



**RECLAIMING PURPOSE: WOMEN LEADING ETHICAL
CHANGE IN THE AI-POWERED ACADEMY
2025 EDITION**

Table of Contents

2025 EDITION

04	FOREWORD FROM CHAIRPERSON Foreword by Dr Soraya Beukes, Chairperson of HERS-SA
07	HERS-SA BOARD MEMBERS Photographs and brief profiles of the HERS-SA Board Members
08	MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR Message from Dr Naziema Jappie, Director of HERS-SA
10	EWLP ARTICLES Feature Articles by Emerging Women Leaders Programme (EWLP) Alumni
18	MENTORSHIP ARTICLES Feature Articles by Emerging Women Leaders Programme (EWLP) Alumni
21	ACADEMY ARTICLES Feature Articles by Academy Speakers, Presenters, and Alumni
40	AWARD CEREMONY ARTICLES Award Winners: Articles and photographs from the Awards Ceremony
61	SPONSORS Acknowledgement Section: A word of thanks to our valued sponsors

CONTRIBUTORS

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

DR NAZIEMA JAPPIE

ARTICLE EDITOR

SAM VENTER

CONTENT DIRECTOR

DR NAZIEMA JAPPIE &
ODETTE ANTONIO

MAGAZINE COMPILATION & DESIGN

ODETTE ANTONIO

PHOTOGRAPHER

ANSURETTE

ARTICLE CONTRIBUTORS

DR SORAYA BEUKES

DR DIONNE ROSSER-
MIMMS

DR NAOMI LUMUTENGA

DR NEERAJ MISTRY

DR LINDA NAICKER

DR BONGIWE MCATA

DR SHARON MUNYAKA

DR VUYOKAZI MNTUYEDWA

MR TUMISO MFISA

MS MEL TOMLINSON

MS THEMBEKILE MADONDO

MS ZETHU LUBISIS

PROF BONGANI NCUBE

PROF CLAUDE-HÉLÈNE
MAYER

PROF PAMELA DUBE

PROF SORAYA BARDIEN

PROF TEMBISA NGQONDI

PROF TINA UYS

TASNEEM WADVALLA





ABOUT HERS-SA

Higher Education Resource Services South Africa (HERS-SA) is a registered non-profit organisation (NPO). It was founded in 2003 to address the critical shortage of women in senior positions in the higher education (HE) sector in South Africa. Our activities include, inter alia, professional development workshops, advocacy, community outreach and engagement, research, coaching, mentoring, networking, and pursuing collaboration opportunities. Our premier programmes on leadership encompass the HERS-SA Emerging Women Leaders Programme, HERS-SA Academy, and the Higher Education Women Leaders Awards. All these activities are aimed at women who currently hold leadership positions in a HE institution or who wish to prepare for leadership positions in HE institutions.

HERS-SA programmes this year focused on embracing the 5th Industrial Revolution and Artificial Intelligence – ethically and responsibly, in the HE workplace and in developing graduate attributes, emphasising the importance of blending digital and human-centric skills.



Artificial Intelligence, the 5th Industrial Revolution (5IR) and disruption: Staying ahead of the curve through evolving the role of leaders in higher education

Embracing the 5IR

It is said that “the only constant is change”. Such are the various industrial revolutions that have introduced new technologies and production methods and thereby changed industries and societies.

\

The 5IR has been touted as the integration of humans and machines. Rethinking human skills, as machines take over repetitive tasks. This frees up human skills of creativity, problem-solving and strategic thinking, underpinned by emotional intelligence. Hence the role of employees is shifting, dictated by the fusion of AI and humans. A key focus in higher education is the ethical and responsible use of technology. In this regard, ethical standards should be observed while driving societal evolution through technology.

The 5IR encourages keeping ahead of the curve and the higher education landscape should align its graduate attributes to the transforming job market. Insightful leadership in higher education recognises that these new job skills require continuous up-skilling and adaptation to new technologies to stay relevant.

Hard facts on AI

Although AI is advancing automation of routine and technical jobs, it underperforms human-centric skills. These essential skills and abilities remain valuable to employers. As it is, only humans can think “out of the box”, bringing their leadership and decision-making skills. Lest we forget, human-centred skills like EQ and adaptability are beyond the reach of AI.

It is the resilience of employees that is needed in a constantly evolving professional environment. Notwithstanding this, AI is an integral part of business operations and students should be encouraged to use AI appropriately. There should be a focus on courses that cover digital transformation, AI ethics and innovation management. These subjects provide insights into the ways that technology works with business processes, ethics and social dynamics. The growing role of AI suggests the need for education systems to adapt to enhance employability after university graduation.

The workplace mantra is driven by the digital economy, requiring resilience to stay ahead and adaptability for the changing job market. Hence professionals are adding AI skills to their portfolios. These skills are essential in the digital economy where AI is a collaborator rather than a disrupter; to improve productivity and uncover new solutions.

Universities should lay the foundation for continuous learning and blend ethical AI integration into their graduate attributes. These attributes should be a blend of technology proficiency and human-centric competence, to ultimately produce graduates that are well positioned to lead and innovate in an increasingly automated world. The Higher Education sector is set to lead the ethical fusion of technology and humans. Hence, the digital divide should be kept in check in order for student equity to flourish.

Dr Soraya Beukes

CHAIRPERSON OF HERS-SA BOARD



Dr Soraya Beukes is chairperson of the HERS-SA Board. She is a human rights lawyer, Doctor of Public Law, member of the BRICS Community of Practice in Law and Governance, journal editor, academic lecturer, researcher and author:

HERS-SA BOARD MEMBERS

Dr Soraya Beukes

Dr Soraya Beukes, a Human rights lawyer, Doctor of Public Law, member of BRICS COP Fellowship, journal editor, academic lecturer, researcher and author.

Chairperson



Ms Shahieda Hendricks-Adams

Ms Shahieda Hendricks-Adams is an experienced HR and development practitioner specialising in neuro-based coaching, training, and facilitation. She manages Staff Learning and Development at CPUT.

Deputy-Chairperson



Dr Mamsie Motshekga-Sebolai

Experienced education executive and Certified Business Coach, Dr Mamsie Motshekga-Sebolai is CEO of 3KM Coaching & Consulting and a HERS-SA Board Member, passionate about empowering women leaders.

Chairperson: HR Committee



Nonkululeko Tsita

Ms Nonkululeko Tsita is a seasoned finance professional with 25+ years' experience in management accounting, costing models, budgeting, and strategic financial planning across public and private sectors.

Finance and Fundraising



Ursula Riddles

Ms Ursula Riddles is a finance professional with 18 years' experience, specializing in financial management and commerce. She manages TFG's accounts payable and is pursuing a doctorate in Business Informatics.

Finance and Fundraising



MESSAGE

from the

DIRECTOR

Dr Naziema Jappie



Reimagining the Future: Women in Higher Education and the Promise of AI

As I step into the role of Director of HERS-SA, I do so with deep gratitude and a renewed sense of purpose. My journey with HERS-SA began in 2003, and over the decades, I have witnessed the remarkable resilience, vision, and leadership of women across South African and African higher education institutions. Today, we stand at the edge of yet another seismic shift—one driven by the transformative power of Artificial Intelligence (AI). It is both a challenge and an opportunity, particularly for women in academia.

A New Frontier in Higher Education

Artificial Intelligence is no longer a futuristic concept—it is rapidly reshaping how we teach, learn, lead, and research. From personalized learning platforms and AI-driven research analytics to chatbots handling student support and administrative functions, the implications are far-reaching.

But this technological revolution also arrives with a stark warning: if we do not act with intention, the AI age could further entrench existing inequalities—especially gender disparities in access, influence, and impact. The underrepresentation of women in AI-related fields is already well-documented. If AI is to be harnessed for social good in education, women must not be left behind. We must lead.

"Artificial Intelligence is no longer a futuristic concept—it is rapidly reshaping how we teach, learn, lead, and research."

Reclaiming the Narrative: African Women and AI

Africa's higher education institutions have a unique role to play in shaping an inclusive AI future. With our youthful population, cultural diversity, and rapidly expanding digital infrastructure, we have both the need and the potential to leapfrog traditional developmental trajectories.

But inclusion must be deliberate. We need women—not only as adopters and users of AI—but as creators, designers, ethicists, and policy shapers. This means:

- **Curriculum Transformation:** Integrating AI literacy across disciplines, not just within computer science. Women in humanities, education, health sciences, and social work must also understand and engage with AI tools and ethical debates.
- **Leadership Development:** Creating space for women leaders in universities to experiment with and critically assess AI technologies that serve institutional goals and community needs.
- **Policy Advocacy:** Ensuring that data governance, AI deployment, and digital infrastructure policies at institutional and national levels are gender-sensitive and equity-driven.

"We are the ones we have been waiting for." And indeed, we still are. — June Jordan

HERS-SA: A Platform for Empowerment in the AI Era

At HERS-SA, we are uniquely positioned to catalyze this transformation. As a leadership development network grounded in equity and inclusion, our programs, alumni network, and regional collaborations can be powerful tools in preparing women to lead in this new terrain.

We are already seeing inspiring examples: women using AI tools to enhance rural education access, to analyze social justice issues in real time, to transform career advising and mental health support for students. The seeds are there. Now we must water them—strategically, collaboratively, and courageously.

Looking Ahead: Our Collective Responsibility

The future of higher education in Africa is intimately tied to how we shape, adopt, and resist certain trajectories of AI development. But as with every other turning point in our history, women must not only be part of the conversation—we must lead it.

Let us ensure that our leadership is rooted in justice, that our visions are expansive, and that we build AI-informed futures that serve all our students and communities—not just the privileged few.

Let this be our moment, again. As June Jordan once reminded us, "We are the ones we have been waiting for." And indeed, we still are.

"Women must not only be part of the conversation, we must lead it."

The graphic features a dark blue background. In the center, there is a white rectangular box containing the text. Behind this box, there are two large, overlapping rectangular blocks: a light blue one on the left and an orange one on the right.

**EMERGING WOMEN LEADERS
PROGRAMME (EWLP)
MAY 2025**

We are the ones we have been waiting for

BY PROF PAMELA DUBE



This is how I titled my presentation at the September 2023 HERS-SA Academy, quoting from June Jordan's Poem for South African Women which commemorated the Women's March of 9 August 1956.

This quotation served as a reminder of the long journey that women, South African women in this case, have traversed, taking things into their own hands and lifting others as they rise. I have enjoyed numerous opportunities through HERS-SA, either as participant in programmes on offer or as a presenter myself.

The 2023 Academy presentation marked a moment of great pride and gratitude for our network of women leaders in higher education, since I had that year been appointed to the role of Vice-Chancellor and Principal at the Central University of Technology (CUT). The university had taken a bold step that attested to its commitment to institutional renewal and transformation by appointing a woman to this role for the first time.

It is so gratifying to see how, since then, the number of female Vice-Chancellors has risen from six to nine. I believe this is largely due to non-governmental programmes such as HERS-SA, along with government initiatives such as the Higher Education Leadership and Management (HELM) programme, the University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP) and National Research Foundation (NRF)-related capacity-building programmes, among others, that are dedicated to fostering an inclusive and equitable academic environment.

HERS-SA's pursuit of gender equity and transformation in higher education through its programmes designed for career advancement and leadership development of women plays a remarkable role. As a product of both the HERS-SA programme and the USA/Mid-America institute at Bryn Mawr, I can attest to their meaningful impact in my higher education career journey. I have been more than happy to pay it forward too, by ensuring that female colleagues in all the institutions where I have served were given the opportunity to attend.

"The appointment of a woman as Vice-Chancellor at CUT was not just a milestone, it was a bold declaration of institutional renewal and transformation."



My 2025 presentation at the Emerging Women Leaders Programme, entitled “Investing in yourself: taking ownership of your career journey”, and the ensuing conversations, happened to be timed just after my leadership of CUT had been tested on public, politicised, and social media platforms. My commitment to promoting opportunities for women in leadership positions was questioned, in the context of both national and institutional employment equity (EE) and internationalisation imperatives. The HERS-SA event provided a welcome sanctuary, a place to recharge and debate the matter sanely, leading to appreciating the importance of continuous professional development beyond high-level qualifications such as the PhD, to stay ready and not be overly reliant on succession planning and favourable EE processes.

The importance of mentorship and the networks which platforms like HERS-SA provide cannot be over-emphasised. I remain indebted to my mentors and role models such as higher education policy and thought leader Nasima Badsha, a former chair of HERS-SA, and educator and former Cabinet Minister Dr Naledi Pandor. Dr Pandor also once attended the Bryn Mawr HERS programme and selected me and supported my attendance at the HERS Mid-America programme when I was working as a director in the national Department of Education. It was an immersive experience that defined the path I am on now and which, through HERS-SA, I am proud to share with the numerous women on the higher education mission of Leading, Learning and Lifting!

“HERS-SA is more than a programme; it is a movement shaping an inclusive and equitable academic future.”

Reflections on the 2025 HERS-SA Emerging Women in Leadership Programme

By Dr Linda Naicker

Research Institute for Theology and Religion
University of South Africa

Participating in the 2025 HERS-SA Emerging Women in Leadership Programme was nothing short of life-changing. It was more than a professional development opportunity; it was a deeply affirming experience that strengthened my leadership capabilities, broadened my perspective, and reawakened a personal commitment to creating meaningful change within the higher education sector.

From the very first day, I knew I was part of something special. The theme, *Resilience and Mental Toughness: AI to enhance productivity and wellbeing*, set the stage for four days that were both future-focused and profoundly personal. HERS-SA chairperson Dr Soraya Beukes's opening remarks reminded us that we were not just delegates, but women called to lead with courage and clarity. The speed networking session that followed, facilitated by Dr Beukes, was an unexpected highlight. Within minutes, I found myself connecting with brilliant, driven women, many of whom I continue to draw inspiration from today.

The theme, “Resilience and Mental Toughness: AI to enhance productivity and wellbeing,”



One of the most powerful moments for me was the keynote address by Prof Puleng LenkaBula, Vice-Chancellor of the University of South Africa (Unisa). Her authenticity, strength and wisdom deeply moved me. Listening to her speak so honestly about the realities of leadership as a woman in higher education reminded me that we can be both visionary and vulnerable, strategic and soft-spoken, and still lead with impact. Her words stayed with me long after the applause faded.

Day 2 was packed with sessions that expanded both my thinking and my heart. Prof Simone Titus-Dawson's insights on using AI for personal growth gave me practical tools I could apply immediately. Ms Nashira Abrahams's session on self-care was a gentle but necessary reminder: we cannot pour from an empty cup. As women leaders, our well-being is not a luxury; it's essential.

"HERS-SA gave me tools, yes, but more importantly, it gave me a renewed sense of purpose. I now walk forward not just as a leader, but as part of a powerful sisterhood of women who are shaping the future of higher education in South Africa."



Dr Colleen Moodley's session on self-mastery challenged me to reflect deeply on how I show up in difficult moments, while Dr Tasmeera Singh's global perspective helped me think beyond borders and imagine my leadership journey on a broader canvas. Dr Sharon Munyaka's coaching masterclass was another standout, full of wisdom, energy, and practical guidance. I left feeling not just equipped but empowered.

Prof Pamela Dube's career journey resonated on a very personal level. Her humility and strength reminded me that no path is linear, and that leadership often begins in quiet, unseen moments of courage. Choosing the Support Services track on Day 3 gave me space to explore my own role in higher education, and the wellness session that followed offered time to pause, breathe, and simply be present.

By the final day, I felt transformed. Sessions on systems, conflict management, and data reminded me of the complex environments in which we lead, and of our capacity to navigate them with grace and strategy.

I left the programme more confident, more connected, and more committed than ever before. HERS-SA gave me tools, yes, but more importantly, it gave me a renewed sense of purpose. I now walk forward not just as a leader, but as part of a powerful sisterhood of women who are shaping the future of higher education in South Africa.

Ebbs and Flows: Navigating Higher Education in South Africa through a coaching lens

“Transformation begins with one conversation, one courageous choice, and one act of connection at a time.”



By Dr Sharon Munyaka

In a career in service of higher education, I have walked many paths and seen this space through different lenses. A student navigating the complexities of learning and belonging, to lecturing and research, leadership and governance roles. Importantly, today I am a parent, vested in contributing to thriving institutions of higher learning that will shape future generations.

My reflections are not abstract. They are woven from lived experience across multiple higher education institutions in South Africa. They are shaped by coaching conversations with leaders grappling with the shifting tides of this sector. Together, we sit session after session, in moments of deep honesty, where leaders confess how much higher education has changed – sometimes quietly, sometimes violently.

These are the **ebbs and flows** of our time.

The Complexity of Higher Education Today

The leaders I coach speak of the anxiety of presenting before the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Higher Education. They describe the strain of leading jaded personnel, colleagues who are scraping the bottom of their emotional barrels just to stay engaged. They share the constant tension of economic constraints, student fees and salary negotiations, and the never-ending balancing act between academic priorities and administrative overload.

They wade through an avalanche of emails, knowing that while they sit in yet another meeting, critical messages slip through the cracks. They speak of student throughput rates under scrutiny, endless compliance demands, and the unrelenting complexity of an institution that never really stops moving.

“choosing integrity over comfort, asking hard questions, and daring to change”

While the academic project of teaching, research and community engagement remains intact, competing demands threaten the balance. Add to this, the long-standing tensions between academics and professional, administrative and support staff, and the picture becomes even more layered.

It is easy to feel that higher education has become too complex to navigate.

“Coaching is a mirror it reflects how leaders can move from reactive survival to intentional, conscious leadership.”

Coaching in the Midst of Complexity

Supporting my coaching clients means holding space for them to reimagine how they lead and thrive in this shifting terrain. In every 60-minute session, I focus not on the noise of the institution but on the person in front of me – their thoughts, emotions, and actions.

My role is to ask incisive questions that awaken new awareness:

- What must you stay awake to in your current reality?
- What leadership adjustments are required for your style to be fit for purpose?
- How must your own mindset evolve to meet the moment?

Through curiosity, compassion and courage, coaching becomes a mirror. It shows higher education leaders how they might move from reactive survival to intentional, conscious leadership.

Awakening to the New Reality

Now, more than ever, we must understand the context in which we work. It is no longer enough to simply clock in and out while waiting for retirement.

We need to equip ourselves to thrive in this new era. This includes:

- Reading and understanding the institutional strategic plan and its annual priorities.
- Knowing the Council resolutions and their implications.
- Fully participating in the academic project – not cherry-picking “pet projects” while leaving administrative responsibilities undone.

- Updating our teaching material to meet the needs of today’s digital nomads, the students who can access knowledge globally and demand accountability in how we teach, serve, and engage.

Today’s students are different. Many dial in to lectures from residence or from their home. They are hungry, sometimes literally. They are enraged by delays in funding or residence allocations. They hold us accountable in ways that might be uncomfortable, topped up by social media where everything is happening in real time and going viral.

Our staff are different too. The new cohort of academics and professionals have lives beyond academia. They care deeply about mental health support, relocation assistance, and flexible working arrangements. They want to know how the institution will support their whole selves, not just their job titles.

The reality is this: higher education must level up.

The Human Side of Leadership

As we step into this new reality, leadership in higher education cannot rely on outdated playbooks. It must evolve. My coaching philosophy offers three anchors for this evolution:

Curiosity

We cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn without curiosity. Leaders must ask: *What else is possible? What more can I do? How can I listen better, see more clearly, and respond with wisdom rather than fear?*

Compassion

When colleagues say “*I can’t cope with this workload anymore*”, or when students say “*this system is failing me*”, we must listen. Truly listen. Mental health is no longer a whisper on the sidelines; it is central to how we function as a community. We must prepare the “social soil” so that what grows within our institutions is healthy and sustainable.

Courage

To lead in higher education today means choosing courage over comfort. It means asking hard questions, apologising when we get it wrong, and daring to stand for integrity: *Is my contribution building or breaking what has been entrusted to me? Am I showing up in a way that future generations can be proud of?*

Co-Creating the Future Together

We can no longer be spectators in higher education. We must all participate: leaders, academics, support staff, students, and parents alike.

We must negotiate openly, update outdated rules, and be willing to learn from global collaborations. We must listen with fresh ears to the new crop of staff and students whose expectations are reshaping the future of higher education.

Ultimately, higher education is still about people. It is about connection, growth, and transformation. It is about preparing the ground for the next generation to thrive, even as we navigate the realities of living in 2025.

So, as we embrace the **ebbs and flows**, let us remember:

- The waves will keep coming, but how we ride them will define the future.
- The institution needs *all of us* – not just some of us – to stand up, contribute, and care deeply.
- Together, we can reimagine higher education as a space of possibility, not just complexity.

Because in the end, just like in coaching, transformation happens one conversation, one courageous choice, and one human connection at a time.

Dr Sharon Munyaka is a Work Psychologist in service of thriving workspaces. Passionate about facilitating leadership conversations, Sharon works with leaders navigating complexity. She anchors them as they lead in uncertain times and co-creates ways of working that optimise behaviour and productivity at work.

“It is easy to feel that higher education has become too complex to navigate but complexity calls for conscious leadership, not retreat.”

The graphic features a dark blue background. In the center, there is a white rectangular box. To the left of this box is a solid blue rectangle, and to the right is a solid orange rectangle. The text "MENTORSHIP" and "2025" is centered within the white box in a bold, dark blue font.

MENTORSHIP

2025

Mentorship – a calling

BY DR VUYOKAZI MNTUYEDWA



Mentorship has always been more than a professional responsibility for me; it is a calling rooted in purpose, compassion, and belief in the transformative power of education. As a mentor, I have recognised the impact of walking alongside others on their academic journeys.

What makes mentorship powerful is its ability to extend beyond academic instruction. I often host one-on-one consultations where we discuss not only coursework and research strategies, but also career paths, self-confidence, mental wellness, and life after university.

Today, as a scholar and mentor with international exposure, that commitment has deepened into a lifelong mission to uplift, inspire, and guide the next generation.

My journey as a mentor began when I served in student leadership roles. I was often the go-to person for academic guidance, personal support, and strategic advice.

“Your background does not define your limits; your vision does.”

As I grew in my own academic path, I realised how critical mentorship is for student success, especially for those navigating higher education systems that can often feel overwhelming and inaccessible.

Every graduation ceremony I attend fills me with pride, not just because the graduates have reached a milestone, but because I’ve witnessed their perseverance and growth up close.

Being selected for the prestigious Oxford Fellowship this year has been a humbling affirmation of my academic journey and a powerful message to my mentees: “Your background does not define your limits; your vision does.”

Mentoring is advantageous because it gives marginalised groups the chance to get assistance and direction. I mentor people because I believe it's critical to support their growth as we do.

A DEVOTION TO MENTORSHIP AND MALE DEVELOPMENT

By Tumiso Mfisa, CPUT Amajita's Men's Programme



“Mentorship is a relational, intentional, and empowering process that nurtures potential, ignites purpose, and shapes leaders.”

Participating in the HERS-SA Mentorship Training Retreat was a transformative experience that reaffirmed my unwavering commitment to mentorship as both a personal vocation and a strategic tool for societal change. The retreat deepened my understanding of mentorship as a relational, intentional, and empowering process; one that does not merely transfer knowledge but nurtures potential, ignites purpose, and shapes leaders.

As someone deeply invested in male development, I view mentorship as a powerful medium through which young men can critically reflect, unlearn harmful social norms, and reimagine their roles in society.

My passion for male mentorship is rooted in the urgent need to disrupt cycles of silence, emotional repression, and gender-based violence. Through intentional engagement, we can cultivate a generation of men who are emotionally intelligent, socially conscious, and committed to equity.

The retreat offered a space to reflect on the nuances of inclusive mentorship, particularly within higher education. It challenged me to refine my approach, to listen more deeply, mentor more ethically, and lead with empathy. I left empowered, not only by the knowledge gained but by the shared spirit of those equally devoted to transforming lives through mentorship.

In a world in desperate need of authentic, compassionate leadership, I remain steadfast in my resolve to mentor with purpose. Whether working with university students, community leaders, or emerging professionals, my goal remains the same: to inspire growth, foster accountability, and empower men to lead lives of integrity and impact.

“My goal remains the same: to inspire growth, foster accountability, and empower men to lead lives of integrity and impact”

The graphic features a dark blue background. In the center, there is a white rectangular box. To the left of this box is a medium blue rectangle, and to the right is an orange rectangle. The text 'HERS-SA ACADEMY AUGUST 2025' is centered within the white box in a bold, dark blue, sans-serif font.

**HERS-SA
ACADEMY
AUGUST 2025**



Facilitating Leadership Transformation in the HERS-South Africa 2025

BY DR DIONNE ROSSER-MIMMS, CAMPUS VICE CHANCELLOR, TROY UNIVERTY



Serving as a facilitator and presenter for the 2025 HERS-SA Academy cohort was a deeply enriching experience – one that reaffirmed the transformative power of intentional leadership development, collective wisdom, and the mosaic of talent that defines women leaders in higher education. As I reflect on this journey, I am struck by the depth of engagement, the courage of introspection and the visionary thinking that emerged from our shared space. It was more than a session; it was a movement of minds and hearts committed to shaping the future of higher education in South Africa.

“Leadership is not a destination; it is a journey of continuous self-development.”

Leadership from Strength, Not Deficiency

Central to my session was the invitation for participants to shift their leadership lens – from one focused on deficits to one grounded in strengths. Drawing from the Clifton Strengths framework, I encouraged each woman to explore her unique leadership DNA. This approach is not merely about identifying what one does well; it is about understanding how those strengths can be leveraged to lead with authenticity, resilience, and impact.

Too often, leadership development is framed around fixing what is broken. But in our session, we challenged that narrative. We explored how self-awareness of strengths can become a compass for navigating complex institutional landscapes. The women in the cohort responded with openness and curiosity, many expressing how this reframing allowed them to see themselves not as incomplete, but as powerful contributors to their institutions.



“Too often, leadership development is framed around fixing what is broken. But in our session, we challenged that narrative”

The Power of Self-Development

Leadership is not a destination; it is a journey of continuous self-development. Throughout the session, I emphasised the importance of investing in oneself – not as an act of selfishness, but as a strategic imperative. We explored practices such as reflective journaling, mentorship, coaching, and professional learning communities as tools for growth.

What emerged was a shared understanding that self-development is foundational to institutional transformation. When leaders commit to their own growth, they model the very culture they wish to cultivate. The women in the cohort demonstrated this commitment in powerful ways – asking bold questions, sharing vulnerable stories and embracing feedback with grace.

A Mosaic of Talent: The 2025 Cohort

Perhaps the most inspiring aspect of the experience was witnessing the mosaic of talent within the 2025 HERS-SA cohort. Each woman brought a distinct voice, perspective and strength to the table. From seasoned academic leaders to emerging change agents, the diversity of experiences enriched every conversation.

This mosaic is not just metaphorical – it is a strategic asset. In a sector as complex as higher education, no single leader can possess all the answers. But together, these women formed a tapestry of wisdom, courage and innovation. Their collective power is a testament to what is possible when women support, challenge and uplift one another.



I saw leaders who were not afraid to confront systemic barriers, who advocated for inclusive policies, and who envisioned institutions where equity is not an aspiration but a reality. Their leadership is not confined to titles or roles – it is expressed in how they show up, how they listen, and how they lead with integrity.

“They are not just participants in a program; they are architects of a new era in higher education—one defined by equity, innovation, and the unstoppable power of women.”

Reflections and Forward Momentum

As I reflect on this experience, I am reminded of the words of African-American educator Mary McLeod Bethune: “Invest in the human soul. Who knows, it might be a diamond in the rough.” The HERS-SA 2025 cohort is full of diamonds – brilliant, multifaceted, and ready to illuminate the path forward.

My role as a facilitator was not to provide answers, but to create a space where questions could be explored, strengths could be affirmed, and leadership could be reimaged. I leave this experience with deep gratitude and renewed hope. The future of higher education in South Africa is in capable hands – hands that are not only skilled but also compassionate, visionary and bold.

The journey of leadership is both personal and collective. It requires us to know ourselves, to embrace our strengths, and to walk alongside others in pursuit of transformation. The HERS-SA Academy 2025 cohort exemplifies this journey. They are not just participants in a programme; they are architects of a new era in higher education – one defined by equity, innovation, and the unstoppable power of women.

Reflections of HERS-South Africa Academy, Aug 25-28 2025

BY DR NAOMI LUMUTENGA



“Too often, leadership development is framed around fixing what is broken. But in our session, we challenged that narrative”

As an invited guest speaker, I started my reflections ahead of the Academy, immersing myself in the theme: 5IR, or The Fifth Industrial Revolution. I asked myself what were the First, Second, Third and Fourth Industrial Revolutions, and when did they happen? How could I tell where one ended and the next began? (Clearly, I had been asleep for most of the time!) One part of me decided that those (1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th) IRs would be for another day. I needed to get a grip on the 5IR to understand where it sits within our shared goal of striving for gender equity, especially in higher education.

Looking back, the HERS-East Africa curriculum, delivered through similar one-week Academies, is explicit about its three guiding pillars – **P**ersonal development, **I**nstitutional awareness (especially skills to navigate deeply entrenched barriers) and **N**etworking (PIN). HERS-South Africa delivers the same objectives, slightly differently.

This was refreshing and reminded me that we Africans are quite comfortable when it comes to delivering a great meal without a recipe (for the record, I find recipe books too restricting). So, both HERS-SA and HERS-EA deliver a great African dish, enjoyed by all, without the restrictions of weighing scales and specific oven settings. That doesn't mean we have cracked it. In fact, we have a lot to learn from and about each other to strengthen our shared goal.

Each speaker touched on personal development aspects – from the exhilarating ‘Speed Introductions’ by Dr Dionne Rosser-Mims– that had hotel staff peering through the door hinges – to a session on Coaching by Dr Jean Hazlitt and ‘Avoiding Burnout’ by Mande Burger-Smith. Which multitasking (by default) woman hasn't experienced burnout at some point?

In came Dr Ana Casanueva-Gonzalez, a global citizen who opened my eyes to the world of technology transfer as an accessible form of wealth (shouldn't that be one's mission?) and introduced a new phrase to me – “we should all be intra-preneurs”. It reminded me of one of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's essays, “We Should All Be Feminists”, that opened my eyes to what I should have seen sooner.

My personal favourite (if I may) in this category of personal development was Dr Neeraj Mistry – what a CV! The personal and professional knowledge and skills he embodies, and yet so unassuming and crediting much of his success to his mother-son bond. His CV has been amassed during university education in a South Africa that was transitioning from Apartheid (still is, in my humble view) to studying economics in the UK; then to live in the USA and work with the United Nations and Congress; to practicing medicine in London's famous Harley Street – and now a happily settled family man in Johannesburg (AND he has time to talk to people like me)! I guess he tickled my internationalisation bug that had been earlier triggered by Dr Casanueva-Gonzalez.

One lesson (of many) I have learnt from managing HERS-EA is that when individual leaders develop and are empowered, especially women (yes, I am biased), the institution and communities they serve benefit. In the words of one vice-chancellor of a Ugandan university, “women leaders mother and calm the university”.

Sitting in that room at the Academy, I got a sense of how universities in South Africa that were represented there would benefit from knowledgeable presenters such as Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) Dean of Student Affairs, Nankosi Tyolwana, AI expert Professor Eunice Ndeto Ivala, and many others, and the rich dialogue and emerging networks. Throughout presentations led mostly by women one got a sense of the underlying institutional barriers they were grappling with in their leadership journeys, some too complex to name.

Listening to informal conversations during coffee and lunch breaks, I sensed relief in different corners, from individuals realising that they were not alone, although there were no quick solutions. Underlying institutional “constrictions” were touched on, and this is an area that needs development during future Academies.

It is not just the “elephant in the room”; there are entire elephant families that need to be named and properly understood, so that the good work done with individuals enables them to thrive rather than just survive. At HERS-EA, we are increasingly turning up the volume on fixing institutions, not women (Wanyenze, 2025; Ed. Lumutenga & Khaita). *

Landing with a bang was the networking aspect. Opportunities for making new intra- and inter-university connections within South Africa, across Africa and the USA were immense. Those who seized the opportunities will gain from what Dr Beukes described as “collaboration is the currency of the future”. My observation, though, was that there was a tendency for participants to drift back to the same tables and the same faces, with not enough effort made to mix-and-match. Perhaps more sessions like Dr Rosser-Mims' ‘Speed Introductions’ would shake things up a little more in the future.

With that in mind, I end my reflections with questions for participants' ongoing reflections: 1) How many new contacts did you make? 2) Which of the presenters are you following up with, and why? 3) In what ways are you leading differently, post Academy?

***"At HERS-EA, we are increasingly turning up the volume on fixing institutions, not the women."—
(Wanyenze, 2025; Ed. Lumutenga & Khaita)***

"The glitzy and glamorous occasion brought together the crème de la crème of women academics, around a sumptuous dinner with a sprinkling of live music to create an ambiance that was truly special."

If you are struggling to answer those questions, do reach out to the wonderfully energetic Dr Beukes and HERS-SA Director Dr Naziema Jappie for a follow-up chat. They want you to succeed. We all do.

The "icing on the cake" was the privilege of attending the HEWLA Awards ceremony and the honour of presenting the Trailblazer award to Professor Bongani Ncube, Research Chair at CPUT. The glitzy and glamorous occasion brought together the crème de la crème of women leaders in higher education, around a sumptuous dinner with a sprinkling of live music to create an ambiance that was truly special.

I sign off with fondest memories of inspiration and look forward to more opportunities!

* Lumutenga, N., Khaita, M. (2025). Re-imagining Women Leadership Through Inclusive Community Engagement. HERS-East Africa's Vision for Gender Equity in Higher Education. New York, United States of America: Peter Lang Verlag. Retrieved Sep 16, 2025, from 10.3726/b22708



Going Global – Reflections on an International Career

By Neeraj Mistry MBBCh, MPH, MSc



Friends, family, and colleagues have often told me they were jealous of my jet-setting career and lifestyle. I believe they saw me as a romanticised James Bond-esque figure. There were indeed many aspects of being a public health doctor working in global health and international development that outwardly aligned with that profile, but it wasn't all champagne and strawberries. Rather, working for global impact was as much an inward journey of deep reflection, vulnerability, openness, curiosity, and a drive for empathic connection.

My goal here is not to bore you with my autobiography, but rather to share what I have learned in a global health and development career in the hope that I may inspire you to work for global impact.

I have three key messages:

1. Have curiosity, true curiosity and not judgement. Love of people. Love of culture.
2. Understand the role of outside influences (pandemics, politics, etc) and how to take action amidst chaos and uncertainty.
3. Love your own story. Get comfortable with telling it. See yourself as a character who will go through ups and downs. Believe that it will have a happy ending. When you are going through one of life's "valleys", remember that fruit grows in valleys, and that if you aren't happy then it must not be the end.

An early sign of my curiosity for people and culture that shaped my career came in the exhilarating exposure to the pan-African metropolis of Johannesburg when I started medical school at Wits, leaving behind smaller, less-diverse and slower-paced Durban. After my internship at Hillbrow Hospital, which coincided with the transition from apartheid to South Africa's newly-hatched democracy, I opted for clinical experiences in rural areas (this was prior to mandatory community service for new medical school graduates) and occupational health on the mines.

"Working for global impact was, ironically or paradoxically, as much an inward journey of deep reflection, vulnerability, openness, curiosity, and a drive for empathic connection."



"LOVE YOUR OWN STORY. Get comfortable with telling your own story. See yourself as a character who will go through ups and downs. Believe that it will have a happy ending."

Yet, I was still curious about what was happening abroad and jumped at the opportunity to work in the UK, experiencing both the public NHS (National Health Service) and private practice on Harley Street. Realising that my clinical practice experiences in SA and the UK did not necessarily reflect the best evidence-based practice learned at medical school, that there were also political and economic influences at play, spurred a decision to enrol for a Master's in Economics and Policy at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). A placement with Merck Pharmaceuticals in the USA followed, to develop understanding of the pharmaceutical industry.

Armed with medical and economics degrees, the world my oyster, I reflected on what I was passionate about. Coming from the epicentre of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and realising that no single sector could take on such global challenges on its own, I was interested in public-private partnerships for HIV/AIDS. Then United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan had asked the former US Ambassador to the UN to head an initiative on private sector engagement on HIV/AIDS and so, stepping into the realm of international non-profits, I was one of four founders of the Global Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS in New York City. It was a creative and technical experience to find ways in which diverse industries worldwide could play a role.

My role in the business mobilisation strategy was to distil scientific and medical information in ways that everyone could understand, which led to my next position in advocacy and politics in Washington, DC. There, I headed the Global Network for Neglected Tropical Diseases, raising awareness and resources with governments around the world, a role that continued to feed my cultural curiosity and exploration.

It was in Washington that I met my wife, and we had our three babies. Fatherhood opened my heart to a whole other realm of curiosity, and the FOMO (fear of missing out) when I travelled drew me to the role of Professor in International Health at Georgetown University.

I had just started a Master's in Ayurvedic Medicine, to satisfy my curiosity about understanding human health more holistically, as the COVID-19 outbreak emerged. We returned to South Africa to be with my mum and dad, and now live in a loud multi-generational house while we enjoy the nine months of Johannesburg summer, outdoorsy lifestyles, and the warm, gregarious South African society.

In reflecting on these experiences, I maintain that having a sense of wonder and curiosity about people and the world has driven my international career. What is equally important is coupling curiosity with action. If you have an itch, scratch it! Do the research, send the email, make the call, set up the meeting, start a conversation, and always follow-up.

Going abroad for South Africans is often driven by a reactive impetus just to leave the country, rather than proactively seeking an international experience. However, the adage of "the grass is not always greener" holds true, as each country has its pros and cons. I don't like value judgments of good-bad or best-worst when comparing countries because this reductionism takes away from the depth, range, and nuance of the people and places to engage and experience.

It is also important to acknowledge that the enabling factors for an international career that I had are not necessarily generalisable. At the time, being male enabled easier travel and was culturally more accommodated, which was different for many women. Additionally, a medical degree and training were transferable. The world has changed since then, and women entering international careers have become more mainstream. Safety for women in most countries has improved, and technology is an incredible tool for staying connected and being safer.

Another important factor, particular to the HERS audience, could be the linear trajectory of academic careers. It is through bold thinking that one can transcend the silo of department, faculty, university, and higher education sector, and apply one's training and expertise to the private sector, international non-profits, faith-based networks, regional organisations, and the UN and its family of agencies that contain every field and discipline.

Stepping out of the security and comfort of what is "known" can make one feel vulnerable and uncomfortable. But discomfort is a symptom of a new experience which is exciting and an opportunity for learning. This transitional space between the known and the unknown is where the magic happens that promotes growth for the individual and society.

"If you have an itch, scratch it! Do the research, send the email, make the call, set up the meeting, start a conversation, and... follow-up, follow-up, follow-up!"

Another consideration is the issue of work-life balance. International careers and jet-setting can take their toll, and it is important to find one's own prioritisation and balance. This could be, for example, doing everything in moderation at the same time, or sequencing phases of deep focus on career, family, sabbaticals etc. Once again, deep reflection is required to sense where you may be in that continuum. Remote work often means that your conference call will fall outside the 9 to 5, so staying flexible with your family is important.

I am often asked how I planned my career. My response is to be open to the organic and serendipitous nature of life. That is not to say it's totally incremental. The visioning or planning is founded in the aspirational goals of your "WHY?" Why do you want an international career? Why do you want to go to a particular country? Why do you want to work for a particular organisation? Understanding your "Why" points to your "How".

The busyness of life can often be the greatest impediment to the self-reflection needed to get in touch with one's curiosity about people and places; for it takes time and effort to do the self-work. That said, one does not have to have it all figured out to begin with. Whether your journey is inward or outward, Rumi captures it beautifully: "As you start to walk on the way, the way appears." Clarity doesn't come before action. It comes from action.



AI for Administrators: Redefining Digital Communication and Efficiency in Higher Education

BY MS MELODY TOMLINSON



Universities are extraordinary organisms. They are places of tradition, but also of new research, innovation, and hope for the future. Yet, behind every lecture theatre, every faculty meeting, and every research project lies an invisible army of administrators. They are the glue that holds everything together: organising conferences, preparing reports, answering faculty queries, ensuring compliance, handling budgets, and responding to the never-ending stream of student requests.

"Stop seeing AI as 'apps' and start seeing it as a team of assistants."

Too often, these administrators are over-stretched and working with outdated systems. They spend hours typing up meeting notes, manually filing documents, or re-formatting reports for the third time because each department has a different template. Many find themselves asking: *"Is this really the best use of my skills?"*

The truth is that the role of administrators is changing fast. Artificial intelligence (AI) and digital communication tools are no longer reserved for IT departments. They are accessible, affordable, and – most importantly – relevant to the daily work of university administrators.

From Tools to Team

When most people hear artificial intelligence, they picture coders writing lines of software or fear their jobs being replaced. But AI today is not about programming, it's about partnering. Administrators don't need to know how to code. They simply need to know how to delegate tasks effectively, by giving clear instructions.

And the easiest way to think about this? Stop seeing AI as "an app" and start seeing it as a team of assistants.

When I demonstrate these tools, I don't just say: "Here's a note-taking app."

I say: "Meet your new meeting secretary. Her name is Fathom. She never gets tired, never misses a point, and she'll have the minutes in your inbox before you've left the room."

"AI is not about replacing people. It's about re-imagining administration as a human-plus-AI partnership."

I introduce Gamma as a presentation designer who can turn rough notes into slides in minutes. Paige is my reflective journaling sage, helping me think clearly. Mo is my momentum coach, keeping me accountable and moving. And Bad Vlad is my tough-minded compliance officer who never lets me miss a filing deadline. Suddenly, AI isn't intimidating. It's relatable. It feels like a set of colleagues you can trust with specific tasks.

Where AI Can Help Administrators Today

The potential is huge, but let's keep it practical. Here are three everyday areas where AI can save time and improve communication:

- 1. Capturing and organising information.* Instead of frantically scribbling during a meeting, administrators can record or dictate key points. Tools using OCR (optical character recognition) can turn photos of handwritten notes into searchable text. AI can then summarise that text into clear action lists.
- 2. Creating polished communication.* Need a slide deck for the Dean? A report for Senate? A briefing note for faculty? Tools like Gamma or Canva's AI can instantly transform messy text into well-designed presentations or reports, cutting hours of manual formatting.
- 3. Humanising communication.* AI isn't just efficient; it can also be creative. Tools like Suno can compose short songs or jingles for staff events, adding warmth and personality to admin work.

Hardware That Helps

While many AI tools run in the cloud, a few pieces of hardware can make them work even better:

- A good headset and microphone ensure accurate dictation and transcription.
- A webcam allows AI-powered meeting tools to capture non-verbal cues.
- A tablet with stylus makes capturing notes on-the-go easy.
- Reliable cloud storage keeps everything accessible and secure.

Think of these as giving your AI assistants the right office setup so they can support you effectively.

Why This Matters Now

Higher education administrators are being asked to do more with less: more reporting, more communication with students, more events, more compliance. At the same time, staffing and budgets are flat.

AI offers a way to reduce the load without reducing the human value that administrators bring. Imagine cutting the time spent on compiling minutes from three hours to fifteen minutes, or generating a 20-slide presentation in under ten minutes. The impact is not just efficiency – it is sanity. It is the gift of time.

"Each university should therefore review and update its AI policies for staff. This ensures that while administrators are empowered by these tools, they also remain compliant with local laws and internal regulations."

And perhaps most importantly, it allows administrators to shift from being seen as “clerical support” to being strategic enablers. With time freed up, administrators can anticipate problems, support professors more effectively, and shape the student experience with foresight rather than firefighting.

Building Your Own AI Team

So how do you start? Don't try to adopt everything at once. Begin by identifying one repetitive task that drains your time and “hire” an AI assistant to take it over. Name it. Personify it. Make it part of your team.

- Let Fathom take your meeting notes.
- Let Gamma prepare your slides.
- Create GPTs to easily retrieve information
- Set up connector in ChatGPT or Zap, in Zapier to automate some of the workflows.

Over time, you'll build a team of digital assistants who feel as real and reliable as your human colleagues.

A Note on Policies and Compliance

As exciting as these tools are, administrators must also use them responsibly. Universities already have policies that apply to students' use of AI tools in academic work, but will likely need separate guidelines for lecturers and administrators, especially when it comes to handling sensitive information.

South Africa's Protection of Personal Information (POPI) Act reminds us that data privacy is not optional.

Using AI in relation to personal data and without clear policies can expose institutions to risks. Each university should therefore review and update its policies for use of AI by staff. This will ensure that while administrators are empowered by these tools, they also remain compliant with legislation and internal policy and regulations

Conclusion: Reclaiming Time, Reclaiming Purpose

AI will not replace the empathy, judgment, and problem-solving skills that administrators bring. But it can take away the repetition, the re-typing, the late nights spent formatting documents. It can give back time.

And with that time, administrators can reclaim their true purpose: enabling professors to teach, researchers to discover, and students to thrive.

In the end, AI is not about replacing people. It's about re-imagining administration as a human-plus-AI partnership. A partnership where digital communication becomes smoother, workloads lighter, compliance safeguarded, and administrators stand not behind the scenes, but at the centre of a more efficient, more creative, more humane university.

This article was written by Melody Tomlinson, Certified Coach and AI enthusiast, in partnership with ChatGPT.

“AI is not about replacing people, it's about reimagining administration as a human-plus-AI partnership.”

Re-igniting the Spark: A Reflection on the HERS-SA Academy

By Zethu Lubisi

The HERS-SA Academy responds to a long-standing and often overlooked need in higher education: to provide professional and administrative staff members with a structured space for leadership development and growth.

Leadership pathways and career progression opportunities on the academic side of the university are well defined, with clear milestones for teaching, research, and advancement. In contrast, professional and administrative colleagues are frequently left to navigate their career journeys without equally well-defined advancement routes or leadership development opportunities.



The HERS-SA Academy has recognised that gap and sought to bridge it in a meaningful way.

My reflection on the programme is that it re-ignited a spark that, for many, may have been dimmed by years of routine, repetition, and uncertainty. For individuals who have spent decades in roles that are rarely prioritised for leadership conversations, the Academy offered a platform where they felt seen, heard, and valued.

Coming from a tech background, I am acutely aware of how fast the future of work is unfolding, particularly with the rise of artificial intelligence and other disruptive technologies. For some, these developments bring energy and excitement. For others, especially those who have worked in the same way for many years, such advancements can bring insecurity and even fear. After 20 years of doing a job in a particular way, what does it mean when technology suddenly changes the rules? Do you need to reskill? Will your contribution still matter?

These are not small questions; they go to the very heart of professional identity.

“The HERS-SA Academy re-ignited a spark that, for many, may have been dimmed by years of routine, repetition, and uncertainty.”

“Leadership is not confined to titles or positions. Leadership is about influence, about showing up as your best self, and about recognising the impact you have on others.”

What the Academy programme did so well was to create a safe and intentional environment where such fears could be named, acknowledged, and reframed. Instead of dismissing the discomfort that comes with change, the Academy validated it but also challenged us to look for opportunity within uncertainty. It opened the space to imagine ourselves as more than the tasks we do, and to see leadership not only as positional authority but as influence, courage, and growth. It ignited conversations that were as much about self-discovery as about institutional transformation.

Another profound aspect was the way it fostered inter-generational and cross-functional learning. In every session, there was an exchange of experience and perspective: younger colleagues learning from the wisdom, resilience, and institutional knowledge of their seniors, while the seniors drew inspiration from the energy, innovation, and digital fluency of the younger generation. This reminded me that growth in our sector cannot be solitary; we need one another. Universities thrive when they create ecosystems where experience and innovation sit side by side, complementing rather than competing.

The inclusion of a section on professional and personal branding was particularly striking because this is rarely discussed in higher education. In other sectors, personal and professional branding are seen as essential, forming part of leadership development and career growth. The Academy reminded us that each individual is, in fact, a brand. What we communicate about ourselves, whether consciously or unconsciously, becomes our brand.

It was a reminder that the perception people hold of you is not simply shaped by your qualifications or job title, but by their experience in your presence. This was a powerful reminder of the importance of self-awareness, intentionality, and consistency. How we carry ourselves, how we interact with others, and how we present our values are all part of the narrative we project. Leadership begins with how we show up in the everyday moments.

The Academy also provoked deeper questions about what we ought to do next in our respective spaces. It reminded me of a quote by Rachel Adams, that "conversation is the birthplace of action". The programme created the conditions for conversations about identity, growth, leadership, and the courage to embrace change. But conversation alone is not enough; it must lead to deliberate action. The challenge now is to translate these dialogues into practices, policies, and personal commitments that reshape not only how we see ourselves, but how our institutions see us.

The HERS-SA Academy Program was not just training; it was an invitation to reimagine ourselves, our work, and our shared future. It was a reminder that professional and administrative staff are not peripheral, but integral to the lifeblood of the university. It was also a call to action: to carry forward the lessons learned into our daily environments, to become intentional about how we lead and how we support one another.

“The Academy was not just training; it was an invitation to reimagine ourselves, our work, and our shared future.”

In sum, the Academy was both a gift and a challenge. A gift in creating a space for growth, affirmation, and new possibilities; and a challenge to act on what we learned. It was an affirmation that leadership is not confined to titles or positions. Leadership is about influence, about showing up as your best self, and about recognising the impact you have on others. The HERS-SA Academy reminded us of that truth and for that, I am deeply grateful.

Zethu Lubisi is Acting ICT Service Delivery Manager: Planning and Governance at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits ICT).





**The Build a Burger
Activity winners**



**The Build a Burger
Activity**



**Four Book Launch by
Kurt Engelhof**



**Dr Dionne Rosser-Mims
Build a Tower Activity**



Build a Mask Activity



HIGHER EDUCATION
WOMEN
LEADERS AWARDS
2025



Deputy Minister Nomalungelo Gina from the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI) as the keynote speaker at the Higher Education Women Leaders Awards

HEWLA Winners 2025



HERS-SA Guests & board Members



My personal journey

PROF SORAYA BARDIEN



HEWLA Winner: Women in Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics

I grew up on the Cape Flats during the 1970s and 1980s, the youngest of six children. My father was the sole breadwinner. He had excelled at school and was even accepted into medical school at the University of Cape Town (UCT) – a remarkable achievement for that era! Unfortunately, he did not want to study medicine; he bunked classes, failed and had to find work. On the other hand, my mother had sadly been taken out of primary school to work in a factory and was denied the opportunity to complete schooling.

In 1985, when I was in grade 11 at Belgravia High School, our school was closed for many months due to anti-apartheid protests. Grade 12 was an intense year of catching up to complete the syllabus. With only one A (in Mathematics), I was fortunate to be accepted for a BSc at UCT. Our high school science lab had burned down, so I had never done a practical experiment before, which made university lab pracs particularly challenging. Back then, we still did mouth pipetting, and I accidentally ingested more than a few chemicals, and nearly poisoned myself, before I got the hang of it!

My time at UCT was the first time I had encountered people from diverse backgrounds, from across South Africa, which was truly eye-opening. A life lesson was that although we came from different socio-economic backgrounds, we had similar needs and expectations. I really applied myself and often got better marks than students from more privileged backgrounds. In fact, many of them came to me for help.

“The legacy of apartheid has left deep-rooted feelings of self-doubt.”

While working as a research assistant in Human Genetics at UCT, I pursued a part-time MSc in human genetics, later upgraded to a full-time PhD. During my doctoral studies, I got married and had my son, Justin, which made that period incredibly demanding. Not something I would recommend. I returned to full-time work when Justin was just three months old. That was not ideal, and I have some regrets, but at the time we had no choice.

I am extremely grateful to my husband, Mark, for his support throughout my academic journey, making sacrifices that enabled me to travel for conferences and research, and work many evenings and weekends.

Today, I'm a full professor in the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences at Stellenbosch University. My research focuses on the genetic causes of Parkinson's disease (PD) in South Africans. We also study how curcumin – a compound found in turmeric (or borrie) – which is a powerful antioxidant, can protect neurons from dying. Our findings suggest that curcumin can protect cells from dying after exposure to a neurotoxin linked to PD, which is very promising.

Winning the HERS-SA Women in STEM Award

I am truly honoured to receive this award. One often doesn't think that you or your work are good enough. The legacy of apartheid has left deep-rooted feelings of self-doubt. Working in a field still largely male and white-dominated, especially at the senior levels, can make one feel invisible or unheard.

Winning this award has been incredibly empowering. It has reignited my sense of pride and accomplishment. Despite many challenges, internal and external, including limited support from leadership, I have persevered and I have succeeded!

My institution is also very proud of the award – it was announced in a Senate meeting, posted to the university social media, and I was interviewed on Maties FM.

What this means for future aspiring women in academia

Believe that you are *more* than enough – never let anyone convince you otherwise.

I come from quite humble beginnings. In fact, I struggled during my early school years and didn't enjoy school at all. If it hadn't been for my mom patiently sitting with me every afternoon, I doubt I would have done well academically.

What I've learned is that where you start does not have to define where you end up. With determination, a bit of luck, and a clear vision of where you want to go, anything is possible. In my experience, a perfect work-life balance is good to aim for, but very difficult to achieve. I prefer to think of it as a work-life see-saw – sometimes one side will tip more than the other. The key is making sure it's not always tipping in the same direction.

“Where you start does not have to define where you end up.”



Although I've never had an official mentor, I've been fortunate to have an incredibly supportive circle of family and friends. My late sister, Shaheda, had a profound influence on my life. She was always there – a steady source of strength and unconditional support.

I end with some inspiring words from one of Whitney Houston's songs. She had many struggles during her short life and this song is about overcoming adversity by finding inner resilience and self-discovery.

“I've never had an official mentor, but I've been fortunate to have an incredibly supportive circle of family and friends.”

I Didn't Know My Own Strength

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bto_lqNmOCU

*There were so many times, I
Wondered how I'd get through the night,
Thought I took all I could take
I didn't know my own strength
And I crashed down, and I tumbled
But I did not crumble
I got through all the pain
I didn't know my own strength
My faith kept me alive
I picked myself back up
I hold my head up high
I was not built to break
I didn't know my own strength
I was not built to break
No, no
I got to know my own strength*

HEWLA Winner: Emerging Young Women Leaders - Academic

BY DR BONGIWE MCATA



I am grateful and humbled by winning this award, as it forms part of the story of my life. It is an affirmation of my belief that a leader ought to be a builder of hope and a driver of equality and inclusivity. It is also a confirmation of teamwork and caring about those we serve.

As a psychiatric and mental health nurse specialist and a researcher in child mental health, I believe there are no short cuts to a place worth going. Every child's journey is filled with challenges, growth and transformation which impact on their mental health. Children's mental health is supported by creating a loving and stable environment where they feel heard, secure and supported through honest communication, consistent routines and shared family activities. As a child grows more independent and curious, they will want to explore the world outside and learn about the things around them. Interactions with people will help them develop their own ways of thinking and understanding the world around them. When children feel stressed or overwhelmed, they need a loving adult to help reassure them and help them to navigate their feelings.

“My grandparents, aunts and uncles provided guidance and moral development, promoted education and cognitive growth, ensured physical and mental health, and at the same time transmitted cultural values and legacy.”

The same applies to young professionals who look up to authentic leaders who walk with integrity, honesty, humility and kindness.

I agree with Ngambi 2010, who said: “Leadership is the process of influencing others’ commitment towards realising their full potential in achieving value, adding shared vision with passion and integrity.”

This award is an affirmation of the resilience gained from birth, through my mother whom I enjoyed for only eight years. Despite her passing away, I enjoyed a foundational environment of emotional support, identity and social development. I felt a sense of belonging and security while learning values, traditions and life skills essential for overall well-being and my role in society. My grandparents, aunts and uncles provided guidance and moral development, promoted education and cognitive growth, ensured physical and mental health, and at the same time transmitted cultural values and legacy, all of which I appreciate.

All kudos to my husband Josiah and children Tshego, Thoriso and Kgaugelo, including my grandchild Babantle, for their support. We are a God-ordained institution, central to His plan for humanity and a foundation for a loving, honouring and supportive society. Being with family helps construct principles and improves overall mental health. “Family means no one gets left behind or forgotten.” - David Ogden Stiers.

What does this recognition mean to you personally and professionally?

The award is an affirmation of self-discovery and teamwork within the School of Nursing and a validation of the alignment of personal and professional values. I am honoured by everyone who contributed to it. I appreciate every effort which everyone is giving, because this aligns with excellence in all endeavours as a North-West University (NWU) value proposition. The award inspires me to continue serving others with passion, care and commitment. I believe it enables and encourages individuals and teams to perform better, so that they succeed in any environment. It encourages growth, challenges me to aim higher, learn more and embrace opportunities for further development.

To the aspiring women leaders

“Life is a journey, not a destination.” – Maya Angelou.

We may encounter many defeats, but we must not be defeated. Each experience is important. Invest in self-awareness because understanding your strengths, weaknesses, values and triggers is important for leadership.

If you know yourself, you inspire trust and can adapt better. Practice empathy and active listening, be realistic, and avoid working in silos. Leadership is not about knowing everything, but about being willing to learn, adapt and innovate. Keep pushing forward and continue trying in whatever you do.

“Success is knowing your purpose in life, growing to reach your maximum potential and sowing seeds that benefit others.” - John C. Maxwell.

“Success is knowing your purpose in life, growing to reach your maximum potential and sowing seeds that benefit others.” - John C. Maxwell.

HEWLA Winner: Women in Social Sciences & Humanities

PROF CLAUDE-HÉLÈNE MAYER,
UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG



“When women enter spaces of knowledge production, they do more than participate - they redefine the frameworks through which we understand power, identity, and justice.” – Dr Chandra Talpade Mohanty, postcolonial feminist scholar

Women have always played a great role in my life. From my early upbringing onwards, powerful women were present: in my family, in my education, and also in my career. Looking back, there were many women role models who contributed to my life, my personal development, and my interests in women empowerment and women leadership. Being a woman and being in solidarity with other women, standing up for social and cultural justice, equality and empowerment, became major values in my life and have helped to redefine the frameworks of power, identity and justice.

I have been deeply involved in advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion, within academic settings and beyond. I believe that women solidarity and empowerment will lead to dismantling systemic barriers and power imbalances, and redefine women's identities.

In 2007/2008, Prof Lynette Louw from Rhodes University asked me to present a workshop on conflict management with her at one of the HERS-SA academies in Cape Town. I have been connected to HERS-SA ever since. I have held several workshops and presentations for HERS-SA over the years and developed a close friendship and collegial cooperation with HERS-SA's late former director Dr Sabie Surtee. With Sabie as my co-researcher, we started a HERS-SA research project on women leadership in higher education in South Africa. Based on this project, we published several articles and book chapters together to create awareness and share new and innovative knowledge on women in leadership. The subsequent director, Brightness Mangoloth, continued the cooperation by inviting me to deliver a number of presentations. Over the years, I have been impressed and pleased that HERS-SA provides a space where women leaders can learn, find support, friends and networks, and create a vision for their future careers.

The Higher Education Women Leaders Awards (HEWLA) is a powerful symbol for women who are consciously shaping the humanities and social sciences. It represents empowerment, the redefinition of gender identities, and the re-creation of the sciences from a gendered perspective.

“Over the years, I have been impressed and pleased that HERS-SA provides a space where women leaders can learn, find support, friends and networks, and create a vision for their future careers.”

Winning such a prestigious award brings increased visibility to women in academia and shines a spotlight on women in leadership within the academic and scientific community. It serves as a beacon of inspiration for younger women, encouraging them to pursue their careers with confidence, build networks, break barriers, and become transformative leaders of the future.

This award also signals that gender equity in academia is underway. It affirms that women can advance despite systemic boundaries and hurdles through scientific dedication, professional cooperation, and meaningful human connection.

The HEWLA awards have a role model effect for women and show that, as women, we need to support each other and work together beyond cultural, language or racial lines. The HEWLA should inspire future women leaders to advance increased representation of women in the humanities, especially since the humanities in the past have been male-dominated.

The recognition of women through the HEWLA can help to ensure women's voices, new perspectives and humane contributions to the humanities. By empowering women, the HEWLA supports the redefinition of socio-cultural frameworks through which we understand power, identity and justice.

“Winning such a prestigious award provides increased visibility for all women in academia and shines a spotlight onto women in leadership in the academic and scientific community.”

Support Services Staff: The Backbone of Higher Education Institutions

BY TASNEEM WADVALLA



HEWLA Winner: Women in Support Services

The role of higher education institutions is essential in a developing country like South Africa. Professional, administrative and services staff play a key role in supporting this developmental agenda by enabling the academic project and the broader societal imperatives of universities. This cohort of staff, of which I have been privileged to be a part for more than a decade, provides the scaffolding to enable trailblazing academics to develop a new generation of leaders and critical thinkers, who in turn, hold significant societal value. The support that services staff provide to academics who develop cutting edge research that often changes lives for the better, not only aids in placing our institutions at the forefront of academic and research excellence, but in most instances also benefits society.

In fulfilling our duties, we also have the privilege of engaging with bright and committed students, student leaders and the most intellectually astute and committed academics across the globe. This is wonderfully rewarding and motivating.

It is in this context that I am honoured to have received the 2025 HERS-SA Women in Support Services Award.

“Professional, administrative and services staff play a key role in supporting this developmental agenda by enabling the academic project and the broader societal imperatives of universities.”

The introduction of this category of award by HERS-SA is both impactful and insightful. Support services staff, and in particular female support services staff, do not always receive due recognition for their contribution to the sector. HERS-SA's role in showcasing and rewarding excellence in this domain is therefore welcomed.

This cohort of staff are generally appointed on a permanent basis, which is distinct from executive leadership roles that are generally for a defined period. The long-term and permanent nature of our roles and our unique skill sets, often results in support services staff organically becoming the “back-bone” of institutions. Faculty registrars and administrators, colleagues in admissions and enrolment, central records, human resources, communications, marketing, finance, services, legal, IT, and student support, amongst many others, hold the institutional memory and bespoke expertise which enables institutions to maintain their longevity. This contribution to the sector should never be underestimated or undervalued.

By the same token, there should also be an intentional recognition, amongst support services staff ourselves, that we are part of a broader purpose and mission. Throughout my own 17-year career in the sector, this has been a common theme for me, from the time I started my career as a legal advisor in 2008 and as I fulfil my current, dual role as the Head of Legal Services and the Chief of Staff in the Office of the Vice-Chancellor. It is this broader purpose and mission that I find incredibly fulfilling and inspiring.

Having said that, working in the sector can also be particularly demanding. Institutions face financial constraints, and the environments are often complex and fraught. It is the resilience and camaraderie of colleagues in support services and in the sector in general that enables one to navigate this very nuanced terrain.

Many will concur with me that no one day is the same in higher education. There is certainly no monotony, and it is this variety and purpose that I, for one, find electrifying and deeply gratifying. In my own role, I am compelled to seamlessly navigate between negotiating complex agreements, to advising on governance related matters, which are so critical within the sector at this moment in time, or advising the senior executive team on a range of strategic matters.

While the expertise to do the job is critical, the ability to fulfil one's role progressively, innovatively and with the necessary empathy and sensitivity is equally important. It is this very balance which I try to keep top of mind when fulfilling my own role. Being intentional about fulfilling one's duty and holding the line when needed, without impeding one's empathy and humanity in the process, is the medium which has been my guiding principle throughout my career in the sector.

“The introduction of this category of award by HERS-SA is both impactful and insightful.”

HEWLA Winner: Women in Student Development & Faculty Administration

BY PROF TEMBISA NGQONDI



As a servant leader, I believe that winning this award is a testament to my commitment and intention to provide unwavering and excellent service to the people I serve, my organisation and the community at large.

Life's humble beginnings helped me to realise and embrace the power of consistency and focus in pursuing my goals. Getting to the level of winning an award took several years of resilience and hard work, learning to fail (and to forgive myself in the process) and to start again, until mastering the task. My journey was shaped by the guidance of parents who modelled commitment to hard work and resilience in achieving their goals and parental responsibilities.

My success is also attributed to the support of great leaders who mentored and coached me. They unleashed my potential through different practical exercises and personal one-on-one engagements. These leaders created opportunities for me to work, fail, and succeed, and provided affirmation. The skills acquired on the academic journey enabled me to develop self-awareness and learn the fundamentals of faculty administration and student development.

As a Faculty Dean at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, the university management afforded me the space, opportunity and autonomy to work independently and to contribute to the University vision and mission without barriers. Being enabled to exercise my discretion in shaping the Faculty is what created the opportunity to win this award. Involvement in student development started as early as my high school days, where I was enthusiastic to support and help peers who were struggling with mathematics.

As a technikon student, I continued this passion of supporting peers with computer and programming skills, as a volunteer student assistant. Developing relationships with students and interns, gave me opportunities to shape their lives through varied, innovative learning and teaching approaches that developed and produced lifelong learners and work-ready graduates.

My approach to student engagement was to expand their scope and stretch their critical thinking, encouraging them to see that they already had the potential to succeed, rather than focusing on the barriers they had before joining the university. Their barriers were used mainly for identifying the kind of support they needed to prepare for success, which was mainly done through one-on-one consultation.

The concept of working with what we have presents an opportunity for students to be creative. I remember my students who were doing well used to say to me, "Prof, we are not PhD students". I would then ask them if they had done a PhD before, and they would laugh and focus on the assignment.

In my role as a Dean, I worked to create an environment for students to find their passion, through introduction of different projects embracing transdisciplinary solutions and entrepreneurship, mirroring the real world of business and industrial processes. Introducing industry collaboration projects and competitions created developmental opportunities for students.

A collaborative approach to leadership has been key to the success of the Faculty. This has been my practice for as long as I have been in leadership, as a lecturer, programme leader, and head of department and school.

A win for one colleague is a win for everyone. I have always served by doing, for example where I can come in and close the gap for a colleague who needs support in being operational or coping with work-related issues.

Guidelines and processes ensure effectiveness and efficiency, key to improving financial and human resources management. With such strategies, we have seen improvement in the Faculty's financial viability, transformation, research output, postgraduate graduation rate, enrolment rate, and introduced a collegial environment for staff and students.

An open-door policy, which makes me easily accessible by students and staff, has enabled an environment in the Faculty that addresses most challenges before they can have a negative impact on the Faculty and institutional image. As an administrative faculty leader, I believe in being a visible leader who embraces, supports and celebrates other leaders' successes by being present.

To women aspiring to become academic leaders, I believe that academic leadership is a service, not a job. It is designed to serve the nation and develop future leaders. It requires selfless service, which does not always have adequate financial compensation but is a treasure that improves lives. One needs to be ready for a challenge, learn, and develop resilience. The academic leader is defined by her integrity and ethical values.

We need more women academic leaders. The journey has its up and downs, but it is fulfilling. Do not wait to be nominated and recognised to lead; start leading in everything you do.

"Academic leadership is a service, not a job. It is designed to serve the nation and develop future leaders."

HEWLA Winner: Trailblazer

PROF BONGANI NCUBE



My favourite Bible verse growing up was Luke 1:37 - “For with God nothing shall be impossible.”

That verse, and my mother’s advice and encouragement, made me believe I could achieve anything if I worked hard for it. Hard work has always been not to win prizes, but to better my life and contribute to the community and society. In 2025, God has shown me that hard work can be rewarded in unexpected ways, and the HERS-SA Award is one of those.

I was born in a village near Kezi, Matobo District, in Zimbabwe. With a BSc in Agriculture Honours in Soil Science from the University of Zimbabwe, I worked in the public sector for three years before pursuing an MSc in Water Resources Engineering and Management and joining the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) in Bulawayo. After obtaining a PhD in Production Ecology and Resource Conservation from Wageningen University in the Netherlands, I joined WaterNet, overseeing the multidisciplinary Limpopo Basin Challenge Programme on Water and Food until 2010. I then worked for non-profit organisations in the United Kingdom before moving to South Africa in 2013.

Since April 2022, I have led the SARChI Research Chair in Governance and Economics for Water and Sanitation Sector Institutions at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), focusing on water security, governance, equity, and financial viability. I have been a full professor at CPUT since March 2025.

When I started working in the academic field at CPUT about 12 years ago, I had planned to remain a researcher, which had been my main focus since the start of my career. However, the shortage of skills and supervisory capacity in my field brought me into lecturing and postgraduate supervision, out of necessity. Working in a centre that included young researchers in addition to students, I took on the role of mentor, a role I had previously enjoyed working for WaterNet, where I mentored 7 PhDs and 30+ MSc students.

In 2018, our director retired and I took over the leadership of the centre. At the same time, I was asked to teach Water Engineering in the Department of Civil Engineering and Geomatics. Once again, I found myself juggling teaching, research and postgraduate supervision. It was a stressful period because I did not have a stable work contract.

The Research Chair that I am now leading brought stability to my career, and it is all thanks to the support of Dr Tania Holmes-Watts, Prof Veruscha Fester, Prof Marshall Sheldon and Prof David Phaho, who supported me in the application. I felt privileged to be able to celebrate together with Prof Sheldon and Prof Fester in the room when I received the HERS-SA award.

I am a functional introvert, so relating to people can be tricky. I can be stone silent, so you may not recognise me when I am “in the zone” with the farmers. However, my job has taught me to open up, and students have also taught me to talk. Teaching first years was one of my most enjoyable moments.

My advice to young women is a mixed bag, because my career journey has had its highs, lows, detours, and surprises. Many people have supported my career, from my family, primary and high school teachers, to university lecturers and postgraduate and work supervisors, and I am forever grateful.

“Stand up, dare to be different, and do things you have never done before. As Joyce Meyer says, ‘Do it afraid.’

In one’s career journey, it is also crucial to know who you are very early. Identify your allies and supporters, and have one or two mentors to guide you. Some people give up too early; but it’s never too late to start. Learning is a continuous process. If you need another degree to reach your goals, go for it. Stand up, dare to be different, and do things you have never done before. As Joyce Meyer says, “Do it afraid”.

I see my role as paying it forward, because without the support and help of other people, I would not be where I am today. I thank first God Almighty for my life, my late parents for their wisdom and guidance, my siblings for being my parents, and Roswitha MacDonald for being my second mother. I appreciate all the people I have worked with, particularly my late supervisor and mentor at ICRISAT, Dr Steve Twomlow; Prof Walter Mupangwa, who continues to write with me; and Dr Geoffrey Heinrinch, who encouraged me when I was ready to quit my PhD.

I thank my current employer, CPUT, particularly the office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, Technology, Innovation and Partnerships, the Dean and staff of the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment, the Research Office, Strategic Initiatives and Partnerships, and the Technology Transfer Office.

Thank you, HERS-SA, for making me shine!

A Lifetime in Academia: Reflections on the Award and the Road Ahead for Women Scholars

PROF TINA UYS,
UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG



HEWLA Winner: Lifetime Achiever

When I received the news that I had been awarded the Lifetime Achiever Award, I felt a mix of emotions: gratitude, humility, and a sense of responsibility. This honour is not only a recognition of my personal journey in academia but also a reminder of the countless women past, present, and future who shape scholarship, often under difficult conditions.

My own academic story began with a deep curiosity about how societies function and, more importantly, how they can change for the better. Early in my career, I realised that research was not simply about publications or metrics, but about people – their struggles, their resilience, their voices, and their hopes. This perspective has guided my work in clinical sociology, whistleblowing, public health, and institutional trust. Along the way, I have been fortunate to collaborate with colleagues who shared a vision of using sociology not as an abstract pursuit but as a tool for social justice.

The path, however, was not without challenges. As a woman in academia, I had to learn to navigate institutional cultures that were not always welcoming, especially to women who spoke up, led, or challenged entrenched practices. There were moments of doubt, times when opportunities seemed closed, and times when the balance between professional and personal responsibilities felt overwhelming.

“Setbacks are not the end – they are the soil from which new opportunities grow.”

Yet each barrier also sharpened my resolve. I learned that perseverance, mentorship, and solidarity with others – particularly with women colleagues and students – were the keys to survival and growth.

Winning this award is not just about longevity in the academy. It signals recognition of a way of doing sociology: engaged, applied, collaborative, and deeply connected to lived realities. I have always believed that knowledge must travel beyond the walls of universities. Whether it is about strengthening ethical governance, supporting whistleblowers, or improving healthcare systems, research has a responsibility to create impact. This award affirms that socially responsive scholarship matters.

For aspiring women in academia, I hope my story conveys three lessons. The first is the importance of resilience. Academia can be unforgiving, and women are still judged by double standards. But setbacks are not the end, they are the soil from which new opportunities grow. The second lesson is about finding allies and mentors. No one succeeds alone. I have been sustained by mentors who encouraged me, peers who stood by me, and students who inspired me with their brilliance and determination. Finally, I encourage women to claim their space unapologetically. Too often we are socialised to downplay our achievements. Yet celebrating our successes is essential – not for vanity, but for visibility. Our stories make it easier for those who follow.

The Lifetime Achiever Award does not mark the end of my journey but a new chapter. It gives me renewed energy to mentor, to write, to teach, and to continue pushing for institutional cultures that value inclusion, integrity, and justice. For younger women scholars, I hope it shows that their contributions matter – that the challenges they face are part of a much larger struggle in which their voices are urgently needed.

In South Africa, and across the world, we need more women who are visible leaders in academia. We need more research agendas shaped by women’s perspectives, more mentoring of women students, and more women professors who influence policies and institutions. This award reminds me that my story is part of a wider collective movement: women claiming space in knowledge production, transforming the academy, and ensuring that intellectual work serves society.

As I reflect on the journey that brought me here, I am reminded of a simple truth: recognition is not an endpoint but a responsibility. My task now is to ensure that the paths for those who follow are a little smoother, the doors a little more open, and the culture of academia a little more just.

This award honours the past but, more importantly, it points towards the future. It is a future in which aspiring women in academia know they belong, know their work matters, and know that the pursuit of knowledge can indeed change the world.

“Recognition is not an endpoint but a responsibility. My task now is to ensure that the paths for those who follow are a little smoother, the doors a little more open, and the culture of academia a little more just.”

The graphic features a dark blue background. In the center, there is a white rectangular box. To the left of this box is a light blue L-shaped block, and to the right is an orange L-shaped block, both of which appear to frame the central white box. Inside the white box, the text "HERS-SA" is at the top, followed by "COLLABORATIONS" in a larger font, and "2025" at the bottom, all in bold black capital letters.

HERS-SA
COLLABORATIONS
2025

HERS-SA 2025: Reflections on Collaborations, Community Outreach and Partnerships

DR SORAYA BEUKES



“Collaboration is the new currency.”

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are key to development of the world population at large. Collaboration is the new currency; therefore, the United Nations developed SDG17 for collaborations and partnerships. In this global village, it is necessary to form relationships across borders, to share ideas and solutions to resolve the global divide testing communities.

International collaborations

With this goal, I joined HERS-East Africa for their 2025 Academy. This was a robust engagement to amplify women's leadership empowerment across East Africa and Uganda's higher education landscape.

Prof Margaret Khaita, Professor of Veterinary Epidemiology, Mississippi State University and founder of HERS-East Africa, and Dr Naomi Lumutenga, co-founder and HERS-EA Executive Director, were the dynamic duo setting the tone of the academy.

Ahead of the Academy, we undertook a whirlwind five-day university tour, visiting Kyambogo University, Uganda Christian University, Clarke International University, Makerere University, Ndjeje University, Mbarara University of Science and Technology, Bishop Stuart University, and Kabale University.

We engaged with Vice-Chancellors, Deans, heads of departments (HODs) and others, particularly seeking out women in leadership. The tour ended at Kabale University for the HERS-EA Academy. Speakers from Uganda, USA, Sweden and South Africa delivered riveting presentations on advancing women in leadership.

Emanating from this interactive collaboration, a connection sprouted with Vice-Chancellor of Troy University in the USA, Dr Dionne Rosser-Mims, which culminated with her participating in our HERS-SA Academy. She led team building exercises and participated in a high-level Vice-Chancellor panel discussion with University of Cape Town Vice-Chancellor Prof Mosa Moshabela and Vice-Chancellor Prof Sakhela Buhlungu of Fort Hare.

Both Prof Rosser-Mims and Dr Lumutenga also shared their women empowerment passions with the audience at the HERS-SA HEWLA awards. Such keen sharing of knowledge and ideas is the pathway to global elevation of women to their just recognition.

It is my keen understanding that when you are in power as women, know what to do with your power. Exemplary of this was Prof Joy Constance Kwesiga, Vice-Chancellor of Kabale University, hosting the HERS-EA Academy 2025, and Prof Pauline Byakika-Kibwika, Vice-Chancellor of Mabara University of Science and Technology, confirming the hosting of the 2026 Academy. Yes, on the spot, decisive and impWe engaged with Vice-Chancellors, Deans, heads of departments (HODs) and others, particularly seeking out women in leadership.

The tour ended at Kabale University for the HERS-EA Academy. Speakers from Uganda, USA, Sweden and South Africa delivered riveting presentations on advancing women in leadership.

“Such keen sharing of knowledge and ideas is the pathway to global elevation of women to their just recognition.”

Emanating from this interactive collaboration, a connection sprouted with Vice-Chancellor of Troy University in the USA, Dr Dionne Rosser-Mims, which culminated with her participating in our HERS-SA Academy. She led team building exercises and participated in a high-level Vice-Chancellor panel discussion with University of Cape Town Vice-Chancellor Prof Mosa Moshabela and Vice-Chancellor Prof Sakhela Buhlungu of Fort Hare.

Both Prof Rosser-Mims and Dr Lumutenga also shared their women empowerment passions with the audience at the HERS-SA HEWLA awards. Such keen sharing of knowledge and ideas is the pathway to global elevation of women to their just recognition.

actful by the strike of a pen, the lives of the next cohort of women participants in the next academy is enhanced. This is how significantly women can use their power to change lives.

Community outreach and engagement

Community outreach is one of the pillars of higher education and HERS-SA strives to engage in meaningful community engagement and outreach, fulfilling our public benefit mandate.

In this regard, I delivered the keynote address for the South African Police Service launch of the Hawks Women’s Network, “Women Leading Positive Change in the South African Police Service”.

“When you are in power as women, know what to do with your power.”

Our collaboration stemmed from the Hawks’ presentation at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) during the Afrocentric programme and the gender-based violence (GBV) conference.

Further outreach and engagements included collaboration with Imphilo Health social workers on GBV awareness and assistance for victims. In addition, HERS-SA joined Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) in raising awareness of GBV through their “100 Days of GBV Awareness” campaign on social media platforms.

National collaborations and knowledge sharing

We kicked off the year with an International Women’s Day webinar in collaboration with the International Education Association of South Africa (IEASA), raising awareness on the continuing lack of gender equality. Thereafter, we delivered a message of support at the CPUT International Women’s Day conference.

Our partnerships and collaborations also encompassed the University of Zululand (UNIZULU), TUT Faculty of Arts and Design, and CPUT.

UNIZULU: I delivered the graduation keynote address focusing on graduate attributes. This interaction resulted in Prof Vuyokazi Nomlomo, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC) for Teaching and Learning, joining the HERS-SA Academy in the DVC and Executive Dean panel discussion.

TUT: My presentation for women’s month on GBV, Art and Social Justice at the TUT GBV Symposium cemented a collaborative association with the TUT Faculty of Arts and Design towards building meaningful networks.

CPUT: We joined CPUT in the Afrocentric International Women Empowerment pre-Conference presented by EmpowerHerSA-CPUT, where I addressed “Empowerment of Young Women to Lead in their Spaces”. The pinnacle of our collaborations is reflected in the Emerging Women Leaders Programme, HERS-Academy and the HERS-SA HEWLA Awards, where women rubbed shoulders with participants across the 26 public universities and the corporates in attendance.

In conclusion, these collaborations unfold into partnerships sharing the same vision to move society forward through a social justice lens, advocating for the inclusion of women in higher education leadership in their rightful numbers and representivity. The *raison d’être* for HERS-SA is gender equity and women leadership in higher education, in the true spirit of SDG 5 on gender equality and SDG 11 on building sustainable communities.

“The HERS-SA Academy was not just training; it was an invitation to reimagine ourselves, our work, and our shared future.”

THANK YOU TO OUR SPONSORS

