

Humanities Across Borders – Namibian-German-South African Student Conference 2025

The second edition of the “Humanities Across Borders – Namibian-German-South African Student Conference” brought together students and researchers from Namibia, South Africa and Germany to discuss questions of history, knowledge and society in an international setting. The conference was hosted by the Chair of European History in the World at the Faculty of Cultural and Social Sciences, FernUniversität in Hagen, in cooperation with the University of Namibia (UNAM) and, for the first time, the University of South Africa (UNISA). It aimed to strengthen academic networking, foster student-led research and create a space for interdisciplinary exchange within the humanities across three countries.

At the beginning of the conference, organiser Leo Ryczko from the Chair of European History in the World at FernUniversität in Hagen briefly introduced the aims and structure of the event before handing over to the representatives of the three partner universities. Welcoming remarks were delivered by Prof. Dr. Torsten Linß, Prorector for Research, International Affairs and Sustainability (FernUniversität in Hagen), Dr. Sipokazi Madida, Head of the Department of History (University of South Africa), and Dr. Michael Shirungu, Head of Section for Social Science at the Multidisciplinary Research Service (University of Namibia). In their opening statements, they underlined that the title “Humanities Across Borders” should also define the spirit of the conference: the exchange was intended to reach across continents through a digital format and to connect academic traditions and disciplines within the humanities. They emphasized the importance of providing students with a platform to present and further develop their research, to engage in intercultural dialogue and to expand their academic networks.

Prof. Dr. Jürgen G. Nagel, Chair of European History in the World at FernUniversität in Hagen, participated in the conference on behalf of his chair and was actively involved in the moderation of several panels. The overall coordination of the event was shared between Dr. Kletus Likuwa (University of Namibia), Samkelo Mngadi (University of South Africa/UNISA) and Leo Ryczko (FernUniversität in Hagen). Together they ensured smooth organization, a constructive working atmosphere and intensive scholarly exchange between all participating institutions.

The thematic scope of the conference was broad. In one of the sessions, Loide Tuwilika Utoni (UNAM) examined under-documented experiences of civilian torture during the period of South African rule in Namibia between 1978 and 1989. Thegofatso Massa Ramothale (UNISA) addressed precarious working conditions in the platform-based gig economy. Francina Pashukeni Kaunalenga Junias (UNAM) analysed the relationship between rainfall variability, wildlife biodiversity and tourism in Daan Viljoen National Park. In the second panel of the first day, Joshua Tewalt (FernUniversität in Hagen) discussed Norwegian energy policy from an economic and environmental history perspective, focusing on the tension between the oil boom and Norway’s self-image as an ecological frontrunner.

The first day concluded with a guided networking event. Desirée Kampmeier from the International Office of FernUniversität in Hagen opened the session with a practical input on international networking in the humanities and encouraged participants to make active use of digital formats for sustainable academic contacts. In subsequent breakout rooms, participants discussed topics such as lifelong learning, the history of Namibia, academic publishing and further issues of particular relevance to students from all three universities. In this way, the conference also became a forum for personal encounters and future cooperation beyond the formal presentations.

The second day of the conference placed a particular emphasis on knowledge traditions and global responsibility. Within the panel “Studies of (Indigenous) Knowledge”, Marie-Dominique Fabry (FernUniversität in Hagen) discussed the challenges of provenance research using the ritual objects of the Herero religious leader Abraham Kukuri as a case study. Helena Ipinge (UNAM) examined Ovahimba cultural practices as forms of sustainable resource use. Sefatsa Qopane (UNISA) argued for holistic and “receptive” approaches to knowledge production that move beyond exclusively Western scientific models.

Further contributions addressed economic and social history. Anton Hable (FernUniversität in Hagen) investigated the political and economic relations between the Weimar Republic and the Union of South Africa. Murendeni Netshivhambe (UNISA) explored ethical challenges in the field of digital funeral insurance products. Tshegofatso M. Legodi (UNISA) analysed how artificial intelligence is reshaping the role of public libraries as spaces of knowledge and access to information.

In the final discussion, participants agreed that the conference had provided a vivid forum for scholarly dialogue and a successful example of international cooperation at student level. The original call for submissions had expressed the ambition to offer students a space for research, networking and exchange across different academic cultures. The 2025 conference fully lived up to this ambition and laid further groundwork for future collaboration between UNAM, UNISA and FernUniversität in Hagen.