

IN
MAGAZINE
IN

DEPTH

ISSUE 02

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A PUBLICATION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL

**OUR STUDENTS' TAKE
ON STUDYING DURING
A PANDEMIC**

**LEARNING TO LIVE
WITH SARS-COV-2:
WHEN WILL WE BREATHE
FREELY AGAIN?**

**REIMAGINING HIGHER EDUCATION
IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19**

**COVID-19
INCREASES
RELIANCE ON
TRADITIONAL
MEDICINE**



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ON THE COVER: PROFESSOR KOLEKA MLISANA, CO-CHAIR OF SOUTH AFRICA'S COVID-19
MINISTERIAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE (SEE FULL ARTICLE ON PAGE 4). IMAGE COURTESY OF SANAC.

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EDITOR'S NOTE



Warm greetings to all our readers and welcome to this second edition of UKZN's *In-Depth* magazine which we are eager and proud to present to you. Amid the joy around its publication, there is also an air of freedom and relief out there as South Africans celebrate the end of the National State of Disaster which was in effect for more than two years.

The change to the status quo, announced recently in a nationwide broadcast by President Cyril Ramaphosa, brings to an end measures imposed by the authorities in the fight against the deadly COVID-19 virus. However, before rushing out to wallow in the luxury of life now almost void of pandemic restrictions, remember a few rules are still in place, i.e. the wearing of facemasks when indoors, and limits on numbers at public gatherings as well as international air travel.

As Ramaphosa said during his address to the nation: Now is the time to grow our economy and create jobs!

We received a great deal of positive and constructive feedback from readers

about *In-Depth* launch edition which we noted and, I believe, have used to good effect in this edition.

When the world first came to blows with the Coronavirus late in 2019, many would have been sceptical about it still being at war with the virus two years on. Some international leaders predicted that the virus would disappear within a few months! However, it made its presence felt in all sectors of life and wasn't going to go away without a fight, taking a huge toll which is still being felt today and will be for some time.

UKZN alumnus, academic and Co-Chair of SA's COVID-19 Ministerial Advisory Committee, Professor Koleka Mlisana is featured as the cover story (page 4) in a fascinating read and is on track with her predictions saying we are likely to keep our face masks on and sanitisers conveniently at hand for the foreseeable future.

In another featured article on page 6, Universities South Africa (USAf) head, Professor Ahmed Bawa, says while it may be too early to fully understand

the many lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, universities must now evolve to become more fluid in their teaching and learning environments and much more flexible in the programmes on offer.

It is generally accepted that the pandemic set the tone and brought into focus what will probably be long-standing changes and developments in the Higher Education sector.

As we all get to grips with the "new normal" life, as well as with operating in a very different and challenging post-COVID-19 environment, a positive outcome of the pandemic is that during lockdown, many of us acquired a host of digital skills and enhanced awareness of the virtual world – more arrows in our quiver!

Looking into the future, the mind boggles at the thought of what the impact of robotics will be on education at all levels. A fascinating subject for a future debate.

Stay safe and enjoy this edition of *In-Depth*! □

Ms Normah Zondo

Executive Director: **Corporate Relations Division**

LEARNING TO LIVE WITH SARS-COV-2

Words by Greg Dardagan

When will we be able to breathe freely again? That is the question on many South Africans' lips two years into the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has indeed been a testing time for the world, causing untold suffering and despair as wave after wave and new strains test scientists' expertise. So does this mean we have to learn to live with this aggressive disease and that face masks will be a permanent feature of our lives for several years to come?

Yes, says UKZN alumnus and academic, Professor Koleka Mlisana who was appointed Co-Chair of South Africa's COVID-19 Ministerial Advisory Committee (MAC) last year (2021). The committee advises the South African government on strategies to fight the pandemic.

"Life will never return to what it was before COVID-19," said Mlisana, a microbiologist with more than 40 years' experience. "The very essence of life has been drastically altered – we have lost so many people and so many more have lost their livelihoods. There's simply no way we can go back to the way things were.

"People must accept that we are going to live with masks for the foreseeable future - I can't say how long, maybe five years, maybe more, unless things change drastically and the impact of vaccinations takes us to a stage where there is almost zero transmission of SARS-CoV-2. In South Africa, we are very far from that situation. For now, we have to come to terms with the routines including the use of masks, social distancing and all the public health and social measures," she said.

Mlisana added that one of the positive spinoffs of face masks being compulsory has been reduced transmission of other respiratory

diseases, especially flu as well as tuberculosis (TB). However, the focus on COVID-19 has undermined research on and control of HIV and TB because other health programmes were poorly maintained. People did not want to visit public health facilities for fear of contracting COVID-19.

"The lesson is that during a pandemic, the focus should be on integrated healthcare so we don't lose out on other well-established programmes. We also need to learn from our current struggle and explore ways to improve our response to the next pandemic as infectious diseases will always be around."

Mlisana, who is also Executive Manager: Academic Affairs, Research and Quality Assurance at the National Health Laboratory Service (NHLS), added that, "A significant percentage of our population has been exposed to the virus so there is a level of immunity within society, but we are not sure exactly what that level is and how sustainable it is. The goal should thus be to vaccinate as many people as possible. For those with comorbidities and in the older age groups, we need to push for as close as possible to 100% getting the jab so we do not see a significant increase in hospitalisations and deaths."

While she conceded that public communication on the efficacy of vaccinations could have been better, she noted that billions of people throughout the world have been vaccinated and the positive impacts are clear. Data from countries with high rates of vaccination shows that the majority of those infected, hospitalised or who died were unvaccinated. "We really need to get the message across that you are more likely to be infected or die if you are not vaccinated."

So where did it all begin for this high-flying achiever who has dedicated her

life to medical science and the fight against infectious diseases?



Professor Koleka Mlisana, the woman who sits at the helm of the country's COVID-19 Ministerial Advisory Committee.

Mlisana was born in East London but the majority of her formative years were spent in and around Mthatha. "My parents moved to the area when I was still very young and we lived in a village near the town. My father died in a car accident soon after my younger sister was born leaving my mom to look after me, my two sisters and brother."

Her parents had opened a spaza shop which her mother ran, helping to put bread on the table and see the children through school. "Mom needed transport so she had to learn to drive a van my dad left her – back in those days, around 1967, it was unusual to see a rural black woman driving on the roads but she did it and soldiered her way through life bringing up her children.

"When my mother died about 15 years ago, my brother took over and is now running the shop successfully.

My mother was the driving force in my early life, steering me in the right direction in her quiet yet strong and determined manner."

Mlisana started school when she was just four years old. It was close to home so she walked there and back. Life circumstances would see her attend several schools, including one where she had to cross two rivers to get there and back.

She excelled in mathematics and science but only took up biology when she was well into high school. "You needed to start biology in Form 4 (now Grade 11) and finish it off in Form 5 (now Grade 12) but I hadn't done that. On my first day in class at a new school, they were writing a Grade 11 revision test in biology and I had no clue. The teacher gave weekly tests so I studied hard and the following week I came first!

"That is how I started biology without which I would obviously not have made it into Medical School."

Mlisana had to write matric twice because of leaked exam papers at her school. She planned to register for a BSc at Fort Hare but changed circumstances led to her enrolling at the then University of Natal (now UKZN) to study Medicine.

This was the era of racial segregation in South Africa and the University had a special section for black students. Mlisana became politically conscientised amid anti-apartheid demonstrations and activities at the Medical School.

"There were boycotts, marches, protests and raids by the dreaded Security Police....to a large extent, I came of age there, grew up, became more informed and left with a lot more than a degree in Medicine. It was probably one of the most enlightening chapters of my life."

A slight hiccup in her university education led to Mlisana failing her second year. This was during the time when she married her sweetheart, Zolile, who was also studying Medicine at the University and went on to become a paediatrician. Their first child was born four years later following her final MBChB exams.

She graduated in 1988 and took up a post at King Edward V111 Hospital (KEH) in Durban where she continued her studies, specialising in microbiology. "I hadn't done exceptionally well in microbiology but I ended up specialising in it and developed a love for the subject while training as a registrar." She went on to become South Africa's first African microbiologist in 1993.

Mlisana said that KEH played a dominant role in her life: "I trained there while I was an undergraduate, did my internship there (KEH is a teaching hospital for UKZN), held a paediatrics medical officer post and trained as a registrar at KEH."

With her three children – Lukholo, Andiswa, and Lufefe – growing up, she wanted a half-day job and as there were no opportunities at the time at UKZN, she went into private practice in 1995 where she worked for about seven years until an opportunity arose at the Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in South Africa (CAPRISA) at the University.

"When I started in the private sector, the HIV epidemic had become serious so I got involved in medical education around the disease."

She was recruited by renowned HIV/AIDS researcher, epidemiologist, infectious diseases specialist and Director of CAPRISA at the time, Professor Salim "Slim" Abdool Karim, who is the former Co-Chair of the COVID-19 MAC. Ironically, Abdool Karim also recruited her for her current MAC Co-Chair position.

"Professor Abdool Karim knew of my involvement in HIV medical education and microbicide research and offered me a job. This enabled me to engage in HIV research, specifically HIV pathogenesis, microbicide trials and HIV vaccine trials."

Mlisana remained at CAPRISA until around 2010 when her family moved to Johannesburg and she returned to microbiology in the private sector until being appointed UKZN Microbiology Head of Department where she served until 2018 when she moved to her current post at the NHLS.

She outlined the functions of the MAC: "While we provide information on request to the Minister or Department of Health, now and again we will identify something important that we need to bring to their attention. We submit an advisory and it is up to the Minister to decide whether or not to accept it."

The committee was actively involved in recent decisions to ease the national lockdown.

Mlisana commented that it is a feather in the University's cap that both the current and former MAC Co-Chairs are UKZN alumni and academics. "Professor Abdool Karim has been my mentor. He has the ability to explain difficult terms in simple language, enabling everyone to gain a clear understanding of what's going on.

"I am grateful for the many opportunities he has given me. He is a wonderful teacher to me and many others. When he told me he would put my name up for the MAC Co-Chair position he reassured me of his support and he has kept that promise."

A highlight of her first six months was MAC members' willingness to go the extra mile to get the job done. "We work as a team and listen to one another, so that when an advisory is required, it is never about a single person, but a joint consultative process."

Discussing her hopes and dreams for South Africa, she said the one thing that gives her sleepless nights is the breakdown of the family unit, which she believes is responsible for many ills besetting the country today.

"My hope is that the family unit reclaims its status and old values involving parent/guardian authority are restored with the correct training and teaching of young children."

What does this busy career woman do to unwind? "I am a sucker for 'happily ever-after movies' and I love cooking and entertaining family and friends. One of my best offerings is a Durban curry!" □

REIMAGINING HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19

Words by Colleen Dardagan

While South African universities and colleges managed to conclude the 2020/21 academic years despite the onset of COVID-19 and subsequent lockdown, Professor Ahmed Bawa, Chief Executive Officer of Universities South Africa (USAf), argues that the Higher Education sector needs to be reimagined to take full advantage of this 'new technology moment'.

Bawa said that while it may be too early to fully understand the many lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, universities must evolve to become more fluid in their teaching and learning environments and much more flexible in the programmes on offer.

"Universities must now think of establishing a national digital teaching and learning platform able to service students enrolled at all 26 universities and the 50 colleges together with other substantive shared services platforms as we navigate the next ten years.

"It is also very likely that universities will increasingly become more flexible work sites although the jury is still out on the efficacy of the forms of work-from-home models we have seen thus far," said Bawa.

He added that following President Cyril Ramaphosa's announcement of the State of National Disaster on 26 March 2020, it became clear the only way Higher Education Institutions could complete the academic year was to collaborate and work as one body.

"This was a very successful strategy alongside an agreement that we would work closely and in partnership with the Departments of Higher Education and Training, Science and Innovation and Communication and Digital Technology. We set up joint projects with the Council on Higher Education and the National Research Foundation. A collaborative framework was also put in place to work with sections of the



Professor Ahmed Bawa, CEO: Universities South Africa (USAf).

private sector such as mobile network operators," he said.

A second plan established teams to address the short-term financial crisis facing higher education institutions, while the third strategy was to immediately secure campuses in case of wanton looting.

"Perhaps most importantly, we addressed the challenges relating to completing the academic year and the associated risks which were underpinned by universities agreeing they would not jeopardise

the possible completion of the academic year by students who were having difficulty accessing data and devices such as laptops."

Anecdotal evidence of what was achieved by universities is nothing short of astounding. For example:

- The Tshwane University of Technology reported it had distributed 71 million pages of notes to 56 000 students at a cost of R26 million at a time when connectivity was not guaranteed.

- More than 40PB – one PB of data is a million GB of data - of data per month was distributed to students and staff in the 2020 academic year.
- More than 600 000 devices were procured by South African universities during that year.

Bawa said that what kept him awake at night was deep concern that poor students would get left behind due to the lack and cost of connectivity and devices and the impact of the pandemic on the mental and physical health of the entire Higher Education community.

“Our academics responded to the challenge of teaching students online with great difficulty and concern. All 26 universities engaged in development activities to support staff and steps were taken nationally to build proficiency which meant remote emergency teaching and learning, via multiple pathways, did go on,” he said.

He added that online teaching and learning had opened up exciting opportunities for increased collaboration, particularly with international universities.

“There are wonderful experiments where students on different continents are experiencing teaching and learning from lecturers and professors from different universities.

“While internationalisation was largely driven by costly travel in the past, we now have an opportunity to experiment with co-badged degrees offered by two or more institutions where students take online lessons together. There is no doubt technology has opened up a host of new opportunities.”

Will online learning replace brick and mortar campuses? Bawa said he believes the ideal model is one with a mix of online and physical interaction.

“The tension lies between requiring our students back on campus while at the same time making sure this is done as safely as possible. We must prevent outbreaks of infection and vaccines are a big part of this,” he said.

The pandemic has opened new vistas of exploration using technology in all aspects of universities’ core functions. At the heart of this is increased

flexibility and the potential for much higher levels of responsiveness. While Bawa said that these are exciting developments, the pandemic has left scars which may take years to heal. He noted the need for academics to assess on a course-by-course basis whether individual students needed assistance to catch up on their academic work.

“Our academics responded to the challenge of teaching students online with great difficulty and concern.”

Higher Health has also set up an online system to support students who are struggling, while individual universities have “galvanised” their student clinics and counselling services to address lingering mental health issues.

“A USAf-Medical Research Council study on the state of the mental health of our students has just been completed and part of that study is the design of a sector wide approach to address what is a very large challenge,” Bawa said.

The report was published at the end of 2021.

Bawa identified the following future challenges:

- Securing the long-term sustainability of the sector;
- Ensuring that the sector is well funded;
- Understanding and developing social ownership of Higher Education Institutions;
- Reimagining Higher Education in South Africa based on the social justice agenda;
- Addressing inequalities while factoring in the threat of climate change and global warming;
- Nurturing the agency to galvanise the use and development of this new technology moment; and

- Gearing up universities as sites of lifelong and continuous learning.

“For me, the student activism between 2015 and 2017 followed by the pandemic has raised serious questions about the social ownership of these important institutions,” said Bawa.

About Universities South Africa (USAf)

Formerly known as HESA (Higher Education South Africa), Universities South Africa (USAf) is a membership organisation representing South Africa’s universities.

The new name (USAf) was launched on 22 July 2015 in order to reposition the organisation as a representative body of South Africa’s public universities that aims to promote a more inclusive, responsive and equitable national system of Higher Education.

This event marked a new dawn for South Africa’s public universities as the organisation’s leadership re-committed itself to advancing the key mission of research, teaching and learning and community engagement in a consultative and transparent manner.

Speaking on behalf of universities on major issues with implications for their well-being; the facilitation of effective dialogue among universities, government, business, parliament and other stakeholders on issues affecting universities; as well as advocating and campaigning for an adequately funded university sector are some of USAf’s key focus areas.

Bawa is the former Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the Durban University of Technology. He sat at the helm of the University for five-and-a-half years before joining USAf as Chief Executive Officer. He was hailed for leaving the University in a better state and position through his vision and commitment towards staff, students and alumni. □

IT'S A CELEBRATION!

UKZN GRADUATIONS STAND ABOVE THE REST

Words by Sinegugu Ndlovu and Bheki Mbanjwa

Each year, the bi-annual Graduation Ceremonies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal break the internet as hearts across the nation are set on fire by the merriment, dance and ululation on and off stage.

Social media is abuzz with proud graduates' incredible stories of academic excellence and triumph, not to mention passionate displays of excitement.

Although the procedures and traditions surrounding graduation ceremonies differ around the world, these are usually protocol-driven, ceremonial events. At UKZN, they have also become a colourful tool to showcase the Institution's academic excellence and enduring human spirit.

This year's celebrations were all the more joyous as they marked an end to two years of virtual graduation due to the COVID-19 pandemic. KwaZulu-Natal also bore the added burdens of unrest and looting in July 2021 and the devastating floods that ravaged the province this April.

The moving story of Dumisani Ngobese (23), who could not hold back his tears as he reflected on the culmination of a "long and difficult journey" while moving across the graduation stage to be capped with a Bachelor of Arts, comes to mind. In less than 24 hours, he gained permanent employment with the Calvin and Family Group after its owner, Durban businessman Calvin Mathibeli was touched by his story that trended on social media.

The cheeky antics of 22-year-old Chrysontha Alicia Palan also come to mind. Donning dark sunglasses and an attitude like Naomi Campbell on the catwalk to receive her Honours degree in 2018, Palan confidently strutted

towards then UKZN Chancellor, former Chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng, to be capped, leaving the retired judge in stitches.



Dr Nancy Barker made history by being the first Deaf Biology doctoral graduate from UKZN.

Many other examples could be cited, but it is clear that UKZN is the country's favourite when it comes to graduation.

The question is whether this is by design or default. Although graduands' actions on stage are largely unpredictable, Ms Normah Zondo, Executive Director of Corporate Relations at UKZN is of the view that it is both.

"Graduation ceremonies are housed under the Office of the Registrar; however Corporate Relations – which is tasked with advancing the University's brand and image – brings them to life. Our thinking as a Division is that, yes, graduations are traditional and formal events, but they are also about celebration. "A large percentage of our population continues to live in abject poverty, and education is seen as one way out. About 70% of our

students are from quintile 1-3 schools, which are poor schools mainly located in townships and rural areas. Couple this with the fact that access to higher education continues to be a challenge for many, and that many of these graduates are the first in their families to obtain a degree, one understands why graduation is seen as the culmination of a long journey which will usher in a prosperous future. This explains some of the things we see on our stage at UKZN. While protocol and proper structures are adhered to, we're also flexible because we understand that we are hosting a celebration for our students, their parents, and ourselves as a University," she said.

Zondo added that as one of the most transformed universities in the country, UKZN's graduation ceremonies are also an opportunity to showcase the diverse nature of its community. The ceremonies have become a platform for graduates and parents to highlight their identity and culture through various garments and accessories.

She said that the Division places strong emphasis on social media reach and penetration during the planning and rollout of graduations. "Social media has become the most powerful form of media, and if used strategically, it can help us gain influence."

Constantly making the cut on global university rankings, the University's academic prestige also adds to the flavour of its graduation ceremonies.

Visit our social media pages (Youtube: University of KwaZulu-Natal South Africa, and Facebook: @UKZN1) to witness some amazing graduation moments. □

STUDYING DURING A PANDEMIC: OUR STUDENTS SPEAK

The COVID-19 pandemic – which continues to wreak havoc across the globe – has had a huge impact on the delivery of teaching and learning. With academic content being moved onto virtual platforms so that students can successfully complete their studies, equitable access to learning and information has been challenging for both students and universities. **Hlengiwe Precious Khwela** spoke to our students from across the four UKZN Colleges of Agriculture, Engineering and Science; Health Sciences; Humanities; and Law and Management Studies to find out how they have been coping.



MS KIARA BREWER
MASTER'S IN
AGROMETEOROLOGY

Completing my MSc during a pandemic was a unique, challenging, and unconventional experience. It definitely had its pros and cons, but I am grateful that it created the current version of myself. The introvert in me was happy to be isolated in my home environment, as it is my most productive, analytical, and creative space. I thrived when completing certain parts of my master's from home, but also struggled with not being able to be on campus to utilise the resources that previously produced successful graduates throughout the years. As a student who was very hands on and interactive with colleagues, as well as one who thoroughly enjoyed networking with my peers and superiors, I found it difficult to acquire 'unteachable' knowledge from these sources. I really relied on physical communication and connections to enhance my studies and to grow as an individual, and not having that challenged my academic and personal development. I think that if the pandemic had not prevailed, my master's would have been completed within a year. Nevertheless, the wait and the challenges I faced have made me realise that I am a strong, resilient, and intelligent woman.



MR MALUSI MTHETHWA
**SECOND-YEAR BACHELOR OF SCIENCE IN LIFE AND EARTH
SCIENCES**

While online learning comes with challenges, mainly because of unstable internet connections, power disruptions, and a lack of access to data and laptops, for me, it was smooth sailing from the onset. I don't confront these issues due to my parents' financial support. However, I have to say that online learning has an enormous emotional, psychological and physical toll that adversely affects one's mental health. It is like walking through a minefield with no metal detector. It is both lonely and easy because with automated, virtual systems, you don't have to wake up at 5:30 am every morning to get ready and travel to class. Class is brought to your home and this enables people to be flexible with their time. However, I find it lonely because I'm isolated from my peers. I don't have a friend or a study buddy on campus or online which can make the experience a lot harder.



MR VULINHLANHLA MCHUNU
MASTER'S IN MECHANICAL ENGINEERING

My postgraduate project entails research, design and manufacturing and hence requires laboratory work which can only be conducted in University facilities and private companies. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a major stumbling block. The lockdown and successive waves resulted in long unplanned delays in completing my practical work. Either one cannot access the University facilities or the outside company is shut down or there's a delay in production.

Working remotely from home to conduct the research part of the project has demanded increased discipline and motivation as there are many disruptions. However, this period has presented an opportunity to try new things which existed long before the pandemic. I relied on Anydesk Software to access the design and simulation software programmes on on-campus computers from the comfort of my home. I also saved the time and resources required to travel.

MS BONGEKILE TABU
**THIRD-YEAR BACHELOR OF SCIENCE IN AGRICULTURAL
ANIMAL AND POULTRY SCIENCE**

The pandemic brought a lot of changes which I had to adapt to in a short period of time. Studying at the campus library worked well for me as I was motivated by other students at the library whereas at home, it's easy to leave things for later as I have to complete my house chores in between my study sessions. That results in a pile of work to finish before going to bed.

Loadshedding comes with a slow connection and it's even worse if it happens during a lecture, especially if it is not recorded. However, I can always send an email to the lecturer if I need clarity on something. My degree includes field trips and unfortunately, we couldn't continue with them but the lecturers share videos of what we would have seen. While I feel that online learning has increased my workload, my family and friends have been supportive, making things easier. I am also lucky to have lecturers who do whatever it takes to give us the best training regardless of the situation.



MS TRIANNE AMARCHUND
MASTER'S IN MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION

I've been studying and teaching through the pandemic. As a postgraduate student, all supervision is online, either through Zoom or WhatsApp. Whilst this is convenient and efficient, I miss the physical interactions and conversations and I feel that online learning loses the heart of academia, which should be to empower, engage and stimulate thinking. Learning and teaching online becomes monotonous and it is hard to come up with innovative methods without the proper resources.

MR MELUSI NHLEKO
PHD IN MECHANICAL ENGINEERING

Learning during this difficult time has been a great challenge. Apart from restricted access to academic facilities and support, concerns about the health and socio-economic effects of the pandemic affect one's mental well-being. While one has to manage interactions with academic staff and other students in order to create a conducive learning environment while observing COVID-19 rules, one is always worrying about family members and relatives infected or passing away due to COVID-19. Extra discipline, effective management of my academic affairs and a proactive leadership approach have been required to achieve successful results. While many believe that, 'where there is a will there is a way', grace and prayer help to see me through.





MR THABANG MDHLULI
MASTER'S IN MECHANICAL ENGINEERING

My journey of studying online during a pandemic has been full of ups and downs. Normally, my day would start at 7h45 but with the introduction of online learning, I started at 6h00. As much as I was still doing the same seven modules per semester, it felt like the workload doubled. With online learning there are always challenges of internet connection. I missed lectures because of loadshedding and the cost of data to attend the sessions or download lessons.

However, things were better when the University started giving students data. Another problem is that as an engineering student I sometimes needed to use programmes that require computing capabilities that my laptop can't handle. Computational work thus has to be simplified to suit the computational resources one has and this robs one of some of the learning that the task aims to teach.

MR AARON NAIDU
SECOND-YEAR BACHELOR OF SCIENCE IN DATA SCIENCE

From an academic perspective, I found that Zoom classes and pre-recorded lectures were more than adequate as a substitute for in-person learning. One key difference, however, is that studying from home demands a greater work ethic and focus than being on campus.

I am fortunate to have a quiet room with a stable internet connection where I can study. This made the transition to online learning far easier for me than for some other students. However, it still required discipline to remain focussed on work in an environment with far more distractions than any lecture hall.

While I may initially have seen this as a disadvantage, after almost two years of studying like this, I believe that it has enhanced my academic self-sufficiency, which I hope will serve me well for postgraduate studies, the job market, and beyond.



MR JIRAH MOODLEY
FINAL-YEAR BACHELOR OF SCIENCE IN COMPUTER SCIENCE

I really miss socialising on campus. It wasn't that hard to adapt to the new study style as, on a normal university day, I'd wake up 5am to get to campus by 7:45 am for my first lecture. The new method meant I was not only able to sleep later, but I was much more productive. I enjoy studying from home even though I don't get to interact with my classmates. My new routine is waking up around 7am, attending lectures till 1pm, completing practicals and tutorials till 3pm and then heading out for a run, making up for the exercise I don't get on campus. I'm able to fit in more study time till 10pm and from 10pm till 1pm I complete assignments and projects. All in all, I favour studying from home.

MS ZINHLE MZOBE
FOURTH-YEAR BACHELOR OF MEDICINE

Before COVID-19 hit us, we attended face-to-face lectures with hands-on practical experience, to help improve our understanding. While moving online has kept us safe, more than a year down the line, it became a huge problem. As medical students, clinical skills are one of the most important foundations, and learning the theory with no hands-on practical experience has made it difficult to grasp these skills. Clinical medicine will start next year and I do not feel confident in my skills. I hope that things will go back to normal. Currently, we are doing the best we can.





MR EMMANUEL GANDE

PHD IN CHEMICAL ENGINEERING

The Coronavirus pandemic has affected each and every one of us in one way or another, disrupting the way we are used to doing things while at the same time bringing new possibilities. The shift to online learning brought both challenges and successes. I am in my first semester of my PhD in Chemical Engineering studies within the Systems Modelling and Data Analysis Research Group under the supervision of Professor Randhir Rawatlal. My supervisor and the University at large embraced online platforms which meant I do not have to be on campus to do my work. My studies are purely computational, so I can study remotely without having to leave my job or having to relocate to South Africa as I am based in Australia. I have regular meetings over Zoom with my supervisor and our research group. The whole process from applying to UKZN to getting down to my research has been seamless, with everything done online.

MR EMMANUEL STAMBULI

MASTER'S IN AGRICULTURE AND FOOD SECURITY

Studying during the pandemic has been both mentally and academically challenging, particularly as a postgraduate student. One of the biggest challenges I experienced was the lack of access to campus and the campus library prior to receiving an access permit. It has also been difficult to communicate with administrative staff on academic and other School-associated matters. Online communication with campus staff, especially via email, has been slow. At times, one receives an automated response, which does not enable one to resolve one's issues.

The pandemic also hampered my data collection. Due to COVID-19 protocols, I could not engage directly with the study participants. Such interaction is of importance to my dissertation which relied heavily on primary data.

However, the pandemic has had positive benefits. It increased my familiarity with online learning using applications like Zoom and Microsoft Teams. I was also able to participate in numerous webinars, which I would not have been part of were it not for the pandemic as I would have needed to travel to and from such meetings.



MR SHEYI ROTIMI

PHD IN CHEMISTRY

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected society in many ways, impairing our social and economic life. Indeed, it is a time we will never forget. When the lockdown started, I was worried as a student with limited time and a lot of work to complete. I knew that remote learning was not going to work for someone like me who needs a lab to conduct research.

I was overwhelmed by the reality of being at home the whole day and I started to struggle. I suffered from frequent anxiety attacks and was unable to engage in my normal daily sporting activities. I had nightmares most nights and struggled to sleep. It was as if I was trapped in my house and in my own head. However, the pandemic offered me opportunities to learn new things. I took some online courses, and started writing and learning how to cook Nigerian food. I believe it is still too early to measure the pandemic's impact on society.

MS KOLITSOE SEHAPI

PHD IN INFORMATION SYSTEMS AND TECHNOLOGY

Concentrating in the midst of fear, anxiety, and a lack of motivation has been our major challenge during this time. In addition, we forget to socialise and try to multitask more. This wastes time, decreases accuracy, and interferes with the process of forming new memories. We miss the most valuable aspects of a graduate student's career which are peer interactions. Furthermore, most of us find it very challenging to maintain a consistent work schedule due to distractions at home. However, every cloud has a silver lining; we have not lost hope - we will finally win! We have managed to create our own unique atmosphere that is conducive to our needs for studying.





MS AMANDA MNTAMBO
FIRST-YEAR BACHELOR OF AUDIOLOGY

Studying during the pandemic was the most difficult thing I have had to get used to. It was far from easy and I had to devise strategies to deal with the situation. One of the most difficult issues was the lack of connectivity, and it's also difficult to be taught online without interacting with the lecturer. Sometimes the session ends without understanding a thing or two. At that time, I didn't have a device that would allow me to use Zoom, so I had to use my last savings to buy one because I didn't have funding. I struggled with online tests, missing out on some classes due to a bad connection. The library was so far away that I couldn't even borrow a book to supplement my knowledge. The assignments were terrible because there was so little information, and it was my first assignment at university so I didn't understand the content. My grades were not what I had hoped for, but I was able to get through those difficult times and I was proud of myself for working harder and smarter. I thank my family for their support.

MS KEIYARA RAMESHWARNATH
FINAL-YEAR BACHELOR OF PHARMACY

COVID-19 was an unexpected turn of events that halted most of our daily routine. As a fourth-year student, I had a taste of on-campus learning which I dearly miss. Distance learning brought many challenges such as the interruption of the academic calendar which resulted in the curriculum being squashed into a few very stressful months accompanied by a sense of monotony due to the lack of face-to-face engagement, not to mention the other overwhelming emotions that were associated with the pandemic which made learning much more difficult. However, distance learning has helped to refine my academic discipline and has allowed me the freedom of learning at my own pace which was most definitely advantageous for a student such as myself whose most productive hours are in the evening. Studying during the pandemic has thus been a journey of learning to adapt and has taught me some valuable skills.



MS SERINI REDDY
FOURTH-YEAR BACHELOR OF MEDICINE

The COVID-19 pandemic has been especially disconcerting as a student. Adapting to online learning has been a significant challenge for students and our institutions. For me, there were good, bad and great moments.

The good: I saved a lot of time, and some money by not commuting to campus every day. I enjoyed attending lectures online as it was much easier to view lecture slides and hear presentations; however, this was subject to connectivity each day. It also afforded more flexibility in my schedule. The bad: It was too easy to let studying slip down my list of priorities. My study patterns became irregular and this led to cramming. I often felt like I let myself down and therefore learned the importance of sticking to a schedule. Another big struggle was acclimatising to hospital environments after being at home.

The great: We have faced unimaginable circumstances. In terms of character building, the challenges that we overcame to continue with our studies during the pandemic have made me more resilient, tenacious and ultimately a better student. It has also taught me the importance of self-discipline and to value clinical exposure.

MR QHAWE NYAWO
THIRD-YEAR BACHELOR OF COMMERCE-GENERAL

At first when online learning was introduced during the first semester of 2020 it was easy, and I passed because I had the same energy and determination that I had on campus. The second semester was not as easy, as we were given tests every week and at the same time we had to attend online Zoom classes. Time management was a big issue for me as I was not familiar with online classes, but I managed to pass the semester with an overall mark of 70%. The first semester of 2021 was easy for me since I knew how to manage my time. I even got three distinctions during the semester and managed to be part of the Enactus UKZN team.





MS NAMUTULA MUKELABAI

FINAL-YEAR BACHELOR OF PHYSIOTHERAPY

I've served as the President of the International Students Association since May 2019 but it was during the lockdown period that I really got to bond with students. I took on the responsibility of being helpful in an incredibly stressful time by giving comfort and providing support to students when they were given three days' notice to vacate residences. During the registration period I had the honour of personally assisting students in getting financial and international clearance, etc.

The lockdown slowed down time and activities which enabled me to make major decisions cautiously with less pressure.

As the Physiotherapy Class Representative I had to communicate with lecturers more often and liaise effectively in order for students to receive information and submit assignments.

The pandemic allowed more spare time to join initiatives such as the Enactus UKZN team. I went from being a general member to Project Manager as I didn't have the responsibility of attending lectures from 9h00 to 16h00 daily.

After all the mental pressure of University I was able to go home and wind down, to organise my life and plan ahead. I saved money on transport and groceries as being at home comes with the blessing of eating my mother's homemade food.

DR MICHAEL AGYEMANG KWARTENG

PHD IN OPTOMETRY

Beginning a PhD in Optometry during the COVID-19 pandemic was one of the most challenging decisions I have ever made. Most of Optometry research involves human subjects and my main focus is learners with disabilities such as hearing and visual impairments. Gaining access to these learners and the schools involved was a challenge.

At UKZN, a key component in acquiring ethical approval is permission from gatekeepers to access their institutions for data collection. All schools were closed, and most of the administrative staff were working from home. Most schools did not respond to emails, which led to introductory letters being deposited with security personnel and only three of 11 schools responded.

Another critical challenge was adherence to COVID-19 protocols. Overall, however, the challenges were manageable.



MS NTHABISENG MOTLOHI

PHD IN PHARMACY

I am currently studying from my home country, Lesotho. As a first-year PhD student, my initial target for 2021 was to develop a study protocol for submission to the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) for review and approval. I found the UKZN virtual library useful in completing my study protocol. Apart from databases that are rich in relevant literature, the library also scheduled virtual training on library operations. The training slides were also shared online for future reference or for easy access for those who might have missed the training.

Given that I commenced my study in the middle of the pandemic, I cannot compare it with pre-pandemic times. Being at home took care of my mental health as I would have worried about my family and vice versa. My supervisor has been supportive throughout. She is readily available for consultations through online platforms and always provides constructive and prompt feedback. I hope we can curb the spread of the pandemic and get back to normal.



MS TRACEY SIBISI **PHD IN GENDER AND RELIGION**

Coming into the world of academia from an activist background, I found it very challenging to adapt to a lifestyle of reading, writing, and more reading. It has been an interesting journey; one that is testing and weighs heavily on a person's mental health. This reality took its worst form during the pandemic. With the lockdown, it was less easy to maintain support from the community of students, such as the Gender and Religion cohort and contact classes. Digital platforms did away with free-flowing conversations as well as moments of humour, moments that are needed in times of great distress. The pandemic has forced us to find ways to remain motivated and disciplined, which has not been easy.

However, we have been fortunate to have a supervisor who ensured that we had constant check-in and online classes. I have been forced to learn to slow down, breathe, to lean on family and a community of support, and trust the process. This contributed to the completion of my master's project and the start of a new journey.

MS NOXOLO MALINGA **MASTER'S IN NURSING SCIENCE**

Studying during the COVID-19 pandemic has really made me appreciate technology. As an international student, I did most of my study at home, which reduced the cost of travel and temporary accommodation. Online courses gave me the flexibility to study at my own pace and convenience. It also enabled me to continue working and taking care of my family.

Challenges include sourcing equipment for online classes such as wireless network connections, and routers, ensuring I have enough funds to keep connected to the internet, and battling slow connections. Studying from home also means that I am sometimes interrupted, but a successful education demands focus.

Studying on campus offers a distraction free learning environment with all the necessary tools and space. I personally prefer first-hand experience, with an instructor in the same room so I can take notes and ask for clarity in real time. I also am not tech-savvy person and sometimes experiences challenges with technology. All in all, studying during the COVID-19 pandemic has put more pressure on us as students.



DR LUXWELL JOKONYA **PHD IN NEUROSCIENCES**

Doing a PhD was a preplanned journey, but imagine in the middle of such a journey, the road network suddenly changes. Without any notice there are detours, dead ends, and steep hills but wait, there was this calming whisper from Student Support Services in the corner. As one becomes accustomed to this maze, one begins to see new opportunities. But when one takes a closer look, one finds that they have always been there. It took the tears of the crisis to clear our vision.

Studying for a PhD during COVID-19 has been a double-edged sword. On the one hand were travel restrictions, physical and social distancing, and a pandemic looming over loved ones and at times threatening my own existence. On the other hand, one can attend more meetings and converse more efficiently despite the distance, courtesy of various online platforms. We need to focus on the advantageous edge as we wield the sword. #COVID-19Diaries



MS NOBUHLE MZOBE

THIRD-YEAR BACHELOR OF SOCIAL WORK

When the first COVID-19 case was identified in South Africa, I hoped it would be over soon, but everything changed in the blink of an eye. As a university student, this affected every aspect of my life - academically, socially and emotionally. The shift from contact learning to remote learning seemed easier from a distance, as people would say "be happy, you now get to attend lectures in your pyjamas". But there was more to it than that.

Connectivity issues preventing one from grasping content during lectures, unavailability of devices such as laptops and tablets for e-learning, inability to submit on time due to network failure, having to complete chores at home before getting to do your school work as some parents do not understand that their child could sit down and study when there are other things to do in the house - the list is endless. Moreover, some homes are not conducive for academic activities. I live in a crime-ridden community and the biggest challenge I encountered was that in the midst of the pandemic, we had several break-ins, where I lost all my gadgets (cellphone, laptop and tablet). I also sustained injuries as the perpetrators were violent and I was hospitalised. It was hard to cope, as I had no financial means to replace the gadgets. I strongly hope that our new normal will soon become a thing of the past.

MS SLINDOKUHLE NDLOVU

MASTER'S IN GENDER AND RELIGION

I thought adapting to studying during a pandemic using virtual classes was going to be easy. Initially, I had my little sister to teach me how it works and show me how to download Zoom, but things got hectic when I had to do my class submissions and my research proposal online. I needed to be at the computer LAN almost all day, but the LAN also had restricted times because they had to sanitise so I was limited in every way.

I had to use pen and paper to write everything down so that I would have more time to type when I get to the LAN and never miss a deadline. Some days were harder than others because there were strikes on campus, and the LANs would be closed. I had to ask to people I stayed with in residence to lend me their laptops and sometimes they couldn't. This was my life for the whole semester. At times I wanted to deregister because it seemed impossible, but I am glad I didn't because this situation taught me a lot and pushed me to work harder. I am grateful that I had supportive and understanding lecturers during this time.



MS ONELISIWE MAHLABA

THIRD-YEAR BACHELOR OF EDUCATION

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic it was not easy to adjust. I was robbed of my phone on my way home and could not attend any classes or perform any of my Enactus UKZN duties.

I live with my grandma who doesn't have a smart phone and in January and February I had not received my NSFAS payment so I couldn't buy myself a new smart phone. When registration opened NSFAS didn't confirm my funding. Had I been on campus with access to Wi-Fi, I would have been able to use my computer to attend classes that were online and sort out my NSFAS crisis.

Getting a permit to come to campus was also a process, but I was finally able to be on campus. I applied for a SRC bursary, registered and did my best to catch up. Zoom recorded classes expire so following documents posted on e-learning was frustrating because a lot was explained in the recordings - which I had missed. I was very stressed and thought of taking a gap year, but eventually I pulled through.



MR SIQALO NDLOVU
THIRD-YEAR BACHELOR OF EDUCATION

Personally, I have found it inconvenient to study online. At first, I was happy to be able to attend classes in the comfort of my own home and spend more time with my family but as time went by, I became lazy. I would often sleep late which meant I woke up late and ended up opening the Zoom app on my phone and listening while in bed, sometimes even before I washed my face.

Studying during a pandemic taught me about the importance of time management. Even though I sometimes lost track of time with contact classes, when one is at home, one needs to be extra careful because it is easy to skip classes. Sometimes, home chores would take up most of my time. I enjoy engaging lecturers during class, and it is just not the same with online learning. Online classes were nice while they lasted, but I cannot wait until we move back to the normal we all knew.

MR GOBIZAZI MBONAMBI
MASTER'S IN GENDER EDUCATION

When the South African government imposed lockdown restrictions in the early months of 2020, I was staying in a campus residence and was forced to return home.

The pandemic has forced me to use multiple digital technologies and it was hard to become familiar and proficient in using these resources in isolation at home. I also had to introduce some of these digital technologies to my participants in order to complete my academic research which was very difficult and resulted in some of them dropping out of the study. The continuity of my research was disturbed as I did not have access to the internet and data – which were a key part of searching and accessing information.

I was both affected and infected by COVID-19 which had a negative impact on my academic research as I did not complete my master's in record time. I am happy now because I am coping under the circumstances and I am expected to graduate in early 2022.



MS SONIL RAMHARAK
BACHELOR OF HONOURS IN EDUCATION

2020 was a beacon of hope for many of us, especially for the class of 2020. Graduation signified becoming an adult, seeking employment, or enrolling for post-graduate studies; our dedication, persistence, and hard work finally being recognised. Then came March 2020, when President Ramaphosa issued an order for us to stay at home. We had no idea that when we shut our front doors, the world that had previously been accessible to us would be forgotten. Life became instantly uncertain. This situation was far from ideal. Balancing school online, work, and home responsibilities was a challenge. As a student, sitting in front of a cold computer screen, there was a lack of a sense of belonging and connection to others. Initially, the transition from contact to online classes was difficult but this gradually changed due to the efforts of my lecturers and university staff. Discipline is also a crucial skill to ensure that tasks and assignments are completed timeously. However, lockdown provided me with the opportunity to spend more time with loved ones and introspect. I learnt to appreciate small chats, events, and face-to-face contacts by digging deep. Furthermore, I discovered that friendships are not only formed via physical presence, but also through meaningful discussions, even if they take place on a screen.

MS SAJIL RAMHARAK **BACHELOR OF HONOURS IN EDUCATION**

The COVID-19 pandemic has unhinged the lives of people across the globe. Studying during a pandemic comes with a unique set of challenges that seem endless. One of the biggest shifts during COVID-19 was the transition from traditional contact classes to online Zoom sessions. Some of us have faced multiple schedule changes and struggled with unreliable internet connections. While Zoom classes may seem awkward and flustering at first, one learns to embrace it and that goes for any challenge posed by COVID-19. The lack of social interaction and being unable to go out to de-stress is hard. However, being a student at UKZN with constant support services and being a part of a community that unites students, makes taking on pandemic challenges easier. Online learning provides more flexibility. One has a bit more time to spend on extracurricular activities and hobbies. It also helps one to practice self-discipline and plan one's day and tasks around class time. No matter what curveball COVID-19 throws, I will try to catch it with positivity and a sprinkle of enthusiasm because education is the key to success.



MS ROSEMARY MUSVIPWA **PHD IN MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION**

My heart is filled with much gratitude for all the things I managed to achieve even when it seemed like the world was falling around me. The past two years have been the most challenging years I (and everyone else) have had to walk through in the journey of life, but as I reflect on my life, I am glad to still be alive to tell the story. This year I embraced a new aspect of life as I embarked on my PhD studies. This was something I wanted to do for the past six years, but things never quite aligned to enable me to study. I am thankful for experiencing two sides of a golden coin. I struggled to hit the ground running as I prepared a multitude of proposal drafts, attended various capacity building seminars, and engaged in mind-stretching (but very enriching) reading group sessions. On the other hand, I enjoyed intellectual conversations with my peers as well as world-class mentorship from my supervisors and the wider society of professors that I was exposed to. This initial year of my PhD studies has been life changing because I have progressed so much as a person and as an emerging academic. Greatness has been inspired in me, and I look forward to the next few years of growing as an impactful member of the UKZN community.

MS KELISHA PANDARAM **FINAL-YEAR BACHELOR OF COMMERCE**

For the past two years, I have studied remotely like many other students and have not experienced physical contact with lecturers and classmates. It was challenging at first to learn to develop a routine and prioritise my goals and studies as I spent most of my personal time at home. I eventually learnt to develop a schedule that included my studies, spending time with my loved ones and making time for my personal wellbeing and mental health. I sometimes feel sad about the lost contact experiences and memories that I've missed out on at university in these past two years but Zoom lectures and interactions on the Learn website have made it easier to engage with others at a distance. My lecturers have been extremely understanding and helpful in assisting their classes with grasping the core concepts in their modules and resolving queries and concerns. I look forward to returning to university in person at some point in the future. I have just completed my undergraduate degree last semester and will continue to work hard at home and study judiciously in my postgraduate studies next year.





MR THANDOLWETHU XONGO

BACHELOR OF COMMERCE (HONOURS) IN ECONOMICS

In 1906, a young Dr Pixley ka Isaka-Seme delivered a speech at Columbia University under the theme: The regeneration of Africa. He observed that, "Civilisation resembles an organic being in its development - it is born, it perishes, and it can propagate itself." More than a century later, civilisation as we know it has changed due to the emergence of the COVID-19 virus.

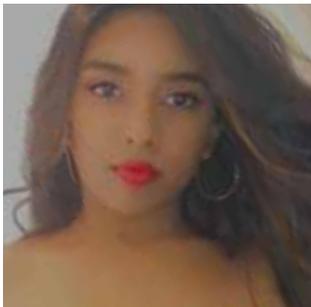
What would the young Seme say about education during a pandemic? What would he say about the rising number of depressed young people? Perhaps, he would have found fault in the process that emphasises deadlines and submissions more than teaching and learning. Studying during a pandemic has been nothing short of a nightmare for most students, including myself. COVID-19 has removed the veil, and it has become clear that there is a need to seriously and urgently review the pedagogical tools currently in use to shift the focus and prioritise learning.

MR TINASHE MUGABE

PHD IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The transition to remote learning is a departure from the standard norms of a traditional education system. The way it occurred was drastic and for some of us with no prior experience of online learning, it has really been a daunting task. Remote learning has exposed me to a lot of vulnerability such as feelings of isolation especially being a first timer in a foreign country. Therefore, integration of social interaction into pedagogy for online learning is essential, especially when students don't know one another. Finding my way around the campus and accessing social amenities has really been a challenge. I missed orientation and the language barrier has been a big stumbling block.

The lack of face-to-face activities has made it harder to establish and sustain relationships, which previously occurred in a mix of social situations. I find it difficult to stay engaged for long periods over video call. The place where I stay is noisy and not conducive for learning. Exorbitant data costs, and poor network connectivity in high-density suburbs are further challenges. While e-learning is an advancement in education there is room for much improvement.



MS JETARIA MOODLEY

FIRST-YEAR BACHELOR OF COMMERCE IN ACCOUNTING

The year 2021 was very difficult due to the changes and challenges triggered by the pandemic. As a first year student, I felt overwhelmed at first as I had to adapt to a new way of learning and studying. I have not had a chance to visit my campus as yet or to really get to enjoy the whole 'first year' experience, but this year has taught me that any challenge can be overcome with a positive mind-set and the willingness to change one's routine to adapt to a new way of life.

Online learning requires me to be very disciplined as well as focused with all the distractions at home. I don't have the opportunity to physically interact with my peers or lecturers and of course there is the challenge of connectivity issues and the change from being physically taught to being taught through a screen, which brings its own set of challenges. However, I adjusted to a new routine that ensures I achieve the goals I set each week and I always focus on the positives rather than the negatives, like the fact that I can work at my own pace or attend lectures in my pyjamas.



MS ITUMELENG MOTLOKOA
SECOND-YEAR BACHELOR OF COMMERCE-GENERAL

The pandemic has made life a little easier for me as it has slowed down time, leaving me with more time to focus on the people I love as well as personal development. When it started I felt really isolated, but then I started to realise that I had more time to spend with my family and friends. It opened my eyes to the fact that we don't know the people around us as much as we should because life is busy, and everyone is focused on their own tasks and achievements. Since everything moved online, I've had more control over how I spend my time and what I prioritise. This has meant that I can attend classes in my own time and study at my own pace.

It became apparent to me that I had also neglected my mental wellbeing. When academic work and other things moved online, I could keep better track of my schoolwork and I had time to plan properly, and I had even more time to study and do other things. One other thing that stood out for me was realising that I have more potential than I'd ever known.

MS NALEDI NDWALANE
**THIRD-YEAR BACHELOR OF BUSINESS SCIENCE IN
FINANCE AND STATISTICS**

Studying comes with pressure, anxiety, and stress. The deadlines, the enormous workload, and the sleepless nights are sometimes too draining. It is no secret that the pandemic has had a negative effect on the mental health of many people. Everything was turned upside down and we were all in panic mode. Having to juggle school while trying to process everything that is happening in the world is difficult. However, there are pros to studying online. It has taught me to be more organised; I am accountable for my actions now. My time management skills are more advanced, and it has helped me acknowledge the weaknesses that negatively affect my academic work. I must say, writing texts and exams in one's own space was the best! It decreased the anxiety and panic that comes with writing a test or exam. Sometimes test dates and assignment deadlines were too close, but, all and all, online learning is convenient and allows us to be flexible.



MS SIMPHIWE NGOBESE
FINAL-YEAR BACHELOR OF LAWS

During these hard times, it is easy to panic and get upset. It may seem that our previous life will never return. Those negative thoughts and feelings really get to me sometimes. Compared to normal schooling, online learning is less effective for me. During normal lectures I could approach my lecturers at any time if I had a question, and I could also discuss with my classmates. I miss the vibrant university environment because staying at home is boring.

However, some positives came with studying during a pandemic. Studying online has given me the time to do things that I enjoy. During the pandemic, I was able to start my lip-gloss business that I have dreamed of for as long as I can remember. The lesson schedule is flexible and I now have time to prepare for my next lecture in-between assessments.

However, I still prefer the traditional way of learning with face-to-face lectures and real-life interactive classrooms. I would advise my peers to remember that this situation is temporary and to try and do things that they enjoy; this is an opportunity to try new things, not just your schoolwork.



MS ALINDILE NKWANYANA
THIRD-YEAR BACHELOR OF LAWS

My experience in academia during the global COVID-19 pandemic has been filled with adversity. Needless to say, it has been an eye opening experience. I have been exposed to depending more on technology on a day-to-day basis. The pandemic compelled most of our studying to be virtual, especially if the degree in question is more theory based. This meant that one had to quickly get the hang of using video platforms and depend more on internet sources to do research and make submissions.

The pandemic changed our lives as we had to cope with the fast-paced virtual life of online tests, virtual submissions and non-contact classes. This has totally transformed the academic world as we know it. However, most students have caught up with the new normal with the aim of achieving the goals we have set ourselves. One thing's certain; we sure know how to adapt!

MS NITASHA PILLAY
**THIRD-YEAR BACHELOR OF COMMERCE IN INFORMATION
SYSTEMS TECHNOLOGY AND MARKETING**

Based on my experiences with online learning at UKZN during the pandemic, online education has paved the way for a richer understanding of concepts. It has equipped me with technological and online collaboration skills to embrace the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Online learning has taught students the value and importance of technology.

Online learning was difficult to grasp when it was first implemented, but eventually, I learned self-discipline in my approach to studying (using my phone alarm as reminders for class and having a diary to manage my tasks for the day). It is flexible as I can work at my own pace. Due to some online lectures being recorded, I can pause videos and write notes to fully extract what is being taught. However, network connectivity issues are a hindrance. As a student who has experienced both contact lectures in 2019 and online classes from 2020, I find online lectures more effective. This new mode of learning has taught me to embrace change and adapt to challenges.



MS ROPAFADZO BLESSING MUNEMO
MASTER'S IN BUSINESS LAW

It has been extremely difficult to study during the pandemic. Restrictions on international travel, the introduction of a compulsory online registration process and virtual learning shifted the academic process for students. It was extremely difficult to complete the registration process without immediate assistance from university staff. The lockdown measures slowed down everything, from accessing the student help desk to communicating with the relevant personal in my Department. Losing colleagues, friends and family to the pandemic made it difficult to concentrate and I sometimes wondered if studying was all in vain. Today all hurdles have been conquered in the most amazing manner through dedication, discipline and passion. While studying during the COVID-19 pandemic was nothing short of challenging, it's a blessing to be able to look back at and say "I made it".

ALWAYS LOOK FORWARD: EXCELLING AGAINST ALL ODDS

Words by Colleen Dardagan

Postgraduate student, Ms Ntombizoxolo Mfeka has not allowed a life-changing disability to stop her from excelling in her studies.

"I had never been sick before. When I was 20 years old, I suffered from a severe headache for three days. When I woke up on day four, my left eye was dark. I was admitted to hospital where my right eye slowly went dark too. Until today the doctors have no idea why I went blind."

Fast forward, and Mfeka is completing a Postgraduate Diploma in Human Resource Management at UKZN, having already been awarded a BSc. Social Science, and Honours in Policy and Development Studies.

On her discharge from hospital in 2012, Mfeka returned home to Ixopo for two years. In 2015, she enrolled for computer training at the KwaZulu-Natal Society for the Blind in Durban after which she was accepted at UKZN.

"My lifestyle changed completely after I lost my sight. I depend on hearing and touch to identify something and need someone to assist me in all that I do."

However, being at university has nurtured her independence. "I am on the Pietermaritzburg campus and was taught to walk alone on campus with my cane. I took a decision to stay alone in residence without personal assistance."

Mfeka uses a Microsoft screen reader application called Jaws which is specifically designed to assist those who are blind or have impaired vision. "I would be so pleased if the app was installed on all computers at UKZN. I would also love to find a document reader at the University library that can read a textbook for me or have access to audio books at the libraries," she said.

Mfeka praised UKZN for its inclusivity. "UKZN's Disability Unit supports students with disabilities.

The University has given me an opportunity to improve my skills and knowledge which means I will be able to find a job one day, or fulfil my dream to start my own business," she said.

She chose to study Policy and Human Resources because of her love of people and concern about how they are treated in the workplace. "The course has helped me to understand and investigate government policies linked to human resources. For example, when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out early in 2020 and President Cyril Ramaphosa announced the national lockdown regulations, I researched the government's response and the critical role hospitals and their staff played in the response. The Human Resource and Management course helped me to understand the organisation of people and policy applications in the different sectors."

Mfeka cites politician, Dr Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma and UKZN Alumnus, Dr Thandeka Mazibuko - a women's health advocate - as her role models because they are independent women leaders.

"These women inspire me to keep working towards my own dreams. When I am financially secure, I want to establish my own business and create work opportunities for others. I hope to establish a non-governmental organisation that improves the skills of people with disabilities. That is why I am studying the subjects that I am. I love to work with different people and create strategies to solve issues in the workplace. In any organisation, human resources in partnership with management is critical to nurture workplace harmony and prosperity."



Ms Ntombizoxolo Precious Mfeka, a UKZN postgraduate student who shines with distinction.

Her advice to young people with disabilities who want to follow a professional career is: "The first thing is to accept your disability. Don't allow other people to control your life. Be self-motivated and think positively about what you want to do with your life. Know your story and your dreams and avoid relationships with people who have no vision for their own lives. I always look forward and that is why I have succeeded beyond my disability." □

MATHEMATICS DEGREE FULFILS AND LIBERATES TOP UKZN GRADUATE

Words by Colleen Dardagan

A decision to study a degree in Mathematics has not only seen UKZN top achiever Mr Shimon Corcos excel beyond his own expectations, but choosing the subject just because he loves it has provided the student with an unexpected sense of fulfilment and liberation.

With so many interests and a desire to choose a career path that promised good financial returns, Corcos looked at a host of options once he matriculated.

"I have been passionate about mathematics and problem solving since a very early age. Strangely, it was not until I looked at various degrees that I realised I could pursue mathematics on its own. But I asked myself what many others still ask me today: 'What would I do with a degree in maths?' It wasn't until I started the degree that I began to realise how fulfilling it is to study for the sake of one's passion without being concerned about any future income-earning potential or how I will use my qualification," he said.

Corcos graduated *summa cum laude* with a BSc in Mathematics and Applied Mathematics and was awarded UKZN's 100th Anniversary Scholarship for his results in his first year of study. This is a Prestige Undergraduate Scholarship awarded to one of the top three performing undergraduate students in the entire University.

In his second-year, he was awarded the Lawrence and Constance Robinson Scholarship - another top Prestige Undergraduate Scholarship which is awarded to the best single undergraduate in the University.

Also in his second year, Corcos was awarded the Townley Williams Scholarship for the best student who entered their final-year of study which was followed by the Zac Yacoob Scholarship for the best student who had completed a three year degree.



Mr Shimon Corcos, one of UKZN's top performing students.

"In my final year, I scored 100% for seven out of the eight modules. For the latter, I scored 98%," he said.

With an overall aggregate for his initial degree of 97%, Corcos is now busy with his BSc Honours degree in Mathematics and has achieved 100% for all four modules completed in the first semester. He was named in the list of UKZN's top 40 Most Inspiring Students.

Corcos, who was born to a South African mother and Middle Eastern father grew up in Queensburgh, Durban. At the age of five, he was diagnosed with Autism and was subsequently enrolled in the autistic unit at a special needs school in the city.

Regardless, Corcos' parents made the decision to place him in a mainstream school as they recognised he had above average potential. He started at Malvern Primary School aged six before enrolling at St Benedict's School in Pinetown for his high school career.

While the decision proved challenging for him, Corcos said he was more than

determined to overcome by adapting and leaning on his family, teachers and friends for support and guidance. "I was accepted for who I was. I was able to express myself freely among my peers and teachers at the mainstream schools. A milestone for me was winning the Good Fellowship award in primary school as pupils and teachers cast a vote for the person they believe is worthy of the award."

Another award which stands out as a highlight during his school years was winning the Cultural Floating Trophy at St Benedict's School.

Now well into his Higher Education career, Corcos says he hopes to study towards a masters' degree and PhD. "I am thoroughly enjoying studying for my own sake and I hope to stay in academia, not only to study further but to impart my knowledge to younger generations through a career in lecturing," he said.

Corcos said if he could invite some of his heroes to dinner, he would include George Cantor, the mathematician who created Set Theory which is now a standard subject in the study of mathematics; Terence Tao, arguably one of the most famous mathematicians alive and a child prodigy who became a professor at the age of 20; Andrew Wiles who proved Fermat's Last Theorem which had remained unsolved for over 300 years; and Athol Fugard, the award winning South African playwright because, Corcos says, he is unafraid to speak out against what he finds to be morally incorrect and was an activist throughout his life against all forms of discrimination or othering. □

A PASSION FOR LINGUISTICS

Words by Taschica Ramkalan

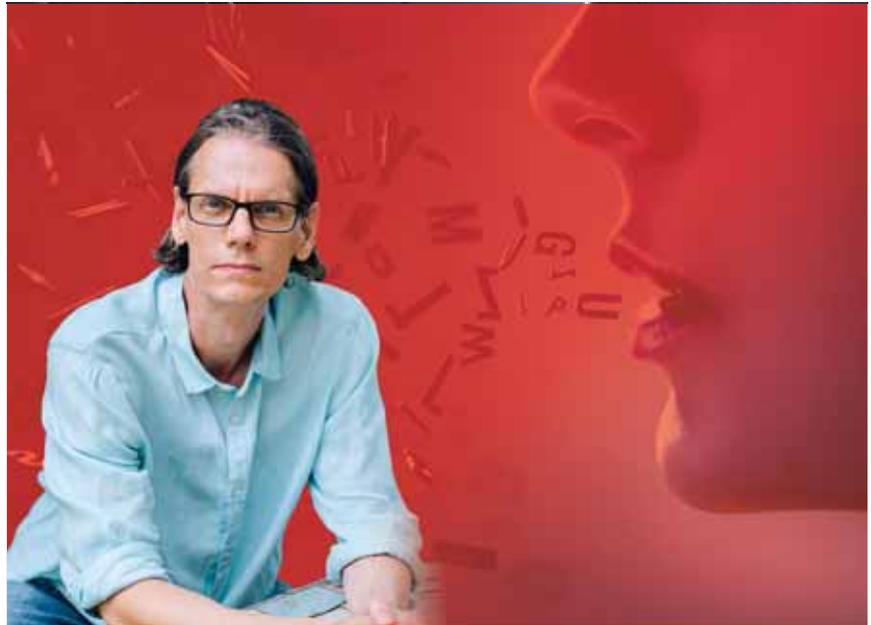
The fact that there are more than 6 000 languages in the world inspired Professor Jochen Zeller to enter the field of linguistics.

Zeller, whose mother tongue is German, said that when he started to learn English and French at school, he was fascinated by how different these languages are. "They use different words, sounds, and grammatical rules. At the same time, I understood that every language spoken on the planet is an expression of something quintessentially human – languages are the product of an underlying, cognitive ability that all healthy individuals possess. This ability is programmed into the human brain and enables every person to acquire at least one language during childhood, and to use it to communicate with other members of the same linguistic community. There are 6 000 to 7 000 languages in the world, and I have always been intrigued by this vast diversity," he said.

As a linguist, Zeller investigates the nature of this biologically determined language faculty, as well as how and why this universal ability manifests itself through language variation. "I study and compare different languages to determine what their differences and similarities can tell us about the 'language instinct' (a term coined by the cognitive psychologist and linguist Steven Pinker)."

Zeller, who holds a PhD from Goethe University, Frankfurt in Germany moved to South Africa in 2001 and joined the Linguistics Programme at the then University of Natal (now UKZN) in 2003. He currently serves as Associate Professor in the School of Arts in UKZN's College of Humanities.

"I've always had great colleagues and wonderful students at UKZN, and together we have built a strong and attractive academic programme over the years, offering undergraduate and postgraduate training and supervision in linguistics, and conducting research



UKZN academic, Professor Jochen Zeller.

in many important theoretical and applied areas of the language sciences. Linguistics is one of the most vibrant disciplines in our School and I'm very happy to be part of this Department," said Zeller.

He started his career doing research on European languages such as German, English and Dutch, but when he moved to South Africa, he began working on African languages, particularly isiZulu and related languages.

"The indigenous languages of South(ern) Africa are extremely fascinating and are of great interest to any linguist who aims to understand how language works, because their rich morphology, sentence structure and relatively flexible word order reveal a lot about the cognitive mechanisms and principles that underlie the computational system of natural language, which determines our ability to combine words and phrases to produce sentences.

"African languages also inform our understanding of what linguists call the 'interfaces' between different components of language. For example, the interface between phonology and syntax regulates how the tonal and

intonational properties of a language interact with word order; the interface between syntax and semantics governs the relation between structure and meaning, etc. Research on the relevant grammatical properties of African languages has provided many insights into the modular organisation of our language organ and the relationships between different aspects of linguistic knowledge," he said.

In 2019, Zeller was part of an international research team led by scientists from the University of Birmingham and the Leibniz-Centre General Linguistics (ZAS), Berlin, that investigated the 'iconic' properties of natural language.

Humans use visual gestures to express meaning that can be understood by other humans, even if no conventionalised link between the gesture and its meaning has previously been established. For example, the meaning of 'round' can easily be gestured by making a round shape with one's hands; the meaning of 'this' can be expressed by simply pointing at something, etc. In such cases, meaning is established because the visual properties of the sign resemble

or cue its meaning, a property known as 'iconicity'.

The research team investigated if iconicity is also a property of vocalisations, can non-linguistic, non-conventionalised sounds (i.e., sounds that are not words) convey specific meanings that can be understood by people from different cultures and with different linguistic backgrounds?

"To test this, we used non-linguistic vocalisations as our stimuli, which had been recorded by English speakers to signify certain basic concepts. For example, a noise with a rising tone was created to indicate the meaning 'good', a sound with a falling tone was produced for 'bad' etc. (other vocalisations were recorded for animate or inanimate entities, such as 'child' or 'knife', for actions such as 'hunt' or 'cook', or for demonstratives such as 'this' and 'that'" (the recordings can be

found in the Open Science Framework repository: <https://osf.io/4na58/>).

The recordings were then played (online or in the field) to listeners who had never heard these vocalisations before. The listeners (986 participants from different parts of the world, speaking 28 different languages, including isiZulu) then had to choose – from six alternatives – the meaning that they thought was intended by the vocalisation.

The research team discovered that iconic vocalisations can convey a much wider, more accurate range of meanings than previously assumed. The study revealed that the 'missing link' that helped our ancestors to begin communicating with one another through language may have been iconic sounds, rather than charade-like gestures – giving rise to the unique

human power to coin new words to describe the world around us.

As Zeller describes it:

"In both the online and field experiment, our participants generally performed better than chance when identifying the correct meaning of the vocalisations. The study therefore provides evidence that humans from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds have the ability to understand new vocalisations produced by others in order to express basic concepts. Although we cannot draw firm conclusions about how our prehistoric ancestors communicated, our results point to the possibility that rudimentary forms of communication between early humans included iconic vocalisations, and that iconicity may have played a role in the evolution of spoken languages." □

PROMOTING MENTAL HEALTH CARE IN AFRICA

Words by Greg Dardagan



Professor Johannes John-Langba who sits on the board of the World Federation for Mental Health.

An interesting story lies behind the name of Social Work academic, Professor Johannes John-Langba.

John-Langba was born in Sierra Leone on Africa's West Coast not long after the former British colony gained its independence in 1961.

His father named him Johannes after a friend he worked with on the iron ore mines – an unusual name for a West African.

The surname, originally Langba, was changed to John by his grandfather, also a miner, who believed it would help having an English name as control of the mines during the colonial era which began in 1808 was still very much in British hands. "Later my father decided to reintroduce the Langba to reconnect with his African roots," said John-Langba.

His election to the board of the World Federation for Mental Health

(WFMH) and appointment as its Vice-President Africa – with which he plans to promote mental health awareness on the continent – adds to the long list of accolades he has received in his academic career of more than 30 years.

The WFMH promotes mental health awareness, prevention of mental disorders, advocacy, and best practice recovery focused on interventions worldwide.

Another highlight of John-Langba's career was receiving the Dr Inabel Burns Lindsay Social Work Education Leadership Award from the School of Social Work at Howard University in the United States in 2019. An alumnus of the University, he was the first African and only the ninth person to receive this award that is presented to graduates who display similar educational leadership qualities to those of the founding Dean of the institution, Dr Lindsay. "I believe I received the award for the excellence I achieved in social work and the promotion of social justice in Africa. I was very surprised by the honour but was told the university had been tracking my contributions in the field for some time."

One of 13 children, John-Langba was born in Lunsar in the Port Loko district in the north of Sierra Leone and completed his SC/GCE 'O' Level exams at the University Secondary School in Njala and SC/GCE 'A' Levels at the Government Secondary School (Bo School) in the south of the country. He graduated with a BSc. Ed degree from Njala University College (University of Sierra Leone), majoring in Chemistry.

John-Langba's hopes of studying to be a medical doctor were dashed by the outbreak of civil war in 1991, forcing him to flee to the United States where he settled in Maryland and started working for a private institution caring for adults with developmental disabilities and mental health issues. He became a Qualified Developmental Disabilities Professional (QDDP) of the State of Maryland and registered for a Master's degree in Social Work at Howard University in Washington DC in 1998, completing it in 2000. He was awarded the William H and Camille-Hanks-Cosby Fellowship (now Founders Fellowship) for "outstanding scholarship and achievement" as a graduate social work student.

He went on to complete his PhD (Social Work) and another Master's degree in Public Health at the University of Pittsburgh in 2004 after which he received a post-doctoral research Fellowship from the Africa Population and Health Research Centre in Nairobi in Kenya. "Now that I was qualified it was time for me to return to Africa and contribute to research capacity building on the continent. In 2006 I left Kenya after being offered a post of senior lecturer and Child Poverty Programme Manager at the Children's Institute in the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Cape Town (UCT) – my first taste of life in South Africa and one I enjoyed a lot."

“I believe I received the award for the excellence I achieved in social work and the promotion of social justice in Africa. I was very surprised by the honour but was told the university had been tracking my contributions in the field for some time.”

John-Langba took up various senior posts in academia in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Kenya as well as at the United Nations and international NPOs. He was a senior lecturer in UCT's Department of Social Development from 2011 to 2017 when he moved to UKZN to become an associate professor in the Discipline of Social Work.

He is currently Academic Leader of Research and Higher Degrees in the School of Applied Human Sciences

and Director of the College of Humanities' Doctoral Academy. John-Langba represents UKZN on the newly-

launched Anti-Substance Abuse Forum of the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Social Development.

His appointment to the WFMH is in recognition of his contribution to mental health care in Africa over many years. Vice-President of Cape Mental Health – the oldest mental care association in South Africa, John-Langba said he would focus on calling on African governments for greater investment in resources for mental health.

John-Langba, who has made significant contributions to challenging socially restrictive and discriminatory practices affecting the mental health of people in Africa and throughout the world, said he will represent the organisation on all issues involving mental health on the continent.

His appointment is in line with his current research interests on the psychosocial dimensions of the COVID-19 pandemic among university students in Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Botswana; its impact on home-based carers of persons with mental and neurological disorders, and the factors that influence university students in deciding whether to get vaccinated as well as the mental health impacts involved in that decision.

His goals for the future are to promote mental health literacy and awareness in Africa and to conduct research on priority mental health problems among survivors of gender-based violence in South Africa, a neglected area of research. "I also want to investigate the mental health impacts of 'Long COVID' among the poor and vulnerable in Africa."

John-Langba is married to Nasaka - who has a doctorate in Public Law from UCT - and they have two children, a son, Mukeh Lemaiyan (14) and a daughter, Musu Naserian Hawa (9).

He relaxes by watching football – Liverpool in England and Pirates in South Africa are his clubs.

His fervent hope for South Africa is that its people learn to tolerate one another and understand clearly that education is the most sustainable way out of poverty. □

COVID-19 INCREASES RELIANCE ON TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

Words by Bheki Mbanjwa

During the early days of COVID-19, remedies like ginger and garlic that were deemed helpful in fighting the symptoms of the virus flew off the shelves of pharmacies and supermarkets.

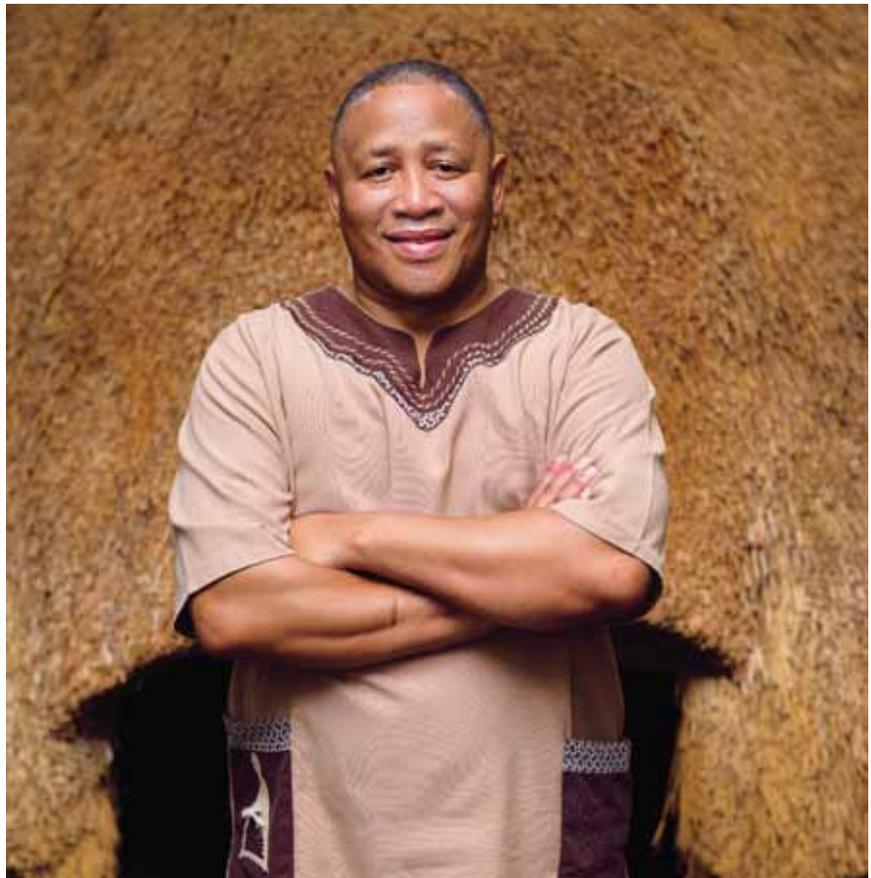
There was also increased use of traditional medicine and other alternatives to treat COVID-19. President Andry Rajoelina of Madagascar made world headlines when he claimed his country had found that a herbal remedy derived from the *artemisa* plant was effective in the fight against the virus. This announcement was warmly received by many leaders, including the late President of Tanzania, John Magufuli who announced in early 2020 that his country was to import the herbal remedy for the treatment of COVID-19 patients.

Before vaccines were developed and made available to people on the African continent, many turned to traditional medicine to fight COVID-19.

Professor Nceba Gqaleni of the Africa Health Research Institute at UKZN said that he heard stories of the over-harvesting of *umhlonyane* (*artemisa-afra* or African Wormwood): “Some people were even pulling the roots of the plant. Steaming became popular on social media,” he recalled.

In-Depth asked Gqaleni to describe exactly what is meant by traditional medicine. He explained that firstly, it refers to an indigenous healthcare system inclusive of practitioners, medicines, and all its supporting systems. Secondly, traditional medicines (plural) refers to products used to treat or manage an unhealthy person. Philosophically, traditional medicine is grounded very differently to biomedicine as it is based on local indigenous knowledge.

“It is holistic and culturally appropriate, while providing persons with health care needs with more than the



Professor Nceba Gqaleni, an expert in traditional medicine.

biological explanations offered by allopathic medicine. It is what people want, while still appreciating the role of biomedicine. Traditional medicine existed long before allopathic medicine was practiced in this country. It is part of the historical memory of our people. It has been part of suffering and has provided the oppressed with resilience. People spend from their own pockets without subsidy from the government or medical aids. This tells you that they derive benefit.”

Gqaleni said that he is not surprised that there has been increased use or reliance on traditional medicine and other alternatives during the COVID-19 pandemic as the world is still scrambling for a cure. This also occurred during the height of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the late 1990s

and early 2000s before anti-retroviral treatment was made freely available.

“Any pandemic without a cure creates anxiety and panic in the population. People look for solutions to protect their health. This not limited to the use of traditional medicines but includes other alternatives like ivermectin (often used for worms in domestic animals).”

How big is the traditional medicine industry? Gqaleni noted that while restrictive legislation during the colonial and apartheid eras rendered this an informal industry, it is showing tremendous growth.

“It is currently estimated to be worth R20 billion annually, creating about 380 000 jobs. These are largely out of pocket expenses of poor households. With the legalisation of Cannabis,



Professor Nceba Gqaleni in the UKZN Traditional Medicine Laboratory.

projections are that by 2023 it will inject R100 billion into the economy.”

However, he highlighted the need for policy and legislative certainty to ensure a good return on investment for entrepreneurs.

“When entrepreneurs see legitimate business opportunities they take them. We are in that time of change”.

Integration into the health care system would also spur the growth of the traditional medicine industry. Despite the Constitution promoting South Africans’ right to freely practice their culture and exercise their choice of health care provision, meaningful integration has been lacking.

Gqaleni attributed this to lack of political will, amongst other things, adding that health care workers are “not interested in traditional medicine due to their lack of training on it.

“We can only achieve this [integration] by integrating traditional medicine in the curriculum of health science students and change in the political leadership of the Department of Health at all levels.”

Given its informality, it is difficult to measure traditional medicine’s impact in the COVID-19 response.

The Department of Science and Innovation is funding a consortium of research institutions to study South African plants traditionally used to treat or manage influenza and respiratory conditions. The results are yet to be published. “This started during the second half of 2020 which was a bit late... At the continental level, the African Union, World Health Organisation and Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) have joined forces and established an expert panel to provide guidance on potential contributions of traditional medicine to the COVID-19 response,” said Gqaleni.

He concluded by saying that given that some members of the public may not want to be vaccinated, it is even more urgent that research on traditional medicines is fast-tracked. □

HOW TRADITIONAL MEDICINE IS REGULATED IN SOUTH AFRICA

The Constitution is the supreme legal instrument in South Africa. It provides that citizens have a right to practice their culture and beliefs and to a health care provider of their choice.

The Health Act is the next level of regulation.

Traditional healers are regulated by the Traditional Health Practitioners Act No 22 of 2007 through the creation of the Interim THP Council with the same status as other health professions’ councils.

The South African Health Products Regulatory Authority is tasked with regulating medicines.

The South African Bureau of Standards facilitates the creation of standards in the industry.

The Department of Environmental Affairs safeguards the protection of our biodiversity while the Department of Science and Innovation has created legislation to protect indigenous knowledge.

The Department of Arts and Culture promotes our heritage. Trade is governed by the Department of Trade and Industry and Small Business.

Each municipality has by-laws pertaining to aspects of traditional medicine at a local and community level.

HARNESSING TECHNOLOGY TO PROVIDE COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Words by Colleen Dardagan

Acutely aware of the challenges facing 'fragile' pastoral groups at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, UKZN's National Research Foundation SARChI Chair in Sustainable Local (Rural) Livelihoods, Professor Betty Mubangizi turned to technology to provide community support and conduct research on the impact of the crisis in these regions.

Mubangizi set up a series of online webinars during the 2020 national lockdown to explore the preservation of income in rural areas and the efficacy of the local government response to the pandemic, while at the same time providing critical information to assist people in keeping themselves safe from infection.

The webinars' guests also drew on insights from previous research in the areas of Matatiele and Mbizana in the Eastern Cape to explain how the social fabric of outlying villages was under heightened threat during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the historical nature of their vulnerabilities such as the lack of service provision and income opportunities.

The webinars were followed by purpose-driven podcasts where guests could enter into conversations relating to issues pertinent to the Chair's overall research objectives on the resilience and needs of rural communities, particularly in a time of crisis. Guests included representatives from non-government and not-for-profit organisations as well as municipal and government officials and community leaders.

Links to the podcasts and webinars were shared far and wide by the researchers, the podcast hosts and guests. The online meeting platform Zoom, as well as the messaging application WhatsApp were used.



Professor Betty C Mubangizi, UKZN's SARChI Chair in Sustainable Local (Rural) Livelihoods.

A second series of podcasts is in the planning stages.

The 10 podcasts titled: SARChI Insights (on Sustainable Local Rural Livelihoods) followed a simple format which included an introduction, conversation or interview and finally, a call to action which in some instances was simply asking listeners to adhere to COVID-19 safety measures to help prevent infection.

"One of the main highlights from the podcasts was capturing how individual people, municipal officials

and community organisations in these remote districts were grappling with and trying to make sense of life, work, and their livelihoods in the context of the uncertainties, disruptions and changing regulations linked to the COVID-19 pandemic," Mubangizi said.

In the podcasts, hosted by Dr Sokfa John – a postdoctoral student under the Chair, participants raised issues such as access to drinking water, sanitation and transport services in the context of the lockdown. "Many of our guests emphasised the role played by traditional leaders and

the importance of engaging in discussions which – particularly during the lockdown – highlighted how multiple actors can play a significant role in supporting governance and livelihoods in rural areas.

Most agreed that while local governments have the mandate to provide services in far-flung regions, on their own, they are generally unable to drive economic activities. We discovered there is real merit in promoting a hybrid governance system that is able to include traditional leaders and democratically elected local government to further the provision of services in rural areas," she said.

Concerns raised over the cessation of public works programmes during national lockdown which offer much-needed short-term employment for rural people, gave rise to an important discussion on income diversification. "The public works programmes are clearly crucial to the economic viability of resource-poor communities. It also became clear how important it is for people to rely on community programmes and projects to derive an income rather than the government's social grant system. To this end, long-term endeavours to promote soil conservation, catchment management and rangeland management within the framework of good governance were highlighted for improved income earning opportunities in livestock-dependent communities," commented Mubangizi.

While the initial podcasts highlighted the important work the speakers and guests were involved in and the critical impact of that work in the aforementioned communities, this contrasted sharply with the sense of powerlessness created by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the tension between personal motivation and social aspiration on the one hand, and the frustration of not being able to continue with or sustain existing development projects on the other.

"This was exacerbated by fears of what would become of all these projects in which so much energy and resources were invested over time," she said.

Interestingly, according to Mubangizi, the later podcast episodes demonstrated less anxiety and

increasing acceptance and mastery of how to navigate what is termed the 'new normal'. Perhaps most importantly, guests explained how they drew clear lessons and insight on how to respond to future disasters or emergencies.

“The public works programmes are clearly crucial to the economic viability of resource-poor communities.”

"We were impressed by the willingness of the guests to share their stories and to reflect on their ongoing activities and future ideals," said Mubangizi.

About the Chair in Sustainable Local (Rural) Livelihoods

While the poor and the socially excluded in Western societies are likely to be found in towns and cities, in South Africa - and indeed in most African countries - they are more likely to be found in rural and far-flung areas of the country and are also most likely to be women. Processes that respond to poverty and social exclusion thus have to take cognisance of not only the spatial aspects, but the gender dimension of poverty and exclusion as well.

Although NGOs and the private sector play a role in addressing the phenomenon of poverty and social exclusion, the role of the state is quintessential in bringing about meaningful change in that respect. This is particularly pertinent to the South African context where the many years of colonial and apartheid policies advanced rural subjugation with women bearing the brunt of these policies.

Against this backdrop, it is critical to question the extent to which the nature, as well as the structure of the public sector's service delivery system, is cognisance of the rural-urban divide. More particularly, it is also important to question the extent to which the public

sector is accessible to the rural based and the socially excluded populace.

Answering these questions is essential to designing long-term interventions for addressing social inclusion and rural poverty. The Chair in Sustainable Local (Rural) Livelihoods is posited in the theory and practice of public administration and focuses on the public service delivery system as critical to reducing social exclusion and poverty among the rural, mainly women populace. It examines the forward and backward linkages between the state and agencies and/or individuals responsible for implementing public services and antipoverty programmes in rural areas.

Theoretically, the work of the Chair draws on three distinct (though interrelated) theories: organisational theory, intergovernmental relations (IGR) theory as well as institutional theory.

The Chair is geared towards unpacking how policy is understood, interpreted and delivered by public officials (and partners) in the context of rural poverty reduction and women empowerment. More specifically, it will examine the policy processes with a view to establishing those criteria that facilitate optimal implementation of policy in a manner that is gender-sensitive, rural-friendly and pro-poor.

In doing so, the work of the Chair will support the capacity of researchers and public administrators to formulate and support effective public administration processes in responding to poverty and social exclusion within the framework of sustainable livelihoods. □



UKZN NEWS

HIGHLIGHTS



LAUNCH OF PROFESSOR NCOZA DLOVA MEDICAL STUDENT FUND

Dean and Head of UKZN's School of Clinical Medicine, Professor Ncoza Dlova launched a fund to support Medical students with historical debt. The fund will ensure that education is a reality for those who are struggling financially with the investment in future medical doctors injecting much needed human resources in an already overburdened healthcare system.

Professor Ncoza Dlova.



Dr Kiara Worth (right) with UN Secretary-General António Guterres.



Filed images of the UKZN Graduation Ceremonies.

THE PAGEENTRY IS BACK - UKZN RETURNS TO IN-PERSON GRADUATION CEREMONIES

Known for their glamour mixed with pomp, pageantry and memorable celebrations, UKZN's iconic in-person graduation ceremonies made a comeback during May. This news was welcomed by the thousands of 2022 graduands who got a chance to walk across the graduation stage and were celebrated in true UKZN style. It was the first time since the outbreak of COVID-19 that UKZN hosted in-person graduation ceremonies that were replaced by virtual ceremonies in 2020 and 2021 due to COVID-19 restrictions at the time.

UKZN ALUMNUS OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPHER FOR UN SECRETARY-GENERAL AT COP26 CLIMATE CONFERENCE

UKZN alumnus, Dr Kiara Worth had a grandstand view of deliberations at the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Glasgow, Scotland, where as an official photographer, her services were provided to world leaders and activists, including former US President Barack Obama and Hollywood actor Leonardo DiCaprio. Worth, who was the photographer for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and was assigned to UN Secretary-General António Guterres at the conference, completed a Bachelor of Social Science and Master's in Agriculture at UKZN and a PhD in Political Science at the University of the Western Cape.



SA STRUGGLING TO MEET EXPECTATIONS OF DEMOCRACY - DEPUTY PUBLIC PROTECTOR

South Africa is still struggling to meet the expectations of democracy 28 years after the end of apartheid, according to the Deputy Public Protector of South Africa and UKZN alumnus, Advocate Kholeka Gcaleka. Speaking at UKZN's annual lecture to commemorate Human Rights Month, Gcaleka said the Constitution had promised a better life for all and an end to injustices. However, the country was bedeviled by a variety of unethical behaviour including maladministration, indifference and corruption which had caused a loss of trust in public institutions which are meant to support the people and the country. She referred to a recent report by the World Bank which said South Africa was still the most unequal country in the world.



From left: HPP Director, Professor Thumbi Ndung'u and Prince Mshiyeni Hospital CEO, Dr MG Khawula with Department of Health and HPP officials at the launch of the new HIV research clinic.

UKZN HIV PATHOGENESIS PROGRAMME LAUNCHES NEW HIV RESEARCH CLINIC

The UKZN HIV Pathogenesis Programme (HPP) under the leadership of Professor Thumbi Ndung'u launched a new HIV research clinic at Prince Mshiyeni Memorial Hospital on 18 February. The clinic will be used to run clinical trials like the Acute Infection Study, Elite Controller Study, and Lymph Node Study, etc. Study volunteers will be counselled and consent to provide samples to advance biomedical research at UKZN. Postgraduate students, postdoctoral fellows and researchers in the College of Health Sciences will utilise the samples to conduct research. The clinic will also offer counselling and health education, as well as free HIV tests to patients visiting the hospital including the study volunteers.



Professor Julia Sibiyi featured on PBS International's Plant Breeding Stories podcast.

PLANT BREEDING PROFESSOR PROMOTES HER DISCIPLINE ON INTERNATIONAL PODCAST

Associate Professor of Plant Breeding at UKZN Professor Julia Sibiyi featured in an episode of PBS International's Plant Breeding Stories podcast where she spoke about her career in the field of plant breeding, her research on the improvement of cereal crops, and the importance of encouraging young people to consider careers in agriculture. Sibiyi is the Academic Leader for the Production Sciences cluster in UKZN's School of Agricultural, Earth and Environmental Sciences and Vice-President of the African Plant Breeders Association (APBA).



Dr Fareed Abdullah received the French *Ordre National du Mérite*.

UKZN MEDICAL ALUMNUS AWARDED FRENCH NATIONAL ORDER OF MERIT

A graduate of UKZN's Nelson R Mandela School of Medicine (Class of 1987), Dr Fareed Abdullah, received the French *Ordre National du Mérite* (National Order of Merit) for his work as a clinical researcher and public health scientist in the fight against HIV and TB. The National Order of Merit, launched in 1963, is awarded by the President of France. Abdullah currently serves as Director: Office of AIDS and TB Research at the South African Medical Research Council while holding a part-time appointment as an HIV clinician in the Division of Infectious Diseases at the Steve Biko Academic Hospital in Pretoria.



UKZN RANKS AMONGST THE TOP THREE UNIVERSITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

Earlier this year, UKZN rated number three in South Africa in a new ranking by University Ranking by Academic Performance (URAP) at the Middle East Technical University's Informatics Institute in Turkey. The rankings show the University's national and global position. At the global level, UKZN is placed at 358. The URAP ranking system focuses on academic quality. A total of 3 000 Higher Education Institutions as well as 61 different specialised subject areas were assessed globally. The rankings were released on 15 December 2021.



Professor Cristina Trois, South African Research Chair (SARChI) in Waste and Climate Change.

UKZN HONOURS TOP FEMALE ACADEMICS IN ENGINEERING AND GEOGRAPHY

Professor Cristina Trois, South African Research Chair (SARChI) in Waste and Climate Change and Dr Jemma Finch of the Discipline of Geography earned recognition from UKZN in the form of a Fellowship of the University and the Vice-Chancellor's Research Award, respectively. Fellowship is awarded to Professors or Senior Professors in recognition of distinguished academic achievement and the production of high-quality scholarly work that demonstrates originality and creativity.



Dr Jemma Finch of the Discipline of Geography.



Dean and Head of the School of Education, Professor Thabo Msibi.



Dean and Head of the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics, Professor David Spurrett.

HUMANITIES ACADEMICS RECOGNISED FOR OUTSTANDING PERFORMANCE

Two academics in UKZN's College of Humanities have been recognised for their outstanding performance. Dean and Head of the School of Education Professor Thabo Msibi was awarded the prestigious UKZN Vice-Chancellor's Research Award, while Dean and Head of the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics (SRPC) Professor David Spurrett received a UKZN Fellowship. Said Msibi, "I'm both humbled and honoured to be recognised by the University in this special manner. This VC's Research Award is an affirmation of my work over the years." Msibi is the youngest Dean in South Africa and the first Black South African scholar in Education to be awarded a prestigious P-Rating by the National Research Foundation (NRF).

