

South African Chapter of the Indian Ocean Rim Association Academic Group University Roadshow 2026 Report

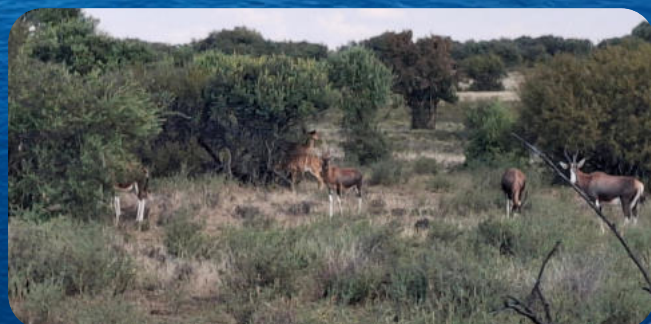
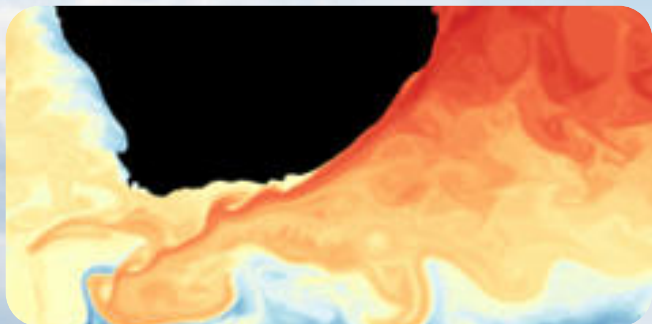


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Executive summary

The South African Chapter of the Indian Ocean Rim Academic Group (SA-IORAG) University Roadshow was held between February and May 2026 to strengthen awareness, participation, and collaboration in Indian Ocean regional initiatives among South African universities. The roadshow aimed to increase engagement of South Africa's research community within international science diplomacy programmes, primarily the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), facilitated by the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI), while showcasing opportunities for research collaboration, postgraduate development, funding, and regional partnerships.

The programme was hosted across seven locations in South Africa, including Cape Town, East London, Durban, Pretoria, Gqeberha, Bloemfontein, and Mbombela, engaging universities and research institutions from both coastal and inland provinces. Each event combined presentations on regional cooperation, ocean governance, science diplomacy, funding opportunities, and innovation, with institution-specific academic contributions that highlighted local expertise and projects.

The roadshow successfully strengthened institutional relationships, increased awareness of available opportunities within the Indian Ocean region, and established a stronger foundation for future collaboration between academia, government, and research institutions. The programme further demonstrated the importance of inclusive engagement that enables both coastal and inland institutions to contribute meaningfully to ocean and sustainability-related challenges.

1. Introduction

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) plays a pivotal role in strengthening regional cooperation among Member States across the Indian Ocean region. Through its adopted priority areas, including the Blue Economy; Trade and Investment Facilitation; Disaster Risk Management; Maritime Safety and Security; and Academic, Science and Technology Cooperation, IORA seeks to promote sustainable development and shared prosperity throughout the region.

Recognising the importance of academia in informing policy and supporting evidence-based decision-making, the Indian Ocean Rim Academic Group (IORAG) was established as a platform to connect researchers, universities, and knowledge institutions across the Indian Ocean Rim. IORAG serves as a mechanism for promoting research collaboration, knowledge exchange, and academic contributions to regional priorities and policy discussions.

The South African Chapter of the IORAG (SA IORAG), established in 2016, serves as a national advisory and coordination platform that supports South Africa's participation in IORA and strengthens engagement within the broader IORAG network. Over the past decade, SA IORAG has played an important role in fostering collaboration among South African academics and researchers while promoting opportunities for regional engagement.

As SA IORAG has reached its tenth year of operation, it is important to consider how the network can continue to grow and become more inclusive by creating opportunities for a broader range of academics, students, and early-career professionals across South Africa to participate in IORA initiatives. In response to this objective, SA IORAG undertook a national university roadshow during February and May 2026 to raise awareness of IORA, IORAG, AAORIA, Ocean20, and related opportunities, while strengthening engagement with universities across both coastal and inland regions.

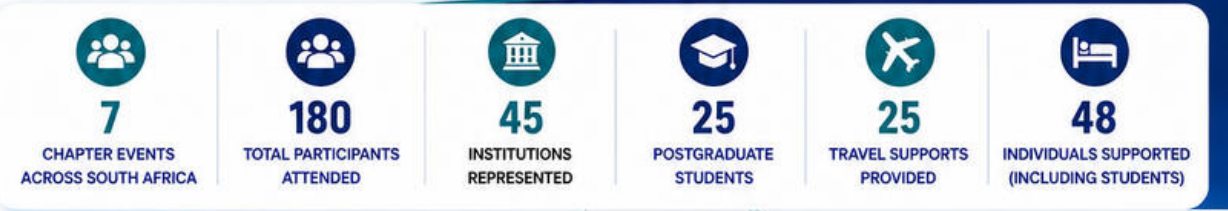
The roadshow provided a platform for academics, researchers, students, and institutional stakeholders to engage directly with national representatives from government, research institutions, and regional initiatives. Through presentations, discussions, and networking opportunities, participants gained insight into research funding opportunities, international collaboration mechanisms, postgraduate pathways, and avenues for contributing to regional development and ocean sustainability challenges.

2. Statistics

SA IORAG UNIVERSITY ROADSHOW

Strengthening Ocean Research, Collaboration
and Impact Across South Africa

A national engagement platform connecting universities,
researchers, institutions and stakeholders to advance
ocean science, policy and sustainable development in
the Indian Ocean region.



OUR JOURNEY ACROSS SOUTH AFRICA

- 1 Western Cape
- 2 Eastern Cape – East London
- 3 KwaZulu-Natal
- 4 Gauteng
- 5 Eastern Cape – Gqeberha
- 6 Free State – Bloemfontein
- 7 Mpumalanga



OUR SHARED THEME

Building a sustainable ocean
future through research,
collaboration and impact.

- Ocean & environmental sustainability
- Maritime law & ocean governance
- Community stewardship & inclusive participation
- Research impact, policy influence & capacity development

ROADSHOW AT A GLANCE

#	REGION	DATE	VENUE	EVENT HIGHLIGHT	PARTICIPANTS ATTENDED	INSTITUTIONS REPRESENTED	POSTGRAD STUDENTS	STUDENTS SUPPORTED
1	Western Cape	23 Feb 2026	Southern Sun Cape Sun, Cape Town	Environmental sustainability & maritime security; plastic & microplastic pollution research.	17	8	0	0
2	Eastern Cape – East London	25 Feb 2026	Garden Court, East London	Community-based mussel restoration & collaboration for coastal conservation.	26	10	1	0
3	KwaZulu-Natal	9 Mar 2026	Rendezvous Restaurant, DUT, Durban	Evolution of maritime law & its role in ocean governance challenges.	28	8	1	0
4	Gauteng	11 Mar 2026	NRF Building, Pretoria	Gender & ocean governance; catalytic research for societal impact.	17	8	3	0
5	Eastern Cape – Gqeberha	23 Apr 2026	NMU Business School, Gqeberha	Interdisciplinary ocean research for sustainable development.	30	8	6	0
6	Free State – Bloemfontein	19 May 2026	Premier Splendid Inn, Bloemfontein	Building ocean literacy & supporting the next generation of ocean leaders.	19	5	10	10
7	Mpumalanga	26 May 2026	Tokomala Hotel & Conference Centre, Mbombela	Biodiversity, ecosystems & sustainable resource management.	43	9	4	0



TOGETHER, MAKING WAVES

Thank you to all our presenters, participants, partners and hosts for contributing to a stronger, more connected Indian Ocean research community.

One Ocean. One Future.

3. Core Presentations

While each event had unique academic presentations aligned with participants and universities expertise and priorities, all roadshow events featured a set of core presentations by representatives of the SA-IORAG Secretariat, the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI) and the National Research Foundation (NRF).

3.1. Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI)

Representatives from the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI) provided an overview of South Africa's science, technology and innovation landscape and highlighted the importance of international cooperation in addressing regional and global challenges. The presentation emphasised the DSTI's priorities and the role of science diplomacy, research collaboration, and innovation in supporting sustainable development, while demonstrating how South Africa's participation in regional and international platforms contributes to national priorities. Participants were encouraged to consider how their research and innovation activities can contribute to broader developmental objectives and strengthen South Africa's position within the Indian Ocean region.

3.2. Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and South African Indian Ocean Rim Academic Group (SA IORAG)

Presentations by Mr KGame Molope (NWU; SA IORAG Chair) and Ms Nicole du Plessis (NRF-SAEON; Secretariat coordinator) outlined the structure, objectives, and priority areas of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the role of the South African Chapter of the Indian Ocean Rim Academic Group (SA IORAG) in facilitating academic engagement within the region. Participants were introduced to the SA IORAG's priority and cross-cutting areas, as well as opportunities available through the IORAG Special Fund, working groups, and collaborative research initiatives, and introduced to other regional academic programmes, i.e., All-Atlantic Ocean Research and Innovation alliance (AAORIA) and Ocean20. The presentations highlighted the importance of strengthening academic participation in regional dialogue and decision-making processes, while encouraging universities, researchers, students, and early-career professionals to become more actively involved in IORAG-related activities and partnerships.

3.3. Ocean20

Ms Melissa Philander (NRF-SAEON) presented on Ocean20 and introduced participants to the social engagement group's role within the G20 process and its focus on advancing sustainable ocean governance, ocean science, the blue economy, and ocean literacy. The presentation highlighted Ocean20's objective of bringing together experts, researchers, policymakers, and stakeholders to develop evidence-based recommendations on ocean-related issues. The presentation also focused on Ocean Actions, like the Early Career Ocean Network of South Africa (ECON-SA), that was proposed during 2025, and the plans to take these actions forward.

3.4. National Research Foundation (NRF)

The National Research Foundation (NRF) presentations focused on the organisation's role in supporting research, human capital development, and innovation within South Africa. Participants received an overview of available funding instruments, postgraduate scholarships, capacity-development programmes, and opportunities for research collaboration. Particular emphasis was placed on NRF instruments for supporting students and early-career professionals through funding, training, and professional development initiatives. The presentations reinforced the importance of building a strong pipeline of future researchers and innovators capable of addressing complex environmental, social, and economic challenges facing South Africa.

4. Cape Town, Western Cape

Date: 23 February 2026

Venue: Southern Sun Cape Sun, Cape Town



The Cape Town roadshow marked the launch of the national programme, bringing together academics, researchers, students, and institutional stakeholders from across the Western Cape. The event introduced participants to the objectives of SA IORAG while providing a platform for discussions on regional cooperation, ocean governance, and research collaboration within the Indian Ocean region. Two academic presentations highlighted key research and policy challenges facing the Western Indian Ocean.

The first presentation, delivered by Prof. Thean Potgieter (Stellenbosch University), explored the interconnected relationship between environmental sustainability and maritime security. Drawing on the rich maritime heritage of the Indian Ocean region, he highlighted how environmental pressures such as illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, marine pollution, climate change, and poor ocean governance are increasingly becoming security concerns. The presentation emphasised the need for integrated approaches that recognise the links between environmental health, economic development, food security, and the wellbeing of coastal communities.

Dr Shanika Reddy then showcased the work of the Centre for Sustainable Oceans at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT). Her presentation focused on the growing challenge of plastic and microplastic pollution in coastal and marine environments, examining the impacts of these pollutants on marine ecosystems, biodiversity, seafood resources, and human health. The Centre's interdisciplinary research aims to generate evidence that can support sustainable ocean governance, inform policy development, and contribute to the protection of coastal ecosystems and communities.

Collectively, the presentations demonstrated the breadth of ocean-related research being undertaken in the Western Cape and underscored the value of collaboration between researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders in addressing complex challenges across the Indian Ocean region. The topics discussed aligned closely with several IORA priority areas, particularly Maritime Safety and Security and the Blue Economy, highlighting the role of research and innovation in supporting sustainable ocean governance, environmental stewardship, and regional development.

Cape Town, Western Cape

Participation

Number of participants registered	15
Universities	6
Institutions	2
Postgraduate students	0
Students supported to attend	0
Total number of participants attended	17

Institutions represented

1. University of South Africa (UNISA)



4. University of Cape Town (UCT)



2. Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT)



5. Stellenbosch University (SU)



3. University of the Western Cape (UWC)



5. East London, Eastern Cape

Date: 25 February 2026

Venue: Garden Court Hotel, East London



Attendees at the Eastern Cape Roadshow in East London.

The first Eastern Cape meeting, in East London, highlighted the important role that community-based research and local partnerships can play in advancing sustainable coastal resource management. The presentation demonstrated how collaboration between researchers, conservation organisations, and local communities can contribute to both environmental restoration and socio-economic development, while supporting broader goals related to ocean sustainability and the blue economy.

Dr Zinzisa Nokwali of Walter Sisulu University presented a community-based mussel restoration project undertaken in Hamburg, Eastern Cape, in partnership with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the Siyaphambili Fishing Cooperative. The project focused on restoring degraded mussel beds while promoting sustainable harvesting practices and community stewardship of marine resources. She was joined by Dr Palesa Sekhejane, Deputy Executive Dean: Faculty of Natural Sciences, who highlighted key university priorities.

The presentation highlighted the successful reseedling of mussels, the involvement of local communities in monitoring activities, and the importance of combining scientific research with local and indigenous knowledge. The project demonstrated how collaborative conservation initiatives can enhance biodiversity, support food security, and strengthen sustainable livelihoods in coastal communities, while empowering local stakeholders to take an active role in environmental stewardship.

East London, Eastern Cape

Participation

Number of participants registered	28
Universities	4
Institutions	6
Postgraduate students	1
Students supported to attend	0
Total number of participants attended	26

Institutions

1. University of South Africa (UNISA)



5. South African Network for Women in Fisheries and Aquaculture Sector (SANFW)



2. South African Institute of Aquatic Biodiversity (SAIAB)



6. Maritime Business Chamber



3. University of Fort Hare (UFH)



4. Walter Sisulu University (WSU)



7. Blue Wild Coast



6. Durban, KwaZulu-Natal

Date: 9 March 2026

Venue: Rendezvous Restaurant, Steve Biko Campus, Durban University of Technology



Attendees at the KwaZulu-Natal Roadshow hosted at Durban University of Technology.

The KwaZulu-Natal meeting highlighted the importance of collaboration, partnerships, and interdisciplinary approaches in addressing challenges and opportunities within the Indian Ocean region. Bringing together academics, researchers, and stakeholders, the event explored both the institutional mechanisms that support research collaboration and the legal frameworks that underpin sustainable ocean governance.

Dr Nokuthula Mchunu of the National Research Foundation (NRF) discussed the importance of building partnerships between higher education institutions, research organisations, and other knowledge-producing entities.

Dr Vishal Surbun from the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Unit for Maritime Law and Maritime Studies examined the evolution of maritime law in South Africa and the growing importance of the law of the sea in addressing contemporary ocean governance challenges.

Drawing on examples such as climate change litigation, seabed mining, offshore energy development, and coastal community rights, Dr Surbun highlighted the increasing need for collaboration between legal scholars, scientists, policymakers, and industry stakeholders. His presentation demonstrated how legal frameworks can support sustainable ocean management and contribute to addressing emerging challenges within the blue economy.

Collectively, the discussions emphasised the value of strong partnerships and effective governance in advancing sustainable development and cooperation across the Indian Ocean region.

Durban, KwaZulu-Natal

Participation

Number of participants registered	25
Universities	4
Institutions	4
Postgraduate students	1
Students supported to attend	0
Total number of participants attended	28

Institutions represented

1. University of Kwa-Zulu Natal (UKZN)



2. Durban University of Technology (DUT)



3. University of South Africa (UNISA)



4. Oceanographic Research Institute (ORI)



5. eThekweni Municipality



7. Pretoria, Gauteng

Date: 11 March 2026

Venue: NRF Building, Pretoria



Attendees at the Gauteng Roadshow hosted at the National Research Foundation in Pretoria.

The Gauteng meeting featured two academic presentations. The first, delivered by Prof. Narnia Bohler-Muller, examined the experiences of women in coastal communities across the Western Indian Ocean region. The presentation highlighted the disproportionate impacts of climate change, declining fisheries, and socio-economic vulnerabilities on women, while advocating for gender-responsive policies, improved data collection, and greater participation of women in ocean governance and decision-making processes.

The second presentation was delivered by Prof. Godwell Nhamo from the University of South Africa (UNISA). His presentation introduced the concept of catalytic research within the coastal, marine, and maritime domains, encouraging a shift beyond traditional academic outputs towards research that generates meaningful societal impact. Emphasis was placed on interdisciplinary collaboration, policy influence, community engagement, capacity development, and research that contributes directly to sustainable development and coastal resilience.

Mr Letlhogonolo Mashilo from the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) shared remarks highlighting the department's support for regional academic cooperation and its role in advancing South Africa's engagement within the Indian Ocean region.

Together, the presentations highlighted the importance of ensuring that ocean-related research remains inclusive, impactful, and responsive to societal needs.

Pretoria, Gauteng

Participation

Number of participants registered	10
Universities	3
Institutions	5
Postgraduate students	3
Students supported to attend	0
Total number of participants attended	17

Institutions represented

1. University of South Africa (UNISA)



2. Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO)



3. University of Pretoria



4. Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC)



5. Agricultural Research Council (ARC)



8. Gqeberha, Eastern Cape

Date: 23 April 2026

Venue: Nelson Mandela University Business School, Gqeberha



Attendees at the Gqeberha event hosted at NMU

The Gqeberha meeting showcased the important role of social sciences and international collaboration in addressing ocean-related challenges. Prof. Joleen Steyn-Kotze from the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) presented on gender transformation and women's economic empowerment, highlighting the importance of inclusive policy development and the role of social science research in advancing sustainable development outcomes. Her presentation encouraged participants to consider the human dimensions of ocean governance and the need for equitable participation in decision-making processes.

Dr Jessica Fraser of Nelson Mandela University shared insights into her involvement with the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), highlighting opportunities for regional collaboration, research partnerships, and knowledge exchange across the Indian Ocean region. She also provided guidance on postgraduate study pathways and career development in the marine and environmental sciences, emphasising the value of applied research, interdisciplinary approaches, and international networks in addressing complex sustainability challenges. Together, the presentations demonstrated how policy, research, and collaboration can contribute to more inclusive and sustainable ocean governance.

Gqeberha, Eastern Cape

Participation

Number of participants registered	25
Universities	3
Institutions	5
Postgraduate students	6
Students supported to attend	0
Total number of participants attended	30

Institutions represented

1. Nelson Mandela University (NMU)



4. Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC)



2. University of Fort Hare



University of Fort Hare
Together in Excellence

5. South African Institute of Aquatic Biodiversity (SAIAB)



3. South African International Maritime Institute (SAIMI)



9. Bloemfontein, Free State

Date: 19 May 2026

Venue: Premier Splendid Inn, Bloemfontein



Attendees at the Bloemfontein Roadshow hosted at the Splendid Inn.

The Bloemfontein meeting explored the links between environmental sustainability, resilience, and ocean literacy through presentations from SAEON's Arid Lands Node and Sol Plaatje University. Dr Zanele Ntshidi, Manager of SAEON's Arid Lands Node, provided an overview of the Node's long-term environmental monitoring work across South Africa's arid regions, highlighting research on biodiversity, water resources, groundwater systems, and community engagement initiatives. Ms Phumudzo Ragimana, Science Education Officer at the Arid Lands Node, demonstrated how inland communities can contribute to ocean literacy through educational programmes such as the Blue Schools initiative, which encourages learners to engage with ocean-related challenges regardless of their geographic location.

The academic session featured contributions from Sol Plaatje University students, who travelled to Bloemfontein to participate in the roadshow. Mr Phumlani Zwane presented research from the Arid Region Water Research Centre, highlighting the challenges of water scarcity, drought, climate change, and sustainable water-resource management in the Northern Cape. Ms Nosihe Sibiya reflected on the achievements of the Resilience and Sustainability Centre for Global Change during its first nine months of operation. Her presentation highlighted progress in establishing interdisciplinary research collaborations, community engagement initiatives, and capacity building among emerging researchers. Ms Sithabile Mbonambi concluded the session by outlining the Centre's future vision, emphasising continued collaboration, innovation, and research aimed at addressing environmental and societal challenges. Together, the presentations showcased the growing role of young researchers in advancing resilience and sustainability research within South Africa.

Bloemfontein, Free State

Participation

Number of participants registered	18
Universities	3
Institutions	2
Postgraduate students	10
Students supported to attend	10
Total number of participants attended	19

Institutions represented

1. Sol Plaatje University



2. University of the Free State



10. Mbombela, Mpumalanga

Date: 26 May 2026

Venue: Tfokomala Hotel and Conference Centre, University of Mpumalanga, Mbombela



From left to right: Thabo Dikgate (UMP), Fhumulani Ramakhwatho (DSTI), Selby Modiba (DSTI), Aldo Stroebe (UMP), Nicole du Plessis (NRF), KGame Molope (NWU)

Opened by Prof Aldo Stroebe, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, Innovation and Internationalisation at the University of Mpumalanga (UMP), the UMP event emphasised the importance of environmental research infrastructure, collaboration, and student participation in addressing regional and global sustainability challenges. Prof. Dave Thompson from SAEON provided an overview of the organisation's national network of terrestrial and marine research nodes, highlighting how long-term environmental observation platforms contribute to understanding climate change, biodiversity, water resources, and ecosystem resilience. He showcased the breadth of SAEON's work across South Africa's diverse environments, from savannas and grasslands to coastal and offshore marine ecosystems, while emphasising the value of partnerships between research institutions, government agencies, communities, and universities.

Particular attention was given to opportunities for students and early-career researchers to engage with SAEON's research platforms, data resources, and postgraduate support initiatives. Dr Thompson highlighted existing collaborations between SAEON and UMP, including research projects focused on socio-ecological systems, environmental change, and sustainable resource management. The presentation underscored the importance of long-term monitoring programmes and interdisciplinary research in generating evidence-based solutions to environmental challenges.



Left to Right: Moderator: Mr Thabo Dikgale (UMP), **Panelists:** Dr Bongsi Mcata (UMP), Ms Nicole du Plessis (NRF-SAEON), Ms Fhumulani Ramukhwatho (DSTI), Mr KGame Molope (SA IORAG Chair & NWU), Dr Nombuso Shabalala (UNISA), Mr Shaun Mashile (UMP, Post Graduate Student)

The event concluded with a panel discussion featuring established academics, professionals, and early-career researchers, who reflected on opportunities for collaboration, mentorship, and participation in regional research networks. Discussions explored pathways for student engagement, postgraduate support, research partnerships, and professional development, while reinforcing the importance of ensuring that inland institutions are actively represented within Indian Ocean research and innovation initiatives.

Participation

Number of participants registered	70
Universities	6
Institutions	3
Postgraduate students	4
Students supported to attend	0
Total number of participants attended	43

Institutions represented

1. University of Mpumalanga (UMP)



2. University of Limpopo (UL)



3. SANParks



4. University of Venda (UNIVEN)



5. University of the Free State (UFS)



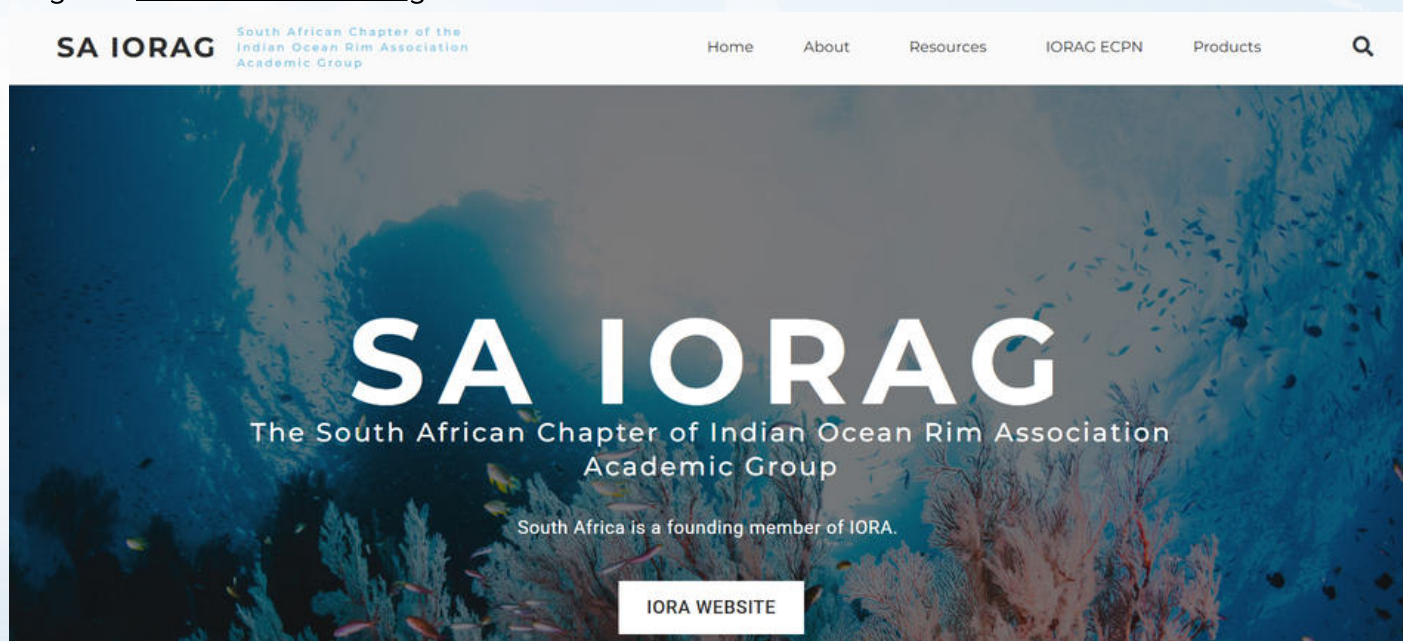
6. University of South Africa (UNISA)



11. Website:

Additional information on the South African Indian Ocean Rim Academic Group (SA-IORAG), including priority areas, opportunities, and updates, is available on the website: iora-sa.saeon.ac.za

Join SA IORAG's Researcher Database to connect with Leading Researchers in the Indian Ocean Region - academic.iora-sa.org



12. Conclusion:

The SA-IORAG University Roadshow demonstrated the growing interest among South African universities in regional collaboration, ocean governance, sustainability research, and innovation. By engaging institutions across both coastal and inland regions, the roadshow reinforced the message that challenges facing the Indian Ocean region require contributions from a diverse range of disciplines, perspectives, and communities.

The discussions highlighted the importance of strengthening partnerships between academia, government, research institutions, and regional stakeholders. Particular emphasis was placed on creating opportunities for students and early-career professionals, who will play a critical role in shaping the future of research, policy, and sustainable development within the Indian Ocean region. The themes explored throughout the roadshow aligned closely with several IORA priority areas, including Academic, Science and Technology Cooperation; Fisheries Management; Disaster Risk Management; Trade and Investment Facilitation; and the Blue Economy, demonstrating the valuable contribution that universities can make towards advancing regional objectives.

The roadshow has laid the foundation for continued engagement through IORA, AAORIA, Ocean20, and related initiatives. Moving forward, the relationships established during the programme provide opportunities to increase participation in regional networks, and ensure that South African researchers continue to contribute meaningfully to addressing shared challenges and opportunities across our shared ocean.

Thank You

The SA-IORAG Secretariat thanks all participating universities, speakers, students, researchers, and stakeholders for their support and active participation in the 2026 University Roadshow.

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