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SA's language learning policy needs to include African languages at universities



Naledi Mapono

Photo: Supplied

African-language-speaking students at South African universities must enjoy the same learning privileges afforded to English- and Afrikaans-speaking students. Changing South Africa's language learning policy is crucial to this process and a fundamental step towards decolonising the education curricula in higher education institutions in the country.

This is according to Naledi Mapono, a PhD candidate in the University of Cape Town's (UCT) African Languages and Literatures section in the School of Languages and Literatures. Mapono is a part-time lecturer at the South African College of Applied Psychology and recently concluded a lecturing stint at UCT where she lectured medical students in isiXhosa communication, as well as first and second language acquisition of isiXhosa to students in the Department of African Languages.

Currently she is a curriculum development specialist at Curro Digital Education, and runs her own company, Inkwenkwezi Language Services – a business that offers clients a range of language services. She is passionate about developing African languages in the education system and to use it as a vehicle for change to address the myriad of challenges in the sector.

Maionocono has already been recognised for her work. She was recently named one of News24's [30 Young Mandelas of the Future](#). The list comprises several young changemakers who embody the true spirit of Nelson Mandela, and who, in their own unique ways, are making a difference in South Africa. In celebration of Women's Month, UCT News will highlight exceptional women in the campus community – Maionocono is one of them.

"Wow! To be likened to an icon like Madiba is massive. I am touched and honoured that I've made this list. It has motivated me to continue working hard and playing my part in creating a better South Africa," she said.

The topic of Maionocono's PhD research is "Analysis of language policy implementation in higher education". Through her research, she seeks to develop a monitoring and evaluation tool specifically targeted at government – to assess its progress and readiness to implement the use of African languages in higher education institutions – for teaching and learning purposes. This idea, Maionocono explained, is in line with the National Language Policy Framework, which aims to promote and strengthen the use of all official languages across functional domains of public higher education institutions in the country.

The goal of her monitoring and evaluation tool is to assist with developing African languages into academic teaching and learning languages and to ensure that institutions of higher learning adopt them. What she'd like to see long-term is for all South African students to receive their education in a multilingual environment in a language that they understand. This, she believes, will help them thrive.

Currently, Maionocono is the only academic in African languages in the country who has embarked on a research project of this kind. This, she said, means that she will be the first South African researcher to make work of lifting government's National Language Policy Framework from its "previously diminished status" to aid the language policy at institutions of higher learning.

Maionocono said she hopes that her research will play a significant role with moving South Africa forward by ensuring access to education for all, despite students' language of choice.

"Changing the language policy plays a vital role in helping students familiarise themselves with the campus environment and the course work," she said. "As things change and I reach my goal, I hope that it gives African-language-speaking students the confidence to apply at any institution of higher learning without any concerns about a language barrier."

More than that, she hopes her research will motivate other would-be scholars to pursue their tertiary education in African languages to grow the pool of academics in this underserved field of study. Maionocono said she hopes her research will also provide government with the jump start they need to implement the Language Policy Framework for Higher Education Institutions.

Story by Niémah Davids, UCT News.

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