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Unisa's Odora-Hoppers honoured for research and scholarship »

Crystallising the discourse on cognitive justice

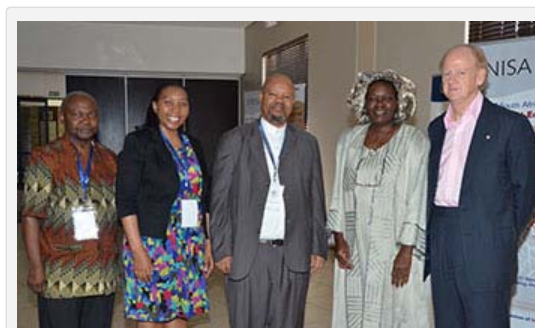
There is a developing consonance of agendas within Unisa's Department of Science and Technology (DST)/National Research Foundation (NRF) South African Research Chairs Initiative (SARChI) in Development Education and its impact on innovation, teaching and learning, research, and community engagement at the university is growing day-by-day. Expanding the chair's genuinely African expression and thinking on education and research, its 6th retreat was officially opened on 23 November 2013. The theme this year, *Establishing the discourse and protocols for innovations from below as restorative action to the communities*, brought together a range of accomplished speakers from across Africa and the globe.

The core aim of the 2013 retreat and interface is underpinned by three main concepts: how scientists can crystallise the discourse on cognitive justice as it relates to the recognition and protection of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS), how to expand the notion of innovation to include knowledges that are produced in the grassroots, and how the parameters of innovation are to be redrawn if IKS is taken into account.

If you do not focus on discourse first, you are dead

Professor Catherine Odora-Hoppers, incumbent of the DST/NRF SARChI Chair in Development Education at Unisa, highlights the power behind the word 'innovation', which is a core part of the retreat agenda. "I tremble just to pronounce that word. If you read any policy document, you will find 'innovation' scattered everywhere. What do they really mean," she questions. By the end of this retreat, we aim to have a slight amendment to that word." Odora-Hoppers adds that "In the concept paper, I entitled this retreat, 'Establishing the discourse' first because if you do not focus on discourse first, you are dead. Following that we have to panel-beat the discourse so that it begins to be like an arrow and then we will take it to where it needs to go."

Recently there has been noticeable focus on innovation in many parts of the world and, specifically, in South Africa. The country's National Development Plan (NDP) recognises innovation as one of the ways of achieving its national development goals. The New Growth Path (South Africa's economic development plan of 2010) also strongly reinforces the role of innovation in respect of economic development.



The 6th DST/NRF SARChI Chair in Development Education retreat kicked off on 23 November 2013. Pictured, Dr. Yonah Seleti (Chief Director of the National IKS office, DST), Khungeka Njobe (Chairperson of the Board of Directors, TIA), Prof. Mandla Makhanya (Principal and Vice-Chancellor, Unisa), Prof. Catherine Odora-Hoppers (incumbent: DST/NRF SARChI Chair in Development Education at Unisa) and His Excellency John Ralston Saul (Political Philosopher, author and Essayist, President PEN International – the world wide association of writers, Canada).



A plenary discussion in progress. Some of the topics included: Innovations in theory and practice – lessons from India and Africa, innovations from below in practice, innovations from below – the transformation of the science paradigm, organisations, worldviews and management in innovations from below, innovations from below in an expanded scientific paradigm, IKS and paradigms of innovation and ethics in innovation.

Inclusiveness has to be a fundamental feature of innovation activity

Khungeka Njobe, Chairperson of the Board of Directors, Technology Innovation Agency (TIA), South Africa, says "it has been deeply satisfying to observe various sectors during this year, even those beyond the traditional or academic science, engineering and technology, showing a growth interest in stimulating and driving innovation....Whilst it is satisfying for those of us who have been champions of innovation culture in our society, we all have to concede that much of whatever little progress that has been made in stimulating and promoting innovations in our economy and social sectors has not been inclusive and at its best. Only the formal sectors, notably the research and development community and private sectors, are participating meaningfully in our innovation activities. If we are to be true to the policy objectives that science, engineering and innovation should impact on the quality of life of all South Africans, inclusiveness has to be a fundamental feature of our innovation activity."

Policies and even strategies are enabling and have the intention to be inclusive of all sectors of South African society to be participants in the innovation system. No doubt in practice, the National Systems of Innovations (NSI), remains challenged with the need to bridge the gap between the various actors/potential actors in innovation activity. "To bridge these gaps will require not only funding, but also soft interventions that connect people and ideas to market users. Ultimately, innovation activity is about people, networks and relationships which oil innovation activity. Gatherings such as these, and others, help to narrow the chasm," advises Njobe.

Also seeing the value and link of the 6th SARChI retreat to the NDP is Deputy Minister of Science and Technology, Michael Masutha. Speaking on his behalf at the retreat was Dr Yonah Seleti, Chief Director of the National Indigenous Knowledge Office, DST. "The theme for this year's retreat fits well with the 2030 South African NDP, which focuses on the critical capabilities needed to transform the economy and society. The focus on transformational education and on the calibre of teaching must improve the quality of higher education. If attention is not paid to the inadequate

human capacity, the effort will constrain knowledge production and innovation," says Masutha. "Consistent with the NDP principles, innovation, research and development should be significantly expanded, and collaboration across the South African education system and internationally accredited institutions should lead to higher levels of innovation."

Other epistemological anchors and facilitators of the retreat include Ela Gandhi (former Chancellor: Durban University of Technology, Founder of Gandhi Development Trust and Former South African Member of Parliament), Professor Shiv Visvanathan (Anthropologist of Science and Human Rights Researcher, Professor in the School of Government and Public Policy, OP Jindal Global University and former Senior Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi, India), Professor Wiebe Bijker (Professor of Technology and Society at the University of Maastricht, Netherlands) Professor Crain Soudien (Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Transformation and Social Responsiveness, University of Cape Town), Professor Magnus Haavelsrud (Professor of Education at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim, Norway) and Professor Louis Molamu (former Registrar, Unisa).

**Article by Kirosha Naicker*

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