



Strengthening Digital Humanities & Computational Social Sciences in South Africa



Information Booklet



science technology
& innovation

Department:
Science, Technology and Innovation
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



Introduction to ESCALATOR

The ESCALATOR flagship programme is a strategic initiative designed to foster digital scholarship and computational research methods within the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) across South Africa.

Launched in 2020, ESCALATOR serves as a catalyst for digital transformation in academic research, creating pathways for scholars to incorporate digital tools and methodologies into their work. The programme aims to build communities of practice that bridge traditional humanities research with computational approaches, fostering innovation and collaboration across disciplines.

ESCALATOR represents a significant investment in South Africa's research infrastructure, equipping HSS researchers with the skills, networks, and resources needed to engage with emerging digital research paradigms. The programme was developed to address identified needs in the South African research landscape, including training, community building, and capacity development in digital humanities and computational social sciences.



About SADiLaR

The South African Centre for Digital Language Resources (SADiLaR) is a national research infrastructure centre supported by the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI) as part of the South African Research Infrastructure Roadmap (SARIR).

Mission and Vision

SADiLaR's primary mission is to create, manage, and distribute digital language resources and technologies for all of South Africa's official languages. The centre serves as a hub for research and development in language technologies, supporting multilingualism and advancing the preservation and growth of South African languages in the digital age.

Core Functions

- **Development of Language Resources:** Creating and maintaining corpora, lexicons, and other language resources for South African languages
- **Natural Language Processing Research:** Advancing computational approaches to language analysis
- **Digital Humanities Support:** Enabling researchers to apply digital methods to humanities scholarship
- **Training and Capacity Building:** Providing workshops, training, and educational resources
- **Infrastructure Development:** Building technical infrastructure to support language technology research

SADiLaR operates through a distributed model with nodes at multiple South African universities, fostering collaboration across institutions and regions.

The SADiLaR-ESCALATOR Connection

ESCALATOR is a flagship programme initiated and managed by SADiLaR. This relationship is fundamental to understanding the programme's scope and resources.

Institutional Framework

SADiLaR serves as the institutional home for ESCALATOR, providing:

- **Administrative Support:** Operational infrastructure and management
- **Funding Channels:** Financial resources through SADiLaR's national mandate
- **Technical Resources:** Access to digital infrastructure and tools
- **Network Access:** Connections to SADiLaR's established partnerships

Strategic Alignment

ESCALATOR extends SADiLaR's mission by specifically focusing on:

- **Interdisciplinary Bridge-Building:** Connecting language technology with broader humanities and social science research
- **Digital Scholarship Advancement:** Moving beyond language resources to encompass digital methods across HSS disciplines
- **Community Building:** Creating networks of researchers with shared interests in digital approaches

The programme operates as the implementation arm of SADiLaR's mandate to promote digital scholarship in the humanities, serving as a practical extension of SADiLaR's broader mission in the research ecosystem.

ESCALATOR Objectives

ESCALATOR has been established with several core objectives that guide its activities:

Primary Objectives

- **Develop Digital Capacity:** Build computational and digital research skills among HSS scholars across South African institutions
- **Foster Community Growth:** Establish and nurture communities of practice in digital humanities and computational social sciences
- **Promote Research Innovation:** Encourage novel approaches to traditional humanities and social science questions through digital methods
- **Address Digital Divides:** Reduce disparities in access to digital scholarship resources and training across institutions
- **Enhance Research Visibility:** Increase the global visibility and impact of South African HSS research through digital platforms

Long-term Vision

The programme aims to transform South African HSS research by normalising digital approaches and creating a self-sustaining ecosystem of digitally empowered scholars who can:

- Compete effectively for international research funding
- Participate in global digital scholarship conversations
- Develop uniquely African perspectives in digital humanities
- Apply computational methods to local research contexts

Key Focus Areas

ESCALATOR concentrates its efforts on several strategic focus areas:

Digital Skills Development

- Programming fundamentals for humanities researchers
- Data analysis and visualisation techniques
- Digital research methodologies
- Text analysis and computational linguistics
- Digital archiving and preservation

Community Building

- Mentorship networks connecting experienced digital scholars with newcomers
- Regional communities of practice
- Cross-institutional collaborations
- Interdisciplinary research teams
- Online forums and knowledge-sharing platforms

Infrastructure Access

- Cloud computing resources
- Research software tools
- Data repositories
- Collaborative platforms
- Digital publication venues

Research Support

- Project development assistance
- Grant application guidance
- Technical consultation
- Research design for digital methods
- Publication strategies for digital scholarship

Programme Structure

ESCALATOR is structured around three interconnected components that work together to create a comprehensive support system for digital scholarship:

Champions Initiative

The Champions programme identifies and supports individuals who:

- Demonstrate leadership potential in digital scholarship
- Commit to knowledge sharing within their institutions
- Serve as bridges between traditional and digital research communities
- Receive specialised training and ongoing support
- Act as local ambassadors for digital approaches

Champions receive dedicated mentorship, advanced training, and resources to implement digital scholarship initiatives at their home institutions.

Training Ecosystem

ESCALATOR provides multiple learning pathways:

- **Foundational Workshops:** Introduction to digital research concepts
- **Skills Intensives:** Hands-on technical training sessions
- **Advanced Masterclasses:** Specialised methodological approaches
- **Online Self-paced Learning:** Digital resource library
- **Peer Learning Circles:** Collaborative learning groups

Training is delivered through multiple modalities, including in-person workshops, online courses, webinars, and hybrid events to maximise accessibility.

Featured Workshops

A comprehensive workshop covering best practices for research data management throughout the research lifecycle. Participants learn about organising, documenting, storing, and sharing research data effectively while adhering to ethical requirements. The workshop includes practical sessions on data management plans, the FAIR data principles, OpenRefine, and data repositories.

Annotatathon to Create Digital Language Resources

This hands-on experience guides language enthusiasts through the process of annotating text for digital humanities and natural language processing applications. Participants work together in language groups to perform annotation using Microsoft Excel, adding sense information from the African Wordnet to text corpora.

Digitisation Workshop

A practical workshop guiding participants through converting analogue materials (manuscripts, photographs, newspapers, audiovisual recordings) into digital formats. Covers digitisation workflows, equipment selection, file formats, quality control, metadata creation, and digital preservation strategies.

Introduction to Text Mining

This workshop teaches fundamental skills for advanced text searching and manipulation. Participants learn to perform complex search operations, identify patterns in text (dates, numbers, etc.), and conduct search-and-replace operations for data conversion. Uses web browsers and PDF viewers for accessible learning.

Introduction to Voyant Tools

A hands-on introduction to Voyant Tools, a web-based text reading and analysis environment. Participants learn to work with various text formats and explore different analytical tools and visualisation options available within the platform.

Linguistic Annotation of Text Data

A comprehensive workshop covering the complete process of adding linguistic annotation to text data. Topics include data management, corpus collection, annotation project setup, protocol development, scheme design, and quality control measures. Includes hands-on experience with tools like NCHLT annotation webservices and CATMA.

External Training Partnerships

First Steps to Python & R

Professional training courses designed specifically for humanities and social sciences researchers with no prior programming experience. These comprehensive 4-week programs provide foundational programming skills in small-group settings.

Python Training:

- Schedule: 1.5-hour sessions
- Duration: 4 weeks
- Format: Virtual (Zoom)
- Participants: Maximum 10 per track

R Training:

- Schedule: 1.5-hour sessions
- Duration: 4 weeks
- Format: Virtual (Zoom)
- Participants: Maximum 10 per track

Learning Outcomes:

- Recognise programming terminology and navigate programming environments
- Run basic code and understand fundamental programming concepts
- Load and inspect tabular data for research
- Install and use packages/functions
- Apply best practices in programming and code organisation
- Identify next steps for continued learning

Project Incubator

The incubator component supports the development of digital scholarship projects:

- **Seed Funding:** Small grants for project initiation
- **Technical Consultation:** Expert guidance on tools and methods
- **Collaborative Workspace:** Physical and virtual environments for teamwork
- **Implementation Support:** Assistance with project execution
- **Showcase Opportunities:** Platforms for sharing outcomes

Projects receiving incubation support serve as case studies and models for future digital scholarship initiatives.



Participation Benefits

Engaging with ESCALATOR offers numerous benefits for researchers, students, and institutions:

For Individual Researchers

- **Skill Development:** Acquire valuable digital competencies
- **Career Advancement:** Expand research capabilities and funding opportunities
- **Network Growth:** Connect with like-minded scholars across disciplines
- **Research Innovation:** Access new methodologies and approaches
- **Visibility Enhancement:** Increase research impact through digital dissemination

For Students

- **Future-Ready Training:** Develop skills aligned with emerging research trends
- **Interdisciplinary Exposure:** Bridge traditional and computational approaches
- **Project Experience:** Participate in cutting-edge digital research initiatives
- **Mentorship Access:** Connect with established digital scholars
- **Career Positioning:** Gain competitive advantage in academic job markets

For Institutions

- **Capacity Building:** Develop local expertise in digital methods
- **Research Profile Enhancement:** Increase digital research outputs
- **Attraction and Retention:** Appeal to digitally-oriented scholars and students
- **Collaboration Opportunities:** Connect with other institutions through digital projects
- **Resource Optimisation:** Leverage shared digital infrastructure

Success Stories

ESCALATOR has facilitated numerous successful digital scholarship initiatives:

Case Study 1: EDUCATOR Digital Humanities OER Champions

The EDUCATOR track under ESCALATOR's Digital Champions Initiative partnered with the North-West University UNESCO Chair on Multimodal Learning and Open Educational Resources to create contextually relevant digital humanities learning materials. The programme supported 25 teams (approximately 80 individuals) from 14 South African universities to develop open educational resources specifically for digital humanities and computational social sciences. Projects ranged from digital storytelling tutorials to text mining guides tailored for African contexts, addressing the critical need for locally relevant training materials in digital scholarship.

Case Study 2: Digitisation Workshop at Mazisi Kunene Museum

Digital humanities researchers from SADiLaR conducted a transformative digitisation workshop at the Mazisi Kunene Museum in Durban, focused on preserving the invaluable manuscripts of renowned poet and philosopher Mazisi Kunene. The workshop trained museum staff in essential digitisation techniques including manuscript handling, scanning procedures, file formats, resolution settings, and metadata management.

The initiative included the handover of an IRIScan Desk 5 Pro scanner and desktop computer, providing the museum with sustainable infrastructure to continue their digitisation efforts independently. This practical application of digital humanities methodologies to cultural heritage preservation exemplifies how ESCALATOR bridges traditional scholarship with modern technology, ensuring South Africa's rich cultural heritage remains accessible for future generations while protecting original materials from physical deterioration.

Case Study 3: DH-IGNITE Events

Between 2022-2024, ESCALATOR established DH-IGNITE as a unique regional event series that brought together 397 participants from 46 organisations across five South African regions. These events combined elements of traditional conferences, workshops, and networking sessions with a focus on building connections between humanities scholars and technological resources. DH-IGNITE events were designed specifically to address identified community needs - providing exposure to digital methods, facilitating interdisciplinary connections, and building regional digital humanities communities where none previously existed.

Case Study 4: SADiLaR-Wikipedia-PanSALB (SWiP) Project

The ENGAGER track successfully launched the SWiP initiative, bringing together SADiLaR, Wikipedia, and the Pan South African Language Board in a collaborative effort to enhance South African language content online. Through a series of structured workshops throughout 2023-2024, the project trained scholars and language enthusiasts to contribute quality content in underrepresented South African languages to Wikipedia. This initiative represented a practical application of digital humanities principles to language preservation and accessibility, while simultaneously bridging academic and public engagement with digital scholarship.

Testimonials

"ESCALATOR has transformed my approach to teaching humanities subjects. The resources and network I gained through the DH-OER Champions program have allowed me to introduce digital methods in ways that resonate with my students' lived experiences." - Participant, EDUCATOR Track

"As someone with no prior coding experience, I was incredibly intimidated by computational methods. The First Steps to Python course provided exactly what I needed—patient instruction in a small group where I could ask questions without feeling judged. I'm now analysing text data that would have been impossible to process manually." - Participant, First Steps Training

"DH-IGNITE was the first conference where I truly felt part of a community. Meeting others who are navigating the same challenges in bringing digital methods to humanities research at other South African universities gave me confidence that we're not working in isolation." - Attendee, DH-IGNITE Western Cape



How to Get Involved

ESCALATOR welcomes participation from researchers, students, and institutions across South Africa:

For Researchers

1. **Join the Community:** Sign up for the ESCALATOR network through our website
2. **Attend Workshops:** Participate in upcoming training events
3. **Apply for Programmes:** Submit applications for Champions or Project Incubator initiatives
4. **Propose Collaborations:** Suggest partnership opportunities
5. **Share Expertise:** Volunteer as a mentor or workshop facilitator

For Students

1. **Join Student Networks:** Connect with student-focused digital scholarship groups
2. **Attend Introductory Sessions:** Participate in beginner-friendly workshops
3. **Seek Mentorship:** Connect with ESCALATOR Champions at your institution
4. **Join Project Teams:** Volunteer for ongoing digital scholarship projects
5. **Apply for Training:** Seek hands-on experience with ESCALATOR initiatives

For Institutions

1. **Host Events:** Offer venues for ESCALATOR workshops or conferences
2. **Nominate Champions:** Identify potential digital scholarship leaders
3. **Develop Policies:** Create institutional frameworks supporting digital research
4. **Allocate Resources:** Provide matching funds or infrastructure support
5. **Recognise Achievements:** Acknowledge digital scholarship in promotion criteria

Meet the Team



Digital Humanities Professor:

Prof. Menno van Zaanen



Programme Coordinator:

Ms. Jessica Mabaso



Digital Humanities Researcher - Sesotho:

Ms. Mmasibidi Setaka



Digital Humanities Researcher - IsiZulu:

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