

UNIZULU hosts inaugural conference on African Thought



Dr Blade Nzimande, Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, receives a token of appreciation from UNIZULU for his worthy contribution to the university's inaugural conference on African Thought. Picture: James Thwala.



The recently-held inaugural conference on African Thought brought together seasoned scholars who shared a wealth of knowledge on the topic of African thought. Picture: James Thwala.

SIYANDA MNTAMBO

THE University of Zululand (UNIZULU) recently hosted a groundbreaking conference themed "Advancing African Thought".

The conference took place at the Bon Hotel, Waterfront in Richards Bay, KwaZulu-Natal, on November 17 to 19, 2022. It was a remarkable event that was heightened by the presence of Dr Blade Nzimande, Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation.

Those attending this pioneering three-day engagement on African thought included Nomarashiya Caluza, Chairperson of Council; renowned international and local academics and scholars; distinguished speakers; as well as UNIZULU's Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Deans and executive management.

The conference was held in line with the university's strategic vision to become a world-class African university that values epistemologies from the Global South and indigenous African knowledge. This is an important chapter in UNIZULU's journey as a knowledge generator and shaper. It is against this backdrop that the university is mandated to produce competitive graduates with an African sensibility.

Through a paradigm shift from the alienating colonial model, UNIZULU is renegotiating and re-contracting with the local, provincial, national, continental and global public as part of the university's contribution to the broader struggle for the total emancipation of African people. By engaging in and implementing African thought, this conference provided a roadmap for systematising, operationalising and modelling "African thought" at UNIZULU.

In her opening address, UNIZULU

Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Professor Xoliswa Mtsose focused on the 2027 strategic vision and goal of the university being a node for African thought.

"Through the current UNIZULU strategic 2027 vision, we have taken a bold but worthwhile decision to move beyond creating a discussion space designed to ignite good imagination about the future trajectory of the university, but also to develop alternative epistemological orientations anchored on African Thought.

"In this regard, our knowledge, and social projects at UNIZULU are informed by our own African history and identity that we will not apologise for," she said.

In his keynote address, Dr Nzimande said: "It is hoped that UNIZULU will target its faculties of science, arts and commerce to actively engage in this space, as it opens up huge opportunities for novel experiments, student entrepreneurship and enterprise development rooted in the cultures and ecologies of local communities. It also offers opportunities to forge new solidaristic and co-operative networks of organic intellectuals, students and local communities to build strong local social capital to promote secure and sustainable futures.

"After a recent visit I undertook with a large delegation, including Professor Mtsose, to Silicon Valley in the US and meeting with Google Deep Learning, I am convinced that we can rapidly accelerate the development and use of indigenous languages – drawing on machine-learning and deep-learning tools – in both social and commercial life.

As you know, language is the most powerful transmitter of cultural and social values, and its future development beyond social communication is vital if we are to foreground African epistemologies – as the conference seeks to do."

Academics acknowledged during VC's Academic Awards

NALEDI HLEFANE

EACH year, the University of Zululand (UNIZULU) holds a special awards ceremony to recognise academic staff members whose teaching, learning and research performance had been notable in the preceding year.

The recent 2022 Vice-Chancellor's Academic Awards was jointly organised by the Teaching and Learning Centre and the Research and Innovation Office. The glitzy event took place at Umfolozi Hotel Casino Convention Resort in Empangeni.

According to Professor Maria Sewela Mabusela, Director of Teaching and Learning, the awards ceremony is a significant period in the university as it gives due recognition to individuals who are "hard workers, (who) sacrifice, have a positive attitude and commitment, and make excellence a habit".

"Furthermore, the awards serve to inspire emerging academics to do their best work while innovating, attaining cumulative output, and adapting to the ongoing changes in higher education," she added.

To qualify for the teaching excellence awards, candidates had to be nominated by their peers in any of the three available categories: emerging academic, developed

academic, and distinguished academic.

In the emerging academic category, nominees had to possess either a Master's or doctoral degree. For the developed academic category, nominated academics had to be in a senior lecturer position and hold a PhD degree in their relevant field. Finally, the minimum requirements for those nominated in the distinguished academic category were a PhD degree and associate or full professorship.

The research excellence awards were handed over across four categories, namely Next Generation of Researchers, Established/ Productive Researchers, Women in Research, and Prestige Awards.

The first category was dedicated to researchers under the age of 40 who generated the most units in their faculty.

In the second category, three different groups of researchers were awarded: most productive researchers, supervisors who produced at least five Master's graduates in the 2022 graduation season, and supervisors who produced at least three PhD graduates in the 2022 graduation season.

The third category honoured the best young woman researcher as well as the most established woman researcher.

In the final category, the three best departments were awarded, according to bronze, silver or gold status.



The recent VC's Academic Awards ceremony was characterised by bliss as select academics were acknowledged for their dedication and unmatched performance in the preceding year. Eight staff members were lauded for their teaching and learning excellence, while over 30 were awarded for commendable work in their research and innovation as well as community engagement endeavours. Picture: James Thwala.

UNIZULU alumnus recognised for exemplary leadership

NALEDI HLEFANE

THE University of Zululand (UNIZULU) is celebrating with its alumnus and convocation member Sizwe Desmond Zwane, who was lauded for his stupendous leadership at Empangeni High School during the recent 22nd National Teaching Awards (NTA).

The NTAs are held annually by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to acknowledge teachers who perform at their peak, often amid challenging circumstances.

"Such teachers provide for better futures for learners, because the lack of quality education is a major factor behind many social, political, economic and health challenges faced by the world today; as well as contributing to poverty, prejudice and conflict," the DBE website reads.

Principal Zwane was nominated by his colleagues at Empangeni High School in the Excellence in Secondary School Teaching category. This category recognises individuals who are exceptional at their work or who have blazed a trail in their workplaces.

On receiving the recognition from NTA, Zwane said he felt humbled, adding that the award did not belong to him but the entire school. In addition, this recognition had placed the school on the map.

"The award vindicates the work we have been doing as a school for the past four years. Since 2018, when I was appointed, together with the then SGB and the current one, we have been working together on our vision to be an internationally recognised school, and on our mission to produce globally competitive



Award-winning principal, Sizwe Desmond Zwane, with learners from Empangeni High School. Picture: Samkele Sokhela

learners – and all our programmes have been translating to that. We have set the vision not to compete with any institution, but we have said let us have a framework that we'll be using as an institution to pave a way on how education should be given to the current generation of young people," said Zwane.

His achievement has been met with excitement from his staff members, who cannot stop singing their principal's praises. Kerry van der Westhuizen, the receptionist at the school, described Zwane as a team player who encourages everyone to aim for excellence at all times. "He inspires everyone each and every day to work to their fullest potential. He tries to push us to achieve the biggest goals ever," she said.

Student teacher Juniqua Grobler said that one of the things she admired about Zwane is his humility and resolve to transform the school. According to her, he has undertaken many projects, including the renovation of the learners' bathrooms, hostels and the school hall.

Zwane assumed principalship in 2018 – making history as the first black individual to ever ascend to that level in the school. Through employing an inclusive leadership style (where every member of his team is part of actualising the school's vision), he has accomplished great feats in terms of the curriculum, academic performance, extracurricular activities, sports and infrastructure.

"In 2017, the matric pass rate went down to 90%, which according to our

school, is the lowest. Our average is usually 94 or 95%. In 2018, we took the school to 97% and we were the top school in the district because we got the highest number of bachelors, distinctions – and we produced the top learner in the district, out of 20 000 learners," said Zwane.

Under his leadership, the school has also augmented its subject complement with Robotics Coding and Marine Science, launched a new music centre and renovated its sports facilities. The revival of sporting codes such as rugby has had amazing returns as teams are performing exceptionally, competing both nationally and internationally. In 2022, the school was pleased to see some hockey and rugby team members representing it in Ireland.

The school has been excelling on the music front as well. The choir has been competing at national level since 2017, and won two national competitions in 2022. A music fanatic and conductor of the school choir, Principal Zwane holds the successes of the choir and school band close to his heart.

EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

Zwane obtained a BSc in Environmental Management and a BSc in Geography from UNIZULU. His longstanding involvement in the choral music space (both as a vocalist and conductor) led him to a career in teaching. After securing employment in this profession, Zwane proceeded to study towards a degree in education through the University of South Africa.

He also recently completed his Master's degree in Educational Management from UNIZULU.

UNIZULU research discovery of vegetable oil in indigenous plants attracts interest from KZN EDTEA

PRECIOUS SHAMASE

THE Department of Agriculture at the University of Zululand (UNIZULU) recently hosted a site visit with the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs (KZN EDTEA) to assess the progress of the UNIZULU Technology Transfer Fund Project.

The project is led by Professor Godfrey Elijah Zharare, a lecturer and a plant scientist at UNIZULU. The other project members are Thulani Nxumalo, an agronomist and agricultural advisor stationed in Jozini, and George Wilsenach, a lecturer and agribusiness specialist in the Department of Agriculture at UNIZULU. Their research focuses on the commercialisation of vegetable oils from the fruit of two similar plants, *Strychnos madagascariensis* (uMkwakwa) and *Strychnos pungens*. The project received seed funding from EDTEA.

Prof Bryon Brown, the director of UNIZULU's Research and Innovation Office was in attendance, together with Prof Innocent Moyo, Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Science, Agriculture and Engineering, and Bonisiwe Ndlovu, the officer for IP, Innovation and Funding.

Highlighting the background of the project, Prof Zharare mentioned the possible methods of oil extraction from the seed coat that surrounds the seeds, and the problems that need to be solved to facilitate the commercialisation of oil extraction from the two plants.

One method of extraction involves drying the seeds so that the skin can be separated from the seeds, and oil is then extracted from the seeds using a screw press or by solvent methods. Alternatively, the skin is scraped off from wet seeds into a puree which is then dried off, and oil is extracted from the dried puree by solvent or by pressing.

Since the oil has not been extracted before, Prof Zharare and his team are investigating the best extraction protocols for the oils, and potential uses of them. Mangosuthu University of Technology's TIA technology station is collaborating with the team on assessing the uses of the oils.

The team is also working on establishing vegetative propagation of the plants to facilitate establishment of plantations of plants with the desirable traits for oil production.

Prof Zharare explained that that the project is to benefit the local community in uMkhanyakude District Municipality, where there is an abundance of *Strychnos madagascariensis*. "The intention is to eventually set up an oil extraction plant in uMkhanyakude district, and to market the oil or products from the oil on a benefit-sharing basis whereby locals will function as harvesters of the fruits or as growers of the plants."

The meeting ended with a visit to the lab where experiments are conducted to optimise the protocols for pre-extraction and the extraction processes.

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