# VUT to play a key role in rejuvenating the declining economy of the Vaal region

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The Vaal University of Technology (VUT) has once again cemented its indelible mark and contribution to enhancing skills and economic development in the Vaal region over the years.

The signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between VUT, North-West University (NWU) and the Vaal Special Economic Zone (SEZ)

This follows the recent signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between VUT, North-West University (NWU) and the Vaal Special Economic Zone (SEZ).

The strategic collaboration between the three seeks to enhance skills, re-industrialise and rejuvenate the declining economy of the Vaal region. The agreement was signed by Dr Simphiwe Nelana (VUT acting DVC: Research, Innovation, Commercialisation, and Internationalisation), Prof Dr Bismark Tyobeka (NWU vice chancellor and principal) and Xola Sithole (SEZ Programme director).

Highlighting some of VUT's strengths that would be relevant and valuable to this project, Nelana singled out the University's Centre for Alternative Energy which has a focus on fuel cells research, dating back from 2004 and has grown to a point that a novel membrane has been developed and manufactured. "This research centre, working with other departments will play a vital role in the project on green energy generation, green hydrogen, green steel," he said.

He further emphasised that the University will play a major in the focus area on greenhouse farming, and agri-processing, cannabis related farming, adding that the VUT's Institute for Chemical and Biotechnology (ICBT) has secured a license to be a testing centre for cannabis growers around Gauteng, and that they have been awarded a grant for infrastructure development by the Gauteng Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (GDARD).

Tyobeka, on the other hand, didn't mince his words when he emphasised how important it is for universities to conduct research that is relevant and has impact in the communities, adding that there is an even greater need for the integration of research and community engagement. "The signing of this MOU is a great step in ensuring that universities participate in the activation of the local and rural economy, in this instance, at Vanderbijlpark," he added.

Prior to signing on the dotted lines, Sithole gave an overview and vision of Vaal SEZ, saying that primarily, it aims to build a multi-site, multi-sector SEZ throughout the Sedibeng district and regenerate the Vaal region by supporting new economic activity within the area. Referring to the twelve-page MOU as 'the pursuit of the mission to reignite the birthplace of industrialisation in South Africa', he highlighted that building on the historic competitive strengths and skills base of the area, this is not ‘mission impossible’.

On the rationale for collaborating with VUT and NWU, he said some of the expected priority outcomes include bespoke basic and applied research and innovation in the priority investment areas for the SEZ, as well as skills development to meet the requirements of the investors over the medium to long-term. “This partnership is a critical to the establishment of an ecosystem that will power the successful implementation of the Vaal SEZ,” he concluded.

Also in attendance at the momentous event were the executive mayor of Emfuleni Local Municipality, Cllr Sipho Radebe and political head of Local Economic Development in Sedibeng District Municipality, MMC Lulama Gamede, who pledged their support for the initiative.


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**Vaal University of Technology**

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