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UCT students scoop lion's share in global challenge from next generation leaders to address COVID-19 impact

Four University of Cape Town (UCT) students, the most from any competing institution globally, have won generous grants in the global Reimagine Challenge 2020. They are Julian Kanjere, Rowyn Naidoo, Lerato Motaung and Muzzammil Ismail.

The Reimagine Challenge was launched last August to source the best proposals from university students around the world to build a better future. The four UCT students were among 20 winners announced in New York on 2 February. UCT was the only African university among the winners.

Some 838 students from 264 colleges and universities in 40 countries participated in the challenge, aimed at tackling the COVID-19 pandemic or sparking global movements for change. Each winner is now eligible to receive up to US\$25 000 (around R375 000) in tuition scholarships, and their institution is also eligible to receive up to US\$25 000 in prize money.

Vice-Chancellor Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng congratulated the winners and encouraged them to fulfill their early promise as change agents in the world – with its many challenges. "Taking four of the 20 winning places indicates the quality of UCT's students and the university's commitment to empowering a new generation of thought leaders," said Phakeng. "That they study in four different faculties – engineering and the built environment, law, commerce and health sciences – also indicates the depth and strength of UCT's teaching and research across disciplines."

Support global talent

The Schmidt Futures initiative was founded by philanthropists Eric and Wendy Schmidt. It was launched in August 2020 alongside the [Reimagine Podcast](#) hosted by Eric and is part of a broader [\\$1 billion commitment](#) by the couple to identify and support global talent.

The Reimagine Challenge 2020 submissions focused on a range of these issues, including: mental health; telehealth services; education; the pandemic and the elderly; refugee and migrant workers; and global food insecurity.

The winning UCT proposals:

- Julian Kanjere (Master of Philosophy in Financial Technology): [The FoodPrint Farmer platform](#), a digital, cloud-based and blockchain-enabled food traceability and produce logging platform for smallholder farmers.
- Rowyn Naidoo (electrical engineering student): [Vertical gardens to address the issue of food insecurity](#). The gardens incorporate drip irrigation and compost from recycled materials found in South African settlements.
- Lerato Motaung (first-year law student): [The Guardian App](#), a mobile application that provides survivors of gender-based violence with resources and ways to get access to free assistance in one place.
- Muzzammil Ismail (Master of Medicine in Public Health Medicine): [The VECTOR \(Virtual Emergency Care Tactical Operation\)](#), a data-driven project for virtually managing and observing patients. The project proposes to scale a successful model from South Africa that assists with the management of elderly diabetic patients during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Living up to expectations

Speaking after the announcement, Julian Kanjere of the Faculty of Commerce said he was humbled to be a winner in a global competition.

“At the start of 2019, I enrolled in the MPhil in FinTech at UCT and during orientation course convenor Associate Professor Co-Pierre Georg told the class that he expected us to produce ideas that can change the world. Being named a winner supports Co-Pierre's expectations!”

He added: “Based on my submission for a blockchain-enabled solution for smallholder farmers, being named as a winner validates the relevance of emerging technology such as blockchain, as well as data-driven business models for the future. I’ve been spurred to continue my research on blockchain technology and data privacy in 2021.”

Kanjere also plans to develop the [FoodPrint Farmer platform](#), the basis of his Reimagine Challenge 2020 submission.

“Challenges such as these provide an opportunity for students to exercise creativity outside of the lecture theatre, validate ideas on the global stage and build up innovation capital. For African students, these provide an opportunity to build diverse international networks and demonstrate that we can compete globally.”

Inspired by bold ideas

Speaking after the announcement, Eric Schmidt said: “I’m inspired by the bold ideas we received and the rising generation of leaders who developed them. Although the long-term impact of this pandemic is daunting, we cannot forget we live in the most educated, interconnected, empowered period in human history. If we come together with all our tools, knowledge, and talents – as these students have done – I’m confident we can build a world that’s fairer, safer, and more prosperous for everyone.”

More information about each winner and their proposal is available on the Schmidt Futures website [here](#).

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