

Human Sciences Research Council

HSRC Annual Conference 2026 honoured outstanding research papers and presentations

Kempton Park, Thursday, 17 September 2026 – The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) Annual Conference 2026 concluded with an awards ceremony recognising exceptional research papers and presentations under the theme, *The Age of Digitality and the Future of Society: Rethinking Knowledge, Ethics, and the Role of the Humanities and Social Sciences*.

The ceremony, chaired by HSRC CEO Prof Sarah Mosoetsa, on Wednesday, 16 September 2026, formed part of the official closing programme alongside the closing address by the Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation, Prof Blade Nzimande.

The awards recognise the best papers and best presentations based on criteria such as relevance to the conference theme, innovation or contribution to knowledge, potential social impact, and articulation that advances understanding of digital transformation in the South African, African, and Global South contexts.

Winners were selected by an independent adjudication panel convened by the HSRC executives and the conference's scientific committee.

The 2026 Best Paper and Presentation Award winners are (in no particular order):

Winner: Sibulele Mabe

Session 1: Rethinking knowledge production in the age of AI

Paper Title: Classification and interoperability in South African digital infrastructures:
Toward context-responsive data governance

Institution: University of the Western Cape

Winner: Tsakane Matsilele

Session 2: Digital humanities and African knowledge systems

Paper Title: The paradox of participation: Preserving indigenous languages when
indigeneity is contested

Institution: University of Cape Town

Winner: Swazi Hlatshwayo et al.

Session 3: The future of work, education, and scholarship

Paper Title: Strengthening local democracy through context-sensitive digital participation:
Evidence from South African municipalities

Institution: Human Sciences Research Council

Winner: Nonzwakazi Natasha Gcelu

Session 6: Ethics, power, and accountability in AI

Paper Title: Making AI mental health support work for key populations in South Africa

Institution: Human Sciences Research Council

Winner: Siphesihle Maseko

Session 9: The Future of work, education, and scholarship

Paper Title: The AI mirror: What generative AI reveals about teaching, learning and assessment

Institution: University of South Africa

Winner: Thamie Ndlovu et al.

Session 10: Digital inequality and social justice

Paper Title: Reconceptualising learning experience design through ubuntu: Towards relational and epistemically just AI-mediated learning

Institution: North-West University

Speaking at the awards ceremony, Prof Mosoetsa congratulated all winners and participants, noting that the quality of presentations across parallel sessions reflected the HSRC's commitment to rigorous, socially responsive research.

The HSRC extends its congratulations to all awardees and thanks all presenters, chairs, and delegates for their contributions.

Full conference papers will be published on the conference website as well as the HSRC website.

The HSRC Annual Conference is one of South Africa's largest and most influential social science conferences. Each year the conference is organised around a pressing societal theme.

The HSRC will disseminate conference proceedings, policy briefs and research outputs emanating from the conference in due course. For more information, please visit: <https://annual-conference.hsrc.ac.za/>

Follow HSRC Media Room WhatsApp Channel for photos and other documents: <https://whatsapp.com/channel/0029Vb8pKy4L2ATzHkm7PM2V>

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YouTube Link:

HSRC Annual Conference 2026: The Age of Digitality and the Future of Society_Closing ceremony.

<https://youtube.com/live/aD8lXV1WfsY?feature=share>

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Notes to the editor

About the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC)

Established in 1968, the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) is South Africa's statutory research agency and the largest dedicated social science and humanities research institute on the African continent. The HSRC generates evidence and insights that inform public policy, support development and improve lives. Through high-quality research, strategic partnerships and research capacity development, the Council contributes to evidence-informed decision-making in South Africa, Africa and globally.

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