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Pioneering UCT law graduate breaks boundaries

Tabeth Masengu became the University of Cape Town's (UCT) first recipient of a jointly awarded PhD in Law with Ghent University in Belgium when she defended her thesis via Zoom due to COVID-19. Her examiners were unanimous in awarding her the doctorate without corrections.

The youngest of six siblings, Masengu was raised in Kitwe in Zambia, where her father, a lawyer, hoped that at least one of his children would follow him into law. It was only in 1994 when, captivated by the action and drama of the televised OJ Simpson trial, Masengu decided that it would be her.

In an early display of academic resolve, she defied naysayers who told her that undertaking a straight Bachelor of Laws (LLB) at Rhodes University would be too onerous for her and that she should enrol for a BA Law instead. "The BA option was longer and meant additional fees for my parents and, given the exchange rate and international fee, this was not feasible. It was probably the first time that I realised how I disliked being told that I was not capable of doing something. I worked hard and, of the five people who graduated with distinctions in my year, I was the only one with a straight LLB," she said.

It was while she was a candidate attorney for the Pietermaritzburg firm Tomlinson Mnguni James that Masengu acknowledged that her future undeniably lay in human rights. "I saw how people who came to the firm needed help but could not afford it. As soon as I completed my articles, I left," she said.

She did her Master's in Human Rights Law at the London School of Economics and Political Science and graduated cum laude in 2011. Master's in hand, Masengu returned to Cape Town and began working as a researcher at the Democratic Governance and Rights Unit (DGRU) at UCT.

Cheered on by her mentor and friend, Professor Caroline Ncube, Masengu succeeded in registering for a joint doctorate. Having already begun the PhD in Cape Town, once she had completed her field work with the DGRU, she went to Belgium to undertake the other part of it at Ghent University under the supervision of Professor Eva Brems.

Although there were challenges along the way – as the UCT Faculty of Law's first jointly awarded PhD, the process was uncharted – they were offset by the many rewards of working

towards a joint degree. Not only did Masengu have access to twin resources and supervisors with different areas of expertise and insights, but she also had the opportunity to build networks and experience working in different parts of the world.

“Tips for others who might consider similar journeys? Be open-minded and avail yourself of as many new and unexpected opportunities as possible. I always thought I would live in Africa, but here I am in Europe,” she said. “Also, do not be afraid of being a pioneer. If you want to do something, don’t let people put you off by saying that it has never been done before. Just because it has not been done previously does not mean that it cannot be done. Also, if you don’t do it, someone else will.”



Tabeth Masengu

Photo: Supplied

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