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## **UCT still ranked first in Africa despite drop on overall QS Rankings**

The University of Cape Town (UCT) continues to rank first in South Africa and on the continent, although this is the second year of a drop in places in the overall Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) Rankings.

This downward movement does not, however, mean that the quality of research or teaching have declined. In fact, much of the raw data shows continued improvement in performance. To explain this paradox, one has to drill down into the methodology used by QS.

UCT has moved down by 50 places in the last two years. A big drop of 30 places in 2014 can largely be attributed to the change in the QS rankings methodology for citations. This indicator accounts for 20% of the overall score, and measures the number of times a piece of research is cited, or referred to, within another piece of research – generally, the more often a piece of research is cited, the more influential it is.

In 2014, QS equalised citations across all five faculty areas to try to better represent institutions that are strong in the arts, humanities and social sciences. This continues to hit institutions such as UCT, which are very strong in life, natural and health sciences, hard. UCT's 'citations per faculty' indicator fell 133 places in 2014 and a further 14 places in 2016. Yet the raw number of citations has seen a significant increase – 31% in the last year – as has the number of papers (16%).

By contrast, institutions that publish mainly in the humanities and social sciences, such as the London School of Economics (LSE), have seen a rise in rankings (the LSE rose from 71 to 35 with the change in methodology).

Even in areas where the methodology has not changed, it is worth noting that a drop in places does not necessarily translate into a drop in performance, because rankings are relative – it may in fact simply mean that other institutions have improved relative to our own. For instance, the numbers of international staff and students at UCT have increased slightly (by nearly three and nine percent respectively), but we have dropped more than 10 places in both areas. This

means that other universities worldwide are increasing their proportions of international staff and students more than we are. This is not surprising, as UCT has capped the percentage of international students at 20% in order to reserve 80% of the places for South Africans.

This underlines the degree to which international rankings do not account for the contexts in which universities around the world – particularly in developing countries – operate, and their often different values and priorities. Another criterion within the QS rankings that drives this point home is the ratio of staff to students. This accounts for 20% of the total score, and has always been an area of dramatic underperformance, where UCT consistently fails to rank even in the top 400 (we were ranked 479 on this measure this year). Unfortunately, this is unlikely to see an improvement, given the chronic underfunding of higher education teaching by government and the increased pressure on fees.

The academic reputation indicator (accounting for a full 40% of the overall score) which is based on a global survey, reveals that UCT's international reputation among leading academics remains steady, with a small drop of three places. And we continue to punch well above our weight in a range of subject areas, most notably development studies (where UCT is ranked 9th in the world) and geography (46th); a further 10 subject areas are in the top 100 (agriculture and forestry; anthropology; archeology; architecture and the built environment; education; engineering [mineral and mining]; English language and literature; law; medicine; and politics and international studies).

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