



Communication and Marketing Department
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso
Kommunikasie en Bemerkingsdepartement

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
Welgelegen House, Chapel Road Extension, Rosebank, Cape Town
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 5427/5428/5674 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 5628

www.uct.ac.za

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UCT to honour globally recognised biostatistician and epidemiologist

The University of Cape Town (UCT) will confer an honorary doctorate on Dr Debbie Bradshaw, a globally recognised biostatistician and epidemiologist who is regarded as South Africa's foremost expert in the field, during the upcoming graduation season from 2–4 September 2024.

Honorary doctorates at UCT rank among the highest form through which the institution can show esteem to accomplished individuals. They recognise individuals who have made exceptional contributions to society, whether in academia, the arts, public service, or other fields of human endeavour.

UCT Vice-Chancellor Professor Mosa Moshabela said: "These awards are significant not only for the individuals who receive them but also for UCT, as they embody the university's values and mission of excellence, social justice, and global impact. Recipients are often leaders, visionaries, or pioneers who have achieved remarkable success or have had a transformative influence on their communities and beyond."

He added that Dr Bradshaw was an individual worthy of this honour.

"Throughout a career spanning nearly 50 years, Dr Bradshaw has tirelessly advocated for the marginalised and vulnerable, fearlessly speaking truth to power. Her expertise and public contributions to health policy debates in South Africa highlight her ability to collaborate with all stakeholders, including national and provincial governments, to promote evidence-based health policies that improves the lives of all South Africans," said Professor Moshabela.

Even in retirement, Dr Bradshaw remains research-active and has been honoured with the South African Medical Research Council's (SAMRC) highest accolade, the President's Award for Exceptional Contributions to Medical Research. Her scholarship is distinguished, with an h-index of 73 and over 22 000 citations, 10 000 of which have been in the past five years

Dr Bradshaw completed her undergraduate and honours qualifications with distinction.

She trained as a mathematical statistician at the then University of Natal (now the University of KwaZulu-Natal), earning a BSc in mathematics and mathematical statistics. She then pursued a BSc Honours in mathematical statistics at UCT, followed by an MSc in 1978. In 1980 she took study leave to further her education at the University of Oxford, where she completed a DPhil in biomathematics in 1983.

From 1978 to 1980, Dr Bradshaw worked as a research officer at SAMRC. After taking study leave from 1980 to 1982, she returned in 1983 as a biostatistician, eventually leading the Epidemiology and Biostatistics Division of SAMRC's Centre for Epidemiological Research in Southern Africa in 1994. In 2000, she founded the SAMRC Burden of Disease Research Unit, which monitors health status and determinants in South Africa. She served as its director until her retirement in 2019.

Her dedication to training the next generation of epidemiologists and public health experts is evident through her supervision of numerous Master's dissertations and PhD theses; and her informal mentoring of colleagues. She was vital in coordinating and leading the South African National Burden of Disease studies in 2000, 2006, and 2016, providing critical data to understand the country's epidemiological transition and inform public health interventions.

Dr Bradshaw has actively contributed to numerous task teams and expert advisory groups. She has held honorary professorship in UCT's School of Public Health and Family Medicine since 2015. She also helped establish a World Health Organization Family of International Classification (WHO-FIC) collaborating centre at SAMRC. She served on the Health Metrics Network Technical Advisory Group.

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Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Elijah Moholola

Spokesperson
Communication and Marketing Department
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch
Tel: 021 650 5674
Cell: 083 981 7770
Email: elijah.moholola@uct.ac.za
Website: www.uct.ac.za