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UCT researchers win big at NRF Awards

Five researchers from the University of Cape Town (UCT) have been recognised for their outstanding achievements and contributions to society at this year's National Research Foundation (NRF) awards ceremony.

Held annually, the NRF Awards recognises individual researchers and teams for outstanding achievements that have had an impact on society. Their internationally competitive work is assessed with a strong emphasis on its quality and impact.

Five UCT researchers were awarded in four categories.

Dr Neelakshi Mungra, of the Department of Integrative Biomedical Sciences was honoured with a Research Excellence Award for Next Generation Researchers. This award recognises outstanding academic performance by final year doctoral students.

Mungra's research looks at engineering affordable cutting-edge antibody technologies that can be used to leverage the development of diagnostic and therapeutic tools for cancer and infectious diseases, especially in developing countries like South Africa.

Associate Professor Christopher Ouma, of the Department of English Language and Literature received a Research Excellence Award for Early Career / Emerging Researchers in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

This award recognises outstanding research excellence by current Thuthuka grant-holders. Thuthuka is central to the NRF's Human Capital Development strategy and aims to redress historical imbalances in the South African researcher cohort.

Ouma's career path, so far, has been framed by two research projects. The first draws connections between childhood studies and African diasporic studies, gender studies, and memory studies in the context of contemporary African identity formation. The other lies at the intersection of literary history and cultural studies by examining small (literary) magazines in mid-century Africa (1955–1975) and the ways they created conditions for Pan-African imagination.

Professor Rachel Wynberg, of the Department of Environmental and Geographical Science received a Public Engagement in Research Award. This award recognises researchers and scientists who make outstanding contributions to public engagement with research over a sustained period.

As the Department of Science and Innovation/National Research Foundation South African Research Chair (SARChI) in the Social and Environmental Dimensions of the Bio-economy, Wynberg's work aims to address the knowledge gaps that exist around the environmental, political and social dynamics of the bio-economy.

Professor Liesl Zühlke, of the Department of Paediatrics and Child Health received the Public Engagement in Research Award.

With her work focusing on neglected cardiovascular diseases of childhood, Zühlke has prioritised raising awareness about this relatively niche and unknown field by engaging patients and communities and disseminating her team's research findings to the affected public. She has made extra efforts to engage with audiences outside of her research domain through multiple mediums.

Professor Sharon Prince, head of Department of Human Biology, was honoured with the Hamilton Naki Award.

Named after the self-taught surgeon who trained generations of medical students in surgical techniques, the Hamilton Naki Award honours individuals for advancing their careers in science and achieving world-class research performance despite considerable challenges.

Prince leads a large research group that studies novel therapeutic interventions and drug targets for the treatment of cancer. She has supervised 78 students from honours to postdoctoral level, most of whom were from marginalised groups. Since 2001, she has published more than 72 articles in peer-reviewed publications, including *PLoS Genetics* and *Nature Communications*.

What makes these achievements more remarkable is the journey Prince undertook to get here.

Prince grew up in a large family with limited financial resources in an area of the Western Cape characterised by high unemployment and crime. While her parents lacked formal educations, they placed a strong emphasis on their children's schooling, encouraging them to excel.

She enrolled for a Bachelor of Science degree at UCT under a special dispensation that allowed black people to study at a 'white' university. Prince helped found the Azanian Students Organisation whose guiding principle was the struggle for the creation of a democratic South Africa, free of racist oppression and exploitation.

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