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UCT launches groundbreaking mechanical engineering isiXhosa glossary



Professor Lolie Makhubu-Badenhorst

Photo: Robyn Walker

The University of Cape Town (UCT) has introduced the Mechanical Engineering isiXhosa Glossary, which was recently launched by the Centre for Higher Education Development's (CHED) Multilingualism Education Project (MEP).

This glossary of terms is "groundbreaking" and is in keeping with enhancing student success not only at UCT but at universities across the country, said the director of the MEP, Professor Lolie Makhubu-Badenhorst.

"As universities, we suffer with the success rate and throughput of students, and part of our research has proven that the issues of success and access are hindered by language. As we

make these terms accessible in an indigenous language, we hope that it will contribute to the success of students.

“We are looking forward to using the terms because in the past when we developed terms, we would keep them to ourselves because they were not authenticated by the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB). They are now authenticated and verified and now we can disseminate them,” said Makhubu-Badenhorst.

As explained by the head of the Department of Mechanical Engineering, Professor Brandon Collier-Reed, the glossary undertaking began in May 2022 and currently contains over 300 terms. At the time, he said, some first-year students couldn’t understand the terms in the textbook.

“We were trying to engage with enabling better literacy and language practices in our first-year classes. There’s no doubt that many of them were struggling – not because they were struggling to do the work, but they couldn’t understand what they were working with.

“This project came at exactly the right time to ... enable us to leverage these great ideas and bring them into the classroom. We can now use these terms actively in lectures,” said Collier-Reed.

Constitutional ideal

The process involved collating commonly used terms, collaborating with academic teaching assistants, and trawling through dictionaries and encyclopaedias to produce their current product.

PanSALB chief executive officer, Lance Schultz, said such innovation from the staff at UCT is invaluable. “With about 7 000 languages spoken around the world today, it is estimated that 40% of the world’s population does not have access to an education in a language they speak or understand.

“Whilst the constitutional ideal for promoting multilingualism in the country has oftentimes been perceived as a problem or a challenge, research has demonstrated that education based on one’s mother tongue is crucial for inclusion and high-quality learning.

“This achievement is a result of extensive work by language experts, and the isiXhosa national language body who undertook this work through research and deliberation to ensure the mechanical engineering isiXhosa glossary is properly authenticated and verified. Standardisation engenders order in the use of language, thereby promoting optimal efficacy. I applaud UCT for upholding the standardisation process and I hope other higher learning institutions will follow suit if they have not already done so,” said Schultz.

Digital data sets

Another key development that emerged was the digitalisation and dissemination of the resource, with the intention to make it accessible to as many students as possible. Executive director at the South African Centre for Digital Language Resources, Professor Langa Khumalo, said that digital data sets are the first resource that needed to be developed to safeguard indigenous languages.

“Whenever we think of solutions to bridge the resource gap, we always think about a connected solution, which makes it easy for us to develop a system here at UCT that Stellenbosch University, the University of the Western Cape and Fort Hare can access.

“If we have that architecture that can make it accessible to all universities, then it will make it easy for us to maximise the funding available for this exercise because the ultimate goal is the end-user; the student with an imperative of student access and success.”

[Access the glossary.](#)

Story by Kamva Somdyala, UCT News

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