

HIGHER EDUCATION • RESEARCH COMMUNITY PLATFORM

Connecting a nation of scholars. **The NIHSS Virtual Doctoral School.**

How the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences brought its doctoral candidates, alumni, mentors and champions together on one secure web and mobile platform — built and operated by Pace Online on **Uniflo**.



The National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences

The NIHSS is a South African public institution established on 5 December 2013 in terms of the Higher Education Act, 1997 (Act No. 101 of 1997). Its central vision is a new Humanities and Social Sciences that stands as an **epicentre of scholarship, pedagogy, community practice and social responsibility in Africa** — an equal partner in global knowledge production alongside centres of excellence in the North and the Global South.

■ What the Institute does

Working with the South African Humanities Deans Association (SAHUDA) and CODESRIA, the NIHSS funds doctoral and post-doctoral scholarships across South Africa's public universities, runs a national Doctoral Schools programme, and supports catalytic research projects, Humanities Hubs and BRICS research initiatives.

■ Why community matters to its mandate

The Institute's model is deliberately national and networked. Candidates are enrolled at universities across the country and grouped into regional Doctoral Schools, thematic groups and mentorship circles. Its flagship gatherings — the Annual National Doctoral Conference, regional and inter-regional workshops — depend on scholars being able to **find each other, share work and stay connected between events**.

That made a dedicated, member-only digital community not a nice-to-have but core infrastructure for the Institute's mission.

2013

ESTABLISHED UNDER
THE HIGHER
EDUCATION ACT

150

DOCTORAL
SCHOLARSHIPS
AWARDED PER YEAR
WITH SAHUDA

700+

DOCTORAL
CANDIDATES
FUNDED ACROSS
PUBLIC
UNIVERSITIES

1

NATIONAL
COMMUNITY OF
SCHOLARS TO
BRING TOGETHER

*"The central vision of the NIHSS is a new Humanities and the Social Sciences that is an **epicentre of scholarship, pedagogy, community practice and social responsibility in Africa**."*

NIHSS MANDATE • REQUEST FOR PROPOSAL NIHSS/VDSS-01/2021

A dispersed community, generic tools, and events that ended when the room emptied

In August 2021 the NIHSS went to market (Bid NIHSS/VDSS-01/2021) for a **Virtual Doctoral School System**: a web and mobile platform on which its funded doctoral candidates, post-doctoral fellows, alumni, mentors and champions could share ideas, communicate and collaborate. Scholars were scattered across universities and regions; collaboration lived in fragmented email threads and third-party tools the Institute didn't control; and the energy of national and regional workshops had no digital home to continue in. The brief was demanding:

A private, governed network

No public sign-up. Membership limited to the NIHSS database, controlled by administrators, with bulk user importation and role management.

Web, Android and iOS

Responsive web application plus native-quality Android and iOS apps to reach candidates wherever they are.

Rich, integrated communication

Private and group chat, voice and video calls, video conferencing for national, regional and thematic gatherings, file sharing and mobile messaging — as one integrated system.

Structured groups & events

Institutional, regional, national and thematic groups; event management linked to video conferencing, targeted to specific groups, regions or users.

Governance & safety

Moderation and reporting, banned-word filtering, copyright and plagiarism controls, user banning, and two-factor authentication.

Multi-channel notifications

Web, email and mobile notifications with user choice, kept history, delegated senders and audience targeting — all styled to the NIHSS corporate identity.

Multilingual & inclusive

An interface members can switch between languages at any time, plus forums and polls open to every corner of the community.

Ownership & accountability

Independent hosting, all data and intellectual property vested in the NIHSS, administrator training with a comprehensive guide, and a 24-hour response commitment.

The real test: generic social networks and off-the-shelf LMS tools could each tick a few of these boxes. The NIHSS needed all of them in one governed platform, under its own brand, on its own terms.

A private social campus, powered by Uniflo

Pace Online won the competitive tender and delivered the **NIHSS Virtual Doctoral School (VDS)** on **Uniflo** — our community platform for institutions (uniflo.app). The VDS is a members-only network fully branded to the NIHSS: one account works everywhere across the web application and the Android, iPhone and iPad apps, with profiles, badges, groups and security settings kept in sync.



Profiles, badges & connections

Scholar profiles carry project titles, disciplines and programmes. Administrators assign role badges — Doctoral Candidate, Alumni, Mentor, Champion, NIHSS Staff — and members build their own networks through connection requests.



Feed, groups & forums

A rich content feed with posts, galleries, polls and comments; institutional, regional, alumni and thematic groups with their own walls, media libraries and join rules; and a category-based discussion forum.



Calls & in-platform meetings

Voice notes, one-to-one voice and video calls with native ringing on locked phones, and full conference rooms that run inside the VDS — no external Zoom or Meet links — with recordings saved straight to the event page.



Targeted events & calendars

Events aimed at specific users, groups, regions or workshop themes — with Google/Outlook calendar invites, ICS files, live "Join Now" banners and post-event summary emails with the recording link.



Notifications on every channel

In-app, email, SMS and push notifications with per-channel preferences, a kept history, administrator-editable templates and delegated senders for targeted announcements.



Governance & safety built in

Two-factor authentication, member reporting, banned-word filtering, image auto-moderation, plagiarism scanning of posts, moderator tools and instant account banning.



Multilingual by design

Members switch the interface language at any time and the choice persists across sessions and devices — meeting the Institute's inclusivity mandate.

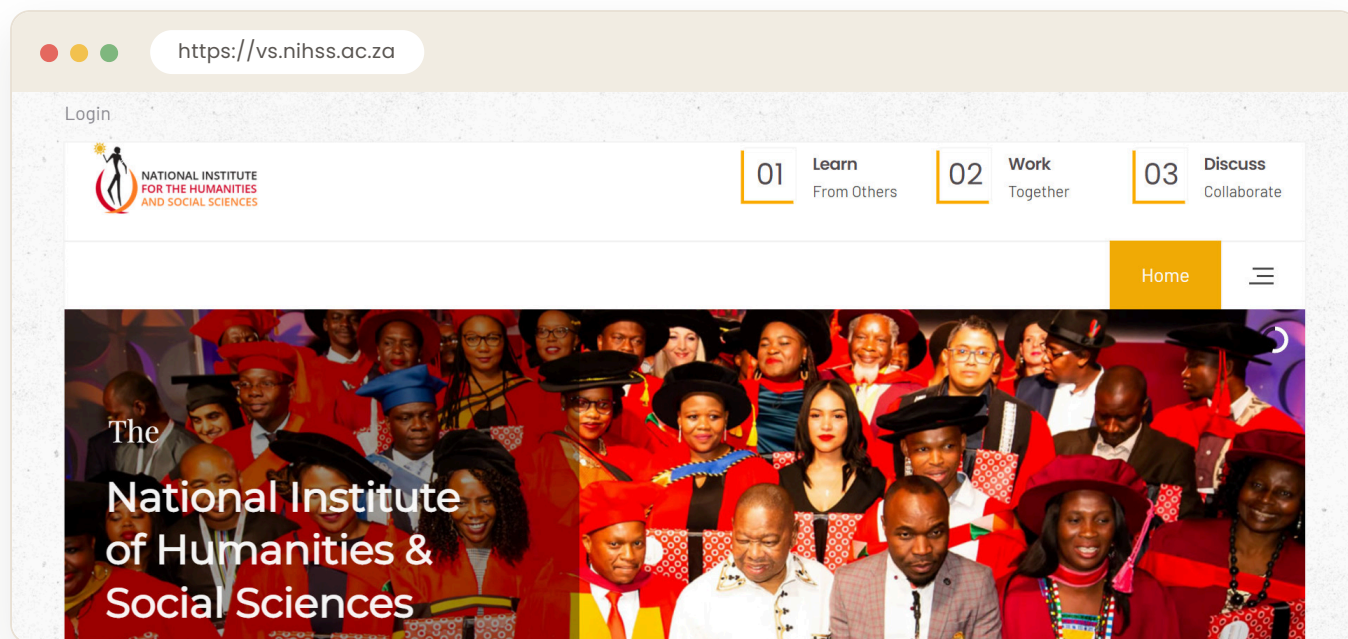


A serious admin console

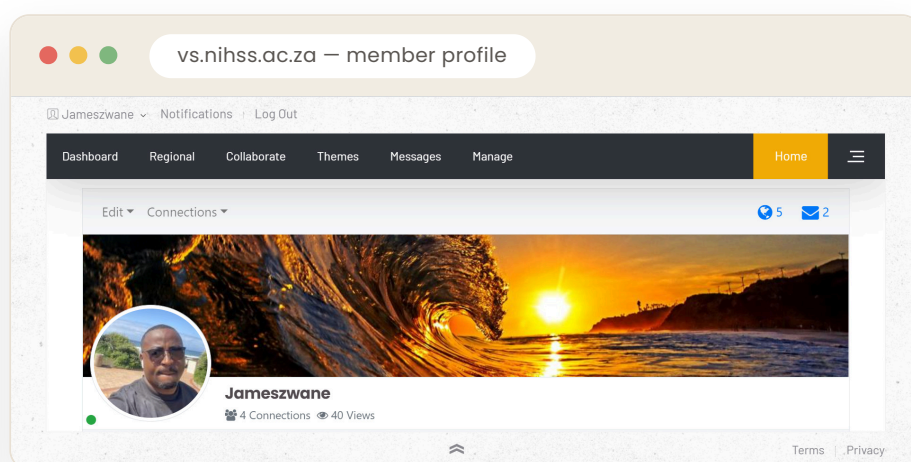
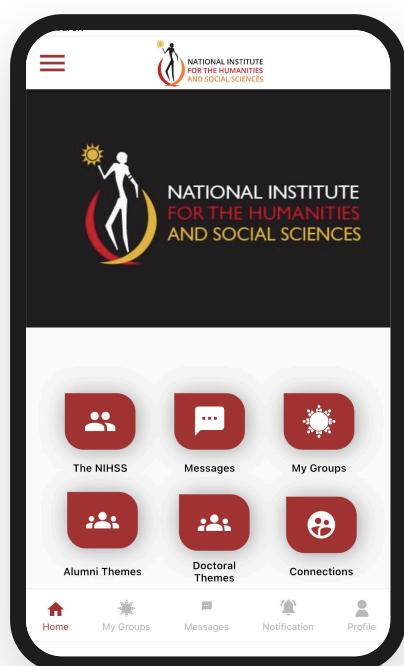
Connection-intelligence dashboards, bulk user import, profile-field schema editing, feature toggles, notification templates, system logs and full appearance control — the NIHSS runs its own platform.

One account, everywhere — in the Institute's own colours

The VDS carries the NIHSS corporate identity end to end — from the splash screen and login imagery to email templates and even push-notification branding. Below: the live member portal at **vs.nihss.ac.za** and the mobile app available on **Google Play and the App Store**.



MEMBER WEB PORTAL — LEARN FROM OTHERS • WORK TOGETHER • DISCUSS & COLLABORATE



SCHOLAR PROFILE WITH CONNECTIONS, VIEWS & MESSAGING

The mobile home screen puts the community one tap away: The NIHSS feed, Messages, My Groups, Alumni and Doctoral themes, and Connections — with push notifications and native incoming-call screens even when the phone is locked.

From tender to a living platform — and a renewed mandate

Aug 2021**The brief**

NIHSS issues RFP NIHSS/VDSS-01/2021 for a Virtual Doctoral School System — web and mobile — through a competitive public tender.

2021 – 2022**Award, build & launch**

Pace Online is appointed and delivers the VDS on Uniflo: the member web portal, the Android and iOS apps, administrator training and full documentation, with all intellectual property vested in the NIHSS.

Dec 2023**Reappointed on results**

The NIHSS formally reappoints Pace Online for a further two years (Dec 2023 – Dec 2025) of hosting, helpdesk, backups and maintenance of the VDS — the strongest endorsement a client can give.

Today**A platform that keeps growing**

Continuous releases have added in-platform meeting recording at 1080p, iPad support, native VoIP call alerts, background blur and deeper admin analytics — documented in a full Help & Operations Manual for NIHSS staff and members.

■ What the NIHSS got

A permanent digital campus

Live at vs.nihss.ac.za with companion apps on Google Play and the App Store — the connective tissue between conferences, workshops and regional schools.

Full ownership & control

The Institute owns the data and IP, governs membership, and administers branding, features, moderation and notifications from its own console.

Security fit for a public entity

Invitation-only membership, two-factor authentication, moderation, plagiarism controls and POPIA-conscious privacy handling.

A partner, not just a vendor

A 24-hour support commitment, documented hand-over, and an operating relationship strong enough to be renewed through 2025.

*"Your company has been appointed for maintenance, including hosting, telephonic, email, helpdesk support, backups, small fixes, and maintenance updates of the Virtual Doctoral School System... **Looking forward to a fruitful working relationship with your company.**"*

NIHSS LETTER OF APPOINTMENT TO PACE ONLINE • DECEMBER 2023

Every institution has a community. Give yours a **home**.

Uniflo is the platform behind the NIHSS Virtual Doctoral School — and it is ready for graduate schools, universities, research councils, alumni offices and professional academies anywhere in the world. Your brand, your members, your rules; our engineering.

White-labelled to you

Your logo, colours, splash screens, email templates and even push-notification branding — configured from the admin console, not hard-coded.

Web + Android + iOS from day one

One account across every device, with your apps published to the public stores under your identity.

Everything in one platform

Profiles, groups, feed, messaging, calls, meetings with recording, events, forums, polls and multi-channel notifications — no bolt-on video tools.

Governed and secure

Invitation-only membership, role badges, 2FA, moderation, plagiarism controls and full audit logs. You own your data.

Proven in production

Battle-tested by a national public institution and renewed on performance — with 10+ years of Pace Online government delivery behind it.

Supported for the long run

Hosting, backups, helpdesk and continuous feature releases under a clear SLA — a 24-hour response commitment as standard.

See Uniflo with your own branding.

Book a live demo of the platform that powers the NIHSS Virtual Doctoral School.

uniflo.app

PACE ONLINE

Software that works.

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