

VUT establishes new law clinic

By [Nontobeko Zondi](#), issued by [Vaal University of Technology](#)

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The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for the county as well as for institutions of higher learning. But in spite of all this turmoil, the Vaal University of Technology (VUT) has succeeded in implementing an uplifting and exciting initiative - a law clinic situated at the VUT Southern Gauteng Science and Technology Park (VUT SGSTP) in Sebokeng. With the VUT SGSTP situated in the Sebokeng Area, to serve our indigent community members; the Project Coordinators (Mr Frans Fouche: Lecturer; Ms Lilian Ndimande: Lecturer and Mrs Anusha Nana: Lecturer) decided on the Sebokeng area because VUT already has the facilities and infrastructure available which they need. Furthermore, the Law Clinic is close to service centres like the Sebokeng Court, Hospital and SAPS. The Project Coordinators are grateful to the Director of the VUT SGSTP, Mr Heindrich Van Der Merwe who went out of his way to secure office space for the VUT Law Clinic at the VUT SGSTP. The clinic is registered and ready to offer limited services to the community from October 2020.



Mr Frans Fouche, a Lecturer in the Legal Sciences Department, said that these service centres form community hubs from where they can advertise their services and distribute information on relevant legal issues. "Our dream is to expand our services and to establish a footprint in other areas of the Emfuleni Local Municipality where clients can make use of our free legal services without having to spend too much money on transport" he said.

The free legal services will be rendered to the indigent members of the Emfuleni community and will be focussing on Family Law matters such as Domestic Violence, Maintenance, Divorces and Children Court matters. Social justice issues such as the right to housing will also be prioritised and firstly the focus will be on eviction matters. Mr Fouche elaborated that they also aim to assist with labour law issues especially unfair dismissals. These services will be rendered to the community outside of VUT and they will use the means test to determine whether a person qualify for free legal services.

Expressing himself about the project, he said: "Excitement cannot begin to describe the feeling that we as a department have! Excitement to be able to give something back to the community, to make a real difference in the lives of those who need legal services but cannot afford it, especially our women and children... this excitement is tingled with a sprinkle of apprehension at the enormity and importance of the job ahead," he said. For this reason, the Project Coordinators count on Senior Management, each faculty, department and their staff as well as the business sector to support them in their own special way. In addition, he said that, it is through such support that they can embark on this life changing journey. "In the end, the Law Clinic is much more than only one department and a few people, it is about the whole of VUT community living the spirit of Ubuntu and reaching out to those who need us. Let us be the change we want to see in others!" he said.

In support of the project, Dr Narissa Ramdhani, Director: Resource Mobilisation shared her elation of the project by emphasising how communities usually benefit through Higher Education interventions especially as they catalyse development and growth in these very communities. Therefore, it is very important for Universities to involve themselves in community-based outreach and research to contribute to a knowledge-based economy in their country.

The Law Clinic was made possible through the support from VUT Senior Management and the support from the Department of Resource Mobilisation which managed to raise funds for the Department of Legal Sciences for the Law Clinic from the private sector. Dr Ramdhani shared how it all began... "When we were approached by the Department of Legal Sciences in 2018 to raise funding for a VUT Law Clinic in Sebokeng, we were very excited, as we viewed this as a wonderful opportunity for the University, through the Faculty of Human Sciences, to reach out to the community in matters related to legal challenges and related trauma experiences. Substantial funding for two years was secured by the Department of Resource Mobilisation in 2019, and with the Registration of the Clinic having just been finalised, we look forward to catapulting VUT forward and in so doing, building that much-needed bridge between the University and its surrounding communities. We are really very pleased to have played a role in making this unique and much needed community project a reality and are hopeful of raising more funding once the success of this project is determined by stakeholders," she said.

Professor Linda Muswaka, HOD: Legal Sciences said that the Law Clinic is not only about the Department of Legal Sciences or the Faculty of Human Sciences but about the whole of VUT... "we are therefore, very excited that through the Law Clinic, VUT will be able to give something back to the community, to make a real difference in the lives of those who need legal services but cannot afford it whilst at the same time benefiting our students" she said. She expressed her sincere gratitude and appreciation for the support they have received and continue to receive from Senior Management, various departments, faculties as well as the business sector. "Without all this support, the Law Clinic would have neither come into existence nor be able to fulfil its legal obligations to the poor and marginalised," she added.

"This is the new dawn for the Faculty of Human Sciences and VUT. Words cannot express enough the excitement and jubilant in the Faculty about the Law clinic. The achievement of this milestone was a collective effort and support from different stakeholders. The Faculty of Human Sciences is proud to house the Law Clinic" said the Acting Executive Dean: Dr Lazarus Maleho.

He further alluded that, the Law Clinic is in response to the University strategic objective of increasing strategic engagement with the community and is aligned to the Faculty vision that aimed at transforming the human condition, through its activities, wishes to improve the quality of life of people in the Vaal region. "The wish is also to reposition and endeavor to change the community perceptions about the VUT. Furthermore, it is the answer to section 34 in the Bill of Rights in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, that guarantees everyone access to courts. Access to justice is a national problem for the poor and marginalised and the Law Clinic is the alternative to those who cannot afford to obtain legal representation," he supplemented.

He further mentioned that: it couldn't have come at the right time when the country is faced with the surge on Gender Based Violence against women and children. The Law Clinic will help the community of Sebokeng in the Vaal to access legal help in addressing the issues related to among others the GBV. He concluded by borrowing from The President of the Republic, Cyril Ramaphosa when he says, ***"A ray of light is visible on the horizon."***

The most common vision shared by the project coordinators is that the Law Clinic was established to provide the need for equal access to justice for the poor communities in and around the geographical area of VUT. "In essence, with the establishment of the Law Clinic, the aim is to bridge the gap between poor and affluent communities which inevitably leads to social inequities and access to resources, especially access to free, high quality legal services whilst at the same time creating Work Integrated Learning opportunities for the final year Legal Assistance and Labour Law students," said Prof Muswaka.

In conclusion, Mr Fouche said that: "Our final year students for the Diplomas in Labour Law and Legal Assistance will be provided with the opportunity to experience Work Integrated Learning. The aim is not only to expose them to real life work experiences, but also to teach them the values of human dignity, equality and freedom as well as the privilege of giving back

to the community."

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Vaal University of Technology

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