

Taskeen Hasrod to represent South Africa in international FameLab competition

Taskeen Hasrod from Wits University has won the FameLab SA 2023 title for her innovative approach to a global problem. She developed a machine learning model that predicts the levels of byproducts in acid mine drainage, a significant issue especially in South Africa. The announcement was made at the National Research Foundation auditorium in Pretoria last night. As the national champion, Hasrod will represent South Africa at the International FameLab competition in Cheltenham, UK, on 24 November.



During the FameLab South Africa Final, ten young scientists showcased research in a three-minute talk using props and simple language. The talks offered a glimpse into the lives of young researchers in South Africa and the impact they hope to have through their studies and work. FameLab is the biggest international competition that seeks and supports science communication talent. This year marked the 11th season of FameLab in South Africa.

Hasrod captivated the judges with her storytelling skills and her passion for using artificial intelligence to create a more sustainable future. Her research in environmental analytical chemistry aims to create a circular economy by extracting valuable by-products from acid mine drainage. The traditional chemistry experiments used to measure by-products are time-consuming and expensive, however, and Hasrod is developing machine learning techniques to short-circuit the process.



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14 Jul 2023



Runner-up Caleb Swanepoel from the University of Cape Town is working to improve phage therapy to treat antibiotic-resistant infections. Caleb, who is in the second year of his MSc studies, says the worldwide growth of antibiotic resistance has sparked new interest in phages, which are viruses that target and infect bacteria.

Runner-up Ayesha Osman from the University of South Africa is studying for a PhD while lecturing engineering students. Her research aims to use titanium, copper and gold to develop an antibacterial alloy for use in dental applications, and she says it has the potential to affect millions of people who need dental implants.

"It's a big win, not just for me, but for my supervisor, my research group, my school, my university, it means a lot and it shows that when we put our minds to something and we work hard we can achieve it," said Hasrod.

She paid tribute to her nine fellow finalists, saying they had "become a bit of a family", and said she was looking forward to representing South Africa and Africa on the world stage.

In pursuit of her scientific goals, Hasrod says discipline, resilience and patience are key. "Understanding the theory is as important as being able to conduct practical work. Science is an incredibly exciting field that is rapidly growing, expanding and evolving, so having a hunger to learn and being adaptable is vital to becoming a good scientist."

She also thanked FameLab for teaching her how to communicate her research without using scientific jargon. "That's incredibly important because the general public deserves to be able to understand our research and learn why it is important. I also learnt how to communicate my research in a really short space of time, which is vital in holding people's attention."

Last year's winner was from SA

The judges for the final – Ina Skosana, Lucky Ditaunyane, Nosipho Mngomezulu and Thabiso Nkone – are all experienced role-players in the South African science communication landscape. Skosana is the news editor at *Health-e News Service* and was previously the health and medicine editor at *The Conversation Africa*; Ditaunyane is the director of communications and engagements at the Human Sciences Research Council and a member of various advisory boards at institutions of higher learning; social anthropologist Mngomezulu is a lecturer at Wits University and a research fellow in science communication at Stellenbosch University's journalism department; and Nkone is the NRF corporate communications manager.

The FameLab competition offered all contestants the opportunity to hone their communication and presentation skills to engage the public with their research, starting with training and participating in heats held at various institutions earlier this year. All contestants were encouraged to continue their new roles as ambassadors of their research and to find opportunities to talk about their research outside their academic spaces.

FameLab, an initiative of Cheltenham Festivals in the UK, has been running in South Africa since 2013 through a partnership between the South African Agency for Science and Technology Advancement (NRF-SAASTA) and research communication specialists, Jive Media Africa.

The International FameLab Final in which Hasrod will compete will be streamed live on [YouTube](#) on 24 November.

Last year's South African FameLab champion, phytochemist Nehemiah Latolla of Nelson Mandela University, went on to win the international FameLab final in the UK.

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