

# Research and Innovation insights

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RESEARCH, POSTGRADUATE STUDIES, INNOVATION AND COMMERCIALISATION PORTFOLIO

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If you have any comments on any of our stories – or would like to contribute an article to the next edition of *Research & Innovation Insights* – please contact the Editor:

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## Success rate for creative output research is on the rise

**The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) has released its latest report on the creative outputs of 17 public universities, including Unisa.**

The report, published in May 2023 for creative outputs from 2021, shows that Unisa has been awarded 4.2352 subsidy-earning units, which is the sixth best in the country.

Creative outputs consist of subfields of fine and visual art, music, theatre, performance and dance, design, film and television, and literary arts. It further includes innovations within the subfields of registered patents and registered plant breeders' rights.

This was the third year in the DHET's creative outputs reporting cycle and, while the number of units awarded to the university might seem low, the results are better than meets the eye.

"We sent in four submissions and achieved 4.2352 units, which implies that what we submit is successful," says Dr Gwenneth Miller, Senior Lecturer at the Department of Art and Music and chair of the Departmental Research Output Vetting Committee (DROVC).

This committee stringently vets all creative outputs sent in by Unisa staff for submission to the DHET, with the purpose of ensuring that only outputs of high quality are submitted.

In effect, Unisa achieved a 100% success rate for its creative outputs submission for 2021. This is significantly better than the success rate in the first and second years (2019 and 2020).

For 2019, the university submitted four items and received zero units. There was no vetting committee at this stage. For 2020, the submission consisted of 21 creative output items, which received 12.83 units. This represents a success rate of 61%. The vetting committee was then established.

The substantial improvement in the success rate for 2021 follows improvements made in the vetting procedures during 2022, says Dr Miller.

"Having improved our vetting procedures in 2022 and having submitted 15 creative output research applications on the Research Outputs Submission System (ROSS), Unisa can look forward to the units results for year four," she says.

"We are now in the process of finalising applications for 2023 (year five) and are again refining our vetting processes." This includes establishing more vetting committees during the course of the year. There will now be vetting committees for literary arts and for design applications.

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UNISA



# Where Unisa stands in the creative output rankings

As the table below shows, five other universities are well ahead of Unisa in earning creative output units, which are subsidy earning. Unisa's national position will be bolstered as other subfields start contributing to creative output research in future. At this stage Unisa's success is due to art, music, and innovations applications.

## 2019-2021 units awarded

CREATIVE OUTPUTS									
Institution	2019			2020			2021		
	#Items	Units awarded	Proportion of Sector Units	#Items	Units awarded	Proportion of Sector Units	#Items	Units awarded	Proportion of Sector Units
SU	87	51.67	43.32%	39	34.45	20.17%	40	34.53	25.74%
WITS	10	8.5	6.96%	11	4.67	2.73%	23	21.3888	15.94%
UFS	25	7.33	6.00%	34	9	5.27%	29	20.4999	15.28%
UP	15	13.31	10.90%	38	35.37	20.71%	23	19.25	14.35%
UJ	6	5	4.10%	20	19.33	11.32%	17	19	14.16%
UNISA	1	0	0.00%	21	12.83	7.51%	4	4.2352	3.16%
TUT	0	0	0.00%	14	6.11	3.58%	4	3.5	2.61%
DUT	7	0	0.00%	9	7	4.10%	6	3.3334	2.48%
UCT	25	24.29	19.89%	9	10.92	6.39%	11	3	2.24%
NWU	0	0	0.00%	6	4	2.34%	5	2.5	1.86%
NMU	8	7	5.73%	12	7.33	4.29%	4	1	0.75%
UKZN	1	1	0.82%	2	2	1.17%	1	1	0.75%
CUT	3	1	0.82%	3	1	0.59%	1	0.6666	0.50%
UWC	1	0	0.00%	7	5.75	3.37%	1	0.26	0.19%
RU	4	3	2.46%	3	4	2.34%	0	0	0.00%
UL	0	0	0.00%	3	3	1.76%	0	0	0.00%
CPUT	0	0	0.00%	4	4	2.34%	0	0	0.00%
<b>Total</b>	<b>193</b>	<b>122.1</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>235</b>	<b>170.76</b>	<b>100%</b>			

Source: DHET

Message from the Executive Director  
**Professor Les Labuschagne**

## Research is urgently needed on the implications of ChatGPT in higher education



Variations of an astonishing headline have recently been appearing in various online news media around the world: "ChatGPT passes CPA exam on V4.0".

For readers who might not have been following the exponentially increasing capabilities of artificial intelligence (AI) content generators like ChatGPT, here is the essence of this piece of breaking news.

Earlier this year, Accounting Today conducted an experiment in which version 3.5 of ChatGPT took a practice exam for the Certified Public Accountant (CPA) qualification. It failed.

Undeterred, ChatGPT made a second attempt about a month later, in its upgraded V4.0 version. It passed the CPA exam with flying colours, scoring over 85%.

This is not the first examination the chatbot has passed. It has also passed the MBA exam of the Wharton Business School in Pennsylvania, the American bar exam and the Canadian radiology board exam, according to various studies done in the seven months since ChatGPT was launched.

It is plain to see that the app and others like it are severely disrupting the way the world works and could work in the future. The higher education sector, in particular, will need to urgently consider its position on the matter. What is evident, is that the technology is here to stay and is evolving at an accelerated pace. Many universities are notoriously slow in the adoption and incorporation of state-of-the-art technologies as part of their business model.

None other than the creator of ChatGPT, Sam Altman, has called for a United States or global agency to regulate this kind of AI technology. Here in South Africa, the Information Regulator recently announced it was having internal discussions on how to approach the regulation of ChatGPT and other AI bots to ensure they do not violate data privacy laws. While this is a step in the right direction, it is the higher education sector that needs to get involved in the

discussions due to the far-reaching effects. While there is some risk of misuse, it also poses tremendous opportunities as a learning tool.

Data privacy is certainly an issue for the higher education sector, which stands to be affected in a host of ways, from assessment and teaching-learning to research ethics and integrity policies and procedures.

Technological advances in AI content generators present both opportunities and challenges, but at this point, there is so much we simply do not yet know about either. Research will be the key to unlocking our understanding.

Unisa urgently needs to understand the implications of AI content generators, as well as how we can use it for the improvement of future research.

We should also actively engage in researching it further in order to develop technologies to recognise and detect AI-generated content.

The Department Research, Innovation and Commercialisation is busy considering the role that we could play in supporting and promoting research on the impact of AI content generators in research and innovation, including research ethics and research integrity.

Time being of the essence in grappling with the ramifications of ChatGPT and the like, there is surely room for collaboration.

One thing is certain: the conversation about the role of AI content generators in higher education has only just begun.



# Unisa applauds its best and brightest researchers and innovators

Unisa hosted the 12th edition of its annual Research and Innovation Awards at the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research International Convention Centre on 21 April 2023.

The event was in honour of the world-class researchers and innovators who exemplify the university's 150th anniversary theme, "Reclaiming Africa's Intellectual Futures".

## The pressure is on to make an impact

In her opening address, Unisa Principal and Vice-Chancellor (VC), Professor Puleng LenkaBula, expressed her deepest appreciation for the ground-breaking research that academics continue to pursue.

The VC said the significant pressure on higher education to produce impactful research is well aligned with the development initiatives of the continent, the country and the global arena through the National Development Plan, the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals.

As a leader recognised in notable global rankings, Unisa must participate in ensuring that knowledge is not just for the elite, but contributes positively to the transformation that societies require in the socio-political, economic and climate conservation arenas, she said.

"Despite the challenges that we experience in the world, they do not overwhelm our researchers. Instead, they become partners with society to ensure that they address these challenges, be it on climate, ecology, affordable and clean energy, gender, equality, or partnerships for education. It is for this reason that Unisa is considered among the top 400 institutions in the world that pay attention to global impacts and sustainable practices."

## Research inspired by real-life challenges

"We present these awards because we strive for excellence at Unisa," said Professor Thenjiwe Meyiwa, Vice-Principal of Research, Postgraduate Studies, Innovation and Commercialisation, in welcoming distinguished academics and guests.

She said institutional recognition is highly prized among Unisa researchers and "spurs them on to produce quality research which is key in supporting Unisa's academic agenda".

Meyiwa stated that some awardees who were not present, were hard at work across the globe, being innovative and stretching the margins of their research projects.



Prof Marcia Mkansi (CEMS) received the Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Innovation.

## Standing ovation for Chancellor's awardees

The Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Research – the highest award for research at Unisa – was presented to six recipients:

- Professor Michael van Wyk, College of Education (CEDU)
- Professor Xinying Liu, College of Science, Engineering and Technology (CSET)
- Professor Kevin Mearns, College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences (CAES)
- Professor Omwoyo Onyancha, (CHS)
- Professor Puleng Segalo, (CHS)
- Professor Memory Tekere, (CHS)

Professor Marcia Mkansi, College of Economic and Management Sciences, received the Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Innovation.

The awardees were celebrated with boisterous cheers and a standing ovation.

## Professor LenkaBula leads by example

In the category External Recognition Awards for Research Excellence, the VC was recognised for her research impact by the Zairi International Awards for Excellence in Research.

## Women in Research champions celebrated

In the category Vice-Principal: Research, Postgraduate Studies, Innovation and Commercialisation Award for Excellence in Research – Women in Research, there were three awardees.

The Youngest Female Doctoral Graduate Award went to Dr Lettah Sikhosana, College of Education (CEDU). The Emerging Researcher Award was presented jointly to Dr Mpho-Entle Puleng Modise (CEDU) and Dr Khomotso Semanya (CAES).

## Awards for commercialising research

In the category Innovation and Commercialisation Awards, Professor Lukas Snyman (CSET) received the awards for First Patent Granted in Examining Jurisdictions, and Recognition for Intellectual Property Applications.

Professor Hennie Stoffberg (CSET) received the award for First Patent Granted in South Africa, and Professor Marcia Mkansi (CEMS) the Copyright Award.

## National recognition

Also celebrated were Unisa researchers recognised by the National Research Foundation through its rating awards. Unisa recognised 52 NRF recipients: seven Y2, one Y1, 10 C3, 25 C2, five C1, four B2, one B1 and one A2.

The 2023 Unisa Research and Innovation Awards once again recognised the academic grit of Unisa academics who continue to climb high in international recognition and stature. Their passion ensures that Unisa remains the university of choice for many in Africa and across the globe.

#Unisa150



Back: Prof Themba Nkambule (CSET), Prof Makwena Moloto (CSET) and Prof Gordon Dames (CHS) Middle: Prof Enrico Lombardi (CSET); Prof Piera Biccari (CEDU); Prof Legesse Debusho (CSET); Prof Itumeleng Mothoagae (CHS); Prof Stanley Madonsela (CHS); and Prof Richard Meissner (CHS) Front: Prof Tameshnie Deane (CLAW); Prof Johanna Mathibe-Neke (CHS); Prof Jeanette Maritz (CHS); Prof Puleng LenkaBula, Principal and Vice Chancellor of Unisa; and Prof Azwihangwisi Mavhandu-Mudzusi (CHS).



Chancellor's awardees for Excellence in Research (from left to right) Prof Puleng Segalo (CHS), Prof Omwoyo Onyancha (CHS), Prof Memory Tekere (CAES), Prof Xinying Liu (CSET), Prof Michael van Wyk (CHS) and Prof Kevin Mearns (CAES).



Prof Puleng LenkaBula, Principal and Vice-Chancellor of Unisa.



Prof Thenjiwe Meyiwa, Vice Principal, Research, Postgraduate Studies, Innovation & Commercialisation.

\* By Godfrey Madibane, Acting Journalist, Department of Institutional Advancement \*\* Photography by Given Maluleka, Multimedia Centre



# ODeL Conference taps into the bright side of uncertainty

Ask any 21st century citizen what they consider to be the defining characteristic of contemporary society, and the word “uncertainty” is likely to be part of the answer.

While people and institutions generally dislike uncertainty because it places obstacles in the way of planning and shrinks comfort zones, uncertainty has a positive side too: it compels individuals and organisations to be creative in their thinking, to be flexible and to take a wider view on the spectrum of possibilities open to them.

Aware of the potential that lies within uncertainty, Unisa has incorporated the positive side of the concept – the opportunities that it brings – into its chosen theme for the 2023 Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) Hybrid Conference. Taking place from 15 to 17 August 2023 both virtually and in person at Emperors Palace, near OR Tambo International Airport in Gauteng, the conference explores the theme, “ODeL in the Global South: Opportunities in times of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA)”.

## Conference aim

The aim of the conference is to encourage discourse about research in open distance and eLearning (ODeL) in a globally connected digital era.

Specific sub-themes delegates might want to consider including, but are not limited to, are the following:

- 4IR - Artificial Intelligence, robotics, internet of things, block chain technology and smart software
- Addressing the digital divide
- Education and the Metaverse
- The datafication of teaching, learning and student support
- Platformisation and commercialisation
- Micro credentialing
- New learning technologies and their impact on pedagogies
- Increasing access to educational opportunities, inclusivity
- Opening up education, science and publishing
- ODeL postgraduate supervision
- Academic integrity in an ODeL context
- Student support in an online environment
- Human resource management in ODeL
- Support for staff wellness in ODeL

## For more information visit:

<https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/Research-&-Innovation/Open-Distance-and-eLearning-Conference/Call-for-Papers>.

## To register your interest or for more information, please contact:

[odelconference@unisa.ac.za](mailto:odelconference@unisa.ac.za).

## ODeL Postgraduate Consortium

In the spirit of growing sustainable capacity development in ODL-related fields, the 2023 Open Distance and eLearning Hybrid Conference will provide a platform for postgraduate students to present their work through the Postgraduate Consortium stream.

Master's and doctoral students who are conducting research in ODeL, Open Educational Resources (OERs), Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and technology-enhanced learning are invited to participate in the consortium by submitting a 2 000-word paper. The deadline for submissions is 20 June.

## For more information, visit:

<https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/Research-&-Innovation/Open-Distance-and-eLearning-Conference/ODeL-Postgraduate-Consortium>.

## For enquiries, send an email to:

[ngubasa@unisa.ac.za](mailto:ngubasa@unisa.ac.za).

There will be prizes for the best ODeL paper, best first paper in ODeL and best ODeL Postgraduate Consortium paper.

# Unisa's research integrity manager makes her mark in *Nature*

Dr Retha Visagie, Research Integrity Manager at Unisa, has added a new academic publishing accolade to her name. She has co-authored an article in *Nature*, which has the highest impact factor of any journal publishing basic scientific research.



The article, titled “The Cape Town Statement on fairness, equity and diversity” in research, was published in the 30 March 2023 edition of *Nature* and was penned by six leading members of the Cape Town Statement Working Group.

In keeping with the Cape Town Statement's principles of fairness, equity and diversity in research, three of the six co-authors are based in Africa, including both the first author and the last author (Dr Visagie). The remaining three are from Global North countries, specifically the Netherlands and the United States.

This equitable authorship split is unusual in the academic publishing world where, as the *Nature* article points out, many journal articles on research conducted in or on Africa have minimal African authorship.

“As an indication of this, a look at the authorship of papers about COVID-19 from the top 10 medical and global-health journals (according to impact ratings), containing content related to Africa or any African country, and published during the first nine months of 2020, reveals that 66% of the authors were not from Africa,” the writers note.

“What's more, of those articles with African authorship, 59% of first authors and 81% of last authors were not from Africa, and only 14% of papers had both an African first and last author.”

In their article, the writers express the hope that the Cape Town Statement which, true to its name, has its origins in Cape Town,

where the Seventh World Conference on Research Integrity was held in 2022, will be a “call to action”.

The hope is that it will “help to turn the global conversation on inequity and unfairness in research into changes in practice by all stakeholders”.

As the *Nature* article points out, change is greatly needed, not only in authorship practices but in how research on low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) is conducted, where research findings are published and how project costs are allocated.

“All stakeholders, from researchers, institutions and funders, to journal editors and publishers, must take steps to ensure they are not exacerbating power imbalances in research collaborations, but instead helping to remove them,” the co-authors say.

For example, publishers and journal editors must question submissions from authors if data were collected in LMICs but the lead and collaborating authors are from high-income countries.

The article notes that some publishers and editors are already doing this. “*The Lancet* has started rejecting papers that are submitted by researchers from outside Africa, with data collected from Africa, with no mention or acknowledgment of a single Africa collaborator. Similarly, *Nature* journals now encourage authors to make various disclosures on inclusion and ethics when submitting manuscripts.”



Read the full *Nature* article on the Cape Town Statement here. While doing so, consider that Dr Retha Visagie has more than 20 journal articles to her name, a number of which were written while in non-academic positions.

She was recognised at the Unisa Research & Innovation Awards held on 21 April 2023 for the recognition she received in category “External Recognition Awards for Research Excellence”.



# New science equipment keeps Unisa on the cutting edge of nano research



A combination of excellent research and the latest scientific equipment is keeping Unisa at the cutting edge of research and development in nanoscience and nanotechnology.



Thanks to a collaboration between the university and a Canadian research organisation, the UNESCO Unisa Africa Chair in Nanosciences and Nanotechnology (U2ACN2) recently took delivery of some of the most modern equipment of its kind.

Advanced, state-of-the-art X-ray photo electron spectroscopy (XPS) equipment has been received from Canada's Institut national de la recherche scientifique (INRS) and is being hosted at the U2ACN2 node of the Western Cape at National Research Foundation iThemba Laboratories for Accelerator-Based Science (NRF-iThemba LABS).

The equipment uses the photoelectric effect operational principle to identify the elements, composition, electronic structure and chemical states that exist within a material (thin films, solids and powders).

XPS is a powerful measurement technique because it not only shows what elements are present, but also to which other elements they are bonded.

The equipment further cements collaboration between Canada and South Africa through the activities of the Canada chair in energy

and the U2ACN2. The two chairs have a longstanding collaborative relationship spearheaded by Prof Malik Maaza (U2ACN2) and Prof Mohamed Chaker of the INRS.

Unisa's Dr Itani G Madiba has been trained to use the new XPS equipment having visited the INRS from 11 June to 12 July 2022 for training and to package the equipment.

The advantage of having the XPS facility is that it will open a pathway for a broad user community that will be able to access the facility in a cost-effective collaborative effort. This will advance Unisa's research outputs, visibility, research and development and overall professional capacity building. All these outcomes align with the long-term objectives of Unisa and serve the internationalisation focus of the Vice Chancellor, Prof Puleng LenkaBula.

The XPS facility will complement a variety of characterisation techniques within the U2ACN2 and enhance the quality of research data and research outputs of our students.

The College of Graduate Studies congratulates the U2ACN2. The future of researchers and postgraduate students at the U2ACN2 is promising.

\*By Hanli Wolhuter, Communication and Marketing Specialist and Musa Buthelezi, Intern, College of Graduate Studies

# African Academy of Sciences opens its doors to Unisa economist



In a rare achievement for an economist, Unisa's Prof Nicolas Odhiambo has joined the prestigious African Academy of Sciences (AAS) as a lifetime Fellow.

It is very difficult for researchers in the field of Economic Sciences to qualify for the AAS award owing to the high scientific standards expected. Although Economics is included with many other disciplines in the Cultural Sciences cluster, only a handful of researchers from that cluster have attained admission to the AAS.

According to the AAS policy, Fellowship is reserved for outstanding scholars who have attained the highest level of excellence in their scientific fields and made significant contributions to the advancement of science, regionally and globally. It is the most prestigious academy award a researcher can receive in Africa.

The Academy applies stringent scientific criteria when evaluating the credentials/profiles of researchers who have been nominated as members. Fellows are elected for life through a rigorous peer-review process based on excellence in their publications record, innovations, leadership roles and contributions to policy and society.

To be admitted as a Fellow, one should be a scientist deemed to have attained the highest international standards and/or made a significant contribution to the development and application of science, technology and innovation in Africa, as well as to the development of other scientists.

A candidate must be nominated by an existing Fellow or Associate Fellow of the AAS and the nomination must be seconded by another Fellow or Associate Fellow. After that, the application of a nominee must be supported by eminent scholars in the candidate's discipline. Finally, the candidate is subjected to a peer review and voting process.

The minimum standards a candidate must meet include qualifying for a factor in scientific journals of high calibre, with a Scopus H-index of 20 or higher. The person must have published at least one journal article with 100 or more citations.

"I am glad that my hard work and dedication to scientific research in Africa/sub-Saharan Africa over the past 20 years has finally paid off," Prof Odhiambo said in response to his achievement.

"I am indeed grateful to the AAS for recognising my sustained contribution to the scholarly body of knowledge, through this prestigious lifetime award. I am honoured to join a prestigious body such as the AAS and I will do my utmost to support the activities of the Academy going forward."

## CEMS raises the bar with new ratings

Four CEMS researchers recently received news of their rating by the National Research Foundation.

They are Prof Ingrid Potgieter (Department of Human Resources - C2), Prof Daniel Makina (Finance, Risk Management and Banking - C2), Prof Zurika Robinson (Economics - C2) and Prof Marcia Mkansi (CEMS Head: Graduate Studies and Research - C1).



Prof Ingrid Potgieter



Prof Daniel Makina



Prof Zurika Robinson



Prof Marcia Mkansi

\*By Ilze Crous, Marketing Specialist, College of Economic and Management Sciences



# FameLab: Simplifying science to reach a wider audience

Unisa's young scholars in science, technology, engineering and mathematics narrated their research in three minutes at the Unisa regional heat of FameLab, the biggest science communication competition in the world.

According to the FameLab website, "FameLab is an international competition to find and support the world's most talented new science communicators. Participants have three minutes to win over the judges and audience with a scientific talk that excels for its content, clarity and charisma."

The FameLab SA/ Unisa regional heat took place virtually on 13 April 2023 and had 12 participants. Three contestants came out tops in simplifying their science to reach a wider audience.

Ayesha Osman, a PhD candidate in chemical engineering, won the regional heat. Her research looks at adding gold to titanium dental implants to keep patients smiling longer. She will be representing Unisa at the national competition with other young researchers and innovators from South Africa's institutions of higher education and training.

The first runner-up is Collen Nepfumbada, an analytical chemist from the College of Science, Engineering and Technology. His research is focused on keeping our drinking water safe and clean. Finally, the second runner-up is Masego Gaorekwe, a parasitologist and molecular biologist concerned with helping cattle farmers win the fight against tick-borne diseases.



Ayesha Osman

## R50 000 grant is a great way to open a new career chapter

Prof Estelle van Tonder, a newly appointed academic in the Department of Marketing and Retail Management, has received a R50 000 research grant from the NRF.

She received the funding for obtaining an NRF rating at the end of 2019 and asked that the money be paid out in 2023.

Prof van Tonder worked in the Department of Marketing at the North-West University before joining Unisa.

Her research focuses on customer citizenship behaviour and she is particularly interested in advancing understanding of the social support and help customers provide to other customers in the retail environment. She has initiated and managed several collaborative research projects with international colleagues in this field.

Some of the highly regarded, peer-reviewed international journals in which her work has been published are the *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Consumer Marketing* and the *International Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*.

As a specialist in her field, Prof van Tonder regularly speaks at international conferences, acts as referee for various international journals and conferences, has made several textbook contributions, is involved in postgraduate supervision and examination and acts as a consultant for industry. She is also a member of the Southern Africa Institute of Management Scientists.

*\*By Ilze Crous, Marketing Specialist, College of Economic and Management Sciences*



Prof Estelle van Tonder

# Specialists and support professionals benefit from research culture and opportunities

Relatively few Unisa staff have been part of both the university's academic operations and its professional services, and while there are differences between these, there are similarities, too. One of them is the cross-cutting research culture.

"One of the things that surprised me, as a staff member who moved over from academia to the professional side, was that, in the process, I retained all the research benefits I had as an academic," says Dr Angelo Fynn, specialist institutional researcher.

Dr Fynn is appreciative of the benefits provided by the Professional Research Committee (PRC), which fosters a culture of research and encourages permanently employed Unisa specialists and support professionals doing formal research to deliver research outputs.

Thanks to the support of the PRC, he has received funding for his research, attended conferences and earned subsidy for articles he published in accredited journals. He has also been granted research and development leave (RDL), enabling him to focus solely on his research for that period. "I thought I was giving up all those benefits when I became a professional staff member," Dr Fynn explains.

In 2018, he transitioned from a senior lecturer in Psychology in the College of Human Sciences to a specialist professional in the Directorate of Institutional Research. Why? To make a broader and more rapid impact through research, rather than reaching only one person at a time as a psychologist.

As a Research Professional Group (PRG) member, his research in education psychology, student success and learning analytics has helped improve the performance, support, risk management and health (behaviour and mental processes) of Unisa students.



Dr Angelo Fynn



Amisha Benode

Dr Fynn has served as the Chairperson of the PRC's Research Ethics Working Group, tasked with managing and supervising its activities. In addition, he was instrumental in developing capacity in the committee for reviewers and future chairpersons and ensuring that PRG researchers are familiar with the relevant policies and procedures.

The Research Insights news desk spoke to him about the benefits he reaped as a PRG researcher, and his role as a PRC member.

### The PRC: at the service of specialists and support professionals

As a PRC member, I don't believe the group's research-enabling support services are being seen for the extraordinary opportunities they present through further study assistance, RDL and funding for conference attendance coupled with a research output.

The PRC, supported by a network of working groups, is readily available to serve all specialists and support professionals who conduct research.

As a PRC member, I have enjoyed dealing with academic ethics research committees, as well as professional staff research committees, even though they are very different. With the PRC there is more of a practical focus, and an understanding that you are dealing with emerging researchers who do not necessarily know all the rules from the outset. So, even if an application is rejected, an applicant receives a great deal of feedback on what s/he is supposed to do.

This is a developmental process, with some gatekeeping built into it. It is imperative to protect the participants as well as the university, and to do so through education rather than through punitive measures.



### Don't shy away from applying

If you are doing research based on your work, or you have learned something that you feel is interesting and important for management and other practitioners in the field to know, my first piece of advice is: Don't be afraid. Apply for research support! The worst we can say, is "try again". And even if we say "no", that does not mean you cannot reapply.

My second piece of advice is to approach us, the PRC, informally, before you apply formally for support services. The committee is not a chair of judges tasked with deciding your fate. We are colleagues who are there to assist, facilitate and develop the production of good research. And, if you need advice, we are available.

We may not always have all the answers, but at least we can refer you to someone who does.

The last piece of advice is that you do not need to have an honours, master's or PhD to conduct good research. You can learn to conduct research by attending workshops. You can learn it by partnering with more experienced researchers, through learning the tricks of the trade and by reading. I cannot overemphasise the importance of reading.

Do not wait for "one day when you have the qualifications" to contribute what you have learned. Do it now.

### Support professionals are gold mines of knowledge and experience

The structure of the PRC is quite unique, and you are not likely to find anything similar at other institutions – at Unisa, professional staff are afforded the same research benefits and access as academics.

We decided that this is something to be encouraged, but perhaps staff are unsure of how to do it. For instance, together with Ms Amisha Benode, our Programmes and Projects Officer, we have one research project that covers the history of the PRC. How was it developed? What processes had to be followed? What policy framework had to be in place?

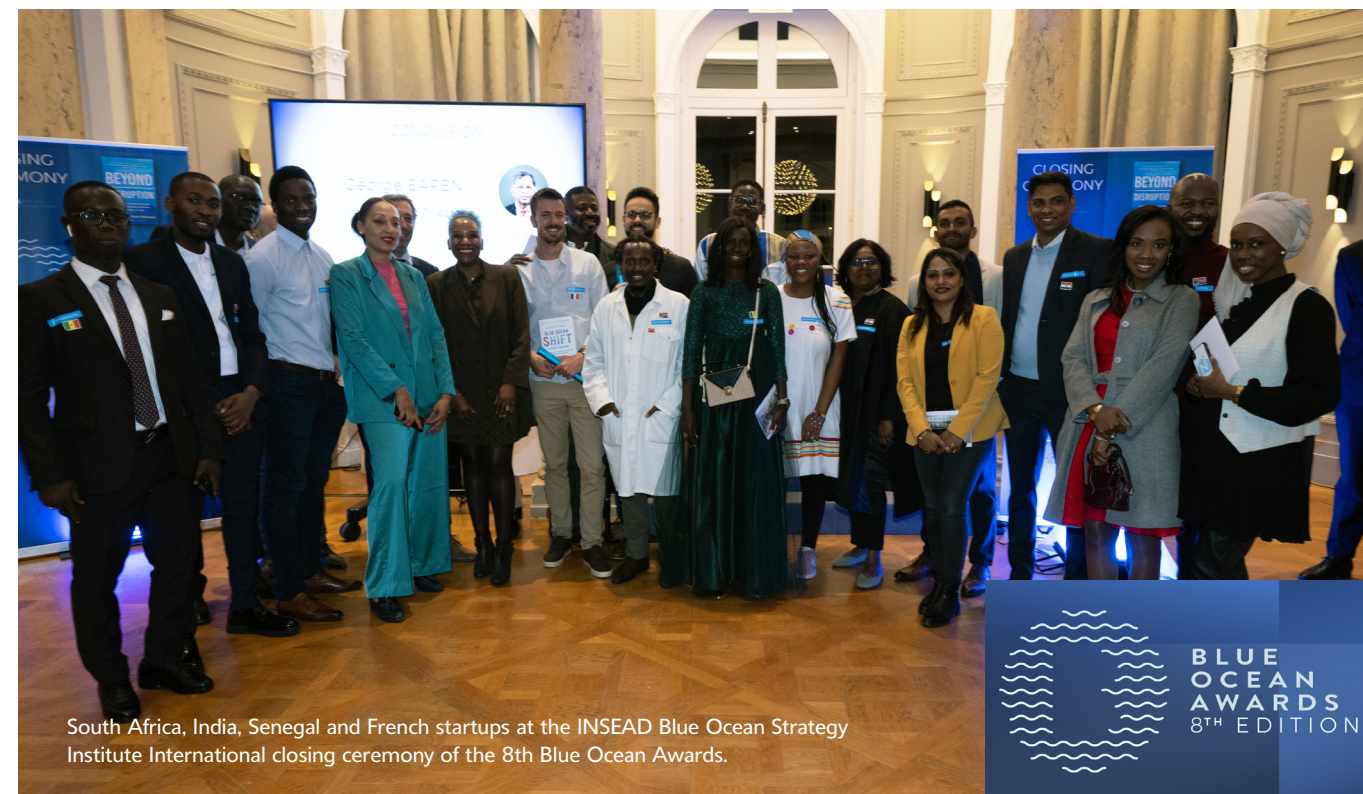
This study will be a "recipe" for other universities hoping to establish something similar, because the professional side of our universities represents a wealth of knowledge and experience.

The second project we are working on is how we can motivate professional staff to undertake research. What issues act as barriers to research? To that end, we will be interviewing staff members who have published, and have been awarded PhDs. We will be asking them for their stories of how they got to where they are. What challenges did they face? What motivated them?

We plan to speak to people who want to publish or pursue further studies and ask them the same set of questions. What drives them? What barriers have they encountered? And then we are going to take that back to the PRC to discuss how we can enhance the enablers, and break down any barriers, going forward.

# Unisa student innovators fly the SA flag high at the International Blue Ocean Awards in France

*"What Africa needs is a new generation of visionary leaders who understand innovation and how to transform the continent into a 21st century economic juggernaut," said Ndaba Mandela, Founder of the Mandela Institute for Humanity.*



South Africa, India, Senegal and French startups at the INSEAD Blue Ocean Strategy Institute International closing ceremony of the 8th Blue Ocean Awards.

Judging from the six South African start-ups that recently represented the country at an innovation competition in Paris, France, a new generation of visionary innovators is emerging – and Unisa is at their side, supporting them.

The start-ups were taking part in the 8th Edition of the Blue Oceans Awards, held at the INSAED Blue Ocean Strategy Institute earlier this year.

Three of the six South African start-ups are from Unisa. They presented their innovations alongside other start-ups from Senegal, India and France, in the presence of Ambassadors, Ministers, the Deputy of Seine-et-Marne and the Mayor of Fontainebleau.

"We as the Republic of South Africa are extremely proud of the South African delegation through the leadership of Unisa who have emerged in their tireless efforts," said Nthabiseng Makuwa, Minister Plenipotentiary representing the Ambassador of South Africa in France at the awards ceremony.

She went on to say, "We are grateful for the innovative work and thoughts of the founders of the Blue Oceans enterprise who saw it fit to create this wonderful and exciting programme which fosters sustainable development."

The innovations of the three Unisa finalists speak to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>). The start-ups are being supported by the Start-Up Academy of the Unisa Directorate of Innovation, Technology Transfer and Commercialisation (DITTC) through training, mentorship and funding.

They have also gone through the Blue Ocean Corners and Blue Ocean City programmes.

As a result, they were well prepared to present their innovations in Paris. These innovations are Ann-Connect, Power Cycle and Parents Education/ uMbala-bala.

For more information on the PRC, contact Ms Amisha Benode, PRC's Programmes and Projects Officer, at: [benoda@unisa.ac.za](mailto:benoda@unisa.ac.za)



# Meet the innovators behind the innovations



## Ann-Connect

Bonginkosi Mabaso, a Unisa BA Honours graduate, currently furthering his studies in financial management, is the founder of Ann-Connect. His start-up strives to build technologies that challenge network issues in remote communities.

Students can access exams and video interviews even when an internet connection is lost.



## Power Cycle

Nkamogeleng Matloga is a Postgraduate Diploma student in Business Administration at Unisa and the inventor of Power Cycle. This early-stage start-up is developing an innovative recycled plastic bicycle that charges a battery to power bike gadgets, a phone or laptop.



## uMbala-bala

Mbuso Ngongo, a Unisa Bachelor of Science in Computing student, has invented uMbala-bala, an integrated, explorative learning method and apparatus. Inequality, the digital divide, poverty, crime, corruption and COVID-19 significantly affect the outcomes of public education. This early-stage start-up brings innovative, affordable uMbala-bala educational toolkits to foundation phase classrooms.

## How Unisa contributes to the Blue Ocean Awards

“Unisa, as a founding key partner of BlueCity and the Blue Ocean Awards in South Africa, has made possible the first BlueCity on the African continent, says Alban Eral,” founder of the Blue Ocean Awards.

He says it is thanks to Unisa that the six South African entrepreneurs could pitch their projects at the international closing ceremony of the 2023 Blue Ocean Awards.

Unisa also extended this opportunity by organising three days of meetings with incubators, investors, corporations and business schools in Paris to highlight the Blue Ocean projects of the entrepreneurs and initiate new partnerships.

The operational principles of the BlueCity programme are to foster international collaboration and open innovation and inclusion for local and national development.

## Where to from here?

Blue Ocean Corners provides multiple opportunities for participants not only to compete but to learn from their peers about existing possibilities in the world of technology, entrepreneurship and business development.

The Unisa finalists of the Blue Ocean awards finalists are currently developing their technologies and piloting their solutions with different stakeholders. In this, they have the support of the DITTC and its Start-Up Academy

Furthermore, they are engaging with more funders for possible commercialisation of their solutions.

Through the leadership of Ayanda Noma, Director: DITTC, and Basanda Pongoma, Business Development Specialist: DITTC, Unisa is planning for the second South African edition of the Blue Ocean Corners with other stakeholders in the region.

This will see new start-ups from Unisa being trained in Blue Ocean Strategy with the objective to participate in the Blue Ocean awards in 2024 to transform Africa into an economic juggernaut.