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UCT drives a new generation of female scientists in human evolution research

The story of human evolution has long been told with fossils from South Africa – discovered by a privileged few. The Human Evolution Research Institute (HERI) at the University of Cape Town (UCT) aims to change that with a new generation of female scientists.

“We have an incredible record of human evolution in South Africa, but the entire narrative of palaeoanthropology has been dominated by white men, many of whom are not even South African,” says HERI’s Director Dr Robyn Pickering.

“We want to disrupt this narrative by supporting South African researchers from all backgrounds and telling our origin story with a diverse and inclusive team.”

HERI aims to do this with projects that break down barriers faced by young researchers. Among these are annual field camps that give women confidence in the remote sites their research will take them.

“Fieldwork is a big aspect of palaeoanthropology, but many of these women don’t know what to expect because they’re not exposed to hiking and camping in their upbringing,” says Pickering.

Apart from feeling unprepared, women can also be subjected to a boys’ club mentality and sexual harassment. This is harmful not only for palaeoanthropology, but for other field-based sciences.

“Harassment and inappropriate conduct are a reality in the field. Through these camps, we hope to inform codes of conduct that improve equality and safety,” says HERI’s Deputy Director Rebecca Ackermann, who is UCT’s Deputy Dean of Transformation in the Science Faculty.

HERI is also investing in black women who want to pursue careers in palaeoanthropology, including archaeology, geology and evolutionary biology.

The institute has launched a call for applications to two PhD fellowships and one postdoctoral fellowship for study starting in 2020. Applications will be accepted until 20 August 2019.

"This funding is critical to ensuring that these women stay in academia and show that they have a rightful place in palaeoanthropology," says Pickering.

HERI has been committed to diversity since its start in 2016, under the directorship of Ackermann. It has strengthened that stance thanks to support from UCT's Advancing Womxn initiative.

With only 39% of science researchers in South Africa being women, HERI's focus couldn't come at a better time.

"It's about time institutions and groups made it part of their memorandum to include young black women and people of colour," says HERI student Nomawethu Hlazo.

Hlazo is a PhD student in Archaeology at UCT studying the fossils of *Paranthropus*, a distant human relative that was discovered in east and South Africa. Currently, she is the only black South African woman, and one of only a few South Africans, to focus her research on the evolution of these fossils.

"Having access to this history on our doorstep is something to be proud of," she says. "It means I can take pride in where I come from and what I'm doing to tell our origin story as a black South African woman."

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Notes to Editors

- For more information on HERI visit: www.heriuct.co.za
- For information on HERI's fellowship opportunities visit: bit.ly/2MJwXcK
- For interviews and media requests contact heri.uct@gmail.com / +27 (0)78 061 2523
- High resolution images and other information is available at: bit.ly/2IccdPt

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