# VICE CHANCELLOR'S DISTINGUISHED AWARD FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

## 2024

#### **Prof Samantha Naidu**

#### Department of Literary Studies in English in Faculty of Humanities

The Vice-Chancellor's Distinguished Community Engagement Award is a prestigious annual award, which recognises academics who have successfully established meaningful and sustainable partnerships between members of the University and community partners in the areas of teaching, learning and research to contribute to sustainable human and community development.

### We are delighted to announce that Prof Samantha Naidu is the winner of the 2024 Distinguished Vice-Chancellor's Community Engagement Award.

The word literacy is defined as the ability to read, write, speak and listen in a way that lets us communicate effectively and make sense of the world. To be able to read, is to be empowered to navigate one's own world and to travel vicariously to a myriad other worlds. Kofi Annan, the secretary-general of the United Nations from 1997 to 2006, further described literacy as:

a bridge from misery to hope. It is a tool for daily life in modern society. It is a bulwark against poverty, and a building block of development.... Literacy is a platform for democratisation, and a vehicle for the promotion of cultural and national identity.... For everyone, everywhere, literacy is, along with education in general, a basic human right.... Literacy is, finally, the road to human progress and the means through which every man, woman and child can realise his or her full potential.

Developing a culture of reading is an essential part of achieving that personal and collective potential and building a healthy society. In South Africa, 81% of young children cannot read for meaning in their mother tongue. While the rate in Makhanda is significantly better at 60%, it is nevertheless a matter of concern (GADRA, 2023). The adult literacy rates are even more devastating; although 'only' 10,5% of adults are illiterate (a decline of 5% from 2019 to 2021) this accounts for nearly 4 million adults who were functionally illiterate in the country. This disproportionately affects the black population and women (DHET, 2023). And ultimately,

significantly affects the social, economic and political participation of society members and our national progress. As such, developing a reading culture, that is, not just learning to read but becoming literate is an essential part of social and cultural construction. Literature is a springboard not only into other worlds through our imaginations (which is critical for human development), but it is also essential for understanding ourselves and unlocking knowledge from various sources and disciplines.

The above-average literacy rate in Makhanda can be attributed in part to the contributions of a city-wide collective of actors dedicated to improving education at a foundational level. A strong and consistent link in this chain of development in the Foundational Learning sector in Makhanda, is Rhodes University's Professor Sam Naidu. As a Literary Studies academic, teacher, researcher and practitioner, Prof Sam Naidu recognises that reading and sustained reading cultures are essential not only to her discipline but also to the broader success of higher education, knowledge production and community well-being. A professor in the Department of Literary Studies in English, Sam has coordinated community engagement initiatives since 1992, when she was chairperson of the Rhodes University Student Community Organisation (an SRC-based organisation). More recently, in 2012, she led a collaborative project to set up a fully-fledged library in Ntsika Secondary School in Joza. Her work spans many decades of commitment to building sustainable reading cultures and literariness. By 2024, Prof Naidu had positioned herself as a community activator, actively seeking out partnerships and connecting people and projects within Makhanda to nurture synergies and share resources for literacy and literary work. In all her CE efforts she emphasises the need for compassion, empathy and reciprocity to address the fractures in our society and to build strong, ethical citizens of the future.

Being in this position requires cultivating strong, long-term relationships through sustained engagement, active listening and a commitment to community-led solutions. Rather than imposing top-down directives, she works alongside stakeholders of all sorts to co-create meaningful interventions. Sam was nominated, therefore, not for one particular project, but for demonstrating over decades an emergent, responsive approach to community engagement that sought to bring people and resources together as community needs arose.

Prof Naidu's CE journey began as a personal and academic passion during her undergraduate years. Beginning in 1991, she did volunteer work with RUSCO, with her first project being a reading club at Masifunde, a shelter for street children. RUSCO was a groundbreaking student

organisation that sought to build community engagement between a predominantly white, affluent campus of students and the then, Grahamstown community. Part of the society's work was the implementation of reading clubs. In 1992, she became the chairperson of RUSCO, and they successfully lobbied for the organisation to prioritise community engagement rather than charity-based approaches to development. As a postgraduate student, she continued to establish and run reading clubs at various schools.

In 2012, she took on more of a coordination role in her CE activities as a committee member of the Friends of the Library (FOL). With the support of FOL and the Department of Literary Studies in English, Sam led a small team that set up a library at Ntsika Secondary School. Through this experience, Sam noticed a great willingness and need to implement reading interventions beyond the foundation phase. However, there was a lack of structured training for student volunteers and teachers involved in reading clubs that ensured they had the necessary pedagogical, administrative, and engagement skills to effectively support reading clubs in schools. In response, she developed the Community Engagement Reading Club Orientation (CERCO) short course in 2017, which was accredited at Rhodes University. This course was designed to equip volunteers with the essential skills, knowledge, and confidence to effectively facilitate and sustain reading clubs in local schools. Recognising the critical role of reading in cognitive development, academic success, and personal growth, this course addresses the gap in structured training for student volunteers and leaders engaging in literacyfocused community engagement. Prof Naidu has co-ordinated CERCO for seven years, training volunteers, meeting with community partners and schools, organising workshops and reflective sessions, and certifying students involved in the accredited short course she developed.

Nompumelelo Frans, a foundation phase teacher at C.M. Vellem Primary School who has worked in partnership with Sam Naidu since 2015 said,

"Sam always made sure she received feedback from both the reading club managers and volunteers, to keep evolving and improving the programme according to our needs. Not only did she keep track of the impact of the programme but would physically visit the clubs to see for herself."

Prof Naidu has served as a Humanities Faculty Community Engagement Representative for several years and has also run parent-child reading workshops for Rhodes University employees. She has also published extensively, with much of her work documenting her approach to teaching literature and emphasizing the importance of an African-centred, decolonial perspective in using literature to access and engage with local literary knowledge. She is also a regular participant and presenter at local community engagement and literacy conferences, where she shares insights from her work and contributes to broader discussions on reading development and sustainable reading cultures.

In 2025, Prof Naidu will be contributing to another CE initiative by collaborating with 3rdyear Journalism and Media Studies students to explore effective strategies for building reading cultures and documenting these processes. She will also contribute to the Iintheto Zobomi course offering an innovative approach to teaching leadership ethics through the use of poetry.

With her understanding of the interconnectedness of individual, family and community wellbeing, Prof Sam Naidu's trajectory from a student volunteer to an academic deeply committed to community engagement and development through literacy, is an excellent example of engaged citizenry, engaged teaching, and engaged research.

