



## **Innovative Advancement Initiatives in an African University Context: The Case of Mangosuthu University of Technology**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Advancement initiatives in an African context are simultaneously compelling and challenging. Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), the only South African university located in a township, Umlazi, in KwaZulu-Natal, finds itself in a unique context, with clearly identified and articulated needs emanating from historical disadvantage, but limited internal resources. Community and institutional contexts impact one another; decreasing state funding and increasing Higher Education fees make the diversification of income streams imperative within what is a complex and contested area. The paper argues that nature, scope and size, and individual characteristics of Higher Education institutions, are factors which directly impact success in resource allocation and goal attainment. The Institutional Advancement structure at MUT seeks to mobilise resources and garner third stream income through the three pillars of Fundraising and Development, Alumni Relations and Enterprise Development. An overview is provided of three advancement initiatives within the MUT context: Student Giving, Alumni Giving Projects and Short Courses. In so doing, it reflects critically on what each reveals about innovation in under-resourced Higher Education contexts. The projects are proving significant, as advancement is both quantitative and qualitative in nature and impact, and transformative giving is developmental. In establishing and sharpening our strategic approach, they are helping to transform understandings of how we advance the goals of the university in an African context. The paper concludes with implications for African Higher Education advancement, notably that context, culture and relationship capital are crucial to sustained engagement and outcomes....

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Advancement initiatives in an African context are simultaneously compelling and challenging. The uniqueness of MUT lies overtly in the fact that it is the only South African university named after its founder and located in a township (Umlazi). Covertly, this unique context is alive with culture, history, ambience and noise, but faces several socioeconomic challenges; with clearly identified and articulated needs but limited internal resources and agency; with a growing alumni constituency but poor employment prospects for graduates, and with physical access to local community within a vibrant township economy, but branded with the long-term effects of historical political and educational disadvantage. This community context impacts the university's context and vice-versa. The decreasing coffers of state funding and ever-increasing fees, the higher cost of living and low-income sources, compel diversification of income streams in Higher Education, but this a complex and contested arena (Bruns, 2021). State funding, through government subsidy and tuition fees, is still considered to be the most reliable source of funding in most universities (see Mbhalati, 2024 and Universities South Africa, n.d.). The nature, scope and size, and individual characteristics of institutions are factors which directly impact success in goal attainment, as critical comparisons from an international perspective reveal (Booyesen, 2025).

As applied in this paper, Pfeffer and Salancik's (1978) Resource Distribution Theory provides support for the argument in this analysis of the challenging MUT context, to which innovative responses are required. MUT is thus embracing innovative advancement strategies to navigate the complex challenges of resource mobilization in a uniquely African university context. The theory frames MUT's environment, its access to resources is mediated by power dynamics, inter-organisational relationships, and environmental uncertainty. In response, MUT's Institutional Advancement structure mobilises third-stream income across three pillars: Fundraising and Development, Alumni Relations, and Enterprise Development (see Inyathelo, The South African Institute for Advancement, for an overview of advancement initiatives).



## The Case of MUT

Generalisations cannot be made, however, about this response or indeed its success, as HEIs are unique and differentiated. MUT is a unique, medium-sized, public Higher Education Institution which was first designated a technikon. As mentioned, it is the only university wholly located in a township, Umlazi, in KwaZulu-Natal. Umlazi is a predominantly African township with a population of over half a million people. Approximately 20km from Durban central, and, despite its apartheid beginnings and historical disadvantages in terms of government support, it boasts a location that has several advantages.

MUT was established in 1979 by the late Prince Mangosuthu Buthelezi, with support from Sir Harry Oppenheimer, who owned the famous Anglo American Gold mines. The goal was to provide access to township youth to a technological institution for Africans, against the backdrop of the compelling need to transform the lives of the disenfranchised, right here in Umlazi. Today, his son HRH Prince Ntuthukoyezwe Zuzifa Buthelezi, Member of Parliament and Inkosi of the Buthelezi clan, has taken on the mantle, to carry forward **Prince Mangosuthu Buthelezi's legacy and vision for MUT**. *The university through several vehicles ensures that we honour this relationship with the Founder's family, who are of Zulu royal heritage as well, because support from the family is critical to our progress and identity.* That recognition of politics, people and personal history make a difference, is beyond question in this scenario.

The university's location is imbued with heritage, culture, traditional protocols, beliefs, values, and history, and presents unique challenges as well as opportunities. The introduction of an advancement structure at the university for income diversification is an acknowledgement of clearly identified and articulated needs but the limited internal resources invested in its establishment is equally resounding; while the academic enterprise continues against the backdrop of changing curricula and industry needs, the growing alumni constituency offers poor employment prospects for graduates, and while access to local community and community engagement within a vibrant township economy are guaranteed, the township itself bears the effects of long-term socio-economic disadvantage. In the bigger picture, universities in the same region are competing for resources when they should be collaborating and sharing expertise. Vocational focus without postgraduate growth dampens research output, internationalisation, and brand elevation. MUT is thus navigating a uniquely challenging environment by implementing innovative advancement strategies, despite limited internal resources and systemic socio-economic constraints. While the university has introduced advancement efforts and a structure aimed at income diversification, signalling a strategic response to resource limitations, several challenges are apparent.

### Theoretical Frame: Resource Dependence Theory (RDT)

It is apparent that investing in structures and expertise, experience and talent for advancement with clear professional development pathways is not yet a driver at MUT, yet the outcomes of increasingly diverse income streams and resources are a priority. In established advancement structures, such investment is a necessity for long-term success. RDT posits that organisations are not self-sufficient; they must secure critical resources from their environment. Dependence introduces vulnerability, making strategy central to managing interdependencies and power asymmetries. In MUT's advancement context, RDT (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978) underscores: (1) the need to invest in scarce skills and systems to attract philanthropy; (2) the importance of building coalitions across industry, government, alumni, and community; (3) the role of leadership and governance in legitimising asks and stewarding relationships, and (4) the value of data for adaptive decision-making. The awareness that resources are needed to generate resources, is taking effect but without strategic investment, resource allocation, support and leadership, MUT's advancement efforts will remain constrained despite its potential. This impacts action and outcomes directly (Pfeffer and Sutton, 1999).

## 2. OBJECTIVES

There is a need to embed advancement philosophy and practice in all activities, and for the required resources to give it traction for desired outcomes. Despite the outlined contextual complexities and challenges, three innovative projects have emerged with potential for income diversification. This paper provides an overview of these advancement initiatives, reflecting critically on what each reveals about advancement in under-resourced Higher Education contexts, and the implications for African philanthropy. It focuses on the tension between the potential strengths and limitations of MUT's advancement efforts, emphasizing the need for a more context-sensitive and strategically supported approach to this initiative.

## 3. OVERVIEW OF THREE PROJECTS

### Student Giving Project

In a concerted attempt to dig deep into our cultural base, the Student Giving reframes students not as passive recipients of aid, but as active contributors to change, even within economically constrained environments.

The transformative power of Student Giving is a theme in advancement. Student Giving in this context is a revolutionary model of advancement—where students are not just beneficiaries but agents of change, building a future together through shared action and purpose. The campaign appeals to the current student cohort to give back through the Future Fund, up ending the historical label that being themselves needy, they are unable to give back. The campaign operationalises Ubuntu—I am because we are. Gade (2011) and van Breda (2019) are useful reads on this philosophy, which in this project, positions students as agents of change: “Student Giving is not just a fundraiser. It is Ubuntu alive and breathing, a movement where students contribute money, time, skills, creativity, and advocacy to uplift their peers and transform their communities. It is a call to action: to give, not because we have plenty, but because we understand the value of solidarity” (Sondela Nawe, External Newsletter, Institutional Advancement, 2025).

The campaign channels contributions (money at any level, time, skills, advocacy) through the MUT Future Fund to improve peer support and campus experience. Activation levers include: an ethic of ‘before reaping, we sow’; alumni engagement of ‘pre-alumni’ via mentorship and Alumni Connect Series; transparent targets and donation tracking; clothing drives and gifts-in-kind; financial literacy workshops; creative arts fundraising (music, drama, poetry, visual arts); social media protocols for professional online engagement; and documentation and storytelling for accountability and trust. A growing cross-faculty volunteer cohort has converged with the SRC’s Student Philanthropy initiative; digital activations have begun, and the first R10 contribution symbolically affirmed student ownership of the movement.

Early outcomes and learning reveal that small-value gifts build solidarity and a culture of giving; student ambassadors catalyse momentum through peer narratives; integrating financial literacy reduces stigma and strengthens agency, and transparent reporting legitimises the effort and attracts partners. That this campaign is imbued with traditional Zulu cultural norms and values, and uses the codes of creative arts and sports, infuses greater interest and momentum from students themselves.

#### Alumni Engagement Project

Strategic re-direction of the Alumni Engagement project invites support for a new R100m & Change Campaign, intended to mobilise alumni as resource themselves. This would advance the idea that giving does not mean a monetary contribution only and take the psychological label off those who themselves have low resources, being perceived as unable or not inclined to give back.

MUT reimaged was motivated as not only assisting with financial sustainability, but uplifting the institution as a modern, cutting-edge one with a profound impact on communities nationwide, not just Umlazi. The framework acknowledged its several hurdles, from infrastructural limitations to a dearth of opportunities for our students and graduates, while noting that all HEIs faced their own challenges in their unique contexts. The new strategic approach led to developments which did not just rejuvenate alumni and the Alumni Relations Office, but turned the tables: not only did we have a plethora of initiatives introduced by alumni in 2024 to 2025, including donations in kind, the introduction of an Indigenous Engineering Competition, the opening of doors to prospects (who are giving), and projects with professional alumni, but alumni were also inspired to give financially! The R100m & Change (2023–2033) Campaign (see Institutional Advancement’s Project Portfolio, 2023) reframes alumni as a mobilised resource network, as donors not only in cash but in kind, as mentors and leaders and future employers. Ten-year projects include: establishing alumni chapters in high-density regions; strengthening mentorship; supporting female engineering students and postgraduate cohorts; enabling graduate employment in the Johannesburg Stock Exchange’s Top-100 firms and abroad; growing alumni entrepreneurs who employ MUT graduates, and building an Alumni Hub for CV-writing support, interview preparation, and even access to formal attire.

The impact of changing the narrative about alumni has been positive. Momentum has been gained since 2024: alumni-led initiatives increased donations in kind, opened donor doors, and launched an Indigenous Engineering Competition that bridges traditional knowledge with STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics streams). Financial giving has intensified—bolstering the Alumni Bursary Fund and creating a new Endowment Fund seeded by a substantial gift. Faith-based alumni networks such as the MUT Student Christian Organisation have amplified brand equity, convened partnerships (energy projects, bank relationships), awarded bursaries, and held high-visibility reunions on campus. These developments signal a cultural shift from transactional giving to relational stewardship, with alumni as brand ambassadors and co-architects of impact.

#### Short Course Project

Enterprise Development’s fledgling Short Course Programme aims to generate third-stream income while strengthening employability and community skills, to develop skills, and enhance job creation. The development of short courses at MUT, to offer to the community at large, in hybrid modes, is considered to be low hanging fruit in the quest to garner third-stream income. The programme has an exciting suite of short courses on offer, but minimal uptake. Building the plane as we fly it, we are currently reconfiguring to meet more effectively the needs of industry and community. This initiative is hoping to demonstrate how targeted investment and coordination can unlock new income streams and foster institutional growth—even in resource-constrained environments. Foundational work includes appointing a Third-stream Income Coordinator,



approving Short Course Guidelines and procedures; aligning with support systems such as Finance, Human Resources and Admissions; securing several MOUs with external partner facilitators and service providers; engaging Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), and preparing content for over 40 courses across industry-relevant topics (Progress Report: Short Courses, Enterprise Development Pillar, Institutional Advancement, 2025).

Constraints which have become dominant, compel repositioning; significant observations are that uptake is limited by affordability among target communities and that there is a preference for recognised accreditation from SETAs and other micro accreditation bodies. Strategic shifts at the end of 2025 include targeting niche non-accredited skills development areas and SETA-aligned courses (agri- and kasi or township-economy); revising marketing strategies with a firm marketing plan; coordinating with internal skills development opportunities; designing pathways from short courses to accredited Short Learning Programmes (SLPs) and entrepreneurship/business school tracks and approaching donors to subsidise fees.

Our goal is to skill the local community first. The delivery of a short course on Satellite Communication training for Umlazi youth provided ample proof-of-concept that these short courses meet a real community need. Potential new directions are focusing on strategically examining how diversified, scalable short course offerings can be a sustainable income stream, while aligning with internal development goals and external market needs. However, this means that human and other resources are needed, and a reconsideration of what will work best to attract subscribers and simultaneously achieve the goal of garnering third-stream income.

#### 4. . KEY CHALLENGES AND INSIGHTS

These three projects are proving significant in uncovering a new learning in our growth and mission-delivery, showing that advancement is both quantitative and qualitative in nature and impact, and that transformative African giving is developmental.

##### **Transformative advancement in African Higher Education**

Institutional Advancement has seen that context-sensitive strategies that prioritize depth over breadth, especially in resource-constrained environments like MUT, are important. In establishing and sharpening advancement, in this African context, where we are starting to look beyond the national scope to that of the continent, these experiences and insights are helping to transform understandings of how we advance the goals of the university. Mati (2017) emphasises that the concept and modes of African philanthropy are rich and diverse, and contrast with Western conceptualisations. What we have had to grasp and manage, are that HEIs are differentiated and resourced, differently, which poses a challenge; stable funding systems for universities, in general, are difficult to attain, given depleting funding sources yet an increasing dependence on diversification.

MUT is intentionally adopting a non-integrated approach to institutional advancement—separating fundraising and alumni relations roles from marketing and communication, in order to sharpen focus and improve effectiveness within its unique African context. This is a response to several challenges:

Differentiated resourcing across African HEIs requires tailored strategies, not one-size-fits-all approaches.

Limited internal awareness and investment in advancement delay embedding a culture of philanthropy and stewardship.

Underdeveloped infrastructure and systems constrain prospecting, stewardship, and reporting quality.

Philanthropic funds in South Africa often target immediate social needs; balancing near-term aid with long-term institution-building is essential.

Leadership health is pivotal for success: visible, accountable leadership is an enabler for fundraising and sustains donor trust.

Moreover, the separate focus ensures that size and shape are taken into account (institutions are unique) and aligned with strategy; specialization and expertise in advancement as a new area are foregrounded; efficiency and effectiveness are promoted; clear goals and objectives are set, for a smaller team and that processes and systems can be streamlined. This makes for enhanced collaboration and coordination both internally and externally:

Managing operations, including Monitoring and evaluation becomes more manageable.

There are different and more specific algorithms and metrics to uncover and talk to in advancement specifically.

Data-driven decision-making is possible, posing less of a challenge in a broader context.

There is greater agility and responsiveness for stewardship.

Digital transformation (including AI) can extend reach, reduce costs, and modernise donor engagement and reporting.

There is more room for the promotion and sustainability of positive team dynamics. Foundational structures are needed through Policies, guidelines, and awareness-raising are essential before advancement becomes embedded practice.

Public–Private Partnerships via collaborations with industry can benefit students through mentorships, internships, and job placements.

Our projects and proposals need to align more closely with donor priorities, and we need to be seen to be addressing the themes of social justice tight where we are and beyond.

Global alignment can be achieved is advancement initiatives respond to global challenges like pandemics, climate change, and disaster management.

Relationship capital—trust, shared values, legacy stewardship—anchors cumulative outcomes and resilience.

We have seen that context matters, as broad generalisations do not work; strategies must reflect the unique realities of African institutions. Moreover, culture matters, and our official languages, township and traditional vibe and values, history and stories, alongside respect for our founder’s vision and legacy, all impact our drive. Philanthropy with African roots must be respected and promoted, as a distinct South African philanthropic model is emerging, aligned with African values and giving traditions; we need to meet prospects where they are, culturally and developmentally, given the legacy of community. MUT manages through advancement initiatives, to bring together the elements of history, monarchy, and legacy to drive transformation and sustainability.

Strategic, culturally grounded, and future-oriented advancement practices can empower African universities to thrive despite systemic constraints. At MUT, in a new and evolving organisational structure, this is the approach being taken, intentionally.

## 5. IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICAN HE CONTEXTS

At MUT, we have learned that advancement strategies in African Higher Education must be deeply—

context-sensitive,

culture-imbued,

community-g geared, and

relationship-rich, with

strategic resource allocation, for achievable outcomes.

A strategic and philosophical shift in how MUT approaches institutional advancement, will need to incorporate the following:

**Ubuntu as a guiding principle:** The African philosophy of interconnectedness and shared humanity is central to MUT’s advancement ethos.

**The revitalization of alumni networks:** There’s a call for alumni to contribute meaningfully and selflessly to the institution’s growth.

**Trust-based donor relationships:** MUT aims to build deeper, more trusted partnerships with foundations, trusts, and individual benefactors.

**Alignment with donor priorities:** Projects and proposals must reflect themes like **social justice**, both locally and globally.

**Moving beyond the “begging bowl” narrative:** The university seeks to redefine its identity from one of neediness to one of **mutual benefit and transformative sharing**.

The goal is to sustain a dignified, values-driven, and community-oriented approach to advancement, rooted in African identity and global relevance.

## 6. CONCLUSION

MUT is growing in understanding that we need to emphasise even more, the uniqueness of African contexts and the tendency to paint with broad brush strokes, which do not address these contexts. The implications for African Higher Education advancement are clear. More awareness raising is needed before a philosophy and practice become embedded and second nature, and foundational policies and guidelines are needed to direct the critical path of development. The emerging mode of philanthropic philosophy and practice that is South African, which we are exploring, sits well with African Philanthropic giving and the platforms available now to share positive experiences, as well meet real needs. The cultural influence of our unique context should be strengthened, so that we show who we are, what we identify with and why, in a relationship that is mutually beneficial, and where sharing is transformative and ultimately, community benefits.

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