

NEWS RELEASE

Spin-out company of the University of Pretoria achieves an important milestone



From left: Refilwe Ngoato, Manager: Technology Transfer Office; Simon Thanyani, Manager: Research Contracts and Innovation; Nic Klopper, CEO of hearScreen (Pty) Ltd; Adv Lawrence Baloyi, Head: Innovation and Contracts Management; and Gerrie Moster, UP commercialisation specialist

PRETORIA – The [University of Pretoria](#) (UP)’s spin-out company, [hearScreen](#), has completed the full cycle of a university-licensed invention that has followed the commercialisation route. However, this may be just the start of the next leg of its journey of ongoing success. Members of UP’s Innovation and Contracts Management Division joined the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the [hearX Group](#), Nic Klopper, to sign an agreement that signified the transfer of the invention’s Intellectual Property (IP) to [hearScreen \(Pty\) Ltd](#), a subsidiary of the hearX Group.

The innovation that led to the establishment of the company in 2016 was developed as a solution to provide access to hearing screening tests for children and adults in underserved areas, who were previously unable to access these services.

The solution, a [mobile hearing screening application](#) that could be used on a cellphone, was developed as a transdisciplinary venture in the laboratories of the University of Pretoria. It was the outcome of the combined

intellectual prowess of [Prof De Wet Swanepoel](#), a researcher in the [Department of Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology](#), and [Prof Herman Myburgh](#), a researcher in the [Department of Electrical, Electronic and Computer Engineering](#). It soon attracted the interest of role-players outside the hearing health industry, including mining houses and companies performing clinical trials.

In an effort to address the global hearing loss pandemic, the company expanded its product portfolio. In addition to the original tool for the screening of hearing loss, it developed a full diagnostic test for use in the occupational health and safety industry, as well in neonatal units. This was followed by a range of acoustic inventions that included a platform for the fitting and support of hearing aids. It was therefore soon able to provide a total solution for individuals suffering from hearing loss.

The turning point for the company came in 2022 when new legislation in the USA led to the deregulation of the hearing aid landscape, allowing the company to market its over-the-counter (OTC) hearing aids to individuals with mild to moderate hearing loss. This enabled it to pioneer digital hearing solutions to detect, diagnose and treat hearing loss around the globe. The hearing aids provided by [hearX](#) are now available in over 15 000 retail doors across the USA, and its Lexie Hearing brand is currently the No 1-selling OTC hearing aid brand in the USA. In 2023, it was recognised as one of TIME100's most influential companies in the leadership category. The company employs over 200 people, including audiologists who operate a call centre in Pretoria. It also has an office and a warehouse in the USA.

Celebrating the company's success, [Adv. Lawrence Baloyi](#), [UP's Head: Innovation and Contracts Management](#), described the transfer of the IP to the company as a significant milestone for both UP and hearScreen. He acknowledged that this would not have been possible without the hard work, vision and perseverance of the entire team.

"They succeeded in turning an idea into something tangible and – more importantly – they are making a real impact in the world of hearing health." He added that the partnership between UP and hearScreen is proof that "when industry and academia work hand in hand, magic happens". He noted that the success that the company had achieved was not just about the technology. "It is about jobs being created, innovation being nurtured and the contribution to both the local and the global economy. It is about creating a ripple effect that will continue to make waves in the world of healthcare."

Representing the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation's National Intellectual Property Management Office (NIPMO) at the signing ceremony, Jetane Charsley, Head of NIPMO, reflected that innovation happens when technology is put into action. "When innovation moves from concept to practice, it can solve real-world problems and improve lives." She considered this to be the essence of the milestone that was being celebrated.

"This achievement represents the collaborative efforts of many – starting with the South African taxpayer, whose investments in research and development make moments like this possible." She acknowledged the contribution of the researchers, who succeeded in transforming curiosity into discovery, and discovery into tangible outcomes. "Your commitment to excellence fuels the innovation ecosystem." She commended the University of Pretoria's [Technology Transfer Office](#) for its dedication in bridging the gap between the laboratory and the market. "You play a crucial role in ensuring that South Africa's innovations reach those who need them most." Finally, she congratulated the HearX Group for recognising the potential of this innovation and for taking the bold step of bringing it into the marketplace. "Your leadership demonstrates the value of partnerships in driving technology-based solutions forward."

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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 2024 Times Higher Education subject rankings placed UP first in South Africa in the fields of Law, Veterinary Science, Accounting and Finance; Agriculture and Forestry and Electrical and Electronic Engineering. 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