



**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](http://www.uct.ac.za)

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## **UCT breaks new ground with first SA sign language-accessible website in higher education**



Sign language interpreter Michelle de Bruyn doing the interpreting as Professor Salome Maswime speaks during a recent event. Photo: Supplied

In a historic first for South African higher education, the University of Cape Town (UCT) has launched a pilot project to make its National Benchmark Test (NBT) website accessible in South African Sign Language (SASL). The project is led by UCT's SASL interpreter Michelle de Bruyn. It marks a major milestone for inclusion in higher education and aligns with the university's [Vision 2030](#) commitment to transformation.

De Bruyn joined UCT's Disability Service in the [Office for Inclusivity and Change \(OIC\)](#) in 2023. Born to Deaf parents, she describes interpreting as her calling. "The first time I saw a sign language interpreter was at a meeting my dad dragged me to," she recalled. "I was blown away. I knew then that this was something I wanted to do."

Now, she's leading a transformation initiative, setting new benchmarks for accessibility at universities. The idea started with a basic observation. "I recognised that while there was plenty of written information on the NBT website, there was almost nothing accessible to Deaf users who use SASL – a language that, importantly, has no written form."

De Bruyn approached the [Centre for Educational Assessments \(CEA\)](#), which manages the NBTs, with a proposal to translate essential content into SASL. The timing was right as the website upgrade was already underway. She worked with colleagues across UCT, including the [Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching's](#) One Button Studio team, to produce the videos.

"We first identified standard introductory information that wouldn't change for at least three to five years. Then I began interpreting those pages, recorded the content, checked it for accuracy, and worked with One Button Studio to film and produce the final product. All without any cost to the university, thanks to their willingness to support this pilot," she said.

De Bruyn and CEA administrator Lynia Norman devised a workaround when delays affected the website upgrade: upload the SASL videos to the NBTs' YouTube channel and link them directly on the site. This simple solution now gives Deaf users direct access to admissions content in their primary language.

"This is the first time a tertiary institution in South Africa has made a website fully accessible in SASL," De Bruyn noted. "It's a massive milestone, and we hope to flagship this approach across UCT and eventually the sector."

The project also led to another first: a Deaf prospective student recently completed the NBT using the support of a SASL interpreter, a national first in benchmark testing.

In partnership with UCT Libraries, De Bruyn and the Disability Service have also created SASL-interpreted informational videos about the NBT process. One such video is a tour of the Oppenheimer Library, available in SASL, English, isiXhosa and Afrikaans, making it the first of its kind in the country.

Looking ahead, De Bruyn and her team are working to make the complete OIC website accessible in SASL by year-end. The admissions website will follow. "We're making strides. We don't want SASL inclusion to be the exception. We want it to become the norm."

For De Bruyn, inclusion is not just about digital access; it's about shifting institutional culture. In collaboration with the Cape Town Deaf Community, UCT has begun SASL training for frontline staff in libraries, residences, traffic services and visitor centres, equipping staff with basic communication tools and greater awareness of Deaf culture.

"This is a holistic effort," she said. "We're identifying gaps and working to build a more inclusive, Deaf-friendly UCT – one department at a time."

The work reflects Vision 2030's focus on creating a transformed and inclusive institution. By making digital content available in SASL, UCT is taking a meaningful step towards a more accessible future.

“Ultimately,” said De Bruyn, “I would love for every UCT website to be accessible in SASL. This isn’t just about meeting a legal requirement. It’s about creating a university where everyone belongs.”

*Story by Myolisi Gophe, UCT News.*

**Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department**

**Velisile Bukula**

Head: Media Liaison  
Communication and Marketing Department  
University of Cape Town  
Rondebosch  
Tel: 021 650 2149  
Cell: 071 642 3495  
Email: [velisile.bukulai@uct.ac.za](mailto:velisile.bukulai@uct.ac.za)  
Website: [www.uct.ac.za](http://www.uct.ac.za)