

# Transformation taking place in the higher education system

Relevant African content and collaboration are key

Sarah Mosoetsa

The National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) has recently celebrated its first 100 PhD graduates, demonstrating collaborative efforts between historically disadvantaged and advantaged universities, and how funding PhDs within the borders of South Africa brings the narrative of transformation in higher education to life.

Just as South Africa has navigated through radical change over the past two decades, so too is the higher education system in South Africa poised for transformation. This transformation will need to be redefined. I am proud that the humanities and social sciences (HSS) community has taken on this challenge.

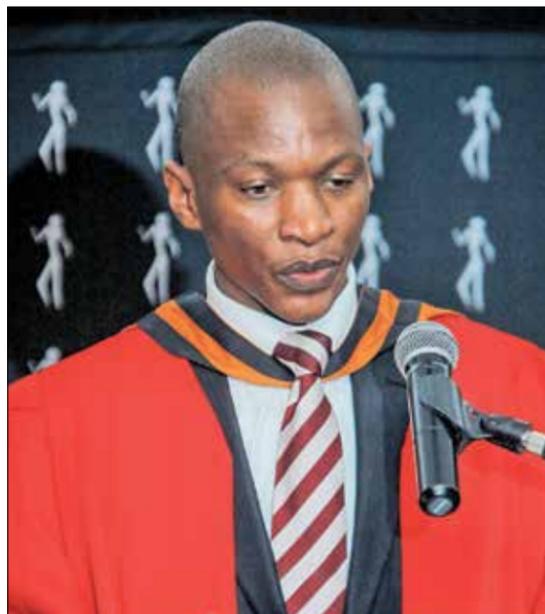
Firstly transformation in the higher education sector is about building the next generation of scholars who truly reflect the demographics of the country and continent. Yet, in its broad sense, transformation goes beyond equity, given that we need to ensure that students see themselves reflected in the content they read. This is where most of the work is concentrated: on researching and developing significant, relevant content to make up our new curricula.

As things stand, Africa has been used as a case study in which some scholars from elsewhere collect information from here, and then apply their theories. They then proceed to tell our stories back to us. This analysis and theorising lacks the essential and authentic context that Africans experience firsthand. The focus needs to be more on lessons taught by those who live on the continent and who have a direct understanding of what they teach.

To plug this gap, the NIHSS is at the forefront of driving research that strives to develop and create new paradigms, as well as to showcase new and alternative platforms for African voices to be heard, while ensuring equity in academia. The more than 600 PhD candidates who've been funded through the institute reflect what it believes equity to be, with most of the recipients of this funding being African women.

The NIHSS is not just a funder of catalytic research projects and doctoral studies. Through greater support, notably, by means of our mentorship programme – with initiatives such as *Shut up and Write* that provide doctoral fellows with the opportunity and space to think, write and express their unique ideas – we are exhibiting exactly how, collectively, we can make the HSS more dynamic on our continent.

This approach will result in new knowledge produced in Africa and not elsewhere, and how an Afrocentric curriculum will be



Above left: Dr Quraysha Ismail Sooliman, University of Pretoria. Above right: Dr Kagiso Poole, North-West University. Bottom left: Dr Siphiso Mahala, University of South Africa. Bottom right: Dr Sithembile Mbete, University of Pretoria. Photos: Supplied

defined by, and for, African people. It is our priority to ensure as the NIHSS that transformation is realised in our lifetime. When it comes to catalytic research projects, it is important to hone in on four specific aspects that encourage organic transformation in higher education.

Our catalytic research project leaders are doing the work that they set out to do, often with limited budgets, with a focus on capacity building – meaning that they expose postgraduate students to the art of research and writing, and to the world of academia as a credible career path.

Secondly, ensuring that the various projects' collaborative efforts take place in South Africa and on the continent. It is through the sharing of expertise, resources and cultures that we can work towards a unified university system in which all degrees from Africa are valued by the Africans who pursue them. This is how novel ways of thinking and acquiring knowledge in the HSS will be established – on a solid foundation.

There are more research collaborations happening between South Africa and the global north than between South Africa and the rest of the continent, which is why HSS scholars are encouraged to explore their world: Africa. We don't want

to be a South Africa excluded from the rest of the continent. Let's be clear: this is not about excluding the global north either, but rather, it is about including more of Africa and allowing more African voices to flourish.

One of the greatest direct results of collaboration among African countries has been the removal of unfounded perceptions of each other on the continent. Continuing in this vein will ensure that Africa's history is safeguarded.

Thirdly, there are many opportunities that lie ahead for HSS scholars to fully explore for the benefit of academia, the country and continent. Some of the examples include, rethinking of heritage sites, inter/multidisciplinary research projects as well as exploring new research sites and themes such as languages and history of slavery in Southern Africa.

Sadly, in South Africa, heritage sites have been treated as mere tourist attractions rather than as spaces for authentic knowledge production. This is where creating more PhD scholars can yield immense value. There are no primary documents to read or listen to at some of these sites, opening an opportunity for HSS scholars to formally document accurate, relevant research about each site, for the benefit of their fellow scholars

as well as laypersons.

The NIHSS is working with various heritage sites, calling them "humanities hubs", to take on this important challenge. Similarly, as we ponder on the HSS's role in producing the next generation of scholars who are able to develop relevant content, the need for collaborative efforts in interdisciplinary work also arises. For instance, when Homo Naledi was unearthed, it signaled a prime opportunity for the different disciplines such as archaeology, history, sociology and anthropology to join forces and preserve this new history in the making.

There is fascinating research on the slave trade route linking Mozambique, South Africa and India, yet the artefacts being uncovered are not skulls, but musical instruments and pottery. These carry handcrafted narratives about slavery in the global south. This highlights the need for strategic and intrinsically linked disciplines to come together, which also solidifies the relevance of the HSS.

Fourth and finally, another aspect of transformation in the higher education sector centres on the relevance of knowledge produced. The question to ask is: "What is the point of knowledge and research if it doesn't touch lives, be it on a political, social or

economic level?"

The knowledge production agenda and curricula must be relevant, both in the continent and for the global community. All of this will inform the new construction of our higher education system as it should be. Already we are seeing significant outputs, as all this research and content comes to life.

Research outputs from HSS have a direct influence for transforming education and helping us evolve as a people in post-apartheid South Africa. Take the winner of the HSS Award 2018 for Best Non-Fiction: Single Authored, Jolyn Phillips. Her book, *Tjieng Tjang Tjerries & Other Stories*, is a collection of tales highlighting the lives of the poor and marginalised, which should be part of the South African curriculum. Through the NIHSS, Dr Nomkhosi Xulu-Gama published her first book based on her doctoral studies, *Hostels in South Africa: Spaces of Perplexity*.

Another example of work that belongs in the public domain for furthering discourse and new knowledge is a fascinating PhD about the life and times of Daniel Canodoise "Can" Themba, submitted by NIHSS graduate Dr Siphiso Mahala, a University of South Africa graduate under the supervision of NIHSS mentor, Professor Kgomotso Masemola. His thesis *Inside the House of Truth: The Construction, Destruction and Reconstruction of Can Themba*; provides a compelling narrative about Themba's works as well as some aspects of his life that are barely written about. It weaves together Themba's complex life story including his troubles with the Transvaal Department of Education, which, in spite of him holding a degree from the University of Fort Hare and passing English with a distinction, refused to recognise him as a fully-fledged teacher.

Works such as these, along with our celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> NIHSS graduates, make a compelling case for transforming our higher education system. The first recipient to have received a PhD scholarship is also the 100<sup>th</sup> scholar to graduate this year. This demonstrates that it is possible to realise the objectives we have set out to achieve, despite trying circumstances and recent challenges.

Historically, working towards obtaining one's PhD was described as a very lonely experience. The NIHSS has turned this notion on its head entirely through its mentorship programme, its catalytic research projects, humanities hubs and its overall view on collaboration. Here, the HSS academic community demonstrates the spirit of ubuntu, a distinctly African notion, which has been brought to life in the world of academia.

This is an extract of a speech by associate professor Sarah Mosoetsa, chief executive of the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences at the National Doctoral Conference. The gala dinner honouring the graduates took place as part of its Annual National Doctoral School Conference on October 31 2018.



The NIHSS celebrates the graduation of 50 new PhD students from 19 universities across Africa, bringing the total number of graduates the NIHSS has funded to over 100 in just four years. The National Development Plan proposes that 100 new PhDs are needed per year. The NIHSS has funded 600 scholars already and plans to introduce 300 new doctoral graduates by 2020. Photo: Supplied

# NIHSS awards scholarships to more than 600 doctoral students

The National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences invests in revitalising South Africa's higher education spaces

Tamsin Oxford

The National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) was founded in 2013 against a backdrop of a decline in teaching and research quality in the social sciences and humanities. It was the result of a special project of the department of higher education and training and its mandate was to advance and co-ordinate scholarship, research and ethical practice in the fields of the humanities and social sciences within, and through, existing public universities.

According to Dr Nthabiseng Motsemme, NIHSS academic scholarship director: "Since inception, the NIHSS has provided scholarships to more than 600 doctoral candidates and plans to produce a further 300 doctoral graduates by 2020. We are proud to have made significant inroads in the support and enhancement of education for many South Africans."

The organisation recently held its Fourth Annual National Doctoral Conference (ANDC) gala dinner to celebrate the graduation of 50 new PhD fellows. This is the second cohort of doctoral graduates and it cements the ongoing success of the organisation and its continued commitment to changing the face of the higher education system. The quality of the graduates, and their rising numbers, is testament

to the NIHSS remaining on track to strengthen a student-centred culture while addressing the inequalities that remain in the system.

Humanities Dean of Fort Hare University, Professor Baba Tshotsho, said: "People with doctoral degrees are considered a viable national resource to address challenges. Doctoral education is the business of identifying the gaps, asking questions and trying to provide solutions to some of the questions."

Tshotsho believes that graduates make a significant difference to the country and contribute to the world of knowledge. This is a view shared by chief executive of the NIHSS, Professor Sarah Mosoetsa. She emphasises that the organisation is not just a funding body, but an intellectual hub that helps to define and shape the future of the humanities and social sciences. It also continues the debate that surges around the transformation imperative of the higher education curriculum and the need to reflect on the humanities and social sciences scholarships that are taught in South African universities. For Mosoetsa, the curriculum needs to become more inclusive, focusing on African intellectual traditions and languages while simultaneously rethinking and cultivating African epistemologies.

## Reigniting African languages

Within this conversation lies another aspect – that of language. Professor Grace Khunou, a mentor of the NIHSS, echoed the same sentiment about the value and importance of learning and writing in a person's mother tongue. She shared: "Two years ago, a doctoral proposal was written in isiZulu and it sent much-needed shock waves through the

education system." She points to the need to reignite African languages in the education sector as this could potentially reignite the nation. Today, more and more scholars are embracing their mother tongues and this movement is further supported by the NIHSS's *Shut Up and Write* intervention.

Initiatives such as these are integral to the success of the goals of the NIHSS and to furthering the vision of the National Development Plan (NDP). The latter is focused on producing highly skilled and qualified individuals to meet the needs of the economy by 2030. An increase in the percentage of PhD graduates is a significant step towards achieving this goal, especially in light of the fact that South Africa must increase the percentage of PhD-qualified staff in the higher education sector to 75%. Currently this number sits at around 34%. The NDP is committed to producing more than 100 doctoral graduates per million people. The NIHSS has already made significant inroads into this total by producing more than 50 graduates in 2018 and has a goal to produce 300 by 2020.

Alongside its *Shut Up and Write* initiative, the NIHSS has also invested in the Catalytic Projects and Humanities Hubs – research-based programmes that focus on catalysing new avenues for humanities and social sciences scholarships. These hubs assist in, and promote, the development of research in the humanities and social sciences and are undertaken by establishing a network of researchers across the university system in South Africa. The goal is to support coherent collaborative research programmes that involve researchers in study areas that have been approved, along-

side a myriad other benefits and opportunities.

## HSS making transformative relevance concrete

The NIHSS ANDC conference was held over two days, on October 31 and November 1. It addressed key themes that resonate across the country and the education sector – the growing need for the humanities and social sciences, and their impact on making transformative relevance concrete. The conference also examined the topics of creating academies of inclusion, spear-heading curriculum reform as well as promoting research and development through trans-disciplinary interactions.

For two days, the conference was also a platform for second- and third-year PhD students to present their abstracts to a room of more than 200 fellow PhD scholars. The students came from 19 different universities across the country, and the winning abstracts were announced at the event.

The awards ceremony saw many of the graduates speak of their inspiration and provide insight into the system, the future and their roles in changing South Africa. One graduate said: "We do not need to be affirmed. We need to be creative, authentic, and generate our own excellence. That is what the NIHSS is asking of us. The time is for us to challenge ourselves to be human. Not a white human, a black human or a brown human, but a human. We want to thank the NIHSS for opening up opportunities that were previously denied to us."

A moving, inspiration and powerful event, the NIHSS ANDC showcased the value of investing in people and recognising inclusivity and diversity of the

South African higher education sector. The introduction of *Encounters* was another innovation introduced at this year's conference. This platform is designed for published authors such as Jolyn Phillips, author of *Tjieng Tjang Tjerries & Other Stories*, Bhekizizwe Peterson, co-editor of Sol Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa: Past and Present*, and Nomkhosi Xulu-Gama, author of *Hostels in South Africa: Spaces of Perplexity* to present their work, as it is playing a fundamental role in shaping the humanities and social sciences curriculum.

The NIHSS reaffirmed its mandate to define a post-apartheid trajectory of scholarships that are cognisant of the country's immediate and long-term developmental requirements as a key society in Africa. The keynote, presentations and scholarship presentations underscored the values that cement the foundations of the NIHSS and the work that it does; co-operation, communities, social responsibility, equity, and transformative relevance. While the students may have experienced highs and lows as they journeyed towards their goals, the NIHSS provided them with the structure and support they required to make their dreams into a powerful reality.

As one student concluded: "Many of us are the first in our families to obtain our degrees. Education is the only way we can break the vicious cycle of poverty in our families and communities and our next task is ensuring we are not the last to attend universities. We need to encourage others and let them believe their dreams are valid. The NIHSS is a huge gift to many of us who did not have the ways and means to get through education."