction in Bookkeeping for Law Practitioners became one of the most emotional moments of her journey, validating her hard work.

"It meant everything to me. It showed me that I had overcome everything that tried to break me."

Today, Mabina no longer measures success by academic transcripts alone, but as a holistic journey of resilience.

"Success is not just about grades anymore. It's about growth, healing, and continuing, even when things are difficult."

"I want to be a lawyer who understands people. Someone who knows what it means to struggle, and still rise."

"I want to be a lawyer who understands people. Someone who knows what it means to struggle, and still rise."

Raised by her father, Mathobela overcomes loss to graduate Cum Laude

After losing her mother at the age of nine, she worked hard to succeed academically with the support of her father

By Rinae Manenzhe – ulpublications@ul.ac.za



Marema Mathobela celebrates graduating Cum Laude with a Bachelor of Commerce in Accounting from the University of Limpopo.

Marema Mathobela (23) from Lebowa kgomo, Capricorn District, has overcome one of life's most defining challenges, losing her mother to graduate Cum Laude with a Bachelor of Commerce in Accounting from the University of Limpopo

But behind this achievement lies a story rooted in heartbreak. At the age of nine, Marema lost her mother, a loss that reshaped her childhood. Growing up as the first-born child without a mother meant navigating life without the comfort, guidance, and emotional support that many take for granted.

"There are moments you wish you could share with your mother, your fears, your achievements, your struggles. You learn to be strong, but there's always that space that cannot be filled."

A critical factor in Mathobela's journey was the unwavering support of her father, Elijah Mathobela, who became her pillar, raising her alone while carrying both grief and responsibility.

"My father became everything," she says. "He was my strength, my support system, and my biggest motivation."

Through his support and belief in her, Mathobela found the courage to persevere.

Her academic journey, however, was far from easy. "I have learned that growth comes with discomfort," she says. "My journey has been about learning, growth, and resilience."

Although she developed a passion for accounting early on, university brought new challenges. In her second year, modules such as Auditing, Taxation, and Ethics tested her confidence.

"I struggled with theoretical modules," she admits. "When I received my first mark below 50%, it felt like everything was falling apart." But instead of giving up, Mathobela chose to push forward. "I told myself that failing once does not mean I am incapable. It meant I needed to change how I approached my work."

She reflected, adjusted her study methods, and worked harder. Slowly, her results improved.

Beyond academics, the emotional weight she carried made the journey even more difficult.

"I tend to isolate myself during difficult times," she says. "But I realised I could not do it alone."

In 2024, she made a turning point, allowing others into her healing journey.

"My community showed up for me," she says. "They never made me feel like a burden."

Through counselling, journaling, prayer, and gratitude, she found ways to heal while staying focused on her studies.

She developed disciplined study habits, rewriting notes, using past exam papers, creating mind maps, and watching online tutorials.

For Mathobela, graduating Cum Laude was more than an academic achievement, it was deeply personal, it was a validation of her intellect.

"I am ecstatic. For a long time, I doubted myself more than I believed in myself. This achievement gave me back my confidence."

For her father, the moment was equally meaningful.



Marema Mathobela (middle) celebrates the rewards of her hard work with her family, including her father and younger sister, following her graduation from the University of Limpopo.

"I am so proud of my daughter," says Elijah Mathobela. "No one can take this degree away from you, your name is attached to it forever."

Today, Mathobela continues her academic journey, having enrolled for a Bachelor of Commerce in Accounting (BCTA) at UL.

“There are moments you wish you could share with your mother, your fears, your achievements, your struggles. You learn to be strong, but there's always that space that cannot be filled.”

PhD research cracks the secret to stronger eggs

Inspired by her upbringing in Sekhukhune, Limpopo, and raised among livestock, Dr Molabe Madikadike's PhD research offers a multi-million-rand solution to egg breakage while strengthening regional food security

Lesedi Mothapo – Lesedi.mothapo@ul.ac.za

Raised in Moroke village in the Fetakgomo-Tubatse Local Municipality, surrounded by livestock and poultry, Dr Molabe Madikadike never imagined that a simple eggshell would one day place her at the forefront of scientific innovation



Dr Molabe Madikadike, who has obtained a PhD in Animal Production specialising in Animal Breeding and Genetics, with eggs central to her breakthrough research on eggshell strength.

Today, as she graduates with a PhD in Animal Production from the University of Limpopo (UL), her research is doing more than earning her a degree, it is exposing a hidden crisis in South Africa's poultry industry.

At the centre of her groundbreaking research lies a simple but costly problem: fragile eggs.

Her study, "Investigating eggshell thickness quality of Potchefstroom Koekoek chicken breeding in South Africa", reveals that nearly 8% of Koekoek eggs break before they ever reach the market, stripping farmers of critical income.

What appears to be a minor crack is, in reality, a major economic leak.

"I looked at population growth and its impact on food security," explains Dr Madikadike. "Eggs are a vital protein source, yet production is under constant pressure. The prevalence of broken eggs is a serious financial drain for both farmers and traders."

Her journey from rural life to advanced science is deeply rooted in lived experience. Long before laboratories and data sets, she had already witnessed the problem firsthand.

During a visit to a household in Makanye (Mankweng), the statistics took on a human face. Piles of shattered eggshells lay scattered on the ground while a farmer explained how much of the harvest was lost before it could be sold.

"That's when it hit me," she recalls. "This wasn't just data, this was people's livelihoods."

Determined to find answers, Dr Madikadike turned to science, focusing on the SCNN1g gene, a critical factor in calcium regulation during eggshell formation.



Dr Molabe Madikadike, who has graduated with a PhD in Animal Production from the University of Limpopo (UL), is on a quest to improve eggshell strength and reduce losses in the poultry industry.

Put simply, her research sought to answer one vital question: what makes an eggshell strong enough to survive the journey from the nest to the table?

Her findings challenged conventional thinking. Her study suggests that increasing egg length results in thicker eggshells. She also revealed Multivariate Adaptive Regression Spline data mining algorithm as the best model for improving eggshell thickness, further genetic markers (A2587T and C1013T) and gene expression levels associated with eggshell thickness were identified for marker-assisted selection to improve eggshell.

She discovered that lighter-coloured eggshells are often thicker and more durable, a revelation that could transform how farmers approach breeding and production management.

"If these findings were applied tomorrow, the impact on small-scale farmers in Limpopo would be immediate," Dr Madikadike says. "By selecting for stronger shells, farmers can drastically reduce waste and secure more profit."

However, the implications extend beyond economics.

"Eggshells are more than just a covering," she explains. "They are a shield protecting freshness and preventing harmful bacteria. A cracked egg is not just a lost sale; it is a risk to human health."

For Dr Madikadike, this realisation transformed her research into a lifelong mission.

"I realised that a good-quality egg is more than just a commodity; it is the first line of defence against food insecurity and foodborne illness."

Her work also carries a sobering warning: ignoring these structural issues could have far-reaching consequences.

"If we don't improve eggshell quality, the gap between supply and demand will only widen," she cautions. "As production costs rise, a basic source of protein could become a luxury that many families can no longer afford."

With four academic papers already published and several presentations at international conferences, Dr Madikadike's focus remains firmly on the ground, where it matters most.

"I'll know my PhD has made an impact when I walk into a village and see stronger, better-quality eggs being produced," she says.

"I want to work directly with farmers," she says. "This research must leave the lab and reach the villages. It's about more than science; it's about sustaining livelihoods and securing the future of our communities."

"I'll know my PhD has made an impact when I walk into a village and see stronger, better-quality eggs being produced."

Researcher probes hidden drivers of kidney disease in HIV patients

Dr Joel Choshi's doctoral research explores how oxidative stress and inflammation contribute to renal dysfunction in people on antiretroviral therapy and advocate for proactive clinical screening

By Malatji Monyelegwete – malatji.monyelegwete@ul.ac.za



Dr Joel Choshi, who graduated with a PhD in Physiology from the University of Limpopo, conducted research that highlights the link between antiretroviral therapy and kidney dysfunction, offering new insights into improving the monitoring and care of HIV patients.

After observing a troubling pattern among people living with HIV on antiretroviral therapy (ART), longer life expectancy paired with rising cases of kidney disease, Dr Joel Choshi set out to investigate what lies beneath the surface

His PhD thesis, is titled "Investigating the pathological implications of oxidative stress and inflammation in renal dysfunction in HIV patients on antiretroviral therapy."

Graduating with a Doctor of Philosophy in Physiology from the University of Limpopo (UL) during the recent autumn ceremonies, Dr Choshi says his work was driven less by the pursuit of a qualification and more by the need to respond to a growing clinical challenge.

"Although antiretroviral therapy has significantly improved life expectancy, we are now seeing an increase in comorbidities such as hypertension, diabetes and kidney dysfunction," he explains. "Some of this is linked to the long term toxic effects of certain antiretroviral drugs."

This observation prompted his research into the underlying mechanisms of kidney disease in HIV-positive patients on treatment, with a particular focus on oxidative stress and inflammation, a process often overlooked in routine clinical assessments.

Dr Choshi, a lecturer in UL's Department of Physiology and Environmental Health (Faculty of Science and Agriculture), utilised a cross-sectional study design to examine these mechanisms. His research establishes a clear correlation between Antiretroviral Therapy (ART) and elevated oxidative stress, and cardiometabolic risk factors associated with early-stage renal impairment.

Importantly, his research highlights the protective role of superoxide dismutase, an antioxidant enzyme that may help counterbalance oxidative damage.

"These findings suggest that we need to rethink how we monitor kidney health in HIV patients," he says.

Dr Choshi recommends that clinical practice move beyond traditional diagnostic tools to include markers of oxidative stress and inflammation. Early screening and targeted interventions, he argues, could play a critical role in slowing disease progression and reducing related complications.

The study has already made a notable academic impact, resulting in five high-impact publications, two more under review, and presentations at both local and international conferences, contributing to the fields of physiology, nephrology and HIV research.

Dr Choshi acknowledges the rigorous demands of doctoral research. "My PhD journey was not an easy one. After all the hard work and challenges, I feel happy and relieved to be done and wearing this gown," he says. "This is a significant milestone for me, and I am proud to have achieved it at the age of 30."

“*These findings suggest that we need to rethink how we monitor kidney health in HIV patients.*”

Dr Masenya probes the persistence of gender inequality within Limpopo municipality

Driven by the gap between progressive policy frameworks and socioeconomic reality, Dr Malasela Masenya's PhD exposes how entrenched patriarchal structures continue to limit women's empowerment at local government level

By Phishego Mohubedu- ulpublications@ul.ac.za



Dr Malasela Masenya, an academic in the Department of Development Planning and Management at the University of Limpopo, examines how gender discrimination affects women's empowerment in a democratic dispensation through his PhD research.

Dr Malasela Masenya's doctoral thesis provides a critical examination of why constitutional protections for gender equality often fail to translate into meaningful change on the ground, prompting him to examine why women in local communities remain marginalised

His thesis, titled "Gender discrimination and its impact on women empowerment in a democratic dispensation: A case of Mogalakwena Local Municipality, Limpopo Province, South Africa," critically interrogates the disconnect between formal policy commitments and everyday lived experiences of women.

Dr Masenya, who hails from Mokopane, recently attained his Doctor of Administration in Development Studies, specialising in Planning and Management, in the Faculty of Management and Law at the University of Limpopo (UL).

"I became increasingly concerned about the gap between policy promises and the reality of women's lives," Dr Masenya explains. "While we see progress on paper, the practical application remains stalled by persistent inequality."

Holding a Bachelor of Development Studies and having spent his entire academic journey at UL, Dr Masenya's research was shaped by a long-standing interest in empowerment and social justice.

Despite a strong legislative framework designed to support gender equality, deeply entrenched

patriarchal norms and cultural expectations continue to confine many women to domestic roles. He argues that these dynamics are further reinforced by intersection of class, race and tradition, which collectively sustain unequal power relations.

Adopting a qualitative research methodology, Dr Masenya utilised interviews and questionnaires, to document the firsthand experiences of women navigating discrimination within the Mogalakwena Local Municipality.

The findings identify a critical persistent structural failure: while progressive policies exist, their implementation remains weak and inconsistent.

"There is still a gap between policy and reality, especially in how women experience empowerment at the local level," he explains.

In his conclusions, Dr Masenya advocates for stronger institutional accountability and a more effective implementation of gender equality frameworks. He argues that empowerment initiatives must transcend beyond symbolic compliance to directly dismantle the structural and cultural barriers that

continue to limit women's societal participation.

Furthermore his work also underscores the importance of community-level interventions that are designed to challenge entrenched norms while fostering inclusive development.

Reflecting on his academic path, Dr Masenya notes that the doctoral process required significant discipline, resilience and self-motivation, particularly during periods of isolation and doubt.

"The commitment to my goals kept me going, even in difficult moments," he reflects. "Completing the PhD represents more than academic achievement, but it signifies personal growth and a strengthened sense of professional purpose."

Dr Masenya attributes much of his success to his supervisors, noting that their openness made the process more meaningful and productive.

The research has already contributed to a substantial impact on academic discourse, producing 10 manuscripts, four published, three accepted, and three under review, further advancing conversations on gender, development and governance.

“There is still a gap between policy and reality, especially in how women experience empowerment at the local level.”

Dr Ravhuhali's PhD research targets rural non-communicable disease crisis

Concerned by the growing number of hypertension and diabetes cases in Limpopo, Dr Khuliso Ravhuhali is developing a community-based prevention model rooted in local realities

By Lebogang Mathaba – ulpublications@ul.ac.za



Dr Khuliso Ravhuhali, whose PhD research focused on tackling rising hypertension and diabetes in Limpopo through community-based prevention.

After repeatedly observing a steady rise in non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as hypertension and diabetes in Limpopo's rural communities, alongside fragmented and largely reactive prevention efforts, Dr Khuliso Ravhuhali set out to investigate the gap between policy and practice

This observation served as the catalyst for his doctoral research at the University of Limpopo (UL), where he recently attained a PhD in Public Health from the Faculty of Health Sciences.

"I noted that while treatment was being provided, there was a serious lack of primary prevention," Dr Ravhuhali explains. "The system was responding reactively, and I repeatedly observed that non-communicable diseases were increasing while prevention remained fragmented and reactive."

Currently serving as an Epidemiologist and Research Manager at the National Health Laboratory Service in Limpopo, Dr Ravhuhali specialises in strengthening surveillance systems, research governance, and evidence-based decision-making across South Africa's health sector. However, it was his early experience in the Limpopo Department of Health that prompted his academic inquiry.

Raised in the province, he began his academic journey with a Bachelor of Science in Nutrition before advancing into public health and field epidemiology. His frontline exposure to healthcare delivery revealed critical gaps in prevention, particularly in underserved rural communities.

Driven by a commitment to address these gaps, he conducted his doctoral research at the Dikgale, Mamabolo and Mothiba (DIMAMO) Health and Demographic Surveillance Site. His study examined disease patterns in conjunction with the socio-economic inequalities shaping health outcomes in rural areas.

The findings revealed a layered and disproportionate burden of disease. Lower-income households demonstrated higher risk profiles linked to smoking and physical inactivity, while higher-income groups showed increased prevalence of diabetes, alcohol consumption, and high salt intake.

"These distinct patterns showed that a one-size-fits-all approach to prevention is fundamentally ineffective," he explains.

A defining moment in his research came during community engagement sessions, where residents described the daily realities of managing chronic illnesses with limited resources. These firsthand experiences shifted the direction of his research.

"It became clear that the work needed to go beyond theoretical analyses; it had to produce practical solutions," he says.

In response to the findings, Dr Ravhuhali developed the DIMAMO Preventive Care Model, a multi-level, evidence-based framework designed to strengthen prevention at both community and primary healthcare levels. The model integrates system-, provider-, and patient-level interventions, aiming to create sustainable and context-specific transformation.

"This model is grounded in local evidence and lived experiences, rather than imported solutions," he adds.

He recommends that health systems adopt early, targeted prevention strategies that address both behavioural risk factors and structural inequalities. His proposed framework includes integrating community-based screening, strengthening primary healthcare services, and tailoring interventions to specific socio-economic contexts.

"Research must translate into tangible action. That is the only way we can begin to shift health outcomes in a meaningful way."

“

The system was responding reactively, and I repeatedly observed that non-communicable diseases were increasing while prevention remained fragmented and reactive.

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When victims become perpetrators: UL study probes the cycle of domestic violence

Dr Chuene Maswanganye's doctoral research develops a criminological model to explain the transition of abused women into perpetrators, advocating for integrated, trauma-informed interventions

By Jostinah Mamabolo – ulpublications@ul.ac.za



Dr Chuene Maswanganye, a Safety in Society lecturer at Capricorn TVET College, celebrates earning her PhD in Criminology from the University of Limpopo, focusing on domestic violence.

Through extensive engagement with the lived realities of women affected by domestic violence, Dr Chuene Maswanganye identified a complex and frequently overlooked pattern, that some victims of abuse later become perpetrators themselves

This observation prompted her doctoral research at the University of Limpopo (UL), where she successfully completed a PhD in Criminology within the Faculty of Humanities. Her thesis, titled "The Transition of Female Victims to Perpetrators of Domestic Violence in South Africa: Towards a Criminological Model," interrogates the cyclical nature of violence and the specific socio-structural conditions that sustain it.

"I have always been passionate about addressing social challenges, particularly those affecting women," Dr Maswanganye explains. "However, I realised that for interventions to be truly effective, we need to understand the full complexity of these experiences."

Currently a lecturer in the Safety in Society programme at Capricorn TVET College, Dr Maswanganye's academic portfolio focuses on gender-based violence, domestic violence, and criminological theory, with a particular interest in women's experiences in South Africa.

Her research integrates feminist, social learning, strain, and trauma theories to develop a specialised criminological conceptual model. This framework explains how victims may transition into perpetrators within abusive environments and highlights what she describes as the "dual roles" women may occupy in cycles of violence.

"It became clear that domestic violence is rarely a linear experience.

There are overlapping dynamics of victimhood and agency, and victims can, in some cases, become perpetrators within complex cycles of abuse."

Her findings call for a more nuanced and integrated response to domestic violence, one that goes beyond immediate protection and addresses underlying trauma, inequality, and social conditioning.

To address these systemic gaps, Dr Maswanganye recommends strengthening existing legislative and policy frameworks to better protect victims, alongside expanding trauma-informed counselling and support services.

Beyond legislative reform, she also calls for greater investment in women's empowerment programmes that prioritise economic independence, social support, and psychological resilience; factors she identifies as critical in breaking cycles of abuse.

"Unless we address the core issues of vulnerability and dependency, it becomes difficult to interrupt patterns of violence," she notes.

“Domestic violence is rarely a linear experience. There are overlapping dynamics of victimhood and agency, and victims can, in some cases, become perpetrators within complex cycles of abuse.”

The study further underscores the importance of community-level interventions. Dr Maswanganye emphasises the need for awareness campaigns and peer education initiatives that challenge harmful social norms and promote healthier relationship dynamics.

She also advocates for integrated intervention strategies that draw on criminological theories to better respond to the complexity of domestic violence cases.

Her research has already begun to influence both academic scholarship and policy development, resulting in one published article, with two more in progress, as well as a presentation at a national conference.

Completing the PhD, however, was marked by significant personal and financial challenges. Without funding and while unemployed, Dr Maswanganye navigated financial strain alongside the emotional toll of researching traumatic experiences.

"While the research was emotionally demanding, the process only reinforced the importance of producing work that can make a real difference," she reflects.

Silent pollution in the Olifants River raises alarm over food safety and community health

University of Limpopo researcher uncovers how microplastics are entering freshwater fish and threatening ecosystems that communities depend on

By Frans Nkhapele - frans.nkhapele@ul.ac.za

The graduation of Priscilla Mokgawa with a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Zoology represents more than a personal academic milestone for the University of Limpopo (UL); it highlights an escalating environmental crisis in one of Limpopo's key freshwater systems, the Olifants River



Dr Priscilla Mokgawa, Research Assistant in the Department of Biochemistry, Microbiology and Biotechnology at UL, is passionate about understanding how human activities affect ecosystems, particularly aquatic environments and fish species, as well as how pollutants move through and impact these natural systems.

Motivated by a lifelong passion for understanding nature and environmental change, Dr Mokgawa concentrated her research on the impact of human activities on freshwater ecosystems, specifically through the lens of microplastics; tiny plastic particles that are increasingly infiltrating rivers, aquatic organisms, and, ultimately, the human food chain.

"I aimed to comprehend how human actions affect ecosystems, particularly aquatic environments, and how pollutants are transmitted within them," Dr Mokgawa stated.

Her findings unveiled a troubling reality: microplastics were present in the water, sediment, and fish species inhabiting the Olifants River. Alarming, the contamination included *Oreochromis mossambicus*, a widely consumed freshwater fish that many households rely on for food and income.

"Inland rivers are vital freshwater resources, yet they face growing threats from human activities and remain largely unstudied," she noted.

The research revealed that microplastics accumulate in essential organs of fish, including the liver, gills, and brain, leading to significant physiological stress and organ damage. Although lower levels were found in muscle tissue consumed by humans, the presence of microplastics in edible fish raises critical concerns about long-term food safety and human health.

"Microplastics were found in multiple tissues of the fish, including those consumed by humans, which highlights a potential pathway for human exposure," she explained.

The implications for communities reliant on freshwater resources are profound. Rivers like the Olifants support fishing, provide water for domestic use and agriculture, and

sustain biodiversity essential for survival. Pollution in these ecosystems jeopardises aquatic life, livelihoods, nutrition, and public health.

Dr Mokgawa's research highlights a broader environmental challenge facing many inland communities. While global attention often centres on plastic pollution in oceans, freshwater systems are frequently neglected despite their crucial role in sustaining life. Her work advocates for the urgent protection and scientific study of rivers.



Priscilla Mokgawa during her PhD graduation ceremony at the University of Limpopo.

"Freshwater systems are often disregarded because they are seen merely as conduits to the ocean, yet they are ecosystems of immense importance in their own right," she stated.

“Microplastics were found in multiple tissues of the fish, including those consumed by humans, which highlights a potential pathway for human exposure.”

The study identifies several contributing factors to the escalating microplastic issue, including inadequate waste disposal, mining operations, agricultural runoff, and rising plastic consumption. Without intervention, pollution levels are expected to increase, placing additional stress on already vulnerable ecosystems.

Nevertheless, the research also presents practical solutions and hope for communities. Dr Mokgawa advocates for enhanced waste management systems, stricter environmental regulations, and regular monitoring of inland water sources. She also emphasises the need for environmental awareness campaigns that promote responsible plastic waste disposal and encourage greater community involvement in protecting rivers and wetlands.

"Tackling microplastic pollution requires improved waste management, stricter regulations, and increased monitoring of inland water systems," she stressed.

Implementing these recommendations could significantly benefit communities. Cleaner rivers would enhance food safety, protect aquatic biodiversity, bolster local fishing economies, and mitigate health risks associated with polluted water and contaminated fish. Increased environmental monitoring could also enable authorities to respond promptly to pollution threats before they escalate into larger public health and ecological crises.

Study reveals rising mental illness relapse among Limpopo teachers

Lack of support systems, stigma, and policy gaps leave teachers vulnerable, jeopardising community well-being and the quality of education

By Reuben Maahe - reuben.maahe@ul.ac.za



Dr Thembi Nkomo, an Occupational Therapy Lecturer at the University of the Free State, recently earned her PhD from the University of Limpopo, where she conducted research on mental illness relapse among public school teachers in Limpopo Province.

A new study highlights a growing mental health crisis among public-school teachers in Limpopo, undermining both educator well-being and the quality of learning in their communities

Research led by Dr Thembi Nkomo, who earned her PhD in the Faculty of Health Sciences with the thesis "Development and Validation of a Strategy to Minimise Illness Relapses Among Public School Teachers in Limpopo Province, South Africa," reveals a significant rise in mental illness relapses among teachers over the past decade. This trend raises concerns about the long-term implications for schools and society. Many affected teachers spend extended periods in mental health institutions or are placed on temporary long-term incapacity leave, disrupting classroom stability and negatively impacting student performance.

Major Depressive Disorder is the most common condition identified, with female, single, mid-career, and high school teachers being the most vulnerable. Factors contributing to this situation include heavy workloads, workplace stress, stigma, insufficient managerial support, and personal pressures, reflecting broader systemic challenges within the education sector.

Dr Nkomo utilised medical record analysis, interviews, and policy reviews to assess the problem's scale. Her findings indicate a significant policy gap within the Department of Basic Education, which currently lacks a dedicated framework to support teachers experiencing mental illness relapses.

"The Department of Basic Education currently has no policy specifically designed to support teachers dealing with mental illness relapse," she stated.

This lack of structured support leaves many teachers without guidance when returning to work after treatment, often leading to repeated relapses. The study also highlights how stigma within schools and inadequate reintegration processes hinder full recovery, isolating affected teachers and compounding their struggles.

Drawing from her experience as a Clinical Occupational Therapist in psychiatric hospitals, Dr Nkomo witnessed firsthand how many teachers cycle through treatment without achieving sustainable recovery. She reports that mental illness relapse rates among teachers increased from 9.43% in 2013 to 16.35% in 2023, a trend she finds deeply concerning.

"What struck me most was that the majority of the patients I worked with were public school teachers, the backbone of our communities. Watching them deteriorate despite intervention was deeply painful and motivated me to pursue solutions that could make a lasting difference," she remarked.

The repercussions extend beyond individual teachers. Frequent absenteeism, burnout, and staff turnover disrupt teaching and learning, placing additional strain on already under-resourced schools and adversely affecting student outcomes throughout communities.

To tackle the crisis, Dr Nkomo proposes a comprehensive, multi-level intervention strategy.

Key recommendations include developing clear return-to-work programmes, introducing targeted mental health policies, launching workplace anti-stigma campaigns, establishing peer support systems, and creating a dedicated mental health support mobile application for teachers.

She warns that failure to act could lead to worsening mental health conditions, repeated hospitalisations, and increased instances of ill-health retirement, outcomes that would further burden the healthcare system and weaken the education sector.

Ultimately, the study contends that supporting teachers' mental health is not merely a workplace issue but a societal imperative. Strengthening support systems for teachers will enhance classroom outcomes, reduce healthcare costs, and contribute to the country's broader social and economic development.

“The Department of Basic Education currently has no policy specifically designed to support teachers dealing with mental illness relapse.”

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New research highlights escalating water crisis in Waterberg

Study reveals that declining wetland health and unequal access to clean water jeopardise communities, ecosystems, and future development

By David Mmatli - ulpublications@ul.ac.za



Dr Katlego Matlou celebrates earning her PhD in Zoology at UL. She is now employed at the University of Pretoria's Centre for Viral Zoonoses.

Water, one of life's most vital resources, is facing increasing pressure in South Africa, prompting communities to feel the effects. New research by Dr Katlego Matlou underscores the declining ecological health of wetlands in the Waterberg region, warning that deteriorating water systems could exacerbate existing inequalities and threaten livelihoods

Dr Matlou, a recent PhD graduate in Zoology from the Faculty of Science and Agriculture at the University of Limpopo, has dedicated her research to understanding how wetlands, critical natural water filters, are being impacted by environmental and human pressures. Bioassessment and biomonitoring of macroinvertebrate assemblages in wetlands of the Waterberg District, Limpopo Province.

Her findings reveal a significant issue: weakened wetland ecosystems are diminishing water quality and availability, particularly in rural and underserved communities that rely heavily on natural water sources. This decline carries serious implications for public health, agriculture, and local economies.

Dr Matlou's passion for environmental science was influenced by her grandfather, who fostered her love for nature through outdoor activities and environmental awareness. This early exposure laid the groundwork for her academic journey, culminating in a PhD focused on water quality and ecosystem sustainability.

Her research highlights the persistent inequities in access to clean, safe, and reliable water across South Africa. Infrastructure limitations, environmental degradation, and historical inequalities continue to obstruct many communities from securing this essential resource.

"Water is fundamental. It is needed for drinking, sanitation, food production, and energy. Protecting it means protecting both people and ecosystems."

In addition to identifying the problem, Dr Matlou's work proposes urgent solutions. She emphasises the need for enhanced conservation and management of wetlands, improved water infrastructure, and increased investment in scientific monitoring of water systems. Protecting wetlands, she argues, is not just an environmental priority but also a socio-economic imperative.

“Water is fundamental. It is needed for drinking, sanitation, food production, and energy. Protecting it means protecting both people and ecosystems.”

Her research also stresses the importance of collaboration among government, scientists, and communities. Sustainable water management necessitates coordinated action, from policy development to local conservation initiatives that empower communities to safeguard their natural resources.

Currently, Dr Matlou is contributing to research at the University of Pretoria's Centre for Viral Zoonoses, continuing to advance knowledge that connects environmental health to human well-being.

Her study concludes that neglecting the protection of wetlands and improving water governance could worsen water insecurity, elevate health risks, and hinder economic opportunities, particularly for vulnerable populations.



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