

From UNIVEN Halls to Global Laboratories: Dr Godfrey Dzhivhuho's Groundbreaking HIV Research Journey



On Picture Above: Dr Godfrey Dzhivhuho

From the modest lecture halls of the University of Venda to the state-of-the-art laboratories at the University of Virginia, Dr Godfrey A. Dzhivhuho's scientific journey is a testament to the power of perseverance, curiosity, and global collaboration. A virologist and research scientist in the Rekosh and Hammarskjöld Laboratory at the University of Virginia's Department of Microbiology, Immunology & Cancer Biology, Dr Dzhivhuho is at the forefront of HIV-1 molecular virology, exploring how subtle genetic variations affect viral persistence and responses to cure strategies.

His current research focuses on the HIV-1 Rev-Rev Response Element (RRE) axis, a critical mechanism in RNA export, viral replication, and latency reversal. His recent publication in PLOS Pathogens, titled "Rev-RRE activity modulates HIV-1 replication and latency reactivation: Implications for viral persistence and cure strategies", has drawn global recognition and was featured in UVA Today for its breakthrough findings. This study reveals how natural variation in Rev activity influences viral replication and reactivation potential, opening new doors for therapeutic interventions in the global fight against HIV.

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Roots at UNIVEN: Where Passion Took Hold

Dr Dzhivhuho's passion for virology and infectious diseases first took root at the University of Venda, where he completed his undergraduate and master's degrees. It was here that he nurtured his early interest in HIV research and first connected with international mentors. His scientific relationship with the University of Virginia began through UNIVEN's partnership with UVA's Summer Research Internship Programme (SRIP) and a gene expression training course led by Professors David Rekosh and Marie-Louise Hammarskjöld, a pivotal experience that laid the foundation for his future collaborations abroad.

After graduating from UNIVEN, Dr Dzhivhuho pursued his PhD in Medical Virology at the University of Cape Town. His doctoral research explored how chronic parasitic infections, particularly *Schistosoma mansoni*, affect immune responses to candidate HIV vaccines work which highlighted the complex relationship between co-infections and vaccine efficacy.

Pioneering Work at the University of Virginia

In 2017, Dr Dzhivhuho officially joined the Rekosh and Hammarskjöld lab at the Myles H. Thaler Center for AIDS and Human Retrovirus Research at UVA. His current investigations into the Rev-RRE axis have revealed that minor mutations in the Rev protein can significantly alter the virus's ability to replicate and emerge from latency, a discovery with critical implications for HIV cure research. His findings show that viruses with low Rev activity exhibit delayed replication and are more resistant to reactivation, while those with higher Rev activity replicate faster and are more likely to reverse latency. These insights underscore the Rev-RRE system as a potential therapeutic target for eradicating HIV reservoirs in patients undergoing antiretroviral therapy.

Broader Contributions to Virology and Public Health

Beyond HIV, Dr Dzhivhuho has also contributed to SARS-CoV-2 research, co-authoring studies on spike protein-mediated viral entry and the role of TMPRSS2 in infection pathways. He was also a co-author on a widely cited paper examining environmental drivers of COVID-19 seasonality in the Southern Hemisphere. He has published extensively in leading journals such as PLOS Pathogens, Scientific Reports, Current HIV Research, and the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health. His publication list includes over 15 high-impact articles on virology, immunology, and genetic polymorphisms linked to infectious diseases and stroke.

A Mentor, A Leader, and a Proud UNIVEN Alumnus

Dr Dzhivhuho is also a dedicated mentor to graduate and undergraduate researchers. In recognition of his contributions, he received the prestigious Leonard 'Pug' Evans Retrovirology Prize in 2022. Despite his international success, he remains deeply connected to his academic roots. His career is a shining example of how the University of Venda cultivates globally relevant scientists equipped to address pressing health challenges. Through his trailblazing work, Dr Godfrey Dzhivhuho continues to elevate the reputation of UNIVEN on the global stage, proving that world-class science can emerge from the heart of Limpopo and that the fight against global pandemics begins with a deep understanding of the molecular world.

From Limpopo Roots to Biochemistry Excellence: The Journey of a Curious Mind (Ms Patel Sadik Sahaima)



On Picture Above: Ms Patel Sadik Sahaima

Born and raised in the heart of Limpopo, South Africa, into a humble and nurturing Muslim family, this top-performing alumna's story is one of quiet resilience, academic excellence, and an unwavering pursuit of knowledge. As the firstborn, she was surrounded by the love and support of parents who deeply valued education and hard work. Her father, a Bachelor of Arts graduate, and her mother, a matric graduate, instilled in her a quiet discipline, not by prescribing a specific career path, but by demonstrating, through their own lives, the power of consistency and belief. Her academic journey began at Little Flower Learning Center and culminated at Mbilwi Secondary School in 2019. It was during these formative years, surrounded by the simplicity of rural life and the complexities of limited resources, that her curiosity began to take root, particularly about the biological challenges in health and agriculture that affected her community.

Initially drawn to medicine and then briefly to the culinary arts, her ambitions evolved organically. With a little humorous nudge from her mother, "Why bother going to school for that when I can teach you how to cook for free?" she redirected her curiosity toward the invisible mechanisms of life itself. It was science, and particularly biochemistry, that eventually captured her imagination. She became fascinated by how living systems function and how that knowledge could be applied to solve real-world problems.

In 2021, she embarked on her academic journey at the University of Venda, where she pursued a Bachelor of Science degree in Biochemistry and Biology, graduating in 2024. Her academic path was marked by distinction, and her admission into a competitive honours programme stands as a testament to her dedication and intellectual capability. In recognition of her exceptional academic performance, Ms. Sadik Patel was awarded the title of Best Student in Biochemistry and Microbiology during the May/June Autumn Graduation Ceremony in 2025, a proud moment that affirmed both her commitment to excellence and her deep passion for the sciences. Today, she is an honours student specialising in biochemistry with a focus on metabolomics, a field that bridges molecular research with tangible societal challenges like food security and plant resilience.

What she enjoys most is the problem-solving nature of lab work, analysing complex data, decoding biological narratives, and uncovering solutions that could benefit humanity. Despite the academic demands, she has maintained balance and resilience, counting those personal achievements as equal to her formal accolades. When the day winds down, she finds comfort in home-baked treats, films, and the occasional scroll through TikTok, small rituals that bring calm to her otherwise rigorous routine. When asked about the secret to her success, she offers a metaphorical recipe: "One cup of consistency, two cups of curiosity, and as much humility as your heart desires. Learn constantly, own your mistakes, and keep moving forward. The world won't end if you don't meet people's expectations."

A firm believer in the power of mentorship, she urges young alumni and aspiring scientists to build strong foundations in biology, chemistry, and research methods. "Stay curious and don't be afraid to ask questions," she advised. "Seeking knowledge is not a crime." The University of Venda remains an integral part of her identity. It was here that she laid the groundwork for her scientific career, and it continues to be a space for reconnection, mentoring, and potential collaboration. Though she has no dramatic turning points to mark her journey, the quiet moments, such as moving cities and adjusting to new environments, have shaped her adaptability, the trait she considers most valuable to her success. Looking ahead, she hopes to be remembered not only for her academic contributions but for her character as someone who worked with integrity, remained humble, and pursued science that solved real problems. She envisions a legacy that bridges innovation with compassion and knowledge with purpose. Her story is a tribute to the unseen strength found in family, the transformative power of education, and the enduring spirit of curiosity that continues to shape her path forward.

Pfano Magavha: From Village Girl to Distinction Graduate in Accounting Sciences



On Picture Above: Pfano Magavha

Growing up in the serene village of Khubvi in Limpopo, Pfano Magavha's childhood was steeped in laughter, faith, and love. The eldest of four siblings, she fondly remembers playful afternoons after school, with her mother often joining in the fun, a simple joy that laid the foundation for a life built on togetherness and Christian values. Her parents instilled discipline, humility, and a deep respect for education, principles that would shape her academic journey.

Pfano began her schooling journey in 2005 at New Nation Pre-Primary School in Khubvi and completed her secondary education at Thengwe High School in 2017. While many children dream of familiar professions, Pfano's curiosity was sparked by a moment on the evening news. A passing comment about accountants caught her attention and lit a fire that would guide her academic choices from then on. In a family where no one had pursued accounting before, she became the trailblazer, opting to study the subject in high school and eventually choosing it as a career path.

Her parents' involvement in her education was both practical and inspiring. She recalls how her father made her count sticks to help with basic arithmetic and how her mother would sit beside them, supervising homework with gentle encouragement. It was this unwavering support that nurtured her self-belief and kept her grounded through life's challenges. After initially enrolling at Wits University, unforeseen circumstances led Pfano to transfer to the University of Venda in 2021, a turning point that tested her resilience and redefined her path. Rather than view the move as a setback, she embraced it as a new beginning. In 2024, she graduated with a Bachelor of Commerce in Accounting Sciences, earning her degree with distinction, a crowning achievement that reflected her hard work, discipline, and unwavering faith in God.

Her academic excellence did not go unnoticed. At the May/June 2025 Autumn Graduation, Pfano Magavha was honoured as the Best Student in Accounting Sciences and also named the Overall Best Student in the Faculty of Management, Commerce and Law, an extraordinary double accolade that firmly established her as a top-performing scholar at the University of Venda.

Currently pursuing a Postgraduate Diploma in Accounting Sciences at the University of Johannesburg, Pfano is building upon the academic foundation she laid at UNIVEN. While she is not yet employed, she remains focused and determined, with a clear vision of becoming a qualified accountant and a source of inspiration for other young women in her field. Outside of her academic achievements, Pfano is deeply influenced by the women in her life, her mother, grandmothers, aunts, and sisters, who she describes as fearless, goal-driven, and unwavering in the face of adversity. "They never give up, no matter how difficult things get," she said, a sentiment that echoes her journey.

Empowered by Purpose: How Ndivhuwo Muronga Became UNIVEN's Top Business Information Systems Graduate



On Picture Above: Ndivhuwo Muronga

Growing up in the vibrant township of Cosmo City, surrounded by the rhythms of a diverse community, Ndivhuwo Muronga learned early on the power of a supportive environment and a resilient mindset. Raised in a close-knit family that believed in the power of positivity and perseverance, her upbringing laid the foundation for a journey defined by hard work, purpose, and quiet determination.

From her early days at Cosmo City Primary School and later at Cosmo City Secondary School, her parents, especially her mother, were a constant source of motivation and inspiration. Her mother's wisdom, strength, and unwavering belief in her dreams made her not just a caregiver but a lifelong role model. "She helped me become the best version of myself," Ndivhuwo reflected.

Though she once dreamed of becoming a doctor, the world of Business Information Systems gradually captured her imagination a field that allowed her to merge technology with real-world problem-solving. Guided by her family's values and driven by her curiosity, she found herself drawn to a career where she could innovate, lead, and make a difference.

In 2022, she enrolled at the University of Venda, embarking on an academic journey that would shape both her career and her character. By 2024, she had completed her Bachelor of Commerce in Business Information Systems, and not just completed, but in record time and without a single academic hurdle. This milestone, she says, stands among her proudest achievements, a testament to her discipline, focus, and the positive mindset she has always carried.

As a crowning moment of her academic success, Ndivhuwo Muronga was honoured as the Best Student in Business Information Systems and the Overall Best Student in the Faculty of Management, Commerce and Law during the University's 2025 Autumn Graduation.

This remarkable achievement firmly positions her among the university's top-performing graduates and marks her as a rising star in her field. She is now pursuing her Honours degree in Business Information Systems at UNIVEN, continuing to expand her knowledge in a field that sits at the heart of digital transformation. "I enjoy exploring the integration of technology with business processes," she explained, highlighting her excitement about future-focused, practical skills that can drive change in organisations.

Her academic path was not without pauses and pivots. A gap year before university turned out to be a life-changing experience, giving her time to reflect, refocus, and prepare herself mentally for the academic road ahead. It is a decision she cherishes to this day, one that helped her enter higher education with maturity and purpose.

As a future professional, her goal is to contribute to innovative solutions that transform businesses, uplift communities, and prepare South Africa for the digital age. She hopes to be remembered as someone who stayed true to her values and served as a source of encouragement for others. "I want to inspire others through perseverance and integrity," she said with quiet conviction. At the end of a long day, she finds peace in music and the warmth of her family, simple joys that remind her of where she comes from and where she's headed. Her recipe for success is grounded in a positive mindset, goal-setting, and resilience qualities she believes are critical for any aspiring student or young professional.

She remains closely connected to the University of Venda community, not only through her current postgraduate studies but also through academic events, seminars, and networking activities. Her advice to fellow alumni is clear: "Stay involved, mentor, share, and participate. It benefits both you and current students." Looking ahead, she encourages the university to continue strengthening its alumni support through job placement initiatives, lifelong learning workshops, and inclusive networking platforms. "A strong alumni network is a powerful resource," she said, advocating for greater engagement and collaboration between graduates and the institution that shaped them.

If given the chance to go back, she would seize every opportunity to join student organisations, participate in academic clubs, and pursue internship experiences that sharpen professional readiness and enrich personal growth. In her story, we see the embodiment of the University of Venda's mission to produce graduates who are not only academically excellent but also socially conscious, innovative, and driven by a greater purpose. Ndivhuwo Muronga is one of those graduates, and her journey from Cosmo City to the lecture halls of UNIVEN is proof that with the right mindset, unwavering support, and clear goals, no dream is out of reach.

Beyond the Blackboard: A Young Teacher's Rise from Resilience to Recognition (Hlulani Nnzimeni Romeo)



On Picture Above: Hlulani Nnzimeni Romeo

From the quiet village of Ka Mhinga, surrounded by the warmth of a large extended family, emerged a young man whose story reflects perseverance, purpose, and an unwavering commitment to education. Growing up with cousins, aunts, and grandparents around him, life was rich in values and life lessons. It was in this environment that Hlulani Nnzimeni Romeo learned responsibility and self-dependence qualities, instilled in him from an early age by his beloved grandmother, who became his greatest role model and source of wisdom. When his parents separated during his early childhood, life took a challenging turn. Yet rather than derailing his ambitions, this experience shaped his strength and independence. He moved between homes and schools, first attending Sunduza Primary School in Mhinga, then Tshikhudini Primary School after relocating, before returning to complete his primary education at Mahagala Primary School in 2013. He then progressed to Milton Mpumfudzeni Secondary School in Lukalo, where he matriculated in 2018.

His decision to pursue education was deeply influenced by his family upbringing and his desire to build a better future not only for himself but for his community. Although he once dreamed of becoming a computer engineer, his passion was ignited by a life sciences teacher who inspired him during high school. This led him to the University of Venda in 2019, where he embarked on a Bachelor of Education degree journey.

In 2024, Hlulani completed his B.Ed. qualification. His academic achievements were nothing short of exceptional. During the University of Venda's Autumn Graduation in 2025, he was awarded in five prestigious categories: Best Student in Bachelor of Education: Further Education and Training, Best Student in the Bachelor of Education, Overall Best Student in the School of Education, Overall Best Student in Education, and Overall Best Student in Education Programmes. These accolades underscored his dedication, discipline, and academic excellence, placing him among the university's most distinguished graduates.

Beyond the classroom, Hlulani also thrived in student life. He received several trophies through his participation in football competitions at Grand Royale Residence, proving himself a well-rounded student who balanced academic with extracurricular involvement.

Currently, he serves as a teacher, passionately helping learners, particularly from Grade 10 upwards, understand and enjoy life sciences. "I enjoy helping learners understand and enjoy life sciences. Making the subject easier and fun is the best part," he shared. When not teaching, he relaxed by watching educational content on YouTube and spending time with his cousins. His recipe for success was simple yet powerful: stay organised, set clear goals, and prepare thoroughly through research. He credited his persistence and competitive nature as the key traits that helped him excel, always pushing himself to meet high standards.

To aspiring teachers and young alumni, Hlulani offered this advice: "Only pick a subject you love, it makes teaching easier and more enjoyable." His journey at UNIVEN was transformative. He gained valuable insight into learner behaviour, educational psychology, and effective teaching methods. He remained engaged with the university community through social media groups, email platforms, and alumni pages.

He encouraged fellow alumni to remain active and give back through mentorship, online platforms, and sharing career opportunities. To further improve the alumni experience, he suggested the university should enhance communication on employment and development opportunities using tools such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and email newsletters. Reflecting on his time at the university, Hlulani said that if he could go back, he would have joined more academic support groups, explored career paths sooner, and nurtured closer relationships with lecturers and peers. His legacy is clear: "I want to be remembered as someone who was always there to help and who stayed focused. As a teacher, I hope to be known as someone who made learning fun." This is the story of Hlulani Nnzimeni Romeo, a village-born educator who transformed personal adversity into purpose, academic excellence, and meaningful impact in the lives of young learners.

Mr Tshifhiwa Tshikota: From Curious Tinkerer to Cum Laude Computer Scientist



On Picture Above: Mr Tshifhiwa Tshikota

Growing up in the modest village of Vleifontein near Elim, Limpopo, Mr Tshifhiwa Tshikota's life was shaped by movement, transition, and unwavering parental support. Frequent relocations across towns like Polokwane, Sabie, Burgersfort, and Ha-Mashamba before settling in Vleifontein introduced him to different languages, new communities, and unfamiliar schools, each experience strengthening his resilience. Despite these shifts, Tshifhiwa's parents remained a constant source of encouragement. His father, a strict yet loving disciplinarian, never accepted mediocrity, while his mother played a nurturing role, managing routines and ensuring he never lost sight of the value of education. These family values formed the foundation of his character and academic focus.

Tshifhiwa began his schooling at Peakanyo Primary in Seshego Zone 1, continued at Ha-Mashamba Presidential School, and completed his primary and secondary education at Mahonisi Christian Learning Center in Waterval. Here, he developed fluency in English and nurtured a fascination with technology, sparked at an early age by assembling sound systems and restoring faulty TVs. In Grade 3, his mother introduced him to Microsoft Word and printing, an experience that ignited a lifelong interest in computers. Though he once aspired to become a doctor, his imagination gravitated toward innovation and science, with Marvel's Iron Man becoming an early icon of inspiration.

After matriculating in 2020, Tshifhiwa faced a defining crossroads. Despite pressure to pursue engineering, he took a gap year to reflect and followed his heart into Computer Science. This decision, made during a time of uncertainty and isolation, allowed him to gain clarity and direction. In 2022, without NSFAS funding, his father's sacrifice and belief in his potential enabled him to register at the University of Venda, where he pursued a Bachelor of Science in Computer Science. His academic journey was defined by discipline, curiosity, and relentless drive.

Graduating cum laude in 2025, Tshifhiwa was recognised as the Best Student in Computer Science at the Autumn Graduation. His achievements extended beyond the classroom, with his participation in high-impact competitions like the Limpopo Varsity Hackathons, the Dirisa Datathon, and the Cyber Secure Hackathon. He is pursuing his Honours in Computer Science with a strong focus on artificial intelligence and cybersecurity, continuing to expand his expertise in digital problem-solving. Tshifhiwa's story is not just one of academic success, but of passion, perseverance, and purpose. He encourages others to follow a similar path by nurturing curiosity, embracing challenges, and prioritising understanding over performance. Reflecting on his time at UNIVEN, Tshifhiwa values resilience and curiosity as the two key traits that carried him through obstacles, from waking up before dawn to struggling with difficult modules. He urges students to embrace setbacks, try new things, and avoid comparing themselves to others. While proud of his journey, he wishes he had started networking earlier, created a tech club on campus, and documented his progress to inspire others.

Looking ahead, Tshifhiwa envisions a more engaged alumni ecosystem at UNIVEN. He proposes the creation of a digital alumni portal with job boards, mentorship programmes, professional development webinars, and innovation showcases. He also recommends a dedicated alumni office to manage career services and foster connections. His journey from rural Limpopo to tech excellence is a tribute to the strength of family, the value of self-reflection, and the power of education to break boundaries. Today, Tshifhiwa continues to explore, build, and ask the same question that first fueled his curiosity: "What else can this do?"

From Seshego to Academic Distinction: Ditshephisho Mamabolo's Journey of Purpose, Faith, and Scientific Excellence



On Picture Above: Ditshephisho Mamabolo

Emerging from the heart of Seshego Zone 2, a township steeped in resilience and community spirit, Ditshephisho Mamabolo's story is one of remarkable transformation and anchored in faith, guided by family values, and driven by an unwavering pursuit of purpose. Raised in a household of six under the spiritual leadership of his parents, who were both preachers, Ditshephisho's early life was profoundly shaped by the principles of humility, discipline, and unwavering faith in God. These values were not simply taught; they were embodied daily, forming the ethical and emotional foundation that would sustain him through the most rigorous academic and personal journeys.

From an early age, his parents instilled in him the importance of education and perseverance through their example and sacrifices. Their steadfast commitment to their family's well-being deeply influenced their outlook on life, shaping a character grounded in responsibility, self-discipline, and service to others. These early influences not only cultivated his spiritual and intellectual growth but also embedded in him a quiet resilience and a deep-seated determination to strive for excellence in every endeavour he pursued.

Ditshephisho's formal academic path began at Maseala Progressive Schools, where he studied from 2008 to 2020. The school provided a solid academic foundation and an environment that nurtured both personal and intellectual development. Building upon this strong beginning, he enrolled at the University of Venda in 2022 to pursue a Bachelor of Science in Biochemistry and Microbiology. What followed was an extraordinary academic performance marked not only by distinction but also by accolades that placed him among the university's top scholars. At the 2025 Autumn Graduation Ceremony, Ditshephisho was named the best overall student, a distinction that came with several prestigious awards. These included the Sabina Pharmacy Award for being the best student in Biochemistry and Microbiology, the Faculty Medallion for being the top-performing student in the Faculty of Science, Engineering, and Agriculture, and the University's Senate Medallion, further affirming his position as the overall best student at the University of Venda. These awards are more than symbols of academic excellence; they represent a story of discipline, perseverance, and the grace of God at work in the life of a young man determined to turn his vision into reality.

Driven by a childhood dream to become a medical doctor, Ditshephisho had always been fascinated by the human body and motivated by a deep desire to help others. However, due to the highly competitive nature of medical school admissions in South Africa, he was initially unable to pursue that path directly. Instead, he enrolled in the BSc programme at UNIVEN, which not only served as a critical stepping stone but also deepened his scientific knowledge and affirmed his calling. The programme equipped him with a robust understanding of biological systems and analytical thinking skills that have proven invaluable as he transitions into his current studies. Today, Ditshephisho is pursuing a Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MBChB) at the University of Pretoria, where he continues to excel, drawing on the academic rigour and foundational knowledge gained from the University of Venda.

Reflecting on his journey, Ditshephisho offered words of encouragement to fellow alumni and current students at the University of Venda. He emphasised the importance of staying grounded in one's values, maintaining humility, and relying on faith, consistency, hard work, and resilience to overcome challenges and pursue a purposeful life. His story is a profound example of how institutions like the University of Venda play a transformative role in shaping not only scholars but also leaders who are principled, purpose-driven, and globally competitive. Ditshephisho Mamabolo stands as a shining testament to what is possible when faith, ambition, and academic excellence converge, and his journey continues to inspire a generation of students who dare to dream beyond their circumstances.

Mr Theko Thato Keabetsoe: A Testament to the Global Competence Fostered by the University of Venda's



On Picture Above: Mr Theko Thato Keabetsoe

From humble beginnings in Mokholuline, a quaint community in the heart of Arthurseat, Theko Keabetsoe grew up surrounded by a warm, loving, and education-focused family whose influence left an indelible mark on his character. Immersed in an environment that prized resilience, kindness, and responsibility, he was nurtured by his mother, grandmother, aunts, and uncle, all of whom instilled in him the enduring values of hard work and a relentless pursuit of knowledge. His primary education at Phatsedi Primary School (2007–2015) and secondary schooling at Lethipele Secondary School (2016–2020) laid a robust academic foundation that propelled him forward, even as he dreamt of soaring the skies as a commercial pilot for South African Airways. However, practical considerations about financial stability steered him toward a more sustainable path, leading him to the University of Venda, where he pursued a Bachelor of Laws (LL.B) degree from 2021 to 2024, ultimately graduating with distinction in May 2025.

Recognised academically as the top of his class, a testament to four years marked by resilience, dedication, and balance between rigorous coursework and personal commitments, he seamlessly transitioned into the practical realm of law, now serving as a Candidate Attorney at one of South Africa's leading law firms. In his professional role, he finds deep fulfilment in applying legal theory to real-world challenges, working collaboratively to solve intricate legal issues, and constantly bridging the gap between theoretical learning and practical application. Reflecting on his journey, he considered his emotional intelligence and the strength of his relationships with God, family, and friends as his most profound personal achievements, while his ability to initiate his legal career beyond the academic sphere stands as a cornerstone professional accomplishment.

Always guided by the lesson that challenges are inevitable yet surmountable through adaptability and self-motivation, he embraced pivotal moments such as the realisation of the fleeting nature of youth and the drive to secure a comfortable future, as essential in shaping his trajectory. His recipe for success remains an enduring blend of hard work, perseverance, resilience, curiosity, dedication, patience, and self-motivation, complemented by moments of relaxation spent enjoying popular culture through shows like *Skeem Saam* and streaming on Netflix.

Determined to leave behind a legacy defined by integrity, kindness, and perseverance, Theko aspires to make a lasting, positive impact on both personal and professional spheres while remaining actively engaged with the University of Venda through alumni events and networking opportunities. His advice to emerging legal professionals is to remain relentlessly curious, stay well-informed, and pursue academic excellence with the understanding that the true measure of success lies not in avoiding failure but in the ability to rise stronger with each setback.

Ms Annah Mahlako Chego: Proving Public Administration is a Science of Impact, Integrity, and Service



On Picture Above: Ms Annah Mahlako Chego

Raised in the modest township of Middelburg in Mpumalanga, Ms Annah Mahlako Chego's journey is one defined by humility, purpose, and academic brilliance. In a home built on values of hard work, respect, and perseverance, she was nurtured by the unwavering belief of her family, particularly her mother, whom she reveres as her greatest role model. Despite financial hardship, Annah was raised in an environment where education was viewed not just as personal empowerment but as a generational investment.

She began her schooling at Mthombeni Primary and completed her secondary education at Mphanama Secondary School. It was here, while observing the inefficiencies in local service delivery, that her passion for governance and reform began to take shape. Inspired by her community's needs, she decided to pursue Public Administration as a way to bring real change to institutions that directly impact people's lives.

In 2022, Annah enrolled for a Bachelor's degree in Public Administration at the University of Venda. Her academic journey, though filled with moments of self-doubt and resource limitations, was marked by resilience and an unshakable work ethic. In May 2025, she graduated with distinction and earned two of the university's highest accolades: Best Student in Public Administration and Best Overall Student in the Faculty of Management, Commerce and Law. These achievements confirmed her as one of the institution's top academic performers and a symbol of excellence in the field of governance. Now pursuing her Honours degree in Public Administration, Annah continues to build her leadership and research capabilities. Though she is not yet formally employed, she views her postgraduate studies as an essential stage of preparation, equipping her with the tools needed to influence policy, lead ethically, and serve communities with integrity. She defines success not only in academic terms but by her ability to make a tangible difference in the lives of others.

Her victories, overcoming introversion, pushing through difficult moments, and remaining true to her goals, are as meaningful as her academic ones. Her formula for success is rooted in hard work, faith, discipline, and surrounding herself with the right influences. Outside of academics, she finds balance through music, books, reflection, and time with loved ones. Annah remains actively connected to the University of Venda community and is passionate about giving back. She encourages the university to enhance alumni engagement through mentorship, communication platforms, and support networks for graduates. Looking back, she wishes she had participated more in student organisations and built stronger networks, recognising now the importance of collaboration and relationship-building in career development.

Annah Mahlako Chego stands as a remarkable example of what the University of Venda aims to produce: graduates who are academically exceptional, socially conscious, and prepared to lead with purpose. Her journey from Middelburg to the top of her faculty is not just a personal triumph; it is a testament to the transformative power of education and the vital role of Public Administration in building a more just and capable society.

Ambition and Excellence: The Academic Ascent of Maswanganyi Surely Nikiwe



On the picture: Maswanganyi Surely Nikiwe

Growing up in Giyani, a cohesive traditional community rooted in warmth and shared values, Maswanganyi Surely Nikiwe learned early on that life's challenges could either discourage you or shape your determination. Raised in a humble yet encouraging family, Surely was taught to uphold values of discipline, kindness, and respect. These early lessons became the foundation of a character marked by resilience and purpose.

Her educational journey began at Madzivi Primary School from 2009 to 2016, where her love for learning took root. From there, she progressed to Mafumani Secondary School from 2017 to 2021, a period that marked the beginning of her deep fascination with Accounting. It was here that her academic path became more defined, guided by teachers like Mam Ndleve, her role model, who inspired her with compassion, patience, and a tireless belief in every student's potential. The example set by her parents, who made sacrifices to ensure their children had food, uniforms, and a future, deeply influenced Surely's ambitions. Their unwavering commitment to education and the careful manner in which they managed household finances sparked her interest in financial systems. This interest would later blossom into a full fledged passion for Accounting.

Surely enrolled at the University of Venda in 2022 and, through discipline and persistence, graduated in record time in 2024 with a Bachelor of Commerce degree in Accounting.

Despite facing emotional, mental, and financial challenges, she remained focused on her goals. Her academic achievements reached a pinnacle when she was named the top-performing student in her programme, an accolade that underscored her unwavering work ethic and exceptional intellect.

What set Surely apart was not just her academic brilliance, but her desire to give back. She returned to her former high school to tutor learners in Accounting, creating a space where they felt supported and empowered. It was a way for her to reconnect with her roots and uplift others, fulfilling a childhood dream of helping people, even though her career trajectory shifted from aspiring teacher to budding accountant. Currently, Surely is actively seeking internship opportunities in the accounting and finance sector. While not yet formally employed, she has used this transitional period to refine her skills, set clear goals, and mentor others. Her dedication reflects a maturity and vision far beyond her years.

For surely, success is not just defined by degrees or titles, but by perseverance, purpose, and the ability to uplift others. She hopes to be remembered professionally as someone who delivered every task with integrity, precision, and humility, and personally, as someone who lived with kindness, inspired faith, and remained grounded regardless of her achievements. She continues to hold the University of Venda in high regard, crediting it for building her confidence and shaping her career path. Her advice to young alumni and aspiring Chartered Accountants is simple yet profound: "Don't rush your journey, own it. Trust the process, volunteer when you can, and keep learning, even in the waiting seasons."

Surely believes UNIVEN can enhance the alumni experience through structured networking platforms, mentorship opportunities, and forums that bring graduates back to share, inspire, and grow together. Looking back, she only wishes she had participated more in leadership activities during her student life. But her dedication to academic excellence made her one of UNIVEN's shining stars, an alumna whose story inspires pride, hope, and purpose. Her legacy is one of perseverance, community upliftment, and the courage to turn humble beginnings into a future filled with impact.

Professor John Mutuwafhethu Mafunisa: A Life of Scholarship, Service and Ethical Leadership



On Picture Above: Professor John M. Mafunisa

From the humble villages of Ha-Railphaswa and later Phadzima in Vhulaudzi, Limpopo, emerged a determined young man who would grow to become one of South Africa's most accomplished scholars in the field of Public Administration. Born and raised under the Headman Maphaha, Professor John Mutuwafhethu Mafunisa's early life was steeped in modesty, discipline, and strong community values. He enjoyed playing soccer and was actively involved in the Student Christian Movement, laying early foundations for teamwork, ethics, and service. Professor Mafunisa began his schooling at Raliphaswa Primary School, completed his primary education at Mudzinga Primary School, and matriculated at Vhulaudzi Secondary School. His academic ambitions were fuelled by the unwavering emotional and financial support of his parents, who made tremendous sacrifices to ensure he received an education. This instilled in him a powerful drive to succeed and a deep respect for the transformative value of education.

A proud alumnus of the University of Venda, Professor Mafunisa studied at UNIVEN from 1984 to 1987, earning a B. Admin in Public Administration and Industrial Psychology and a B. Admin Honours in Public Administration. He initially aspired to become an industrial psychologist; he realised this dream by working as a Human Resources Officer at the Venda Development Corporation in 1989/90. However, his passion for teaching and capacity building soon led him into academia. Inspired by his mentor, the late Professor Dovhani Reckson Thakhathi, Professor Mafunisa pursued and obtained a D. Admin in Public Administration at the age of 35, the same age his role model completed his doctoral studies. His academic journey includes a Master of Administration and D. Administration degree from the University of Pretoria and a Certificate in the Protection of Human Rights from the Institut International d'administration Publique in Paris (France).

His academic and professional accolades are extensive and distinguished. He has authored over 100 learner and assessment guides for institutions such as the National Treasury, National School of Government, LGSETA, Polokwane Municipality, University of Venda, and Enterprises@UP, among others. In addition, he has contributed to over 50 commissioned research reports for

organisations including the Presidency, the Department of Social Development, German International Cooperation (GIZ), Limpopo Premier's Office and the United Nations.

Professor Mafunisa has also received numerous awards for excellence in teaching and research, including recognitions from the University of Venda, the University of Pretoria, UNISA, the South African Association of Public Administration and Management (SAAPAM), and various international bodies. He was a recipient of the French Government Scholarship and participated in high-level global conferences in countries such as France, Cameroon, UK, Mexico, Turkey, China, Canada, and the USA. His academic work has taken him to respected institutions, including Gonzaga University (USA) and Florida State University (USA), where he engaged deeply in matters of public service ethics and public service governance.

Beyond academia, his leadership within professional bodies is exceptional. He served as the first Black Chief Editor and Deputy Editor of the prestigious Journal of Public Administration and held leadership roles in SAAPAM and numerous academic committees. His experience includes serving on audit and performance committees of municipalities and government departments, and acting as a registered assessor and moderator with several SETAs. Currently, Professor Mafunisa serves as a full Professor in the Department of Public Administration and Development at the University of Venda. He is passionate about teaching, mentoring postgraduate students, and conducting commissioned research for public institutions. Despite facing challenges including life-threatening car accidents and unfair promotional academic decisions, he credits his survival and perseverance to divine grace and personal resilience. These experiences have reaffirmed his belief in living life purposefully and cherishing each moment. Professor Mafunisa defines his success by passion, persistence, and patience. He believes that while some achieve academic recognition quickly, others must work tirelessly, and he proudly belongs to the latter group. His advice to aspiring scholars is simple but powerful: "Burn the midnight oil." His legacy is rich and multifaceted, an author of countless academic works, a mentor to thousands, and a capacity builder for municipalities across South Africa. Through his contributions, he has strengthened the backbone of public sector ethics and administrative capacity. Still deeply connected to the University of Venda, Professor Mafunisa engages in collaborative research and alumni activities, encouraging others to give back through mentorship, work experience opportunities, and alumni events. He suggests that UNIVEN could further support its alumni through postgraduate bursaries and platforms to share their expertise, such as public lectures and research associate roles. Prof. Mafunisa is currently participating in the Research and Policy Development Forum meetings, on Invitation, by the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) since June 2025. He is also participating in the Forum for the professionalisation of Supply Chain Management in South Africa with a focus on the Draft White Paper on Professionalisation of SCM.

In reflection, Professor Mafunisa has no regrets about his journey at UNIVEN. He continues to find joy in exercising, reading, and immersing himself in scripture and current affairs. Above all, he wants to be remembered for the knowledge he imparted, the students he empowered, and the ethical values he championed throughout his illustrious career.

Mr Nedoboni Ndivhuwo: A Visionary Leader Empowering the Future – From UNIVEN to National Impact



On Picture Above: Mr Nedoboni Ndivhuwo

From the vibrant township of Shayandima in Limpopo, Mr Nedoboni Ndivhuwo emerged as a purpose-driven leader shaped by a household steeped in faith, love, and relentless hard work. Raised by a father who was a dedicated teacher and a mother whose entrepreneurial spirit turned scarcity into survival, he grew up in an environment where spiritual grounding and values of discipline, humility, and service to others were more than ideals; they were a way of life. These early life lessons, instilled through action and example, would not only guide his journey but shape the transformational impact he would later make on others.

Nedoboni's education journey began at Lurenzheni Junior Primary School, continued at Tshidumbi Senior Primary, and culminated in matriculation at Khwevha Commercial High School. It was a path filled with both challenges and formative moments that built his character and sharpened his vision. Though his original dream was to become a teacher like his father, life had broader plans for him. Education remained a central thread in his aspirations, but entrepreneurship soon emerged as his vehicle for teaching and empowering at scale. In 2010, Nedoboni enrolled at the University of Venda, as the institution that would shape his life's mission most profoundly.

From 2010 to 2014, he studied towards a Bachelor of Commerce in Economics, later adding a Postgraduate Certificate in Education and a Postgraduate Diploma in Accounting Practice. At UNIVEN, he gained leadership. Elected to student governance from his second year until his final year, he developed confidence, public speaking skills, and a powerful sense of social responsibility. These years were pivotal in shaping his character, laying the groundwork for the visionary entrepreneur and mentor he is today.

Today, Mr Nedoboni Ndivhuwo is the Co-founder and Chief Executive Officer of VA Group, a dynamic, multi-sector enterprise with four thriving subsidiaries. Value-Able Consulting provides expert services in accounting, auditing, tax, and compliance.

Delight Training Academy is a youth-focused skills development institution that has already trained over 2,000 young people. Marshall Barbers, a premium Sandton-based grooming establishment, serves both local and international celebrities, while Dail-A-Mover operates in the logistics and transport sector. His vision is expansive, yet focused; each venture is designed to create jobs, develop skills, and uplift communities. VA Group currently employs 67 permanent staff and continues to grow under its leadership.

What drives him is not just the thrill of entrepreneurship, but the joy of impact, mentoring teams, building systems, and witnessing real change in the lives of the people his businesses touch. He sees business as a platform to teach, to empower, and to build long-term prosperity. His professional achievements are matched by his integrity, and he describes his greatest success as "building a life of purpose and impact while staying grounded in faith and values." It is no surprise that his formula for success is as powerful as it is simple, and that is to say, have Faith in God, work hard, be involved in lifelong Learning, and be of service to Others. Despite his demanding schedule, Mr Ndivhuwo remains grounded. He ends his days reflecting, watching the news, jogging, listening to music, or playing golf, a sport that helps him maintain the balance essential for sustained energy and vision. But even in moments of rest, his mission never fades. He is deeply committed to a legacy defined by empowerment, youth development, and systemic change. "I want to be remembered as someone who created opportunities for others to become economically active, especially the youth," he reflects. "Whether it's jobs, skills, or inspiration, I want my work to speak long after I'm gone."

His bond with the University of Venda remains strong. As a member of the Gauteng Province Alumni Chapter Executive Committee, he continues to support alumni initiatives, mentor students, and offer opportunities for collaboration and internships. He firmly believes that alumni must take an active role in uplifting the university and the next generation. His advice is clear: "Stay involved. Reach out. Offer your time, expertise, or resources, no matter how small. Together we can raise the profile of UNIVEN and build stronger bridges for future students." To young graduates and aspiring entrepreneurs, he offered timeless wisdom: "Start where you are with what you have. Stay focused, remain teachable, and move with purpose, not just for profit." For him, adaptability is the defining skill of the modern era. He credits his success to his willingness to grow, learn, and evolve while remaining rooted in purpose. "The world is changing fast, and those who can evolve while staying true to their values will lead."

Though now a national figure in business, Mr Nedoboni Ndivhuwo's journey remains closely linked to the institution that nurtured his early steps. He is living proof that the University of Venda produces graduates who are not only competitive in all sectors but who lead with character, vision, and global relevance. His story can be told in Sandton boardrooms, township classrooms, and yes, even in lecture halls at Harvard University. It is the story of a young man who turned a moment of redirection into a lifetime of impact, and it began at UNIVEN.