



Long walk to success... Johannes Matsi with the Registrar at Unam, Professor Francis Nyathi.

Visually impaired student graduates with master's degree at Unam

■ Paheja Siririka

WINDHOEK – Meet 37-year-old Johannes Tala Matsi who last Friday made history by being the first visually impaired student at the University of Namibia (Unam) to graduate with a master's degree.

His academic journey started in 2004 when he was admitted to the University of Namibia to pursue a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology and Sociology after completing Grade 12 the previous year at Gabriel Taapopi Senior Secondary school in Ongwediva.

Born in Ontananga village in the Oshikoto Region, Matsi graduated on Friday with a Master of Arts in Gender and Development Studies. He was motivated to study when he observed that many people with disabilities are unable to do anything for themselves.

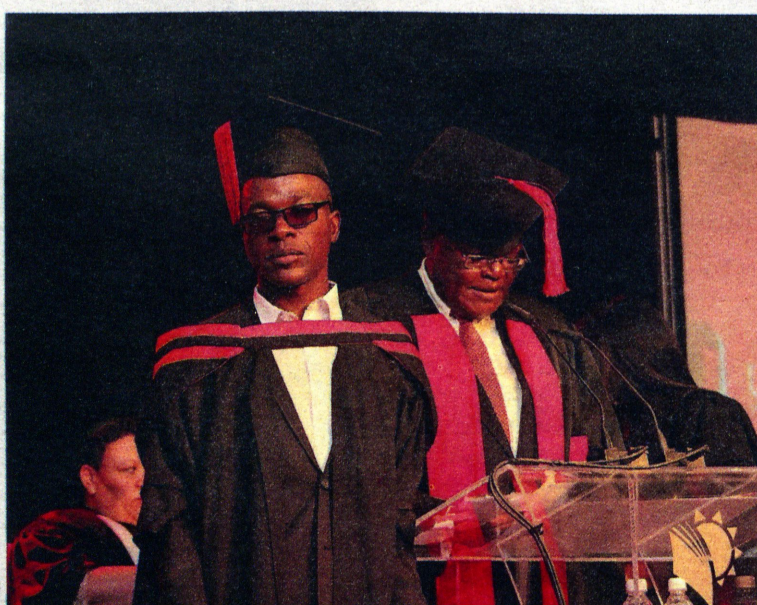
"I took a decision to pursue studies instead of being at the village," he told the Youth Corner. "I have many other senses that I can use to better my life and I can't rely on sight alone," he emphasised. Matsi was fortunate to have a grandmother who moulded him to take education seriously.

"She used to compare me with successful people in our community who were disabled," reminisced Matsi. As a matter of fact his grandmother prophesied that he would "be successful one day", Matsi related. Matsi says he was not born blind and only started losing his sight completely when he was about five years old.

Navigating through university was not easy. "Since I was just the second student with visual impairment to have ever enrolled at the university, settling down was



Officially mastered... Johannes Matsi being conferred by Vice-Chancellor of Unam, Professor Kenneth Kamwi Matengu.



A good listener... Johannes Matsi listening to the words of Professor Jairos Kaneira

hindered by numerous challenges as the university was not equipped with teaching aids for students with special needs. These included lack of braille materials, lack of computer screen readers (software), and unfriendly infrastructure," said Matsi. Despite multiple challenges, he vowed not to give up on his academic dreams. "I coped by making use of tape recorders and cassettes to record every lecture session. By the end of every semester I had accumulated a box of cassettes that even doubled up by the end of each year," narrated Matsi.

"What's more, the cumbersome exercise was that I would have to listen through all those cassettes to prepare for exams," he related. With the support of the Unam Department of Special Education

staff particularly, Dr C. K. Haihambo and Dr Mostert, Matsi adapted and gradually picked up.

Over the years things eventually improved and Matsi commends Unam for providing resources to cater to his needs. "In 2006 whilst in my 3rd year, things changed for the better. The university established the Disability Unit with the assistance of the Voluntary Service Overseas volunteer from Canada who was knowledgeable in assistive devices for students with special needs," he said.

"The unit was equipped with computers with talking software, internet facilities and braille transcribers," Matsi outlined. The programme required extensive reading which was always a challenge to a student with visual impairment, presentations and the tiring research project. "However, with self-belief and the passion to succeed I completed the course and graduated on April 12th, 2019," a proud Matsi said.

For his Master's thesis, Matsi's focus was on the "Vulnerability contributing to GBV against women with disabilities in the Khomas region." While trying to secure a job in his line of study, Matsi is currently a Chief Labour Relations Officer at the Ministry of Labour.

In his final remarks with the Youth Corner, Matsi encouraged prospective students with disabilities to never give up on their aspirations in life on the grounds of their impairments. "Disability does not mean inability. Thus it should not predetermine who you become neither allow society to limit who you want to become," he said emphatically. He urged Namibians, in general, to chase and fulfil their dreams.