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14 November 2022

UCT project provides psychosocial support for new teachers

It was not the beginning of the end for the 2022 cohort of newly qualified teachers; quite the contrary. Rather, it was the end of the beginning of a journey of service – to the learners who have passed through their classrooms this year, and to all those who will follow in their footsteps.

It's been a bumpy first year in the classroom for the cohort of the Newly Qualified Teachers (NQT) Project; it often is. But it's also been a year of great learning and building character in preparation for a career dedicated to shaping young, curious minds and nurturing the next generation of professionals – guaranteed to make a difference in the country, on the continent and globally.

The NQT Project is an initiative of the University of Cape Town's (UCT) School of Education (SoE) and provides critical support to young teachers who have entered the classroom for the first time. The project focuses on developing their professional resilience and provides them with the academic and psychosocial support they need to successfully complete their first year in the field. This year marks the seventh year since the project's inception.

Academics from UCT and the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) – the NQT partner university – mentees and loved ones recently gathered in the new SoE building on middle campus to celebrate this group of resilient and courageous new teachers, who have persevered and survived their first year in the classroom.

"To the NQTs, this is about you. This is a celebration of your courage, your strength, your agency and your grit. You travelled a long walk this year, and I'm sure that many times you felt that you weren't going to get to this point," said Kate Angier, the chairperson of the NQT Project.

"To the friends, the family and the colleagues who have come out to support your teacher, your NQT, on this journey they've been travelling through this year: it wouldn't be possible without your love, your support, and those arms to pick them up. There have been many challenges along the way. It's incredibly difficult to do this job, and the first year is very, very hard. Without your support, it would've been that much harder."

Haamedah Rawat, an NQT and UCT honours student, described her first year in the classroom as a sacrifice and a push, while burning the midnight oil. Rawat spent a large chunk of her first year of teaching in a primary school setting, even though she was trained

to teach high school learners. She said the NQT project was her safe haven and provided a space where she could share her experiences and challenges; and after a difficult day, put her mind at ease.

For Rawat, the learning experience of the year came knocking when she was required to teach subjects she was unfamiliar with. But she pressed on. She also found it especially difficult to ask her colleagues for help or advice. "I felt like I should manage; I felt I must manage." As overwhelming as her first year of teaching was, she said, it was also an exciting and rewarding experience, and in many ways emotionally fulfilling.

Fellow NQT Thandolwethu Jele said she has made it through her first year of teaching having gained the tenacity of an ultra-marathon runner. The natural sciences and life sciences teacher said she's grateful to be reaching the end of her first year in the classroom.

She said her teaching career had started off rocky, as she had struggled to secure a job – which was hard to believe, considering South Africa's many under-resourced schools and overcrowded classrooms. But after a turbulent first term that required juggling three part-time jobs, Jele eventually secured work at a non-profit special independent school, where most learners are vulnerable, at-risk youth in need of a second chance at education.

Jele said she didn't realise that her first year of teaching would require her to invest so much time and emotion into nurturing and motivating learners who've been told that they'd never make it to Grade 12. Many learners, she explained, live in children's homes, come from violent, at-risk communities, or simply lack the correct support structures at home.

Story by Niémah Davids, UCT News.



The 2022 cohort of newly qualified teachers.

Photo: Lerato Maduna/UCT

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Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

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