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UCT scientists honoured for excellence by South Africa's official science body

Three University of Cape Town (UCT) academics, Professor Kelly Chibale, Professor Virna Leaner and Professor Kevin Naidoo, were among 20 of the country's leading scholars and scientists who were inaugurated as members of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) at the annual Awards Ceremony on 10 October 2018.

ASSAf honours the country's most outstanding scholars, from a full spectrum of disciplines, by electing them to membership of the Academy. New members are elected each year by the full existing membership.

On the same evening UCT Professor Linda-Gail Bekker was awarded an ASSAf Science-for-Society gold medal for outstanding achievement in scientific thinking to the benefit of society. Professor Bekker is the deputy director of UCT's Desmond Tutu HIV Centre and world renowned for her major contributions to the [prevention and treatment of HIV and tuberculosis](#). She is also the Head of the International AIDS Society.

Another UCT academic, Dr Sarah Fawcett, is also among the 10 new members of the South African Young Academy of Science (SAYAS). SAYAS aims to enable South Africa's young scientists to fully participate in local and internationally relevant research and development agendas as well as contribute towards solutions to national and global challenges facing society.

Members of SAYAS are young scientists below the age of 40, who have PhDs and are deemed excellent in their fields of expertise. They come from various disciplines including pure and applied sciences, humanities, social sciences and the arts.

"We are extremely proud of all our academics who have been recognised in this way. Recognition by one's peers is different, it is a form of reassurance and acknowledgement that what you are doing and how you are doing it is positively influencing your field. As a university we will continue to support our academics to be

the best that they can be," said Gerda Kruger, Executive Director: UCT Communication and Marketing Department.

More on the new UCT ASSAf members:

- **Professor Kelly Chibale:** Professor of Organic Chemistry and a Full Member of the UCT Institute of Infectious Disease & Molecular Medicine. Professor Chibale is the founder and director of Africa's first integrated drug discovery centre and has been named as one of *Fortune magazine's 50 World's Greatest Leaders for 2018*.
- **Professor Virna Leaner:** Professor in the Division of Medical Biochemistry, Faculty of Health Sciences. Professor Leaner's work focuses on looking for [novel cancer biomarkers](#) that could serve as therapeutic targets. During a recent study focusing on a small cohort of cervical cancer patients at Groote Schuur Hospital, Leaner's group identified a protein called Kpnb1 as a potential biomarker and therapeutic target for this kind of cancer.
- **Professor Kevin Naidoo:** DST/NRF South African Research Chair in Scientific Computing and is Director of the Scientific Computing Research Unit, Chemistry Department. Professor Naidoo's research uses informatics and computer-modelling techniques to interrogate data and simulate complex molecular processes in disease. Some of his latest work found that the [gene expression pattern of a patient can be used to accurately classify cancer types](#), which can be used for accurate early diagnosis and targeted treatment.

More on the new UCT SAYAS member:

- **Dr Sarah Fawcett:** Lecturer in the Department of Oceanography. Dr Fawcett is studying the [nitrogen pollution in South Africa's biggest natural bay](#) with the aim of identifying the sources of nitrogen pollution to the bay, how far offshore the pollution can persist and, through a dedicated monitoring programme, understand what happens to it once it enters the water. A chemical baseline will also help oceanographers understand the effects of poor water quality on small-scale fishers.

ENDS

Note to editors

Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)

ASSAf was established in May 1996. It was formed in response to the need for an Academy of Science consonant with the dawn of democracy in South Africa: activist in its mission of using science and scholarship for the benefit of society, with a mandate encompassing all scholarly disciplines that use an open-minded and evidence-based approach to build knowledge.

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