

#UPGraduation2023: ‘Having a growth mindset is key to your success’ – UP PhD graduate

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UP veterinary science lecturer Thembeka Mtetwa

Any student who hopes to obtain a degree needs the love and support of family, friends, supervisors and faculty administrative staff. This was very much the case for University of Pretoria (UP) veterinary science lecturer, Thembeka Mtetwa, who recently graduated with a PhD in during the University’s autumn graduation ceremonies.

“My biggest supporter was my late grandfather, who was extremely proud of me even before I’d accomplished anything,” says Mtetwa, who is a lecturer in the [Department of Anatomy and Physiology](#) in the [Faculty of Veterinary Science](#).

“My parents and siblings inspire me with their love and support. They constantly remind me to be confident in myself and my abilities. I’m also grateful for the support I received from Professors Leith Meyer and Ned Snelling, and my co-workers, Ashleigh and Annette. Finally, I must mention my partner, a brilliant and hardworking man who I met during my first-year at university and who has been very supportive of me and my dreams.”

Mtetwa adds that she is grateful for the financial support she received from various institutions and organisations.

She was born and raised in Soweto, and matriculated from Letsibogo Girls High School.

“I went to public schools in Soweto, where there was limited or no access to resources, which became an obstacle when it came to reading and writing, and my research, public speaking and presentation skills,” she says.

Yet despite the odds against her, Mtetwa not only went on to university but has excelled as an academic who has been published in international journals and now has a doctorate to her name. And if that isn’t enough, she was also appointed as a lecturer for UP’s New Generation of Academics Programme, which was established by the Department of Higher Education and to foster young academics.

“This appointment allows me to contribute to society through teaching and research,” she says.

For Mtetwa, choosing to study at UP was a no-brainer.

“UP is an internationally renowned university and has the only veterinary sciences faculty in South Africa,” she says. “After completing my undergraduate studies, I became a [National Research Foundation](#) (NRF) intern at UP, where I shadowed and assisted Prof Leith Meyer with research. He

not only encouraged me to pursue postgraduate studies, but also ignited my love and interest for physiology and medicine.”

She then registered for a Master of Science degree in the Department of Paraclinical Sciences under Prof Meyer’s supervision.

“My studies exposed me to a team of researchers who were doing fascinating and diverse research on the effect of different anaesthetic drugs on wild animals in the Kruger National Park,” she says, adding that this inspired her doctoral research.

“My PhD focused on assessing the reliability of methods used to determine arterial oxygen-haemoglobin saturation in immobilised southern white rhinoceros.”

Unsurprisingly, Mtetwa’s achievements have not come without a few challenges, all of which she is proud to say she overcame. Time management and maintaining a healthy work-life balance were just two hurdles. Managing her expectations and being realistic was another and, of course, there was the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I had to cope with being isolated from friends and family, and having to delay data collection for a full year due to the pandemic,” she recalls.

Mtetwa was appointed as a lecturer in the Department of Anatomy and Physiology at UP in February this year. She also undertakes physiology-related research. Her dream is to establish a laboratory that focuses on oxygen transport in various species to enable researchers to detect, monitor, manage and improve blood and tissue oxygenation levels in mammals.

Apart from listing “patience, resilience and confidence” as attributes that have assured her academic success, Mtetwa points to several other significant factors.

“My ambitions and goals motivate me to keep working harder, and I accept criticism and failure as that allows me to learn and grow,” she says. “I collaborate well with others and form strong bonds and genuine relationships with colleagues. I also have good science communication skills and won awards for the best oral and poster presentation in the faculty. I understand the benefits of delayed gratification and working hard to achieve my end goal – that has made me more resilient.”

Mtetwa has a final word for aspirant academics.

“Success does not depend on where you are from, your family or your friends, but on you and the goals you set. Have a growth mindset, focus, work hard and be patient, and the rest will follow.”