

UFS International Studies Group

The preferred choice of **top** international history scholars

BY CHARLENE STANLEY



Photo: Supplied

Some of the postdoctoral research fellows associated with the UFS International Studies Group include, from the left, front: Dr George Bishi (Zimbabwe); Dr Priscillah Machinga (Zimbabwe); back: Dr Geraldine Sibanda (Zimbabwe); Dr Innocent Dande (Zimbabwe); Dr Mathew Ruguwa (Zimbabwe); and Dr Mutale Mazimba (Zambia).

A unique research centre launched by the University of the Free State (UFS) about a decade ago is luring top-quality history scholars from all over the world and has established itself as a world-class academic incubator – launching high-profile career trajectories for a large number of young academics from across the continent and across the world.

The International Studies Group (ISG) was established with the aim of attracting and recruiting high-calibre postgraduate students and postdoctoral fellows from all over the world to the UFS. The group comprises postgraduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and academics with an active research interest in histories of Central and Southern Africa in particular, and African and global history in general. Albeit a relatively small programme, its outputs are prolific. Since enrolling its first cohort of scholars about 10 years ago, the ISG has delivered around 50 PhDs and 60 postdocs, with its participants producing 31 books (evidence-based single-authored monographs), 55 chapters in books, and 176 academic articles. Articles are regularly published in first-class international journals, while book contracts are signed with leading British publishers such as Palgrave Macmillan, Routledge, and Cambridge University Press, as well as with top North American publishers, including Ohio and Nebraska University presses.

Many ISG authors have gone on to win international book prizes, such as Dr Rebecca Swartz, who won the prestigious Grace Abbott Book Prize (best book in English) from the Society for the History of Children and Youth (SHCY) in 2020, as well as the First Book Award of the International Standing Conference for the History of Education (ISCHE).

Producing top-quality scholars

An undisputed measure of the centre's success is the fact that it has produced two P-rated scholars in the space of only four years. A P-rating (prestigious awards) by the National Research Foundation (NRF) is highly coveted

by all young researchers at all South African universities and across all disciplines, with only one or two researchers normally granted this sought-after standing each year. It is seldom awarded to researchers within the field of the Humanities. NRF P-ratings were awarded in 2016 to the ISG's Dr Daniel Spence, who wrote his doctoral thesis on the colonial history of the Royal Navy, and in 2020 to ISG scholar Dr Matteo Grilli, who specialises in the political history of Ghana and Southern Africa.

Apart from intensive academic and research input, ISG scholars are also equipped with various related skills during their three-to-five-year tenure. Great emphasis is placed on enhancing participants' employability and developing their academic profile. Many ISG graduates have since been appointed to senior academic positions, such as Dr Miyanda Simabwachi, who is currently Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Chalimbana University in Zambia, and Dr Clement Masakure, who now heads the Department of History at the UFS.

Establishing research networks

Aside from the valuable bonds formed with supervisors and fellow participants, scholars' tenure at the ISG is also focused on building a wide research network and contact base, which often opens up new opportunities and proves to be invaluable in their later professional careers.

ISG scholars are also assisted in applying for international research opportunities and are consistently selected for coveted fellowships, such as the African Humanities Programme funded by the Carnegie Corporation. **D**