

# Five winners of the Advancing womxn awards

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*UCT VC Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng launched the new scholarships at the UCT 2018 National Women's Day event.*

Five substantial grants have been awarded to women researchers to make space for more women's voices to be heard – both for their own advancement and for the advancement of others. The winners of the grants, announced on the International Day of Women and Girls in Science, are Dr Katye Altieri, Professor Floretta Boonzaier and Professor Janet Hapgood, while Professor Patricia Kooyman and Dr Robyn Pickering are recipients of meritorious awards.

Three of the winners – Altieri, Kooyman and Pickering – were successful in the category “For womxn by womxn: conducting research in a field in which womxn are in short supply”; the other two – Boonzaier and Hapgood – were chosen in the category “For womxn by womxn on womxn: conducting research in an area of study that focuses on womxn”. Capacity building, with a particular emphasis on diversity, was an important criterion for both categories.

Announcing the initiative on National Women's Day in August last year, Phakeng said that while they would target human capital development, the projects would also “help us rethink our views of gender in South Africa and give us new insights into ourselves and others in different communities”.

No grant was however awarded in the third category, “Re-imagining gender”, announced by Phakeng last year to support research on transgender or non-conforming gender issues.

“These are people whose identities are outside the gender binaries many people are used to. We need to stop pretending that those people don’t exist, and queerness is not African,” she said last year at the launch of the scholarships.

She says the lack of proposals for this category indicate a gap in UCT’s research that needs to be filled, and challenged UCT’s research community to do just that.

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“While it is true that this remains a globally under-researched area, we need to improve our understanding of the transgender experience so we can improve the lives of these individuals, particularly gender non-conforming youth in Africa,” she says. “The experience in Africa will be different from those in the global north, and we need to be able to understand and respond to that experience.”

Phakeng has publicly committed herself and UCT to creating more opportunities for women, and she is stepping up to the plate by offering millions of rands in funding to advance women at UCT, in South Africa and globally.

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The research projects to be funded are:

**Dr Katie Altieri: enabling South Africa’s black oceanographers**

Along with three co-investigators, Altieri from the Department of Oceanography aims to enable a cohort of postgraduate black women and transgender oceanographers to become the leaders of oceanography in South Africa – and the global south.

“Our vision is that over the next five years the postgraduate culture of oceanography at UCT will become visibly and audibly different,” said Altieri in her proposal.

**Professor Floretta Boonzaier: unsettling research on gendered and sexual violence**

Despite countless efforts to address gendered and sexual violence in South Africa, it continues to persist, risking the lives and well-being of women, girls and non-conforming genders across the country.

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...What does it mean to think differently about research on gender-based violence?

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Through her project, Boonzaier – from the Department of Psychology – aims to shift the ways of thinking about and doing research on gender-based violence. She asks, what does it mean to think differently about research on gender-based violence?

The work aims to impact not only the ways we teach approaches to research, but also the ways we think about the purpose of research itself and the benefits that might be derived from it.

### **Professor Janet Hapgood: informed choices for women's contraception**

Women in sub-Saharan Africa are at high risk of being infected with HIV. They also need access to effective, safe and affordable contraception. However, the hormonal contraceptive that's most widely used in the region has a potential side-effect: it may increase the risk of HIV infection by about 40%. Sub-Saharan Africa is also the region with the highest use of this injectable contraceptive – called depo-medroxyprogesterone acetate or Depo-Provera – and the highest prevalence of HIV.

Hapgood will investigate the molecular mechanisms behind this potential increased risk for women using Depo-Provera.

The results will improve our understanding of the side-effects of hormonal contraceptives and give insight into the best choice of hormonal contraception for women, with the goal of improved health for women and informing public health policy.

### **Professor Patricia Kooyman: building fuel cells, better**

Hydrogen gas can be used in fuel cells to generate electricity independently and on a small scale. However, if there is any trace of carbon monoxide in the hydrogen gas of a fuel cell, it can hamper power generation.



Providing cheap, easy-to-use and -maintain, stand-alone fuel cells may contribute to the economic empowerment of people who are socially disadvantaged.

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Kooyman will explore ways to remove carbon monoxide gas from hydrogen gas with the goal of improving methods for preparing fuel for fuel cells. Providing cheap, easy-to-use and -maintain, stand-alone fuel cells may contribute to the economic empowerment of people who are socially disadvantaged.

As part of her project, Kooyman will train a cohort of black female or trans postgraduate researchers in critical skills in chemical engineering, catalysis research and transmission electron microscopy – areas in which men still dominate. The skills in physics and chemical engineering will be unique to the African continent.

### **Dr Robyn Pickering: transforming the field of paleoanthropology**

South Africa has a rich record of human evolution spanning fossils of our early ancestors through to more recent evidence for the emergence of modern humans and their complex behaviours. Research into human evolution in South Africa has been substantial and has received international attention for nearly 100 years. However, the leading researchers in South Africa have always been men: women are under-represented and black women are virtually absent.

Pickering and her co-investigators, Professor Rebecca Ackermann and Dr Jayne Wilkins, want to take the first step towards transforming the field of paleoanthropology. They plan to build up the Human Evolution Research Institute (HERI) at UCT to make it a world-class and enabling research environment where excellence shines and the next generation of great South African black women palaeoanthropologists can thrive.

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