



LEARNING TO THINK, THINKING TO CREATE

UNISA SBL's new executive dean is Prof Pumela Msweli, a polymath with a deep love for creativity, and a firm belief in the innovative future of Africa's entrepreneurs.

Prof Pumela Msweli started her academic journey as a scientist, earning her Bachelor of Science through the University of the Witwatersrand, before setting off into several exciting and challenging years in the working world. Scholarship, however, soon called her back, and she enrolled for an MBA at the University of Exeter. "I got my results from my MBA and I had graduated cum laude. I couldn't believe it, and I immediately enrolled for my doctorate," Msweli says. This, you could say, was where her academic career really took off.

"I had excellent supervisors who put me on a path to publishing within the first three months. I was soon presenting at conferences." And it was through one of her conference networks that she was first recruited as a lecturer, back at her alma mater of Wits University.

Challenge, growth, and returns

Msweli spent a year at Wits, before writing off Johannesburg and the never-ending traffic for a quieter life in KwaZulu Natal (KZN) at the then Howard College, before the merger that would result in the University of KwaZulu Natal.

“I was lucky to work with some very experienced academics in KZN,” she says. “In 2001 I became an associate professor, and in 2006 I was NRF-rated.” In 2005 she was appointed as the dean of the faculty of management studies, a faculty with some 18 000 students.

“It was a challenging time, but in hindsight I am thankful for those challenges. It was a time of great growth,” Msweli adds.

In 2007 she resigned and began her own consulting business, as well as taking on the role of editor-in-chief for the *Journal of Green Economy and Development*, which was the flagship title for Green

Publications. “But if you have taught,” Msweli says, “it is like a bug”.

“I missed the students, and I felt a strong need to interact with young people and students. I think you learn a lot by teaching, and you get inspired by young minds that have nothing to lose.”

It was this that lead her back, first to Unisa School of Business Leadership (SBL) and then the University of Limpopo. “It was a brilliant experience,” she says, “it was another place I really enjoyed being in academic leadership. In two years, we transformed the publishing portfolio and the faculty doubled their publications.”

“I came back and joined SBL in 2018. I had no intention of being in the leadership. I just wanted to pursue my own academic interests, publish, write, work with students. But I got invited to take a leadership role, and I put my hand up when no one else would.”

Dreams and directions

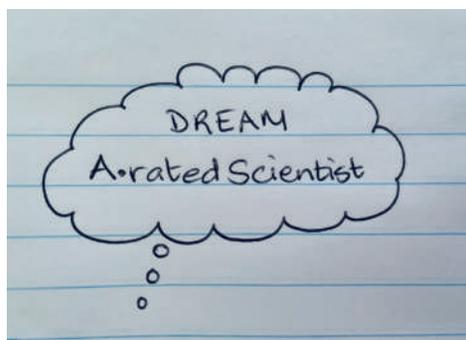
Prof Msweli’s ultimate personal goal, she tells SABSA, is that “I don’t want to die before I am an A-rated scientist”. And for school SBL, she says, she wants to see it reclaim its place as a top business school.

“I have no doubt that we can do this. Unisa has over 30 branches and a strong a footprint in Africa. We must reconfigure what we are doing and achieve market extension using what we already have.”

And she’s hoping to learn from her SABSA peers in this regard. “I know intuitively that a lot of problems we have could be solved by engaging more with SABSA members, by engaging with colleagues with similar experiences and challenges. We don’t need to reinvent the wheel, but rather to learn from each other.”

She continues: “I want SBL to take its rightful position as the most influential business school when it comes to African continental free trade issues, when it comes to the African Union’s Agenda 2063.”

This is in line with the direction and goals of the country too, she explains. “If you look at the budget speech, that allocated R10bn to township and rural enterprises, were are aligned to the economic recovery plans proposed by the Minister of Finance.”



Key to this is their rural-urban linkage strategy, and their growth plans she explains. “This is centred on four pillars: firstly, responsible business leadership, and then sustainable livelihoods, intra-Africa trade and investment, and digital transformation and innovation. We want to be known for these things.”

“We have also introduced a vehicle called the Business Leadership Clinic, into which we bring identified enterprises to support them. Our students will be assessed on transferring their knowledge to these enterprises. We are also setting up a virtual market for these types of enterprises. We want to facilitate trade and help rural and township businesses access global supply chains.”

Cultivating thought

This is where Msweli believes Africa can add particular value to the world, she says: through our raw creativity and innovation. And to support this, she advocates for thoughtful scholarship. “I used to think writing skills were the gap, but really it is the thinking skills that pose a serious challenge in academic endeavours.”

“We should be using education to mould a human being who can think independently and sophisticatedly. Reading behaviour – how often and what you read – is part of this. You can think about it like this: the hardware of a scholar or intellectuality is their minds, their nervous and mental systems. The software is what you put into that brain. And you can’t write from a vacuum. You are informed by what you are reading.”

Msweli says we (in the education space in general) are not doing that enough, and we need to be creating well rounded individuals for academia who can think, who are creative.”



Portfolio pursuits



She is herself someone with many interests and pursuits. “I am an avid gardener. When I garden I don’t feel hungry or tired. I am also a fine artist; I’ve exhibited and sold some paintings. I play the guitar. I do crocheting and knitting. I do ballroom and Latin American dancing.” The latter is an inspiration from her father who was a professional ballroom dancer, as well as a champion athlete and an accountant.

“My father really shaped my character and my love for all I do,” she adds. “I have hands that want to do something, create something, and I can’t wait to venture into these in five years’ time when I complete this job. I believe it is so important to keep physically fit and to feed your mind with art and music. It is important to be well rounded to do this job.”





Quick-fire questions

Q. What are you reading right now?

I'm currently reading a collection of essays by Zadie Smith.

Q. What book (fiction, non-fiction, business) had the greatest impact on you?

Probably the work of Tibetan sage Lobsang Rampa. His work is timeless.

Q. Who is your personal hero?

My father, Luvuyo Msweli.

Q. Where will I find you on a typical Saturday morning?

At an organic market, shopping for fruits and vegetables.

Q. What is a bucketlist destination for you.

Rwanda is up there, as is Burkina Faso.

