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UCT honours country's top matriculants and first-year scholarship recipients



VC Prof Mamokgethi Phakeng (in pink mask) with Vice-Chancellor's Scholarship recipients.
Photo: Lerato Maduna/UCT

The University of Cape Town (UCT) recently rolled out the blue carpet when Vice-Chancellor Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng honoured 17 of the country's top matriculants, now UCT first-year students. Each has earned a Vice Chancellor's Scholarship for their stellar results.

Their first week at UCT was something of a baptism of fire, with student fee protests bringing in-person teaching to a halt. But the recipients were in high spirits, describing their experiences as "staggering", "extraordinary", "interesting", "vibrant", "exciting", "incredible", "busy" and "refreshing".

Invited by Phakeng to introduce themselves, they shared their degree choices (ranging from medicine, chemical and electrical engineering, computer and actuarial science to genetics and biochemistry) and hopes for their UCT journey.

In her welcome to the scholarship winners, Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research and Internationalisation Professor Sue Harrison said they could be reassured that their academic programmes were cutting edge, based on internationally renowned research and scholars.

UCT's Vision 2030, built around sustainability, research and transformation, "cuts across everything we do at UCT", Harrison said.

"And it's helping us think about how we position our research; this is to be excellent and sustainable with an impact that reflects where we are as a country and continent."

Road less travelled

To ease the scholarship awardees' passage into academia, three guest speakers shared their experiences of UCT; how they had broken new ground by asking questions of the university and themselves – and by choosing the road less travelled. National Research Foundation P-rated scholar and 2020/21 Human Sciences Research Council Emerging Researcher Awardee, Dr Ryan Nefdt, shared his journey as the Department of Philosophy's first lecturer of colour.

Having grown up in Mitchells Plain, "the other Cape Town", Nefdt fell in love with philosophy as a curious young student. He was always asking "big questions", he said. That curiosity and desire to learn took him on a multi-disciplinary journey at UCT and abroad.

"So It doesn't matter where you came from. Just go for it. "Silos are meant to be broken, he said.

"During my career I decided that these boundaries that you find in different majors and departments in different buildings that's nonsense."

Nefdt emphasised the role of interdisciplinarity in solving problems.

"Every problem we look at has an economic dimension to it, a scientific dimension, a philosophical dimension, and there's no reason to stay in your corner. It's strategically important to make sure you know what you're doing, and that you 'get' the basics of what you're doing but be open to those moments where you can find ways to talk about things that no one has spoken about before. "I've made lots of moves like that in my career. And some of them have resulted in publications in logic and linguistics and philosophy."

And learn how to take and weigh up criticism, he advised.

"Besides opening yourself up to interdisciplinary options, possibilities and experiences, don't be closed off to criticism. Sometimes people are going to be harsh, sometimes your lecturers are going to be harsh as well. And sometimes they're going to be harsh because they want you to develop and grow. And sometimes because they're just jerks – and you need to be able to deal with both!"

Be relevant, open to challenge

Guest speaker Dr Timothy de Wet took the road less travelled, he told the group. He graduated with a PhD in 2021 and is set to graduate with an MBChB in December 2022,

thanks to UCT's intercalated programme, which grooms clinician-scientists. It had been a 10-year journey.

De Wet said higher education would challenge the group; both academically and their perspectives of "what is right". They would also be challenged socially, especially those new to Cape Town. "But there are also many opportunities, many people that you will meet, so find those support structures and friendships that will carry you, potentially throughout your life.

At a higher level, he urged the students to remember that they are now part of one of the world's leading universities, at the tip of Africa.

"And that gives you both a valuable exposure to academics and science that is world-class. But that also challenges you to consistently ask yourself: What is your situation within this country and within academia? And what are you interested in? What research are you doing? How is that relevant to the people who maybe aren't at UCT, but are living in poor communities along the road to the airport?"

Venture into the unknown

Guest speaker Kumoetsile Komane, a postgraduate student in accounting, was top of her class throughout her BCom degree. She urged the group to embrace the "I don't know". That's the first part of transitioning, she said.

"Ask a lot of questions. Do not be afraid to say, 'I don't understand'. There are always people who can answer your questions. And be open to change," she said.

ENDS

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