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UCT scientific prowess – top researchers scoop NRF awards



UCT researchers proudly celebrate their success at the NRF Awards, where they were recognised for their outstanding research, innovation and impact. **Photo:** NRF

Several top University of Cape Town (UCT) researchers were honoured with prestigious accolades at this year's National Research Foundation (NRF) Awards. The awards celebrate the country's top researchers, scientists and research teams for their work towards advancing knowledge and helping society address and overcome challenges through research.

The awards were held under the theme "Celebrating 25 Years of Research, Innovation, Impact and Partnerships".

Professor Mosa Moshabela, UCT Vice-Chancellor and Chairperson of the NRF Board, recognised all awardees as "the pride of our nation, the epitome of excellence" whom society must be proud of. He also acknowledged the NRF's role in "bringing science much closer to society and society much closer to science."

Champion of Research Capacity Development and Transformation Award – Professor Eric van Steen

The award recognises individuals within the research community who are dedicated to capacitating, transforming and diversifying the scientific landscape in South Africa through the supervision of research students.

Over the span of nearly 30 years, Professor Eric van Steen has devoted himself to cultivating emerging research talent, guiding over 200 students in their research pursuits. “Training of postgraduate students is an intricate part of being an academic. They are essential in doing research and development of new knowledge,” said Van Steen.

“The development of research capacity starts with a partnership between the students and me as the supervisor thus creating a space where students can explore new ideas, but also be open to criticism,” Van Steen added. The influence of his mentorship is evident in the successful careers of many students, who have excelled in both industry and academia. He continues to maintain strong connections with them.

Research Excellence Award: Next Generation Researchers – Sancho Nyoni

The award recognises outstanding academic performance by final-year doctoral students who are on the path to establishing their academic research career.

Sancho Nyoni is a PhD candidate at the [Department of Chemical Engineering](#) within the [Centre for Minerals Research](#) (CMR) at UCT. He is dedicated to researching water chemistry in mineral processing, which is vital for recycling and maintaining closed water circuits in mineral processing plants. This research is significant for the regional mining industry as it adjusts to the challenges of operating in a water-scarce environment.

“The impact of this work on the mining industry is significant, and I am proud to be a part of it,” he remarked, underlining the profound significance of his research.

Science Team Award – African Brain Child

The award recognises the innovation and achievements of a team dedicated to pushing the boundaries of scientific research in Africa and raising South Africa’s profile as a world-class research destination.

The African Brain Child (ABC) is at the forefront of addressing the research gap in brain conditions affecting children – conditions that are often neglected in science and healthcare policies. These include traumatic brain injury, meningitis, brain tumours, epilepsy and hydrocephalus.

Professor Anthony Figaji, the director of the ABC, said: “Conditions that cause brain injury or neurological disease are the single largest cause of death and disability in children over the age of one across the world.”

NRF ratings-based awards

A-ratings are given to researchers recognised as leading international experts in their fields. The quality and impact of their research are evaluated through the NRF’s peer-review rating

system. This year, two UCT researchers obtained new A-ratings, while four others were recognised for retaining this rating for the second time.

First ratings

- Professor Edward Sturrock, Department of Integrative Biomedical Sciences, Faculty of Health Sciences
- Emeritus Professor Sue Harrison, Department of Chemical Engineering, Faculty of Engineering & the Built Environment (will be invited to receive this recognition at next year's ceremony)

Second rating

- Professor Ed Rybicki, Department of Molecular and Cell Biology, Faculty of Health Sciences
- Professor Heather Zar, Department of Paediatrics and Child Health, Faculty of Health Sciences
- Professor Keertan Dheda, Department of Medicine, Faculty of Health Sciences
- Professor Kelly Chibale, H3D: Drug Discovery & Development Centre, Faculty of Science (will be invited to receive this recognition at next year's ceremony)

P-ratings are assigned to researchers considered likely to become future international leaders in their respective fields based on their demonstration of exceptional potential. Usually under the age of 35, these are researchers who have held a doctorate of equivalent qualification for less than five years. Three UCT researchers obtained this rare and exceptional rating.

- Dr Itumeleng Monageng, Department of Astronomy, Faculty of Science
- Dr Jan Buys, School of Information Technology
- Dr Mubeen Goolam, Division of Cell Biology, Department of Human Biology, Faculty of Health Sciences (will be invited to receive this recognition at next year's ceremony)

UCT's acting Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research and Internationalisation, Professor Jeff Murugan, highlighted that the achievements of UCT researchers exemplify the university's commitment to driving scientific excellence. "Our scientific pursuits not only advance knowledge but also deeply impact the lives of people in South Africa and beyond."

Added Professor Murugan: "These awards are a testament to the first-rate research conducted at the university. Guided by Vision 2030, our research portfolio challenges all of us at UCT to unleash knowledge in and from Africa and redefine and co-create a sustainable global future – an endeavour also made possible by those working behind the scenes to support this vital work."

Story by Ayanda Mthethwa – UCT News

ENDS

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