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For Immediate Release

South Africa's skills crisis won't be solved while TVET graduates are forced to start over

VANDERBIJLPARK, 10 September 2026 - South Africa will struggle to address critical skills shortages as long as Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) graduates are required to effectively start their studies from the beginning when progressing to university programmes, according to Vaal University of Technology (VUT) Associate Professor of Civil Engineering, Prof Mathews Ochieng.

Speaking at the VUT Teaching and Learning Conference 2026, Prof Ochieng called for stronger articulation between TVET colleges and universities, arguing that South Africa's post-school education system must create seamless pathways that recognise prior learning, improve graduate employability and support economic development.

The three-day conference, hosted by VUT from 8 to 10 September 2026 at Emerald Tsogo Sun in Vanderbijlpark, brings together academics, researchers, higher education practitioners and thought leaders under the theme: *"Reimagining Teaching and Learning for the Future"*. The conference serves as a platform for exploring innovative approaches to teaching, learning and student success in an evolving higher education landscape.

Presenting a paper titled *"Bridging the Skills Gap: Revamping Construction Education for Articulation and Inclusion"*, Prof Ochieng challenged delegates to rethink how South Africa supports student progression from vocational and technical education into higher education.

At the centre of his presentation was a question that resonated strongly with conference delegates: *"Why should a student coming from the TVET system have to start again from the beginning?"*

Prof Ochieng argued that many students spend years acquiring valuable technical knowledge, workplace experience and practical competencies within the TVET sector, only to find that significant portions of their prior learning are not recognised when they enrol at universities.

According to him, this represents more than an academic challenge. It raises important questions about access, inclusion, social mobility and whether the post-school

education system is effectively developing the skilled workforce required to drive national development.

"South Africa cannot afford to waste skills that already exist within the education system," he said.

Prof Ochieng emphasised that stronger articulation between TVET colleges and universities would enable students to progress more efficiently through different educational pathways while building on competencies they have already acquired.

He argued that such reforms would also help address shortages of technical and professional skills that continue to affect critical sectors such as infrastructure development, municipal services and the built environment.

As part of the proposed solution, Prof Ochieng presented an integrated approach to built environment and municipal engineering education developed through collaboration with municipalities, industry partners, small and medium enterprises, Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) and professional bodies.

Rather than reintroducing traditional programmes, he advocated for qualifications specifically designed to respond to contemporary industry needs and future workforce demands.

"We did not say we just want to reintroduce this programme," said Prof Ochieng.

"The intention is to develop something that responds to contemporary skills requirements and creates meaningful opportunities for students."

He stressed that curriculum design should begin with understanding the needs of employers, communities and the broader economy.

While conventional civil engineering qualifications focus primarily on infrastructure planning, design and construction, Prof Ochieng noted that municipal engineering requires additional competencies related to infrastructure management, maintenance, sustainability and service delivery.

Assuming that all civil engineering graduates automatically possess these specialised competencies can contribute to mismatches between graduate capabilities and industry requirements, he said.

To address this challenge, the proposed curriculum model seeks to produce graduates with a balanced combination of technical expertise, practical experience and professional competencies aligned with the needs of both society and industry.

A central component of the proposal is community engagement.

Prof Ochieng argued that universities should play a more active role in addressing real-world challenges affecting communities, including deteriorating infrastructure, water management challenges, environmental concerns and urban development pressures.

"We want to make sure that the community becomes a living laboratory," he said.

Under this approach, students and academics would work directly with communities to identify challenges, develop solutions and generate knowledge that contributes to teaching, research and innovation.

The presentation generated robust discussion among conference delegates, who explored how the higher education sector can strengthen collaboration across the post-school education and training system.

Several participants highlighted the importance of creating an educational continuum that enables students to move from vocational and technical education into university programmes without unnecessary barriers, while others challenged institutions to ensure curriculum development remains responsive to the needs of society and industry.

Prof Ochieng welcomed the debate and stressed that curriculum reform must be grounded in the realities of the regions and communities universities serve.

"We should respond to the community. We should respond to the region," he said.

He noted that VUT operates within a region characterised by significant industrial and agricultural activity, creating opportunities for strong partnerships between higher education institutions, communities and industry.

Prof Ochieng further emphasised that any curriculum reforms should align with the requirements of professional councils, the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB), industry stakeholders and transformation objectives to ensure programmes remain relevant, credible and sustainable.

His message aligns closely with VUT's Strategy 2033+, which seeks to produce future-ready graduates, strengthen industry partnerships, enhance student success and contribute to socio-economic development through responsive teaching, learning, research and innovation.

Ultimately, Prof Ochieng challenged universities and policymakers to move beyond simply expanding programme offerings and instead focus on creating qualifications that are purposeful, inclusive and responsive to South Africa's development needs.

His message was clear: South Africa's skills crisis will not be solved while barriers continue to exist between TVET colleges and universities. Meaningful recognition of prior learning, stronger institutional partnerships and seamless progression pathways are essential if the country is to unlock the full potential of its future workforce.

About VUT

The Vaal University of Technology (VUT) is one of South Africa's leading Universities of Technology, committed to advancing innovation, research, teaching and learning in support of socio-economic development. Guided by its Strategy 2033+, the University is focused on producing graduates who are future-ready, driving impactful research and innovation, and strengthening partnerships that contribute to sustainable development at local, national and global levels. VUT continues to position itself as a responsive, engaged and transformative institution that creates knowledge and solutions for the benefit of society.

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