

NELSON MANDELA UNIVERSITY

RESEARCH WEEK 2026



FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES
DAY THREE: 2 SEPTEMBER 2026
VENUE: Ocean Sciences Campus,
Plenary Room.



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programme

**HUMANISING INNOVATION, AND INNOVATING
HUMANITY**

Executive Dean's Introductory Remarks

The 2026 Research Week theme, Forging Intelligent Futures: Research & Innovation Shaping AI • AI Advancing Research & Innovation, invites the University to consider not only how artificial intelligence is transforming research and innovation, but how research and innovation, in turn, must shape the trajectory of artificial intelligence. For the Humanities Faculty at Nelson Mandela University, this reciprocal framing is an invitation rather than an imposition. While AI may be perceived, at first glance, as the preserve of the Sciences and Engineering disciplines, the Faculty of Humanities recognises this moment as an urgent call for disciplines historically concerned with meaning, value, culture, and the human condition to assert their place at the centre of the conversation.

It is in this spirit that the Faculty proposes its theme for Research Day: Humanising Innovation, and Innovating Humanity. The formulation is deliberately reciprocal. On the one hand, it calls for the humanisation of innovation, insisting that technological advancement, and artificial intelligence in particular, be interrogated through ethical, cultural, historical, and social lenses so that it serves rather than diminishes human dignity, agency, and diversity. On the other, it calls for the innovating of humanity itself, an acknowledgement that the Humanities cannot remain static custodians of tradition, but must themselves be reimagined, revitalised, and made newly responsive to a rapidly changing technological and social landscape.

This year's keynote address, delivered by Professor Monde Ntwasa, speaks directly and powerfully to this theme. Professor Ntwasa reframes Africa not as a continent defined by its challenges, but as the epicentre of future innovation, labour, and global markets — with its youth and natural resources standing as its greatest assets. This reframing resonates deeply with the Faculty's own conviction that innovating humanity begins with recentring Africa in narratives from which it has too often been marginalised, and with recognising African knowledge, African people, and African futures as generative rather than peripheral to global innovation. His keynote further advances the critical importance of transdisciplinary modes of knowledge production, affirming that the intelligent futures we seek to forge cannot be built within disciplinary silos, but demand precisely the kind of cross-disciplinary dialogue and collaboration that this Faculty has long championed.

This theme, and Professor Ntwasa's keynote, build directly on the intellectual momentum established last year through Knowledge Entanglements and Convergences: Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences and Natural Sciences in Dialogue, which affirmed that knowledge is never produced in isolation, but through dynamic historical, cultural, ethical, and scientific relations. Where last year's theme foregrounded convergence between disciplines, this year's theme sharpens that convergence into a pointed question: what does it mean to innovate responsibly, from an African vantage point, and what does it mean to remain human, in an age increasingly defined by intelligent systems? This is not a retreat from the University-wide theme, but a deepening of it — a recognition that "forging intelligent futures" is as much an ethical, cultural, and transdisciplinary project as it is a scientific and technical one, and that AI cannot meaningfully "advance research and innovation" without the interpretive, critical, and value-driven contributions that only the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences — working in genuine collaboration with the natural and applied sciences — can offer.

This continues the Faculty's broader intellectual project on the Revitalisation of the Humanities in the academy — our ongoing quest to engage across disciplines and with society, for societal impact and sustainability. The contributions that follow, presented by Faculty academics, students, research associates, and colleagues from across the University, illustrate how we are living out this theme in our learning and teaching, our research and innovation, and our social engagement: humanising the technologies that are reshaping our world, and, in the process, discovering new ways of being, knowing, and innovating as African scholars within it.

09:05-09:15 **Welcome and Opening remarks**

Professor Pamela Maseko, Executive Dean: Humanities Faculty.

09:15-09:20 **Introduction of keynote speaker:** Dr Jacqui Lück, Deputy Dean: Humanities Faculty.

09:20-10:10 **Advancing Africa's Future through Smart Technologies**

Professor Monde Ntwasa, Distinguished Professor of Biotechnology, UNISA.

10:10-10:30 **Question & Answer**

10:30-11:00 **Tea Break**

Facilitator: Ms Chanel van Der Merwe, Department of Linguistics & Applied Linguistics.

11:00-11:45 **Humanising the Archive: Curating S.E.K. Mqhayi for Cross-Disciplinary Enquiry**

Mr Sanele Ntshingana, UCT.

11:45-12:30 **African Coloniality and Innovation in Territorial Planning: Spatializing 20th Century Setswana Literature in/for African Political Geography.**

Dr Ernestina S. Nkooe, Department of Geosciences.

12:30 -13:00 **General reflections**

13:00-14:00 **Lunch**

Chair: Prof Pamela Maseko

14:00-14:45 **In our Own Image: Transhumanism as our last hope?**

Mr Lemohang Tebeli, Department of Philosophy with Mr Jude Mathurine, Department of Media & Communication.

15:00-16:30 Prof Shelley Barry, and screening of her film, Record which has been selected to feature at the New York Africa Film Festival. Popcorn and refreshments will be served during the screening.

Evening session

16:30-18:00 Prof Shelley Barry (in conversation with Dr Janelle Vermaak-Griessel and Mr Lungelo Manona) followed by Art Exhibitions.

Advancing Africa's Future through Smart Technologies

Professor Monde Ntwasa, Distinguished Professor of Biotechnology, University of South Africa (UNISA).

Biography:

Professor Monde Ntwasa is a biochemist and translational scientist whose career bridges molecular biology, cancer research, and higher education leadership. He earned BSc degrees in Microbiology and Clinical Science & Immunology from the University of Cape Town (UCT), followed by an MPhil and PhD at the University of Cambridge. Returning to South Africa, he served as Research Fellow at UCT and spent 17 years at the University of the Witwatersrand, rising to Associate Professor, before joining UNISA as Distinguished Professor of Biotechnology and Acting Executive Dean of the College of Agriculture & Environmental Sciences. His research topics include apoptosis, autophagy, innate immunity, and cancer biology, with pioneering work on Retinoblastoma Binding Protein 6 (RBBP6), a regulator of p53 and a promising therapeutic target. He has published widely, secured international patents, and advanced anticancer drug discovery and development through innovative small-molecule targeting. Beyond science, he is a leading advocate for transformation in higher education, emphasizing inclusive, socially responsive research and entrepreneurship. His contributions—spanning scholarship, innovation, and leadership—continue to shape cancer biology and inspire the next generation of African scientists.

Humanising the Archive: Curating S.E.K. Mqhayi for Cross-Disciplinary Enquiry

Mr Sanele Ntshingana, University of Cape Town.

Abstract:

This presentation traces the digital curation of S.E.K. Mqhayi's archive — from the sole surviving 1930s recording of his voice to his contested portrait and biographical timeline — undertaken with the Cory Library and hosted on EMANDULO. It considers what it means to structure a 19th/20th-century isiXhosa intellectual's material for multiple, divergent scholarly publics: the linguists, the historians, or the sociologists. In doing so, it argues that digitisation is not a neutral technical act but an interpretive one, a case study in humanising innovation by keeping African intellectual heritage legible on its own terms.

African Coloniality and Innovation in Territorial Planning: Spatializing 20th Century Setswana Literature in/for African Political Geography.

Dr Ernestina S. Nkooe, Department of Geosciences, Nelson Mandela University.

Three literary texts—Lesityane's Letlhaku le le Gologolo, Molema's Bantu Past and Plaatje's Mhudi—are read to excavate elements of territorial innovation and coloniality among pre-19th century Batswana, against established knowledge concerning the disruptive impacts of international borders in Africa. What emerges is that pre-20th century Batswana, inter alia the Matebele nation, experienced intra-racial colonial domination which led to deterritorialization and misanthropic skepticism. Amidst the internecine war period preceding Difecane, some Batswana Kings demonstrated innovation in the territorial production of border-post settlements to act as geographic buffers against Anglo-Boer encroachment.



These non-geographic discourses negate epistemic traditions that describe pre-19th century Africans as empty of territorial cognition, devoid of philosophical thought and having pre-existed in a utopia.

In our Own Image: Transhumanism as our last hope?

Mr Lemohang Tebeli, Department of Philosophy, Nelson Mandela University.

Transhumanism presents one of the most ambitious responses to the limits of the human condition. It proposes that human beings need not remain bound by ageing, disease, cognitive limitation, emotional suffering, or biological mortality. It considers the movement's principal promises: the Three-Supers; Super-Longevity, Super Wellbeing and Super Intelligence. These promises are commonly expressed through the ideal of a human being who becomes an active designer of own body, mind, and future rather than a passive product of nature, history, or biological inheritance. Yet these ambitions are inseparable from political and economic contexts. As Alexander Thomas argues, transhumanist ambitions are entangled with advanced capitalism, raising concerns about unequal access, corporate control, and the marketisation of human capacities. The central question is therefore not simply whether human enhancement is possible or desirable. It is who will define enhancement, who will control its infrastructures, who will gain access to it, and what forms of vulnerability or humanity may be devalued in the process. This presentation, therefore, will seek to clarify the philosophical claims of transhumanism, examines its technological promises, arguing that transhumanism is morally defensible only when governed by justice, democratic accountability, and a non-reductive understanding of human flourishing. Without these conditions, I argue "self transformation" risks becoming just another market driven transformation.

Film screening

Record (2026) by Prof Shelley Barry, Department of Media & Communication, Nelson Mandela University.

Executive producers: Gender Dynamix and twospinningwheels

Produced and directed by Shelley Barry

Co-directed by all participants

Record premiered in May 2026 at the New York African Film Festival, NYC.

In 2023, transgender and gender diverse persons in Southern Africa were trained in mobile phone filmmaking and recorded their lives through video diaries.

Record is a selection of their footage, weaving together a story of resistance and pride.

Sazi has to contend with living in a traditional Zulu community in Kwazulu-Natal where some people refer to her as a man, even though she prepares to have gender-affirming surgery. Diane, hailing from the Northern Cape, struggles with her addiction to meth, while escaping her need to be loved and accepted. Ntelele is gender non-conforming and this notion is confusing to his family, in the mountains of Lesotho. Gleo, in Cape Town, devotes her life to the rights of transgender and gender diverse individuals, while reflecting on her own lived experience.



Electrazie is a content creator in Malawi, moving between the perils of living openly as a transgender woman and creating content and being forced into hiding for fear of her life. Seoketsi navigates the streets of the North West province, battling with her mental health, while insisting on living life on her own terms. The Kid, based in Johannesburg, hides the truth from their family, as they realise that they are not a lesbian and do not like to be referred to as a girl/woman. Leona, a fashion designer in Zimbabwe, is outspoken on the rights of transgender persons, while knowing that she could have the same fate as her friend, who mysteriously disappeared and was murdered. Basetsana from Cape Town, works relentlessly to bring awareness about transgender persons to rural communities in the Western Cape. Mukubesa works in the military in Zambia and has to pretend to be a woman.

Follow their journeys, as transgender and gender diverse persons represent themselves in Africa, on their own terms.

Change the World

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