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1 December 2023

Honorary doctorate for UCT drug discovery trailblazer



Prof Kelly Chibale was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Basel. He is flanked by the Dean of the Faculty of Science at the University of Basel, Prof Marcel Mayor (left) and the President of the University of Basel, Prof Andrea Schenker-Wicki.

Photo: University of Basel, Christian Flierl

Leading University of Cape Town (UCT) scholar and scientist Professor Kelly Chibale has been awarded an honorary doctorate from the Faculty of Science at the University of Basel, Switzerland – a world-leading research university – and one of the oldest in Europe.

Chibale was one of seven scholars who received honorary doctorates during the recent Dies Academicus ceremony in Basel. This was the only award the university's Faculty of Science awarded.

The annual Dies Academicus celebration is held in St Martin's Church on the last Friday of each November. It commemorates the opening of the university on 4 April 1460 at the Basel Minster. The ceremony is also an occasion to honour early-career researchers' achievements through awards sponsored by companies, foundations, or associations.

"Exceptional and inspiring."

Chibale is an A-rated scholar at the National Research Foundation and holds the Neville Isdell Chair in African-centric Drug Discovery and Development at UCT. He is the founder and director of H3D, UCT's drug discovery and development centre based in the Department of Chemistry and the Institute of Infectious Disease and Molecular Medicine (IDM).

The commendation for his honorary doctorate reads: "At the Dies Academicus of the University of Basel, the faculties award honorary doctorates to outstanding personalities in science or society. I am delighted to inform you that the Faculty of Science has decided to [award] you with this year's honorary doctorate.

"It is to honour your exceptional and inspiring curriculum vitae, your outstanding academic achievements and your continuous and ongoing support of the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute, an associate Institute of the University of Basel."

It continues: "Professor Kelly Chibale is one of the most influential scientists in the research and development of researching and developing new drugs for malaria, tuberculosis, and understudied tropical diseases. The researcher, who is currently working in South Africa, was part of the Next Generation Scientist program run by Novartis and the University of Basel for over a decade."

Speaking after the event, Chibale said: "The ceremony at a packed church was movingly symbolic as a church is a place of worship for me. I was there in the church worshipping, thanking, and giving glory to God for being the source of this award given to me.

"The celebratory banquet that followed was out of this world and the largest I have ever attended."

After the event, Chibale presented a Novartis public lecture titled "Fostering drug discovery in Africa" at the "breathtakingly impressive" Novartis Pavillon.

"It was a fantastic day of celebrations with my Swiss friends. In the process, I boosted the economy of Switzerland with the many Swiss chocolate gifts I was presented with by my Swiss friends, who in turn boosted the South African economy with the South African wine I took to Switzerland for them," he remarked on a lighter note.

"With the Royal Society Africa Prize and Schmidt Futures AI2050 Senior Fellowship, the two other individual awards already received this year, this honorary doctorate is like icing on the cake. An individual award like this is also an opportunity for me to thank my present and past team members (both in my academic group and H3D), as well as research and funding partners because, as the saying goes, 'It takes a village to raise a child.'"

Story by Helen Swingler, UCT News

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