

NEWS RELEASE
Responsible AI in higher education: Balancing innovation and accountability to unearth solutions



From left to right: Professor Sunil Maharaj (UP), Mr Buti Manamela (DoE) and Sir Nick Clegg (Meta) at the Javett Art Centre

PRETORIA - What are the implications of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in higher education and what does applying such a technology responsibly look like for the African continent?

These are some of the questions that were explored during the recent UP - Meta AI Policy Dialogue that was held at the University of Pretoria's Javett Art Centre at the Hatfield Campus. The policy dialogue brought together leaders and practitioners from the higher education, government and private sectors who explored the use of AI under the theme: "Responsible AI: Current Realities and Future Possibilities for Africa."

"One of the things we foster at the University of Pretoria is what we call trans-disciplinary work because the world's problems are not an engineering problem or a computer science problem or a law problem. They encompass different facets and we try and bring all facets to work on challenges and opportunities," said Professor Sunil Maharaj, Vice-Principal: Research at UP.

“I hope that through this dialogue we’ll have today, we’ll develop actionable and context-specific recommendations and contribute to the development and governance of AI in South Africa and more broadly, in Africa,” he said.

Prof Maharaj added that the dialogue can also “offer guidance to inform the actions and decisions of AI developers, researchers, funders, and policy makers and of course, how we teach and learn going into the future.”

Deputy Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, Buti Manamela, who delivered the keynote address at the dialogue said: “As a continent, we have immense diversity of potential and are standing on the cusp of a technological renaissance. The possibilities for artificial intelligence in Africa today are vast and diverse.”

He said in order for the continent to fully tap into the potential offered by AI it needs to address challenges such as access to technology, infrastructure, data privacy, security concerns and skills development.

“We have to, probably under the African Union, consolidate our discussions as governments so that we have a clearer African agenda in terms of the use and deployment of artificial intelligence,” Deputy Minister Manamela said.

“AI is not just a buzz word,” he added. “It’s a tool that can be used to leverage some of our most pressing challenges from predictive analysis in healthcare, improving patient outcomes and managing diseases, to AI-driven agricultural technologies that promise higher yields for farmers. We’re also seeing artificial intelligence transform the educational sector by personalising the learning experience and making education accessible to all, regardless of geographical location.”

Dr Chijioke Okorie, the founder and leader of UP’s Data Science Law Lab, emphasised the importance of context-specific solutions when developing AI solutions for the African continent.

“Within the AI policy space for the continent of Africa we know what to do, and what we need to do is focus on our context and our realities and use them to inform how to do AI policy research and how to devise policy implementation strategies,” she said.

Dr Okorie pointed out that even within the continent “there are comparable and similar experiences – but the engagement and impact of those similar experiences differ across the board, and so we must be nuanced and contextual in our approach in dealing with this”.

Sir Nick Clegg, the President of Global Affairs at Meta said events such as the policy dialogue are important because being clear about what generative AI does and doesn’t do allows society to marry innovation and responsibility with the right blend.

“Transparency and openness are two foundational principles for us when it comes to innovating responsibly,” he said.

“I think it’s important to remember that this technology, far from disempowering people, will play a really vital role in empowering people. It isn’t realistic to imagine that very soon, every single person in this room, will have an online AI assistant equal to the very best executive assistants found in corporate life. The degree of personalised help that can be given to people I think, should lead to an immense democratisation of power.”

Clegg said the value exchange of AI is immensely beneficial for people.

“It’s not just a one-way street where your data is being sucked into some impenetrable machine and you get nothing out of it. We will all get a lot out of this and we can already see the beneficial applications of the technology in education, health, agriculture and in raising productivity across the economy.”

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on its Hatfield Campus in Pretoria. This 115-year-old institution is also one of the largest producers of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only university in the country with a Faculty of Veterinary Science, which is ranked the best in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 56 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes. It has the most academic staff with PhDs (70%), NRF-rated researchers (613).

The [2024 Times Higher Education subject rankings](#) placed UP first in South Africa in the fields of Law, Veterinary Science, Accounting and Finance; Agriculture and Forestry and Electrical and Electronic Engineering. Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) ranked the University among the top five in Africa, as part of their [2024 World University Rankings \(WUR\)](#). UP was the only South African university featured in the [2023 World University Rankings for Innovation \(WURI\)](#), falling within in the 101-200 range of innovative universities.

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