

UNIZULU's ongoing dialogue on African thought results in robust discussion during HSS workshop

NALEDI HLEFANE

THE University of Zululand (UNIZULU) this month launched a four-part series of workshops aimed at inculcating in its academic pool the institution's strategic vision to establish itself as a distinctive African university.

The three-day workshops are specifically targeted at academics in the four faculties and will be held monthly by the Office of the Vice-Chancellor and Principal in collaboration with the different faculties. The workshops seek to develop a roadmap for integrating African thought into the university's curriculum and practices. The strategic vision for 2022-2027 positions the university as "A Node for African Thought". This suggests an ongoing focus on promoting African knowledge systems.

The Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) kick-started the series at the Premier Hotel in Richards Bay, where insightful presentations and roundtable discussions inspired intellectual deliberations.

During the three days, Professor Siphso Seepe, a higher education and strategy consultant and facilitator of the workshop, delved deep into how hard the university was working in upholding its commitment in this journey. He emphasised the importance of collaborations and the role of academics in realising these goals.

"What our engagement is all about is taking the struggle to the next level. If you read our policy document – the higher education document on transformation 1997 – it talks about the need for us to ensure that all knowledge systems and African knowledge need to be part of our curriculum. In a sense, that posture is a posture that has informed the University of Zululand to come up with a strategic plan to say that it is about time that we change gears; it is about time that we seek and try to



UNIZULU's Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences kick-started the African thought workshop series Picture: Samkele Sokhela

establish a truly African university.

"In saying that, we are making a distinction between universities in Africa and universities that are African in orientation and in contact. This is where the idea of a cognitive empire comes in; that we may have people located in certain spaces, but cognitively or epistemically, they may be somewhere else. So, the journey tries by all means to make a distinction between social location, geographic location and epistemic location," Prof Seepe noted.

Professor Lulu Shokane, HSS Dean, emphasised that the workshop was necessary to provide strategic guidance on how to unpack the university's vision and added that the discussions would be cascaded at the faculty level.

Some of the key issues raised during the three days included the topics of colonial entanglements and "re-membering" elements of identity that were

dismembered through coloniality.

Professor George Moyo, Director of the Richards Bay Campus, highlighted that there were colonial entanglements the University found itself in. "When I say entanglement, it means all the areas and actions are influenced by things that are not even local. It's a question of interconnectedness. So, all these issues of colonialities are an example of interconnectedness," he explained.

He was particularly glad that, given its colonial entanglements, UNIZULU's Vision 2027 had begun the process of "unfreezing" among UNIZULU academics; thereby instituting change. To this end, he urged the academics to develop a decolonial consciousness and start reading with understanding on concepts currently being researched by scholars around the issue of colonialities, as this would enable change. He encouraged them to also interrogate two phenomena:

epistemologically insurgent curriculum and pluriverse curriculum.

"We can have as many workshops like this, talking around issues, but unless we sit down and read and try to understand and implement and reconfigure our teaching, we are going nowhere. It's time to get our hands dirty. It's time for action," he said.

His hope was that in the next workshop, many academics would showcase what they would have done in terms of developing a pluriversal curriculum or an insurgent pedagogy. That, for him, was the way to move to develop the required world of consciousness.

Dr Smangele Cele, Head of the Department of Sociology, agreed with decoloniality scholar Prof Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsaheni's stance on colonisation having caused the dismemberment of Africans. This dismemberment was not only in the form of geography and being, but stretched all the way

to indigenous knowledge systems and historical records. According to her, the workshop presented an opportunity of re-membering what was dislocated by coloniality – and her suggestion for resolving this matter was collaborating through community engagement.

Prof Seepe said the struggle of today was one that required different approaches and skills. "For too long Africans have engaged in a scholarship where they seek to be accommodated and they are accommodated in spaces whose posture is inimical to their interest," he stressed. "This is why Malcolm X was saying that to sit in someone's bus – whether you sit at the back or in front or in the middle – does not dignify you until such a time when you have your own bus."

This, according to the professor, was linked to Audre Lorde's statement that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house".

UNIZULU in partnership with school principals to develop professional practice knowledge for teaching



Faculty of Education Dean, Professor Sithabile Ntombela. Picture: Xolani Ncube

PRECIOUS SHAMASE

IN a decisive step towards changing the educational landscape, the Faculty of Education at the University of Zululand (UNIZULU) hosted a principals workshop at the Bon Hotel, Empangeni to build mutually beneficial collaborations with neighbouring schools.

The workshop was attended by 48 principals from neighbouring schools as well as teachers responsible for mentoring student teachers during teaching practice. The targeted district was King Cetshwayo District Municipality. This forum aimed to bring together principals and educators to discuss and develop stronger partnerships that benefit both teacher preparation and student learning.

Themed "Strengthening UNIZULU's Teaching Practice Partnership with Schools", the workshop was aimed at exploring what it takes to develop a "learning place" conducive to student teachers' development of professional practice knowledge and the role of mentoring in this regard.

Faculty Dean, Professor Sithabile Ntombela, said that it was heart-warming to learn that most schools are happy about the students and the faculty's contribution in terms of the teachers produced by UNIZULU. A few issues outside the agenda were brought up which could not be tackled in the time available, and it was decided that an Indaba would be planned for later in the year.

"You contribute significantly to the success of the faculty. Without schools, we would not have the Faculty of Education. By fostering a collaborative environment, this forum can lead to a more effective partnership between the Faculty of Education and schools; ultimately benefiting both future teachers and student learning," explained Prof Ntombela.

The workshop served as a platform for sharing ideas and strategies to elevate the quality of education – ultimately enriching students' learning experiences. Discussions revolved around creating adaptability, paving the way forward, and networking opportunities. The Dean also highlighted the importance of partnership. She urged the teachers to facilitate learning and to make provision for teacher training, as learners need empowered teachers to become productive citizens.

Presentations were given highlighting innovative teaching practices or successful partnerships. Presentations also dealt with equipping students to meet the needs of the global citizenry, the roles of higher education institutes and schools in guiding learners to choose correct careers. By working together, the Faculty of Education and school principals can create a more robust and effective system for preparing and supporting teachers. This will ultimately lead to a better educational experience for all students.

The meeting was also attended by chief education specialist, Bekabantu Senzo Dube, who made significant contributions to the discussions. He indicated that district stakeholder events such as this suggest that the university is a supportive institution. "Institutions like UNIZULU are excited and willing to partner. When we open doors to our learners, we make profound advancements to young lives with a very positive ripple effect," affirmed Dube.

Remarkable story of Prof Neerish Revaprasadu – among world's top 2% researchers

NALEDI HLEFANE

THE University of Zululand (UNIZULU) boasts within its academic cohort Professor Neerish Revaprasadu, an acclaimed productive nanomaterials researcher and senior professor in the Department of Chemistry who is also among the world's top 2% researchers.

The latter became apparent in 2022 following the release of Stanford University World's Top 2% Scientists list. Regarded the pinnacle for scientists globally, the Stanford University list considers the most prolific and cited scientists in 22 scientific fields and 176 subfields, ranking them according to their individual contribution in their fields. The criteria is largely based on bibliometric information found in the Scopus database, which contains data of more than 180 000 researchers out of over eight million considered to be active around the world. Information on citations, h-index, co-authorship adjusted hm-index, citations to papers in different authorship positions and a composite indicator (c-score) is provided on the Scopus database.

Learning of this notable achievement, Prof Revaprasadu said he felt triumphant and proud of himself, his team and university. "The appearance on the list validates our quest for quality and impact in our work. It shows international recognition. But what is most satisfying for me is that we have achieved this at a rural university with limited resources. It shows what can be achieved through determination and institutional support. My students can be counted as being of world standard," he proudly stated.

Prof Revaprasadu's involvement in the nanotechnology space spans over two decades. He began his research on



Professor Neerish Revaprasadu. Picture: Samkele Sokhela

nanomaterials in 2000 at UNIZULU, working on a wide range of materials – from sulfides to selenides and tellurides, involving metals such as nickel, cobalt, iron and copper. He has since formed a research group consisting of young and vibrant chemists with whom he works on carbon-based composites, 2-D nanomaterials, ternary and doped materials. The group perfected a formula Prof Revaprasadu learned from his late mentor, Prof Paul O'Brien, and applied it to various materials, which has given it the edge in developing new materials.

Prof Revaprasadu believes that the high quality of materials his group has synthesised, coupled with the fact that they were among the trailblazers in the nanotechnology field, contributed to his recognition. "The advent of green energy, in particular water splitting applications using functional materials, helped our work gain visibility within the materials community. The high quality of materials synthesised has allowed us to publish the work in high impact journals. This has then increased

our citations exponentially in the past few years," he said.

The citations are bound to multiply as Prof Revaprasadu intends continuing producing high-quality work with his research group.

EDUCATION AND EARLY CAREER

Prof Revaprasadu holds a BSc (Hons) in Chemistry from the University of Natal (now University of KwaZulu-Natal) and a PhD from Imperial College in London. He was the first South African to obtain a PhD in nanomaterials chemistry owing to three years spent in Prof O'Brien's research group in London.

"Through close mentorship I was able to achieve some good results in my first year. I published my first paper at the end of my first year. I went on to publish 15 papers in my PhD – a record in the group," he recalled.

Upon obtaining his PhD, Prof Revaprasadu returned to UNIZULU where he swiftly moved up the ranks from senior laboratory assistant to lecturer then senior lecturer in 2000. He was there-

after promoted to Associate Professor in 2004, Professor in 2008 and Senior Professor in 2020.

Noticing a gap in the nanotechnology space in the country, he started his own research group with only one student. Through funding from the National Research Foundation (NRF), his research group increased. Some of his protégées are now senior researchers and professors.

His most successful graduates include Prof Nosipho Moloto, new director of the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) Centre of Excellence for Materials, Energy and Nanotechnology (ARUA CoE MEN) at the University of Witwatersrand. Others include Dr Sixberth Mlowe, a Tanzanian national who is now Director of Postgraduate studies at University of Dar Es Salaam; and Prof Samuel Oluwotobi Oluwafemi, an NRF-rated full Professor in the Department of Chemical Sciences within the Faculty of Science at the University of Johannesburg. He leads the Nanotechnology for Biological, Energy, and Water (CHEM-NA-NOBEW) Laboratory Research group, which currently comprises 10 researchers, three postdoctoral research fellows, and 20 postgraduate students at honours, Master's and doctoral levels. He recently received the Vice-Chancellor's Distinguished Award for Outstanding Researcher of the Year. Dr Muntuwenkosi Chili was appointed as the new Executive Director for the Centre for Academic Development at the Vaal University of Technology. Dr Advocate Sibusiso Mondo is an advocate of the High Court of South Africa. Dr Phumlani Mdluli is Head of Advanced Materials Division at Mintek. Dr Ndabenhle Sosibo is research and development manager at AECI Mining Chemicals. Dr Dilshad Malik Khan is an emerging

NRF Y-2 rated researcher who is a post-doctoral research fellow at UNIZULU. Dr Siphso Masikane is a HRTEM technologist at UNIZULU. There are a host of students from the continent who are now junior academics.

In 2007, he applied for a South African Research Chairs Initiative (SARCHI) Chair and was awarded. The Chair is among the top performing in the country, having published over 200 papers and more than 20 book chapters. Prof Revaprasadu has also been a member of the South African Academy of Science since 2014 and has been associate editor of the Royal Society of Chemistry Special Periodic Review series since 2016. He has collaborations with numerous international scholars as well. Prof Revaprasadu is now an NRF B2-rated researcher – the first UNIZULU academic and the first chemist in KwaZulu-Natal to reach this status.

Among the researcher's multiple accolades are three awards he received during the 2023 Vice-Chancellor's Academic Awards. He was awarded the Excellence in Research award. He also received an award in the Innovation and Creative category wherein intellectual property creators who submitted the most actionable disclosure leading to a patent, trademark or readers' right were acknowledged. His final award was in the Recognition category which was handed over to individuals who either obtained external grants of R800 000 or more or were recognised externally by an entity for excellence in research, innovation or creative work.

"I am ever grateful for the support of the university that allows me to carry out work that I enjoy. We work in a very research-conducive environment. The management should also take credit for my success," the professor said.

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