

NEWS RELEASE

Breaking boundaries: UP student completes actuarial science degree at age 17



Mongiwa Hazel Ntuli at the UP 2025 autumn graduations.

PRETORIA - At an age when most teenagers are still navigating high school, Mongiwa Hazel Ntuli will be donning her graduation gown this autumn as one of the University of Pretoria's (UP) youngest-ever graduates – obtaining a degree in [Actuarial Science](#) that she'd completed at the age of 17.

Originally from Rosettenville, Johannesburg, Hazel's academic journey is nothing short of remarkable. She began her university studies in 2022, having accelerated through primary and secondary school after her academic talents became clear at an early age.

"When I was in Grade 3, I mistakenly wrote a Grade 4 mathematics paper and scored the highest of all the actual Grade 4 students," she recalls. "My teacher identified this and allowed me to write more Grade 4 papers, and saw that I performed exceptionally well."

This led to an extraordinary academic leap, eventually placing her in university, years ahead of her peers. Her

achievements, she says, are grounded in gratitude and faith: “I first and foremost attribute it all to God.”

Choosing UP was an easy decision for Hazel.

“It was the first university to call out to me when I applied,” she says. “It had the best perks and is one of the top-ranked actuarial science departments that is internationally recognised.”

The balance of being both “far and near” to home added to the appeal.

Despite her academic brilliance, being significantly younger than her classmates brought about a few challenges.

“Many students treated me like the little sister they never had,” she says. “There were a lot of expectations of me, and it got difficult to meet those expectations.”

Learning to work with older peers and finding her voice in unfamiliar academic spaces was a steep, but rewarding, learning curve. Her resilience was powered by a clear vision and a strong support system – mentors, friends, lecturers and especially her house mother, Zamile, who constantly encouraged her to step out of her shell. Hazel also mentions her mentor from the department, [Refilwe Lehobo](#), as well as the Vice-Chancellor’s Distinguished Merit Awards team, Momentum mentors, and the office of UP Vice-Chancellor and Principal [Professor Francis Petersen](#).

“I always reminded myself of why I’d started, and made sure that my ‘why’ was strong enough,” Hazel says. “Having multiple vision boards kept me on track, and of course, prayer.”

A particularly memorable moment was receiving confirmation of her graduation.

“I thought I’d failed and would need to repeat the year. It was a sign that no matter how many times I got knocked down, as long as I got back up, I still had a fighting chance.”

Now pursuing an honours degree, Hazel has no plans to slow down.

“After this, I’m planning to both work and further my studies. I’ve always wanted an MBA.”

Her long-term vision includes qualifying as an actuary and stepping into the business world when the time is right. As the first in her family to graduate from university, Hazel sees this moment not just as a personal victory but as a generational milestone.

“My parents will have their much-deserved bragging rights,” she says. “It will alleviate a lot of pressure and burdens that my family has been carrying for so long.”

To other young people dreaming of early university admission or facing big challenges, her advice is heartfelt: “Be teachable. You don’t know everything. Learn how to fail forward. Take your losses, mix them up with perseverance and grit. Be like a baby when taking on a challenge – ready to receive all the knowledge and wisdom you can.”

Hazel’s story is a powerful example of what’s possible when determination meets opportunity. As she crosses the stage during the autumn graduation ceremony, UP will celebrate not only an academic milestone but the spirit of a young woman who is poised to shape the future.

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>> [Watch Hazel talk about her experience at university](#)

Media enquiries can be directed to Mr Sashlin Girraj - Public Relations & Events Manager

Email: sashlin.girraj@up.ac.za | Cell: +27(0)72 447 3784

ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on its Hatfield Campus in Pretoria. This 115-year-old institution is also one of the largest producers of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the [Gordon Institute of Business Science](#) (GIBS). It is the only university in the country with a [Faculty of Veterinary Science](#), which is ranked the best in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 56 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes. It has the most academic staff with PhDs (70%), NRF-rated researchers (613).

The 2025 Times Higher Education subject rankings placed UP first in South Africa in the fields of [Accounting](#) and [Finance](#); [Architecture](#); [Electrical and Electronic Engineering](#); Law; Sport Science; and Veterinary Science. UP's Faculty of Law has been ranked as the top law school in Africa for a remarkable eighth consecutive year.

Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) ranked the University among the top five in Africa, as part of their [2024 World University Rankings \(WUR\)](#). UP was the only South African university featured in the [2023 World University Rankings for Innovation \(WURI\)](#), falling within in the 101-200 range of innovative universities.

For more information, please go to www.up.ac.za