

SACEMA Research Days 2016

Gavin Hitchcock - Assistant Director: Training, at SACEMA.

The annual “Research Days” meeting in Stellenbosch, to which all SACEMA-funded students and their supervisors are invited, was this year extended to a four day training and research event and took place from 11 to 14 April 2016.

The first day kicked off with a keynote talk by Ian-Malcolm Rijdsdijk on *Media, Science and Publics*. Communicating scientific research in the public sphere in the contemporary world is alive with possibilities yet fraught with issues. How does one distinguish between what is convincing and what is accurate? What is the role of images in communicating scientific research? How is knowledge used to further particular ideological and political agendas? This talk examined the relationship between media, science and publics, and how scientists and non-scientists alike present and interpret “the contours of uncertainty”.

The keynote was followed by four training workshops: *Speaking Confidently in Public*, led by Vicky Davis; *Ethics, Writing and Talking about What you Know*, led by Ian-Malcolm Rijdsdijk; *Developing and Maintaining a Good CV / Resume*, led by Alex Welte; and *Scientific Literature Search & Management Skills*, led by Wim Delva.

The remaining three days consisted of student research presentations, with some senior speakers, and three keynotes. The Minister of Health, Dr Aaron Motsoaledi, had to cancel his keynote due to an emergency cabinet meeting, and Alex Welte stepped in, and spoke on: *Basic Calculus in Epidemiological Surveillance: Still Cutting Edge 300 Years Later*. Other keynotes were: Dr Natasha Palesa Mothapo: *From Alex to the World: An Odyssey in Pursuit of a Career in Science*; Dr Makobetsa Shooz Khati, of the National Research Foundation; and Wim Delva: *Mind the Age Gap: Age-mixing Patterns predict HIV Incidence*.

Twenty-seven SACEMA funded students (13 PhD and 14 Masters) gave talks on their work-in-progress, and engaged in discussions with SACEMA's trade-mark friendly-though-critical

audience. The meeting provided a perfect opportunity for emerging researchers to receive constructive critique and stimulation in a friendly environment, and to develop core skills. New students and their supervisors were introduced to SACEMA and the scope of its work, and all students had the chance get to know each other, meet fellow researchers, and foster collaborations. Once again an expert consultant, Dr Jo Barnes, was commissioned to attend and report on individual presentations as well as on the overall relevance and quality of the work, from an epidemiologist's point of view.

Looking back, this was a meeting we believe we can be proud of, with good work on display, an improved quality of presentation, and (most importantly) a higher level than ever before of serious mentor and peer interaction, with constructive challenge and critique.

The workshop day (a first) turned out to be a fine warm-up – breaking the ice and helping people feel at home with each other. Each of the four workshops was very highly rated in feedback as evidenced in the summary below:

Workshop on ethics, writing, and talking about what you know

Facilitator: Ian Rijdsdijk, 17 participants.

Participants described what they gained: “How to keep my curiosity alive.” “How to communicate ideas to the public without being misconstrued.” “Asking the right questions, clear reporting on findings.” “Appreciation of need to portray work that locks into audience's mind in a positive way.” “How to communicate my own research so as to interest other scientists and the lay public.” “Thinking of ways to have your research translated into practice.” “Helped me understand media perspectives in science communication.” “I enjoyed the discussion around framing our research and findings – this will become more and more important as I progress but even at this early stage of my research it was helpful to start thinking about how I could translate my work into

public sphere.” “It opened my eyes to new ways of communicating ideas.” “Very interactive, practical and interesting.”

Workshop on speaking confidently in public

Facilitator: Vicky Davis, 12 participants

Some responses of the participants on what they learned: “How to engage audience; posture, and altering pitch of voice.” “Being able to control my movements – and not to talk to slide but to audience.” “Understanding what I was doing wrong – voice tone and hand gestures.” “Not to apologise ...” “How to introduce humour ... Keeping the tone flowing; how to relax.” “Importance of dress code; warm-ups for presentation.” “I especially gained from seeing myself on video.” “New presenting techniques, and preparation techniques like voice warming.” “Importance of preparation; warming up voice and doing neck exercises.” “How to make slides work.” “Things not to do during presentation.” “How to deal with audience.” “Videos highlighted errors evident in my own presentation.” “The first informative/helpful and practical workshop on public speaking that I have attended.” “So many things we do without realising; input from Vicky and the group was very helpful.” “I never realised that the position of your hands could have impact on thinking!” “The need to articulate research findings verbally is an important skill, not just in presentation but in general communication with different stakeholders.”

Workshop on developing and maintaining a good CV / Résumé

Facilitator: Alex Welte, 11 participants

Participants indicated what they gained: “A critical assessment of my own CV.” “That CVs are dynamical and job-specific – the structure of CV depends on job you are applying for.” “Need to tailor CV for specific context.” “Comparing one another’s CVs was useful.” “The different formats were interesting.” “The workshop was highly interactive.” “Very important workshop for those of us nearing the end of our study.”

Workshop on scientific literature search & management skills

Facilitator: Wim Delva, 27 participants

Participants learned the following: “Efficient literature search via PubMed and Sci-Hub.” “Creating and maintaining literature search database.” “A solid grasp of Boolean operators, search terms.” “Introduction to search engines; deeper understanding of MASH terms.” “Creating MCBI account and using it to search for updates about a specific topic.” “An appreciation of how a really good scientist does what he does.” “Highly interactive; useful insights, simple ideas but soft skills that are sometimes overlooked.”

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