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21 November 2023

Six UCT scholars head to Oxford University after receiving prestigious Rhodes Scholarships

Six University of Cape Town (UCT) scholars have received the prestigious Rhodes Scholarships to study at Oxford University in 2024. The six scholars-elect – Justine Crook-Mansour, Daniel Erasmus, Sagel Kundieko, Mothibi Mathivha, Leago Sebesho and Savannah Verhage – are part of the ten exceptional young graduates from across the Southern Africa region.

The Rhodes Scholarship is the world's preeminent and oldest graduate fellowship, based at the University of Oxford since 1903. Over the last 120 years, nearly 1000 graduates from Southern Africa have been awarded Rhodes scholarships. Ten scholarships are awarded annually in the constituency, comprising South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia and eSwatini.

The annual Rhodes selection process seeks young people with a proven record of academic excellence who also display exceptional moral character, evidence of leadership skills, the energy to use their talents to the full, and a commitment to solving humanity's challenges.

UCT Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Transformation, Student Affairs and Social Responsiveness, Professor Elelwani Ramugondo congratulated the scholars and said she was confident that they would acquire knowledge that would advance UCT's mission of producing graduates who contribute towards addressing complex and critical challenges facing South Africa, Africa, and the world at large. "UCT is internationally recognised for its efforts and strides in continuously contributing to the global discourse. We pride ourselves for producing young people who have an insatiable appetite for knowledge, and we know that the six scholars will use this opportunity to broaden their knowledge," she said.

National Secretary of the Rhodes Scholarships in Southern Africa, Ndumiso Luthuli, noted that 2023 was a landmark year as they celebrate 120 years of the Rhodes Scholarship.

"This year, following wide-ranging outreach to universities across the region, we recorded the highest number of applications ever for the Southern African Rhodes Scholarships, with applications up by 5% on last year, the previous record.

"Our selection committees were spoilt for choice and had exceptionally strong pools from which to shortlist for the regional interviews. The finalists interviewed by the national selection committee were all quite outstanding and some tough choices had to be made by the South Africa-at-Large selectors.

"The scholars selected have studied diverse academic disciplines, ranging from astrophysics to applied mathematics, commerce to computer science, from law to medicine, from international relations and leadership, to neuroscience and biomedical engineering. All are academically gifted, socially committed, well-rounded and exceptional young leaders," said Luthuli.

CEO of the Rhodes Trust, Dr Elizabeth Kiss, added: "We are excited to see the tremendous talents of this year's Rhodes scholars-elect, who come from countries all around the world. We know from 120 years of bringing exceptional people to Oxford to study and build a dynamic global community that when unlikeminded but like-hearted people come together, we can forge brighter futures for individuals and the world. For 120 years, the global Rhodes Scholar community has been a force for good. Scholars form a lifelong community, diverse, multicultural and multidisciplinary in nature, but united by a common commitment to having a positive impact on the world."

The Southern African cohort will head to Oxford University in October 2024 to join more than 100 Rhodes scholars from around the world to undertake fully funded postgraduate studies and become part of a strong international network and supportive community of young leaders determined to make a positive difference in the world.

NOTES FOR EDITORS

MEET THE UCT RHODES SCHOLARS-ELECT FOR 2024

Short bios on each of the six UCT Rhodes scholars-elect.

JUSTINE CROOK-MANSOUR (22)

Justine grew up in Cape Town, where she attended Rustenburg High School for Girls. She is currently completing her Honours degree in Astrophysics at UCT, having previously obtained a BSc, majoring in Physics and Computer Science. She has a strong interest in space and wants to work at the intersection of computer science and astrophysics. In June 2023, she took part in the Vatican Observatory Summer School in Italy, which focused on data science and machine learning applications to astronomy. In her honours project, she is investigating the use of deep learning to identify strong gravitational lenses. Justine placed first nationwide in her final year of school, and has continued to place top in various courses at university. In 2022, she took a year off from studies and worked at the South African Astronomical Observatory on various science engagement and coding projects. Alongside

her studies, Justine is an Allan Gray Orbis Foundation Candidate Fellow. In her free time, Justine enjoys playing sport, especially hockey, watching films, travelling, and writing.

DANIEL ERASMUS (23)

Daniel grew up in the Eastern Cape and matriculated at St Andrew's College in Makhanda. Daniel is motivated by a radical desire for a more caring world. As a student of law, they are interested in the philosophical and political challenges that confront its modern-day role in South Africa and beyond. During their studies at the University of Cape Town (BCom and LLB), Daniel prioritised involvement in student leadership, most notably serving as the Secretary General of the Students' Representative Council in 2020/21. Daniel enjoys the art of advocacy and has participated in both national and international moot competitions, including winning the Kate O'Regan Inter-varsity Moot Competition (2022). They have also completed research papers on the right to further education and on abolitionist constitutionalism. Daniel cherishes time spent running, especially when alongside his brother, and playing in the occasional cricket match.

SAGEL KUNDIEKO (23)

Sagel was born in the DRC and grew up in Cape Town, where she attended Claremont High School. She is pursuing an MSc in Neuroscience at UCT, supported by the Mandela Rhodes Foundation. Sagel graduated cum laude with a BSc and Bachelor of Medical Science Honours degree, supported by the Moshal Scholarship Programme. Her research utilises single-nucleus RNA sequencing and electrophysiology to study the link between inflammation and epilepsy. At Oxford, she intends to expand her training in neuroscience. She aims to explore the connections between poverty, trauma, and brain health. Sagel's commitment to growing neuroscience in Africa is demonstrated by her involvement as an executive member of the Southern African Neuroscience Society, a member of the Society of Neuroscientists of Africa and the ALBA network. Beyond research, Sagel is the founder of a digital marketing company, Elle Zeka; and is passionate about mentorship, education, and entrepreneurship. She tutors and mentors students in various organisations, lectures neuroscience, and coordinates a youth mentorship programme. In her spare time, you can find her writing poetry, listening to gospel music, or dancing.

MOTHIBI MATHIVHA (22)

Mothibi matriculated at Mondeor High School in Johannesburg and is completing his BSc Honours in Physics at UCT, working on Random Walks on Lie Groups. Before this, he completed an undergraduate degree in Mathematics and Computer Science. This led to his interest in how to build dynamical physics simulations in low resource environments, an idea he pursued during his time at the Allan Gray Orbis Foundation, where he is now a fellow. Mothibi intends to read for an MSc in Mathematical and Theoretical Physics and an MSc in Mathematical Sciences at Oxford University. His future research interests lie in the applications of topology to aspects of condensed matter physics such as topological order and phase transitions. Outside of academics, Mothibi is an avid cricket player and a beatmaker composing Lo-Fi instrumentals.

LEAGO SEBESHO (26)

Leago is a junior doctor and aspiring clinician-scientist presently in the final stages of her internship at Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital in Johannesburg. She successfully earned a Bachelor of Medicine and Surgery from UCT in 2021. Her achievements include being honoured with the Bongani Mayosi Academic Prize and Foreman Prize, both of which commend her academic excellence, dedication to community upliftment, and substantial contributions to student affairs. Within the university community, Leago held leadership roles in various structures, notably serving as the Deputy Chairperson of the Health Sciences Students' Council and as the Convenor of UCT Student Parliament. In 2019, she received both the Abe Bailey Scholarship and Klaus-Jurgen Bathe Leadership Scholarship, recognising her leadership qualities and dedication to fostering sustainable change in Africa. Leago is deeply committed to youth development and empowerment. She has facilitated a youth development programme in rural Eastern Cape through which young learners get taught computer skills, reproductive health, career opportunities and personal development. Her overarching vision is to contribute to the improvement of health outcomes in Africa by making a meaningful impact on the African health sector through her research endeavours. Ultimately, she aspires to influence health policy, with a particular focus on issues affecting vulnerable communities. In her leisure time, Leago can be found engrossed in a novel, avidly following sports, exploring new destinations, or enjoying quality time socializing with family and friends.

SAVANNAH VERHAGE (26)

Savannah is a Master of Public Health student at UCT and a junior doctor, currently working at Khayelitsha District Hospital in the Western Cape. Savannah has a keen interest in global health, a discipline that allows her to combine her passion for clinical medicine with her heart for improving equity and social justice in healthcare. Savannah has held numerous leadership positions in the healthcare field, including President of the UCT and Southern African Student Surgical Societies in 2020 and Director of Mentorship and Professional Outreach for the International Association of Student Surgical Societies in 2023. She is also a Reach Alliance researcher, where she is investigating ways to make healthcare services more accessible to those that are the hardest to reach in society, with a focus on developing local South African solutions that address the sustainable development goals. Savannah is passionate about outreach and has established and led a number of outreach initiatives aimed at improving access to healthcare services in her local community, for which she was recently awarded the "Outstanding Youth Delegate" Award at the 28th Session of the AFS Youth Assembly in New York City. In her spare time, Savannah likes hiking, attempting to surf, travelling the globe and spending time with friends and family.

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