

# WSU to test Africa-focused vaccine

## Eastern Cape university part of trials to develop Covid-19 shot best suited to conditions on continent

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Walter Sisulu University has received a R5.5m grant to conduct preclinical trials to test the efficacy of a candidate Covid-19 vaccine developed specifically for African social, socio-economic and physical conditions.

The grant, announced on

Monday, is funded by the Chemical Industries Education and Training Authority (Chietta), a statutory body established by the Skills Development Act 97 of 1998.

In June, a number of mostly African academic institutions, including WSU and North West University, collaborated to establish the Sisulu Foundation for African and Pandemic Disease Response, the vehicle within which this trial and others will occur.

WSU vice-chancellor Prof Rushiella Songca confirmed the

Chietta grant would assist the university and the Sisulu Foundation to go ahead with research crucial for the development of African ingenuity in solving the problems the continent faces.

The Sisulu Foundation is a pan-African response to a critical skills shortage in vaccinology and the development of African reactions to pandemic disease.

Songca said: "WSU's research values were embedded in the provision of community-based research and strive to solve

challenges that face society.

"The value of this project cannot be understated, considering the effect of the pandemic on our societies and the inherent inequality which continues to plague health provision and disease response on the continent.

"WSU is a member of an African community of scientists and researchers deliberately taking steps to boost home-grown vaccine development and manufacturing capacity.

"Clinical trials, like all research, can be expensive. The

more participants they engage and the longer the trials run, the more expensive they become. This grant will surely assist the university," Songca said.

"The second phase of the trials is under way and we are

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hoping it will be completed before the end of the year."

WSU hopes to include senior students as part of the project.

Prof Markus Deffenhart, who holds extraordinary professorships at WSU and NWU, is the lead researcher and developer of the vaccine.

"When the pandemic spread internationally early in 2020, we predicted that African nations would be at the back of the queue for vaccines and that the leading vaccine platforms would likely not prove highly effective on Africans.

"This called for a broader collaboration with African scientists, some of whom have developed vaccines before, who are experts in this field."

Songca said: "One of the partners in this project is a research unit from Kenya.

"The Kenyan government is excited about this initiative to the extent they have asked us to launch the initiative in Kenya next month.

"We are excited about that because we believe it is going to strengthen the Pan Africanist angle of the project."

She said the project would focus not only on Covid-19 but would look at other viruses challenging Africa, such as malaria.

Academics would work closely with communities because often many community members had little access to medical treatment.

"We are hoping that through our health faculty we will provide avenues to medical team members. We are hoping that we will gain more collaborators, especially government stakeholders."