

UNIZULU shines at JINR – South Africa Days Conference

PROFESSOR KHOBOSO LEHLOENYA, DR PHUMLANI NGCOBO, PROFESSOR MELUSI SIBANDA, DR SAMSON MOHOMANE

THE Joint Institute for Nuclear Research (JINR) recently hosted the prestigious South Africa Days conference in Dubna, Russia – highlighting the growing bilateral co-operation between South African scientific institutions and one of the world's renowned nuclear research institutes. The South African delegation was led by high-level representatives, including Imraan Patel, Deputy Director-General at the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI) as well as Professor Fulufulo Nelwamondo, CEO of the National Research Foundation (NRF). They were accompanied by key researchers and academic leaders from across South Africa, representing national facilities such as the NRF IThemba Labs, NECSA, SARAO and SAEON.

A major highlight of the programme was the University of Zululand (UNIZULU) presentation, led by Prof Khoboso Lehloenya, Dean of the Faculty of Science, Agriculture and Engineering (FSAE). The presentation was titled "Empowering sustainable futures: Innovation-driven science at the University of Zululand aligned to DUBNA-JINR." It showcased the institution's vibrant research ecosystem and growing contributions to high-impact and transdisciplinary collaboration. The UNIZULU delegation included Prof Melusi Sibanda, Head of the Department of Agriculture; Dr Samson Mahomane, Head of the Department of Chemistry; Dr Phumlani Ngcobo, FSAE Internationalisation Co-ordinator and Physics department representative; Dr Puleng Biyela, a lecturer in the Physics department; and Nhlakanipho Khoza, a PhD student in the Physics department.

UNIZULU's Physics department has a longstanding collaboration with iThemba LABS and has worked closely with JINR for several years.



The UNIZULU delegation at SA Days at JINR included (from left): Dr Samson Mohomane, Head of the Chemistry Department; Prof Khoboso Lehloenya, FSAE Dean; Dr Phumlani Z. Ngcobo, FSAE Internationalisation Co-ordinator and Physics Department representative; Khulekani Bantubonke Manqele, Physics PhD candidate; and Prof Melusi Sibanda, Head of the Agriculture Department.

This foundational relationship has led to shared expertise, capacity building, and meaningful nuclear research and material science technology exchange. These collaborative efforts span semiconductor defect analysis, positron irradiation studies and rare nuclear decay investigations – representing significant progress in knowledge exchange and scientific training.

Khoza is among the students who are benefiting from this relationship. He is working on a project to study the defects created by irradiation and/or implantation of semiconducting metal oxides for gas sensing applications. The main characterisation technique is positron annihilation spectroscopy, although he will use other techniques to support the PAS data. His project is a joint collaboration between the Physics department and JINR, with Dr Biyela and JINR's Prof Yakovenko Sergey as the principal investigators.

UNIZULU's multidisciplinary research team at the conference were involved in discussions around the global research agenda. Topics included among others earth observation for land reform and food systems;

using AI and satellite imaging systems, and climate-smart food systems. These joint projects will utilise the JINR's state-of-the-art irradiation and analytical infrastructure; supporting UNIZULU's broader commitment to innovation-driven development.

Among the joint research collaboration initiatives, the key outcomes of the week were exploring institutional collaboration prospects with Dubna State University, with the aim of including several FSAE departments such as Agriculture, Biochemistry and Microbiology, Chemistry, Geography and Environmental Studies, as well as Physics. The partnership includes joint student training programmes, staff and student exchanges, and co-supervision of postgraduate research – further strengthening academic diplomacy and institutional innovation.

Throughout the week, delegates participated in site visits to JINR's leading laboratories, including the NICA Complex and Neutron Physics Laboratory and the Joint Co-ordinating Committee (JCC) meetings.

"The engagements in Dubna have also opened the door for intra-South African institutional collaboration.

UNIZULU is now actively pursuing joint projects and knowledge exchange opportunities with South African universities such as the Nelson Mandela University (NMU), Vaal University of Technology (VUT) and others who also presented at the SA Days at JINR," said Prof Lehloenya.

Key to the SA Days at JINR was the formal signing of a new Memorandum of Understanding between UNIZULU (signed by Vice-Chancellor and Principal Prof Xoliswa Mtose) and JINR (signed by the Director of JINR, Prof Grigory Vladimirovich Trubnikov) – with the JCC-24 decisions signalling a new chapter in the SA-JINR partnership. UNIZULU stands ready to leverage this momentum to co-create innovative solutions through inclusive, transdisciplinary research that serves the African continent and the world.

Reflecting on the experience, Prof Lehloenya echoed this sentiment. "This engagement is a transformative opportunity for UNIZULU and the broader African research community. The partnerships we build today will shape the sustainable futures we envision tomorrow."

'Incredible' opportunity for scholar conducting research in Poland

NSIKELELO MALINGA

UNIZULU proudly celebrates the international academic strides of one of its own – Nsikelelo Malinga – a staff member at the UNIZULU Science Centre and a doctoral candidate in the Department of Biochemistry and Microbiology.

Malinga is currently in Warsaw, Poland, undertaking an advanced research visit to the University of Warsaw. This is a significant milestone in his PhD journey and a reflection of UNIZULU's expanding global academic footprint.

Malinga's doctoral research focuses on the development and annotation of a bioinformatics database of ferredoxins from viruses and Salinispora species. His visit to the University of Warsaw, hosted by the Faculty of Biology under the mentorship of Prof Dominik Gront, an internationally respected expert in structural bioinformatics, is a vital step in enhancing the technical and theoretical foundations of his study.

This research visit is made possible through the Department of Higher Education and Training's University Staff Doctoral Programme (USDSP) – a national capacity development initiative administered at UNIZULU through the office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research and Innovation, Professor Nokuthula Kunene. The USDSP supports academic and support staff in advancing their doctoral studies and gaining international experience.

"As both a staff member at the UNIZULU Science Centre and a PhD student, this opportunity is incredibly meaningful," Malinga said. "The exposure to advanced computational tools and techniques, such as molecular docking, protein-ligand interaction analysis and fingerprinting, is invaluable for my research and for the scientific enrichment I hope to bring back to our institution. I am immensely grateful for the USDSP grant that made this visit possible."

Prof Kunene commended Malinga's commitment to academic excellence and professional development.

"The USDSP is designed to nurture emerging scholars and researchers from within our institutions. Malinga's participation in this international research collaboration illustrates how support for staff development translates into long-term institutional benefit. We are proud of his achievements and look forward to the impact his experience will have on his research, his work at the Science Centre, and the broader UNIZULU community."

Malinga's visit is scheduled to conclude in August. The knowledge and skills gained are expected to significantly strengthen his PhD work and capacity to contribute to science education and outreach through the UNIZULU Science Centre.



UNIZULU Science Centre staff member and PhD candidate, Nsikelelo Malinga is currently undertaking an advanced research visit to the University of Warsaw.

UNIZULU hosts three-day MBALI Conference

NALEDI HLEFANE

THE International Management, Business, Administration and Legal Initiatives (MBALI) Conference – an annual flagship event organised by UNIZULU's Faculty of Commerce, Administration and Law (FCAL), commences today at the BON Hotel Waterfront in Richards Bay.

The three-day event, which is now in its ninth year, will once again bring together some of the continent's greatest minds in the management, business, administration and legal disciplines to deliberate this year's theme: "Africa, a Beacon of Strength and Stability in Turbulent Times".

Through this theme, FCAL hopes to not only spark a robust conversation around topical commercial matters such as trade tariffs and foreign policies, but also provide a platform for devising possible ways of addressing these challenges through research.

The programme promises to be enriching, with more than 100 papers set to be presented on sub themes that include business and 4IR/artificial intelligence, entrepreneurship and climate change, among others.

KwaZulu-Natal Premier, Thamsanqa Ntuli; Senior Counsel, Dr Muzi Sikhakhane; and Dr Edwell Gumbo, Director of Entrepreneurship at Universities South Africa, are among the guests who will grace this prestigious event.

Absa Group, a longstanding supporter of the MBALI brand, will also be represented by some of its delegates throughout the conference.

The conference will end on July 31.

'Decolonising development for a just future' discussed at IADS Conference

SBAHLE DUMAKUDE

UNIZULU'S Department of Anthropology and Development Studies (ADS) recently hosted its fourth International Anthropology and Development Studies (IADS) Conference at the Richards Bay Campus.

The highly successful two-day conference, themed "Reclaiming Human Rights: Decolonising Development for a Just Future", brought together distinguished scholars and practitioners to discuss critical issues in human rights, decoloniality and development.

The event featured a series of highly impactful presentations delivered by esteemed keynote speakers. Among them was Professor Morgan Ndlovu, a distinguished transdisciplinary scholar renowned for his extensive publications on decolonising knowledge and power, indigenous knowledge systems, education rights and transformation. Dr Collins Brobbey Adu-Bempah, a senior lecturer and Head of the Department of Integrated Social Sciences in Ghana, also contributed significantly. In addition, Lindokuhle Patwa, a dedicated social justice activist and independent researcher who spearheaded the #RhodesMustFall Movement, shared his insights. Furthermore, Mduduzi Sylvester Dlamini, the Chairperson of the Mkhwanazi Central Development Committee, provided valuable perspectives.

Prof Ndlovu captivated the audience with his presentation on "Re-visiting the question 'Human' in Human Rights Discourse and Praxis". He focused on human rights discourse and the problem of assumptions and presumptions, stressing that the main challenge with the dominant discourse about human rights in gen-



The two-day IADS Conference brought together distinguished scholars and practitioners.

eral conversation, is that it assumes the posture of a global truth. "It assumes the status of equality among all human species – implying that as long as you are born human, you will have access to all legal rights that are made available to all human beings," he said.

According to Dlamini, the purpose of human rights demands a bottom up, not top down perspective. Historically, many struggles were caused by decolonisation, but over the years, these struggles have become the focus of studies on ordinary people, particularly in European colonising countries.

Dr Brobbey presented on "Rethinking democracy in post-colonial Africa: Emerging discourses from Ghana". He urged participants to protect and redefine democratic credentials; celebrate the democratic past and also co-create a future where "democracy is ours in spirit, form and function".

Participants engaged in various breakout sessions that provided an opportunity to delve deeper into specialised topics and share their research findings. These sessions facilitated dynamic discussions and the exchange of pioneering ideas aimed at fostering a more just and equitable future.

Lesiba Phahladira, a lecturer in

ADS and one of the organisers of the conference, posed a provocative question to the assembly: "How do we speak about human rights yet never truly consider the violation of humans?"

The roundtable discussion, moderated by UNIZULU's Clasper Monyela, featured four academics from the universities of Zululand, Lesotho, Cape Town, and Johannesburg, who critically examined the intersections between human rights development and decolonisation – offering profound insights into these crucial interventions.

Professor Joyce Mdiniso, Head of ADS, expressed her heartfelt gratitude to all the conference speakers – acknowledging their invaluable contributions and insightful presentations, which greatly enriched the event. She further conveyed her hope that the friendships and collaborations between UNIZULU and the esteemed speakers from various institutions around the world would continue to flourish in future; fostering further academic and cultural exchange.

"Your commitment to justice and equity inspires us all to continue questioning dominant paradigms, and to imagine a new pathway towards a further and more inclusive future," Prof Mdiniso said.

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