

## SAMRC HOSTS THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA DELEGATION TO FOSTER CAPACITY BUILDING IN THE AREA OF BIG DATA

In the continuous effort to strengthen research capacity building through collaboration and partnership, the South African Medical Research Council's (SAMRC) Research Capacity Development (RCD) division recently hosted a delegation from the University of South Carolina (USC). This delegation was made by a team of big data experts collaborating with Professor Refiloe Phaswana-Mafuya, a beneficiary of the SAMRC Mid-Career Scientist Programme and Director of the University of Johannesburg's African Centre for Epidemics Research (PACER), an SAMRC extramural unit. The USC team included Dr Bankole Olatosi, Prof. Sharon B Weissman, Prof Xiaoming Li, Prof Shan Qiao and Mr David Reddy.



*The delegations of USC and SAMRC's RCD and Research Units. Prof Phaswana-Mafuya, Dr Edith Phalane and Prof Jason Bantjes joined the meeting online.*

The visit was initiated by Professor Phaswana-Mafuya and aimed to deepen the partnership between USC experts and SAMRC units, as well as RCD-funded researchers interested in big data. Organised under the theme of "Fostering Capacity Building through Partnership and Collaboration in the area of Big Data, the primary goal was to explore how SAMRC researchers and RCD grant holders can benefit from the capacity-building opportunities provided by the USC Big Data Health Science Center.

Dr Frederic Nduhirabandi, Programme Manager /RCD Careers awards, extended a warm welcome to the guests and thanked Prof Phaswana-Mafuya for initiating the visit. He provided an overview of SAMRC RCD grant and career development funding opportunities and how RCD supports grant-holder collaboration as integral to strengthening research capacity. Professor Refiloe, who is also a USC Research Associate, introduced the guests and highlighted the contribution of the USC colleagues to strengthen capacity building within her research team.

As part of the engagement, colleagues from intramural research units had the opportunity to present their unit's research overviews and interest in big data, providing a platform for the USC delegation to share their research and explore potential areas of collaboration with SAMRC. Presenters included Professors Rabia Johnson and Carmen Pheiffer, Deputy-Directors of the Biomedical Research Innovation Platform (BRIP), Professor Jason Bantjes (Deputy-Director at the Mental Health, Alcohol, Substance Use and Tobacco Research Unit (MASTRU), Dr Vundli Ramoko (Specialist Scientist HIV and Other Infectious Diseases Research Unit) and Ms. Kate Bergh and Tracy McClinton Appollis (Health System Research Unit).

Following the SAMRC researchers' presentations, the USC delegation showcased opportunities available at the USC Big Data Health Science Center, focusing on capacity development, academic training, and professional development. They also highlighted their recent collaboration achievements with Professor Phaswana-Mafuya on the BOLOKA project, which included training and hosting early-career researchers and postgraduate students working on the project (*Harnessing Big Heterogeneous Data to evaluate the potential impact of HIV responses among key populations in generalised epidemic settings in Sub-Saharan Africa*).

Overall engagement revealed a strong interest of participants in further discussion for collaboration and partnership. Dr Bankole Olatosi, who co-leads the Big Data Health Science Center, outlined the future plan and opportunities, which will include expert contribution in pre-conference events, rotating big data in health sciences, assistance for PACER to host big data case competitions, furthering collaboration with South African researchers to develop data science analytic training programme and to establish SAMRC training site to foster capacity building in the area of big data.

Concluding the meeting, Dr Nduhirabandi emphasised the importance of collaboration in capacity building. He stated, "Strengthening collaboration is a key mechanism by which research skills and practical knowledge are exchanged, developed, and enhanced for more impactful research," and encouraged participants to maximise the engagement. The visit provided a valuable platform for exploring collaborative opportunities, with some participants scheduling follow-up meetings to discuss their interests further.

For event pictures, [click here](#).

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