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## **Trio of leading UCT health sciences women scholars share stories of perseverance**



(From left) Dr Albertus, Prof Galvaan and Assoc Prof Sinxadi

Photo: Nasief Manie

Back your work, don't stand aside for male counterparts, budget carefully for your research projects, and change the narrative of self-belief. Sage advice from three leading women health sciences scholars, all part of the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Research Leadership Programme.

The trio of Professor Roshan Galvaan, Dr Yumna Albertus and Associate Professor Phumla Sinxadi was speaking at the recent "Women of the Future" event to mark the Faculty of Health Sciences' 110th anniversary. It was a platform to share their personal stories, advice and wish lists with other young women in research.

Spread across UCT's faculties, the Research Leadership Programme aims to grow the cohort of leading women scholars who will lead the university's research in the future.

Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research and Internationalisation Professor Sue Harrison heads the initiative. While the programme targets research leadership, its approach is holistic. The pilot programme will run for three years.

### **Perseverance, balance, dedication**

The trio's stories interwove common and individual experiences, touching on perseverance, barriers to women in academia, balancing family and work life, tips for emerging women researchers, and contributing to high-impact research.

It's important to hear these stories, said the dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences, Associate Professor Lionel Green-Thompson. Women's stories had been attenuated too often in the past. "Everybody has a library of stories, a whole cabinet of stories that they tell, some tinged with pain and upset and violence."

### **Pioneers, innovators, role models**

Associate Professor Sinxadi was an early pioneer. With her MMed at UCT in 2010 she became the first black South African clinical pharmacologist. Sinxadi now leads the Division of Clinical Pharmacology's 's pharmacogenomics group. She was also the lead investigator for the initial First-Into-Human phase I clinical trial for a [novel antimalarial compound discovered at UCT](#).

Growing up in a women-led household, Sinxadi said her mother and grandmother had been her role models. Her grandmother, who had to leave school in Grade 6, was her champion. "She was passionate about ensuring I got an education. Growing up, I was motivated mostly by my teachers," Sinxadi said.

A PhD was not something she dreamt about, but the young Sinxadi was clearly meant for academia. Her advice for young women researchers includes careful financial planning. "In the planning, don't forget the financial side. When I applied for my PhD scholarships abroad, I added the budget stating how much it was going to cost to live in the United States for six months. It's important to budget properly."

### **No 'one' way**

Professor Roshan Galvaan heads the Department for Health and Rehabilitation Sciences. She came through the ranks via the Division of Occupational Therapy. She has led curriculum change in undergraduate and postgraduate teaching, promoting social justice through curriculum development within the university, nationally and internationally. Galvaan is the co-founder of the Inclusive Practices Africa, a research unit focusing on how disability inclusion drives change.

Galvaan has won the UCT Social Responsiveness Award twice: in 2015 for engaged scholarship, and in 2018 she was again a co-recipient for her contribution to UCT's Schools Improvement Initiative. Her advice to young women researchers is not to eschew a different, more feminist way of thinking about research.

"There is no 'one' way of approaching research. It's about caring for each other and opening up the research space for everyone," she said. The culture of research would benefit from acknowledging the "different ways of doing research that are not lesser than".

### **Confident in quality**

Dr Yumna Albertus is a senior lecturer and emerging researcher in the Division of Physiological Sciences. She is one of the few sports scientists in South Africa working in

rehabilitation, neurophysiology and biomechanics. Her research has ranged from rehabilitation using robotic over-ground walking in spinal cord injury, exercise-based rehabilitation following cardiovascular disease, in elite para-athletes with cerebral palsy, and injury risk in running. Albertus uses innovative biomechanical technology to monitor neuromuscular changes over time.

Albertus and Associate Professor Amir Patel's (mechatronics) have also produced two patents on low-cost force plates and inertial motion sensors. These technologies will improve the way biomechanics data are captured and allow these measurements to be taken outside the laboratory. UCT spin-off company Acino Technology will be manufacturing these low-cost biomechanics devices.

She encourages young researchers to be confident about the quality of their work. "We don't realise how good our research is. It's only when you attend international conferences that you really see that. It's about changing our mindset: that we are the best, we are up there."

A personal anecdote underscored this. "I was telling my 13-year-old son that I had a Bangladeshi cricketer coming to my lab for tests on his bowling biomechanics. And he said, 'But why to *your* lab? Surely he would be going to England or Australia?' And I stopped the car and said, 'What makes you think that *my* lab isn't as good, or even better, than those in England and Australia? And what makes you think, at your young age, that we're not as good or even better?' But I was actually talking to my younger self when I said that."

*Story by: Helen Swingler, UCT News.*

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