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EDITOR'S NOTE

Enabling the disabled

The theme for this issue of *Quest* is Disability, which is any continuing condition that substantially restricts a person's life activities. A disability may be present from birth or occur as a result of an accident, illness or the ageing process.

According to StatsSA data from the 2011 national census, some 7.5% of South Africa's population lives with a disability. The National Council for Persons with Disabilities organises the annual Casual Day on the first Friday of September as an awareness and fundraising campaign for organisations supporting the disabled, and the country also commemorates National Disability Awareness Month for the month leading up to 3 December, which was proclaimed the International Day of Disabled Persons by the United Nations General Assembly in 1992.

In recent years, technological advances have helped ease the challenges faced by disabled people, and the big players in the global tech industry have recognised the role they can play. Google introduced its Impact Challenge: Disabilities in 2015, and gave \$20 million to 29 organisations using technology to help solve accessibility challenges around the world. And in May 2018, Microsoft pledged \$25 million towards the development of tools

that use artificial intelligence (AI) for the benefit of the disabled. The funds are being channelled through a five-year grant initiative called AI for Accessibility, which focuses on three areas: employment, daily life, and communication and connection. The more than 30 grantees to date include developers of speech therapy video games powered by AI; an app that converts specific sounds into coloured flashes to warn deaf people of fire alarms, doorbells, etc; a neuromuscular-sensing 'watch' to control digital devices using micro-movements of the hands and arms; and a social app to connect people with special needs.

In this issue, we highlight some international examples of such technological advances, while also drawing attention to the diverse ways in which researchers at local universities 'enable the disabled'.



Sue Matthews
QUEST Editor

Ukukhubazeka kuyinoma isiphi isimo esikuvimbela ukuba uzenzele izinto eziyisidingo, ezijwayelekile empilweni. Kungenzeka uzalwe nakho ukukhubazeka noma ukhubazeke ngenxa yengozi, ukugula noma ukuguga.

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