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UCT launches milestone Khoi and San Centre

The University of Cape Town (UCT) recently launched the Khoi and San Centre, which will foreground erased or marginalised indigenous knowledge, rituals, language and “ways of knowing” of the San and Khoi clans across the university and its communities. Many of their descendants still live in communities across the Cape Flats – and many are students, staff and graduates of the university.

The development continues many years of groundwork by academics such as UCT’s Dr June Bam-Hutchison who has worked extensively in indigenous heritage. Last year UCT held its maiden Khoekhoegowab language short course, a partnership between the Centre for African Studies (CAS) and the Centre for Extra-Mural Studies. With only 167 000 speakers remaining, Khoekhoegowab is one of the continent’s endangered indigenous languages.

Four 12-week courses were convened by the A/Xarra Restorative Justice Forum and CAS, supported by UCT’s Multilingualism Education Project. It was the first of its kind for a South African university.

Bam-Hutchison said she was delighted that the archives – the languages, knowledge and rituals – of those who once lived on the slopes of the mountain were now being made visible through the centre.

“It is almost unthinkable that these things have now been moved to [the] centre at the historically white university associated so much with colonialism and those deep wounds of the past.”

Speaking at the launch, Vice-Chancellor Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng said that the new centre aims to become the foremost research centre of its kind, producing research of international standing and developing bespoke African philosophies and epistemologies through socially engaged research partnerships in San and Khoi studies.

It will also develop a San and Khoi digital archive based on South African minoritised languages and host research fellows and visiting fellows to grow a strong cohort of PhDs in the field.

A highlight of the launch was the announcement that an undergraduate programme offering Khoekhoegowab would be developed at UCT in the next five years.

In foregrounding the Khoekhoegowab language, Bam-Hutchison said that they were also mindful of all the other marginalised Southern African languages and the “entanglement within the San and Khoi archive of knowledges and multilingualism and languages”.

The centre also acknowledges the importance of adding to a global body of work in the indigenous languages, those of other first-nation groups in New Zealand, Australia, Canada, etc.

To that end the new centre will work with the Worldwide Universities Network.

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