

Innovation in Society Research Seminar 1 - 30 September 2025 - Transcript

Topic: An engagement with the Wits Strategic Plan for Innovation 2022-2026

Speaker 1 Letlotlo Phohole (WIC Director)

Background on the development of the document

Good afternoon everyone. My role is simple: to give a high-level strategic overview of the innovation strategy. When we drafted this document, we recognized that innovation is a global priority for universities. As one of Africa's leading academic institutions, Wits needed to play its part. The university has been behind many innovations over the years, but we never had a coordinated plan.

From a South African perspective, innovation has become central. The Department of Science and Technology even renamed itself the Department of Science and Innovation. At Wits, after celebrating 100 years, we decided that innovation would be the focus for our second century, supported by the broader Wits 2033 strategy.

We also acknowledged challenges. Innovation was often seen as belonging to science and engineering. We needed to define it more broadly for Wits. Through systems-thinking workshops with all faculties and entities, we asked: What is innovation to you? What should we do? What benefits should follow?

We adopted a penta-helix model — involving government, industry, academia, society, and the environment. For us, innovation must be teachable, ethical, and benefit society, not only staff and students. We mapped our ecosystem: hubs, centres of excellence, accelerators, incubators. But we also had to cultivate a culture and mindset for innovation.

That's why we introduced initiatives such as the Postgraduate Diploma in Innovation, commercialization guidelines, and innovation readiness levels. We set up structures — a university-wide innovation committee including external people — and emphasized measuring innovation. Mature frameworks don't yet exist, so we started experimenting with readiness levels. We also emphasized intellectual property awareness and transparent practices.

A significant institutional step was the creation of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research and Innovation (previously only Research and Postgraduate Studies). The message is clear: innovation is central, and the vehicle is the Wits Innovation Centre.

Speaker 2 - Prof Diran Soumonni (Innovation Policy and Management, Wits Business School)

Historical and conceptual framing:

I want to give an overview of university-based innovation. The idea that science solves society's problems goes back to World War II. Vannevar Bush, an MIT professor and advisor to the White House, argued that science would determine humanity's future. Similarly, in India after independence, Prime Minister Nehru declared that "science will be the temples of modern India."

This created a "science-push" model: research generates solutions, society benefits. Over time, policymakers added a "market-pull" model: society demands, researchers supply. Both were linear. Later, in the 1970s, the concept of national innovation systems emerged, recognizing broader factors: how students are trained, what policies exist, what resources are available.

For countries in the Global South, "catching up" was the goal: imitating and adapting existing knowledge rather than reinventing. From this grew the triple helix framework — universities, government, and industry driving innovation. But this excluded society and the environment. Critics expanded the model: the quadruple helix included society, and later the quintuple helix added the environment, recognizing climate change.

In our Wits workshops, these ideas surfaced: innovation must be multi-directional, not dictated solely by universities. Communities, artisans, musicians, and everyday innovators also create knowledge. Universities contribute depth and rigor, but should be humble and dialogical.

Training students is itself innovation capacity building — a network of knowledgeable people generating unforeseen futures. The Wits strategy embraces these perspectives. The challenge now is to bring them to life.

Speaker 3 - Prof Christo Doherty (Acting Angela & David Fine Chair of Innovation, Wits Innovation Centre/Wits School of Arts)

Critical perspective from the Humanities:

I'd like to reflect critically on the strategy. As someone from the Humanities, I observed that many colleagues kept their distance. There was discomfort with the discourse of innovation and knowledge production. The strategy document acknowledges that innovation's impact extends beyond the university and includes society, culture, policy, economy, and environment. It also recognizes that innovation is not only technological — the humanities, creative arts, and social sciences also address major issues like inequality, migration, and health.

However, these strengths are inconsistently developed. The strategy falls back on a commercialization-oriented framework. The definition of innovation relies on the Oxford English Dictionary and South Africa's R&D Strategy, both emphasizing measurable products and markets. As a result, social innovation is insufficiently conceptualized.

There is little unpacking of how innovation might emerge from grassroots practices, indigenous knowledge, or African contexts. Measurement also collapses back into commercial metrics such as patents and spin-outs. Humanities contributions are gestured to but not developed into a roadmap for resourcing or evaluation.

Thus, the strategy names social impact as important but does not provide conceptual or structural tools to treat it as a genuine form of innovation.

Speaker 4 - Prof Nosipho Moloto (Nedbank/NRF-DSi SARChi Chair in Energy Materials, Wits School of Chemistry)

A Researcher's reflection on the Strategy document:

Coming from a background at CSIR and later MIT, I was accustomed to environments where innovation and commercialization are central. At Wits, before the strategy, innovation seemed invisible or peripheral. The strategy has made it visible and signaled that the university takes it seriously.

It encouraged translational research, collaborations, and made pathways for IP protection and commercialization clearer. It also unlocked new funding opportunities. But as a researcher reading the strategy, I find it aspirational rather than practical. Unlike promotion policies, which give step-by-step guidance, this document lacks actionable details: e.g., if I want to file a patent, what exactly should I do?

It should be a living document, a blueprint with checklists and points of contact. Right now, it creates visibility but not usability. I'd also suggest embedding faculty-level innovation champions who can connect researchers to opportunities. Without this, we risk defaulting to publication rather than innovation.

Nic Cloete Hopkins (Wits Innovation Centre)

Audience comment:

Two quick points. First, not every project should hinge only on cost-benefit. Sustainability — social, environmental, economic — must be part of our business models. Second, when defining “environment” we must include not only climate but also regulatory, financial, and policy environments. Finally, instead of always comparing ourselves to UCT or Stellenbosch,

we should benchmark against global examples, such as universities in the US where venture capital ecosystems are embedded around campuses.

Speaker 6

Audience response and synthesis:

Absolutely. Sustainability-oriented business models are being researched, and our language in the strategy should reflect that. Also, national innovation systems differ by context, and regulation and finance are part of the environment. Innovation systems are social systems: relationships between people who share goals and values.

Speaker 7 - Thandeka Mhlanga (Wits Innovation Centre)

Audience challenge:

What has actually been achieved since 2022? Beyond the plan, is there a theory of change — a clear outline of inputs, outputs, activities, and impacts? This would help with monitoring and evaluation and clarify how we achieve social impact.

Speaker 1 - Letlotlo Phohole

Closing response:

This is a strategic plan, not a policy or standalone strategy. It complements other Wits strategies, including Wits 2033. We had to start somewhere — no other South African university had such a plan. But we are operationalizing it: commercialization guidelines, IP awareness, funding opportunities, and spin-offs. We are already applying readiness levels and engaging externally.

That said, your point about a theory of change is well taken. As we revise the strategy, adding explicit monitoring and evaluation frameworks would make it more actionable.

Speaker 4 - Prof Christo Doherty

Final words as moderator:

Thank you to all our speakers. This seminar has created space for critical and constructive engagement. Please join us for lunch and continue the discussion. This is just the beginning of the Innovation in Society research seminar series, with more to follow in October and November this year, and an exciting programme for 2026 that may include participation from scholars at other universities.
