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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

THENSA's IVLP visit opens new pathways for international research collaboration and commercialisation



THENSA representatives along with the U.S. colleagues

In a significant step towards strengthening international partnerships and advancing research commercialisation, representatives from the Technological Higher Education Network South Africa (THENSA) and some of its member institutions recently travelled to Washington, D.C., in the United States, as part of the International Visitor Leadership Programme (IVLP). The visit provided a valuable platform for international knowledge exchange, professional networking and engagement with key stakeholders, while creating opportunities for collaboration, innovation and the advancement of higher education.

The programme sought to establish and strengthen international partnerships with leading US organisations and institutions, including the Bayh-Dole Coalition, the United States Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO), Tech Fort Worth, and universities in Southern Maine and Texas. These engagements are expected to facilitate knowledge sharing, strengthen intellectual

property (IP) management, expand industry partnerships and support the commercialisation of university research, innovation and entrepreneurship.

“Participation in the IVLP advances THENSA’s strategic objective of strengthening technology-focused higher education through research commercialisation, innovation and international collaboration,” said Prof Henk de Jager, CEO of THENSA. “The programme provided valuable exposure to US best practices, expertise and networks that can help strengthen South Africa’s university innovation ecosystems and build stronger partnerships between universities, industry and government.”

Looking ahead, THENSA is keen to translate the experience into sustainable partnerships and practical initiatives. Prof de Jager indicated that the organisation intends to pursue strategic partnerships, engage with the National Intellectual Property Management Office (NIPMO) to explore a review of South Africa’s intellectual property and innovation ecosystem, and facilitate collaboration between its member institutions and relevant US organisations.

“Further initiatives include exploring cooperation in advanced technologies, biotechnology and artificial intelligence, inviting international experts to THENSA events, and pursuing another IVLP opportunity in 2028. These efforts will help ensure that the programme delivers lasting benefits for member universities, researchers, students, and the broader innovation ecosystems in South Africa and Namibia,” he added.



For Nontokozo Ngcobo, Centre Manager at innobiz DUT Centre for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, one of the key lessons from the visit was the approach adopted by US universities towards intellectual property ownership, particularly in relation to student entrepreneurship. She noted that universities generally do not claim ownership of intellectual property developed by student start-ups where the innovation does not originate from university research. Even in

the case of research spin-offs, some institutions register and fund patents primarily to support inventors, recognising the high costs associated with patenting and the challenges of establishing a business.

As Ngcobo aptly put it: “Institutions exist to back entrepreneurs, not to take from them.”

For innobiz DUT, the experience will inform efforts to strengthen its entrepreneurship development pipeline. This includes embedding entrepreneurship as a methodology across faculties, introducing customer discovery into its programmes, and developing an accelerator and investment-readiness stage that connects emerging ventures with potential investors.

Ngcobo further highlighted that the programme offered valuable insights beyond entrepreneurship development, particularly for DUT's Technology Transfer and Innovation (TTI) office. These included models for inventor-centred intellectual property practices, proof-of-concept funding and intellectual property training through the US Patent and Trademark Office. She emphasised the importance of closer collaboration between innobiz DUT and TTI to ensure that innovators and start-ups receive the necessary support throughout their journey from idea development to market entry.



Dr Ncebakazi Galada, Technology Transfer Manager at iYunivesithi Walter Sisulu, also highlighted the value of the programme, particularly in understanding the role of government and industry in supporting university-led research and innovation. She noted that the US

government's commitment to funding university-led research, complemented by industry support, helps reduce barriers to market entry and creates a more enabling environment for entrepreneurs to thrive.

Reflecting on the partnership opportunities emerging from the visit, Dr Galada recommended that South African universities participating in the programme formalise partnerships with the US universities visited. Such collaborations could pave the way for joint research initiatives, staff and student exchange programmes, enhanced technology transfer capacity, and the exploration of commercialisation opportunities in international markets.

The IVLP experience has reinforced the importance of international collaboration in strengthening university innovation ecosystems. Through continued engagement with global partners, THENSA and its member institutions are well positioned to translate the knowledge and networks gained into practical initiatives that support researchers, entrepreneurs and the broader higher education sector.



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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.