

Stakeholders must take ownership of UCT, says Vice Chancellor

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New UCT Vice-Chancellor Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng urged the community of Philippi to work with the university to heal the divisions of the past and move forward at a special event to round off Heritage Month at the GSB Solution Space in Philippi.

University of Cape Town (UCT) Vice-Chancellor Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng has encouraged stakeholders to “take ownership” of the institution as it undergoes transformation to become more inclusive.

“The complaint that UCT belongs to white people doesn’t hold anymore. Whoever tells us it’s not ours we will say to them ‘it’s ours... look at how we treat it’. My hope is that we work together so that the community feels the university is theirs,” Phakeng said during a keynote address to celebrate Heritage Day at the UCT Graduate School of Business (GSB) Solution Space in Philippi at the weekend. The event was attended by community leaders and entrepreneurs based in and around Philippi.

Phakeng said the history of UCT was complicated and to a large extent compromised. For the institution to become more inclusive, she said, “we have to own up to our complex past.”

“We have to start telling the truth about the parts of the past that we are not so proud of... We need to speak openly about the past and ask for forgiveness...we cannot move forward as an institution until we look at the past. We need to recognise that our past is problematic. This process involves redressing the key symbols of our heritage in order to acknowledge why we are where we are today,” the Vice Chancellor said.

She said the presence of the university in Philippi, a township on the outskirts of Cape Town, signalled a new approach and was part of the drive by the institution to be more present in communities.

“While UCT has for many years, through initiatives like Shawco and SaVi (Safety and Violence Initiative) worked in the communities of Cape Town – this is the first time in its 180-year existence that it has set up a permanent base in a Cape Town community,” she said.

GSB-Philippi is a campus-like space that offers students, alumni, clients and local entrepreneurs in the community a place to meet and engage. It also acts as a business incubator and is helping local business ventures that are making a positive impact in the community to flourish.

“Business incubation and support is a key initiative of this site and it speaks to the value of skills development in context, in community, in everyday life,” said Professor Phakeng.

Professor Phakeng also spoke about aspects of UCT’s compromised past, including how black academics such as Professor Archie Mafeje and Stella Petersen, were side-lined. Professor Mafeje was appointed a senior lecturer in social anthropology in 1968, which was unanimously approved by the UCT Council, only to have the offer withdrawn after pressure from the then Apartheid government.

Dr Stella Petersen, the first woman of colour to earn a master’s degree in botany from UCT in 1947, faced discrimination and racism at UCT when her white classmates would not sit next to her during lectures.

“But prejudice and financial hardship did not deter her. She strove for excellence, writing a ground-breaking Master’s thesis

analysing the peculiar structure of an indigenous Oxalis species,” said Phakeng.

In 1949, Dr Petersen she was awarded the first South African International Foundation Research Fellowship to study at Syracuse University in New York, where she graduated with a Master’s of Science in Education degree. She then returned to South Africa, where she embarked on a long and dedicated career as a high school teacher. She is best remembered as the biology teacher at Livingstone High School where she taught for 38 years.

“After her retirement in 1999, she continued to have an active role in education through her participation in the Environmental Centre at the Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens – introducing thousands of pupils, many from the Cape Flats, to the wonders of botany. In recognition of her lifetime dedicated to education, she received an Honorary Doctorate in Education from UCT in 2011, at the age of 88,” said Phakeng.

Interestingly, Dr Petersen’s legacy is tied to the Philippi community in a very tangible way: Her mentor at UCT was Edith Stephens, the visionary botanist whose concern for the critically endangered Cape quillwort plant (*Isoetes capensis*) led her to buy the Philippi property where it was found - today this is conserved as the Edith Stephens Wetland Park.

Professor Phakeng, who was the first black woman in South Africa to obtain a PhD in maths education, also offered young people and entrepreneur’s advice on how to achieve success.

“Young people need to know that you do not achieve anything if you do not work hard. Hard work is not so sexy but the results are sexy. Success looks easy when you do not know where it comes from. You do the hard work and the smart work comes afterwards. If you haven’t done the hard work the smart work will not come,” she said.

In welcoming Professor Phakeng to the GSB Solution Space in Philippi, Interim Director of Bertha Centre for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship at the UCT GSB Bulelwa Makalima–Ngewana said culture remained important in any context whether at home or in the working environment.

“Heritage month provides us with an opportunity to appreciate our cultures and embrace others...this will help us heal the divisions of the past,” she said.

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