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## UCT academic awarded prestigious fellowship for groundbreaking isiXhosa research



Sanele Ntshingana

Photo: Supplied

University of Cape Town (UCT) lecturer in [African Languages & Literature](#), Sanele Ntshingana, is one of 18 global fellows selected for the W.E.B. Du Bois Research Institute Fellowship at the Hutchins Center for African & African American Research at Harvard University.

During his four-month stay as a Mandela Fellow at Harvard, he will focus on his book project titled *Theorizing Political Authority from Vernacular Concepts: The Political Discourse of isiXhosa-Speaking African Intellectuals from South Africa, 1836–1914*. The project explores how 19th and early 20th century isiXhosa-speaking African intellectuals theorised political authority using vernacular concepts.

"It is both a privilege and an honour. I'm incredibly excited. This is a highly competitive fellowship, and only one academic from UCT is selected each year. Many exceptional scholars at UCT, doing remarkable work, apply and are not selected. That makes this opportunity even more meaningful to me," Ntshingana said.

While at Harvard, Ntshingana will also participate in the weekly colloquium series hosted by the W.E.B. Du Bois Research Institute, where he will present a paper. In addition, he will present his work at the African Studies Association Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, in November 2025.

Ntshingana is currently doing his PhD in [Historical Studies](#) at UCT. In 2019, he received the Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders – the flagship programme of the US Government's Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI) – at the Fanning Leadership Institute, University of Georgia.

### **Selection process**

To be considered for selection, applicants had to clearly outline their intended research at the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute, explain how being at Harvard – and specifically at the institute – would enhance their research profile, and demonstrate how the work would contribute to the development of teaching and learning in higher education in South Africa.

Applicants first submit their applications to UCT for the Mandela-Harvard Fellowship. UCT's selection committee then reviews the applications and recommends two or three top candidates to Harvard. The Harvard selection committee then makes the final decision.

"I believe my research proposal and teaching plans were compelling to both the local selection committee and the final review panel at Harvard," said Ntshingana.

Ntshingana said he submitted his formal application in February, although the process began earlier. "It was a rigorous and intense experience that required me to have a clear sense of the research I intended to pursue at Harvard, as well as a plan for teaching and research upon my return," he explained.

His proposal was shortlisted and forwarded to Harvard for the final selection. "At that stage, I was assigned a reader – Dr Jeffrey Murray, a recent recipient of the UCT-Harvard Mandela Fellowship – who assisted with refining certain aspects of my application. The internal process at UCT was incredibly supportive and encouraging throughout," he said.

"The UCT-Harvard Mandela Fellowship offers a unique opportunity to strengthen my scholarship through access to Harvard's rich academic resources and by presenting my research at key African Studies conferences. Beyond this, the fellowship will help establish enduring academic networks and foster innovative research initiatives upon my return."

"One of my plans is to design an inter-departmental Honours course at UCT that explores African political thought through vernacular sources. This course would bring together students and colleagues from African Studies, African Languages and Historical Studies, encouraging postgraduates to engage directly with African-language historical texts rather than relying solely on colonial archives," he said.

### **Establishing research networks**

Through the networks formed during the fellowship, Ntshingana also hopes to create exchange opportunities between his graduate students and those at Harvard who are working in similar areas, promoting dialogue and shared learning across institutions.

"Another initiative I plan to develop is a research group focused on African intellectual history, particularly using African-language archives. This group would include research partners in the US and would host regular reading sessions and annual research development workshops. These workshops would be hybrid to accommodate international participation, offering spaces for feedback, collaboration and knowledge exchange," he explained.

Ultimately, these initiatives aim to "nurture a rigorous, interdisciplinary postgraduate cohort attuned to vernacular epistemologies. This work will contribute to building a more inclusive historiography that centres African ways of knowing and supports the emergence of a critically engaged generation of scholars. It is an important step in advancing a transformative knowledge base in South African higher education," Ntshingana concluded.

***Ends***

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