



SAASTA
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To all Media

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For immediate release:

North-West University's Letago Kgomoewana shines with her tales of indigenous knowledge in local climate science research

Letago Kgomoewana, an environmental geographer from North West University, was announced as the FameLab South Africa 2021 winner on 20 October 2021 and will represent South Africa on an international stage hosted by Cheltenham Festivals, UK, in November.

The FameLab South Africa 2021 Final showcased science story-telling at its best as 10 young scientists from around South Africa captivated the audience while speaking about their research and highlighting the impact young scientists are making in society.

The topics of the talks were diverse, and provided a glimpse into the range, quality and potential impact of some of the research being conducted in South Africa. In addition to Letago's research into environmental geography and climate science, research topics spoken about also included cancer treatments, botany and indigenous knowledge, water ecology, biodiversity, palaeobiology, HIV vaccine and drug development, food science and information security.

Letago is researching the impact of climate change on smallholder farmers and agriculture in the Mopani District in Limpopo Province. Her research advocates that indigenous knowledge be incorporated in disaster risk management strategy and in climate change policies.

In reacting to her win and the upcoming opportunity to talk about her work on an international stage, she said "In Sepedi we say 'Motho ke motho ka batho', which can be translated as 'I am because you are'. I owe this win to the men and women who have trusted me with generations of knowledge and contributed immensely to my MSc journey. I hope that my journey from Limpopo to the world stage inspires a new generation of bold, young researchers who will take up careers in STEM, Research and Science Communication."

First runner up, Caitlin Rabe, a palaeobiologist from the University of Cape Town, shared why she cares about her work with old bones. She said "When I hold a fossil in my hands, I'm opening a window through which I can see into the past." Palaeoscience shares stories of the past, helps us understand modern biodiversity, model long term patterns and make informed decision about our future.

Second runner up, Tasvi Daya, a cancer biologist from the University of Witwatersrand, spoke about her research into the link between cholesterol and cancer, and the use of cyclodextrin in cancer treatment. She says she feels privileged to contribute to cancer research, potentially saving millions of lives.

The talks were an inspiring reflection of South African science, incorporating indigenous knowledge, delving into our past and mapping a way for our future. The judges remarked on the passion and excitement the young scientists have for their work and what it may lead to. They acknowledged, with appreciation for the participants, that their task in selecting one person from the 10 finalists was a difficult one.

FameLab, an initiative of Cheltenham Festivals in the UK, has been running in South Africa since 2013 through a partnership between the British Council, Jive Media Africa and the South African Agency for Science and Technology Advancement (SAASTA). FameLab aims to develop science communication and public speaking skills and confidence in young scientists. Connecting science in society is critical to ensure that science, in the words of the 2021 national winner, Letago Kgomoewana, is “for the people and with the people.”

Susana Galvan, Country Director for British Council South Africa said “We are grateful for the work this local partnership has delivered, reaching out to hundreds of researchers, and also highlighting the importance and beauty of science and how important effective and creative science communication is.”

The 10 finalists had been on a journey of growth and development over the year, from their initial participation in science communication training; participating in and being selected at one of the 14 heats across the country; attending a science communication masterclass with an international trainer; participating in the semi-finals and being selected to participate in the finals. The end of this year’s FameLab cycle does not end their journey in science communication and engagement, and all partners involved encouraged all participants to continue to find opportunities to talk about their work and to connect society with science.

Michael Ellis, Science Communication Manager at NRF-SAASTA, commented that “FameLab is inspiring young scientists to talk about their science and to make their voices heard. Our hope is that these young scientists will continue to do so throughout their research careers.”

Robert Inglis, Director of research communication agency, Jive Media Africa, encouraged all participants to continue having the courageous and creative conversations that are necessary for their science to have impact in the world. He said, “It is really through conversations and dialogue that your science can have powerful impact in the world.”

The first international FameLab semi-final, in which Letago will be participating, will be broadcast on 10 November 2021 on the FameLab International YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/user/famelab/>).



Letago Kgomoewana, a Masters student in Environmental Geography at North West University, is the 2021 FameLab South Africa national winner.



Letago Kgomoeswana talking science.

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To find out more about FameLab in South Africa, go to: <https://www.saasta.ac.za/competitions/famelab/>

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About the British Council

Founded in 1934, the British Council is the United Kingdom's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. We create international opportunities for the people of the UK and other countries and build trust between them worldwide. We are a global organisation with more than 190 offices in 110 countries and territories. We touch the lives of around 500 million people every year – almost a tenth of the world's population

About Jive Media Africa

Jive Media Africa supports top researchers with innovative, cutting edge communications. Winners of the National Science and Technology Forum Award for Science Communication, they brought the FameLab competition to South Africa in 2013.

About the South African Agency for Science and Technology Advancement (SAASTA)

SAASTA is a business unit of the National Research Foundation (NRF) with the mandate to advance public awareness, appreciation and engagement of science, engineering and technology in South Africa. SAASTA's contribution to the NRF's vision is to grow the pool of quality learners today who will become the scientists and innovators of tomorrow. It aims to be the leading science advancement agency in the country by promoting and communicating the value and impact of science, technology and innovation in a dynamic knowledge economy. It also intends to contribute significantly towards building a science, engineering and

technology (SET) human resource base. For more information on the operations and programs within the NRF please visit www.saasta.ac.za

About the National Research Foundation (NRF):

The National Research Foundation (NRF) was established on 1 April 1999 as an independent statutory body in accordance with the National Research Foundation Act. The NRF is a key public entity responsible for supporting the development of human resources for research and innovation in all fields of science and technology. The organisation is one of the major players in educating and training a new generation of scientists able to deal with South African and African needs. The organisation encourages public awareness and appreciation of science, engineering and technology, and facilitates dialogue between science and society. Its vision is to contribute to a prosperous South Africa based on a knowledge economy. For more information on the operations and programs within the NRF please visit www.nrf.ac.za