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THENSA INNOVATION BOOTCAMP STRENGTHENS TECHNOLOGY COMMERCIALISATION AND INDUSTRY COLLABORATION



Programme facilitators together with technology transfer professionals, researchers and innovators

The two-day programme brought together technology transfer professionals, researchers and innovators to strengthen practical approaches to commercialising research and intellectual property.

The Technological Higher Education Network South Africa (THENSA), in partnership with the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI) and the National Intellectual Property Management Office (NIPMO), recently hosted its second 2026 Innovation Bootcamp on Enhancing Commercialisation and Industry Involvement of Technology Transfer Offices (TTOs) at Mpekweni Beach Resort in the Eastern Cape on 5–6 October 2026.

The intensive, hands-on programme brought together more than 30 technology transfer professionals, postgraduate researchers, scholars and innovators from Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), Lovedale TVET College, Nelson Mandela University, Rhodes University, Sol Plaatje University, the University of Fort Hare and Walter Sisulu University.

Designed to simulate real-world technology transfer scenarios, the bootcamp focused on equipping participants with practical skills to identify promising technologies, assess their commercial potential and develop effective strategies for moving research innovations from the laboratory to the marketplace.

Against the backdrop of resource and funding constraints faced by many TTOs, the programme highlighted the importance of making informed decisions about intellectual property (IP) management, commercialisation pathways and industry partnerships. Participants explored commercial potential, IP management, value chain analysis, technology assessment, new venture creation, strategic IP portfolio management and funding instruments for commercialisation. Practical exercises also enabled them to assess technologies, evaluate commercialisation opportunities and consider strategies for engaging potential industry partners.

Welcoming participants, Dr Phumuza Langa, Project Manager: Technology Transfer Projects at THENSA, emphasised the importance of translating knowledge and innovation into practical, market-ready solutions.

He noted that the bootcamp was designed to explore key concepts in technology transfer and commercialisation while encouraging participants to apply the knowledge gained to the technologies within their respective institutions.

Dr Langa further highlighted the role of assessment criteria in determining whether innovations have commercial potential, stressing that this process requires more than a general understanding of an invention.

Although commercialisation criteria may appear broad or straightforward, he explained, evaluating a technology's viability requires detailed analysis, critical thinking and strategic decision-making. A clear understanding of the commercialisation process is therefore essential for TTOs seeking to move innovations beyond the research environment and towards meaningful real-world impact.

Understanding the market before commercialising innovation

Providing insight into the criteria used to assess commercial potential, Dr Gerard Verhoef, Intellectual Property and Technology Attorney at Barnard Inc., identified three key considerations: the market opportunity, the technology itself and the team responsible for developing and commercialising the solution.

“I always use three criteria, namely the market pool, the technology push, and the team – how a team can bring together a sustainable solution,” he said.

Dr Verhoef emphasised that innovators must begin by understanding the market and the needs of potential customers, rather than developing solutions based solely on problems they believe they can solve.

“One needs to start there first. Your innovation must speak to the needs of the market, rather than address a problem that you think you can solve,” he said.

He also highlighted scalability as an important consideration for attracting investment and achieving sustainable growth. While some technologies, particularly those in the software industry, may be easier to scale, other sectors can present different challenges. Nevertheless, he noted that scalability remains essential to building a commercially viable venture.

Reflecting on the challenges of evaluating early-stage technologies, Dr Verhoef acknowledged that innovations at technology readiness levels one to three may not yet provide clear indications of market demand. He encouraged participants to pay close attention to market conditions and emerging trends to better understand whether their technologies could eventually meet customer needs.

Building the right pathway from research to market

Expanding on the commercialisation process, Thandiwe Maretlane, a Technology Transfer Professional at Mintek, explored how research and intellectual property can move beyond the laboratory to generate market value and societal impact.

Maretlane stressed that technical readiness alone does not guarantee successful commercialisation. Innovators must also understand market attractiveness, customer needs, competition, value chains, strategic partnerships and commercial risks.

“Technical fit is necessary but not sufficient,” she highlighted, emphasising the importance of understanding the customer and the problem a technology is intended to solve.

She encouraged innovators to ask critical questions: Who is the paying customer? What are their real constraints? Which existing solution would the innovation replace, and what would motivate customers to switch?

Maretlane outlined four primary pathways through which research can reach the market: licensing, spin-out companies, joint ventures, and the direct transfer or sale of technology. She explained that selecting the most appropriate pathway requires careful consideration of market readiness, capital requirements, team capabilities and strategic alignment.

She also highlighted the importance of mapping the broader value chain, from research and funding to regulation, manufacturing, distribution and market access. Strategic partnerships, she noted, can accelerate time to market, provide specialised expertise, reduce risk and expand market reach.

Her presentation reinforced the need for TTOs and innovators to look beyond the technical merits of an invention and consider the wider commercial environment required to turn it into a sustainable solution.

Strengthening commercialisation capacity across institutions

The bootcamp provided a platform for knowledge-sharing, practical learning and collaboration among participating institutions. Through presentations, discussions and hands-on activities, participants gained insights into the decisions and processes involved in assessing innovations, protecting intellectual property and identifying suitable commercialisation opportunities.

The programme also underscored the importance of closer collaboration between research institutions, industry and other stakeholders in strengthening the commercialisation of publicly financed research and innovation.

By equipping technology transfer professionals and researchers with practical tools to evaluate opportunities, understand market needs and develop appropriate commercialisation strategies, THENSA and its partners aim to strengthen institutional capacity to move promising technologies towards market adoption.

Ultimately, the bootcamp reinforced a central message: successful technology commercialisation requires more than innovative research. It demands a clear understanding of market needs, sound commercial judgement, scalable solutions, capable teams and strategic partnerships that connect research with industry and society.



Attendees during the workshop

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Media enquiries can be directed to Mr Xolani Mathibela – Marketing and Media Liaison Officer
Email: marketing@thensa.co.za | Cell: +27(0)72 174 0692.

About THENSA (https://thensa.co.za/):
THENSA is a catalyst consortium that supports member institutions through technology-focused teaching and learning, applied research, innovation, and entrepreneurial ecosystems, enabling societal transformation. THENSA is a consortium of technology-focused higher education institutions that aims to promote relevant, impactful, and globally competitive qualifications, skills, research, and innovation in collaboration with businesses, industries, and research institutions, both locally and internationally, to foster a vibrant economy in Africa. THENSA is focused on its transformation agenda regarding the 4IR, thereby creating curricula, entrepreneurs, international research, innovation, and business opportunities.