

## NEWS RELEASE

### Dr Tshinangi Kapya defies the odds and transforms adversity into achievement



*Dr Tshinangi Kapya recent UP PhD graduate and lecturer at EBIT's Department of Industrial & Systems Engineering.*

PRETORIA – What started as encouragement from friends while working as a car guard in Pretoria evolved into an academic journey that took Tshinangi Fabrice Kapya from that car park to the [University of Pretoria](#) (UP), where he eventually became a lecturer, and now a PhD graduate.

Dr Kapya's incredible and inspiring journey reached a new peak recently when he received his [PhD in Industrial Engineering](#) during UP's 2024 Spring Graduation ceremonies in the first week of September

"A few years ago, I was working as a car park attendant at Wonderpark Mall in Pretoria. Despite the repetitive nature of my work, I discovered an unexpected source of comfort: books," he says. "Whenever I had a free moment, I devoted it to reading... My former colleagues would often catch me reading. They'd say with a mix of playfulness and sincerity: 'Fabrice, you don't belong here, you should go back to school.'"

He received his first degree (in Chemical Engineering) from the University of Likasi. After a friend convinced him to apply to UP, he was accepted for an honours degree programme, and continued to work as a car guard while studying during 2019. In 2021 he was accepted into a UP master's programme, and offered a position as an assistant lecturer in the [Department of Industrial and Systems Engineering](#). Before he'd even walked the stage for his [master's degree graduation](#), he'd already enrolled for his PhD.

He recalls that the foundations for his master's and PhD research were laid during his time spent guarding cars. "[It] started with just a simple observation in a parking lot and has grown into a passion for using mathematics to improve the efficiency of flexible production systems. There is beauty in observing how systems and processes work," he says.

"While I was working at Wonderpark, I frequently observed trucks from various logistics companies delivering a wide range of products. These trucks usually followed strict schedules, ensuring that goods reached their destinations on time. However, when COVID-19 struck, I noticed a significant shift in consumer behaviour and the way certain products were being consumed. This shift got me thinking about the processes involved in the production of certain goods."

Dr Kapya's research focused on developing mathematical models for managing production systems for perishable goods. His models addressed challenges such as changing production rates, demand influenced by stock, price and product freshness, and the impact of corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities on demand and product quality.

"What I love most about my research is the creative freedom it offers to create complex models, solve unsolved problems or just look for beautiful mathematical relations about systems," he says.

Despite everything he'd already attained against great odds, the path to his PhD was fraught with further challenges. He faced the typical highs and lows of a doctoral journey but persisted, driven by a profound belief in the importance of his research, and with the support of his PhD supervisors, [Professors Femi Adetunji](#) and [Sarma Yadavalli](#).

Reflecting on his journey since arriving in South Africa just six years ago, he hopes others will find inspiration and encouragement in his story, especially during the first few years while he juggled studying with working as a car guard.

"Every morning before leaving the house, I had to remind myself that it would get better with time, that each day was an opportunity to conquer, to fight for a better future. I learnt to keep a strong face, to go to war with my depression, and to cling to my faith even when it felt like a thin thread... Beyond the emotional toll, there was the challenge of balancing work, studying, and finding time for rest. I would come home late at night, exhausted from standing all day, only to face a pile of assignments and textbooks."

Just as colleagues and the local community around Wonderpark Mall urged him on and supported him, he says the UP community embraced him and offered encouragement when he needed it most.

"The University, in particular, made me feel like I was part of something much larger. The academic staff were not just educators but mentors who guided me through the challenges of my studies. They were patient, understanding, and always ready to help me navigate the complexities of my programme."

He is also grateful to his classmates. "They played an essential role in my journey. They included me in study groups, shared notes, covered my transport, paid my rent, and treated me as an equal, despite the differences in our backgrounds. I could really feel the true meaning of living THE UP WAY."

His reminder to everyone facing seemingly insurmountable challenges is, "Success does not define a person, but losing does. How we react to failure reveals who we truly are, because life is not about winning, it's about having the courage to continue the journey after a setback. True success, in my eyes, is not measured by degrees or titles but by the positive change we bring to the world around us and that is exactly what Prof Yadavalli, Prof Femi, this university and its people did for me."

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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](http://www.up.ac.za)