

DH-Ignite: Digital upskilling in the spotlight at 3rd regional event

The South African Centre for Digital Language Resources (SADiLaR) recently hosted another successful [DH-Ignite](#) regional event at the Premier Hotel O.R. Tambo in Kempton Park, Gauteng. Humanities and social sciences staff and students from public universities in Gauteng, Northern Cape, Free State and North West joined the three-day event from 23 to 25 August 2023 to upskill themselves on and share experiences of digital and computational methods and practices for application in their own research and teaching.

By [Birgit Ottermann](#), issued by [North-West University \(NWU\)](#) 5 Oct 2023



Organised through [Escalator](#), a programme funded by SADiLaR, DH-Ignite's goal is to help catalyse digital innovation in humanities and social sciences research in South Africa, and share what is currently happening in the South African humanities and social sciences landscape.

Participants from the universities of Pretoria (UP), South Africa (Unisa), Witwatersrand (Wits), Johannesburg (UJ), North West (NWU), Free State (UFS) and Sol Plaatje (SPU); the Tshwane (TUT), Vaal (VUT) and Central (CUT) universities of technology; Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University (SMU); the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR); and the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) enjoyed two days of presentations, discussions, lightning talks and interactive sessions, and a third day of in-person workshops.

It was the perfect opportunity for them to showcase their work, meet peers at similar learning stages, establish new collaborations, advertise and explore postgraduate study opportunities, and brainstorm ideas for digital innovation in their research projects.



Building an active community of practice

“The vision that we had when we started the Escalator programme was to help humanities and social sciences within South Africa specifically, to organise, connect and take what is already there and build on it,” says Anelda van der Walt, Escalator’s programme manager.

“We also wish to identify what lessons we can learn from others outside of South Africa, across the continent and worldwide, to build our own community of practice. As the programme grows over the next couple of years, SADiLaR hopes that individuals who have participated in the programme will start contributing through collaborative efforts.”

Highlights from the programme include the lightning talks about South African data sources, resources and opportunities for learning and teaching digital and computational skills, and case studies of humanities and social sciences research projects with computational and digital elements. There also was a fascinating expert panel discussion, chaired by SADiLaR professor in digital humanities Menno van Zaanen, about a vision for digital and computational research in humanities and social sciences, with Marissa Griesel (Unisa), Cobus Rademeyer (SPU), Mathabo Grace (UJ), Prevendren Naidoo (Wits) and Lebona Mafisa (NWU) as panellists.

On the final day of the conference, participants had the option of joining one of three workshops to put some of their newly learned skills to test. The three topics were: ‘The first steps to text mining’ presented by Van Zaanen, ‘An Introduction to working with digital texts (Voyant Tools)’ presented by SADiLaR digital humanities researchers Mmasibidi Setaka and Andiswa Bukula, and ‘Using computational tools for translating text (Autshumato)’ presented by UJ’s Laurinda van Tonder.

Passion and genuine interest

According to one of the participants, the conference provided crucial information on the available tools and resources that will help to intellectualise South Africa’s indigenous languages. “We need these tools to assist us to elevate the standard of our languages so that they can match other languages, especially the European languages,” he comments.

Another participant was grateful for the interactive space in which many questions were being asked, people had the opportunity to really engage with speakers and immerse themselves in the various topics, and to enjoy the event on a comfortable but very productive kind of way.

“There’s a lot of hope and a lot of scope if this kind of passion and genuine interest in digital humanities, as broad as it might be, carries on existing and continues in forums and formats like this one.”

Register your interest for the next DH-Ignite event

Registration for the next DH-Ignite events (in the Eastern Cape and Northern Region) is not open yet, but you can [register your interest](#) to participate and receive more information when it becomes available.

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