

Alex Du Toit Lecture 2026: Associate Professor Robyn Pickering



It gives me great pleasure to announce that Associate Professor Robyn Pickering has been selected as the Alex Du Toit Memorial Lecturer, for 2026. The Memorial Lecture takes place biennially and is awarded to an individual to recognise world class research in the earth sciences. She will be the first female Alex Du Toit lecturer since Edna Plumstead in 1969.

Pickering is currently an Associate Professor at the Department of Geological Sciences, as well as the Co-Director of the Human Evolution Research Institute (HERI), at the University of Cape Town. Her undergraduate degree was focused on both geology and archaeology at the University of the Witwatersrand, with completion of her Ph.D at the University of Bern, in Switzerland in 2009, in isotope geochemistry.

Following her Ph.D completion, Assoc. Prof. Pickering was employed as a Post Doctoral Research Fellow at the University of Melbourne, Australia, from 2009 until 2015. Thereafter, she returned to South Africa as a Lecturer in 2016 at the University of Cape Town, advancing to the position of Associate Professor.

Assoc. Prof. Pickering leads a productive research group at UCT, focused on the age and development of Quaternary landscapes, as recorded by rivers, lakes and caves. She was key in establishing the first carbonate U-series dating laboratory in South Africa, as well as pioneering the U-series technique to include time and cost saving in *situ* analysis. She directs field programs in the Cradle of Humankind, at the Kalkkop meteorite impact crater palaeolake and in the southern Kalahari. Further, she is the co-director of the Human Evolution Research Institute, which aims to disrupt, deconstruct and transform patriarchal narratives of human

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evolution. She is focused on the transformation and decolonisation of the geosciences in improving field experiences for women and underprivileged students, and raising awareness around neo-colonialism in geoscience research practices. Pickering has no less than 59 peer reviewed publications, has hosted six post doctoral fellows, supervised 3 Ph.D, 3 M.Sc and 11 B.Sc Honours students and is actively involved within the European Geosciences Union.

For the 2026 Alex Du Toit Memorial Lecture, Assoc. Prof. Pickering will speak on the geology and dating of human evolution in South Africa, how the uranium-lead technique has provided the first direct chronology for the early hominin fossils in the Cradle of Humankind and how her research group are actively building a detailed palaeoclimate record for this region from 1-3 million years ago. She will also discuss the role of uranium-thorium dating in understanding how early modern humans survived and even thrived in the now arid southern Kalahari. Finally, she will speak to how the pioneering approach of Alex du Toit has inspired her approach to research, innovation and capacity building within South African geosciences.

Dr L Coney
Fellows Chair
2 December 2024