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6 December 2023

UCT among nine partners in new collaborative to strengthen primary healthcare in Africa

The University of Cape Town (UCT) is one of the nine partners in the new Africa Higher Education Health Collaborative (AHEHC), a pioneering initiative aimed at strengthening primary healthcare across Africa and empowering the continent's health sector through transformative education and innovation.

Since its inception in 2012, the [Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program](#) has been a beacon of hope for young people across Africa, providing unparalleled opportunities to pursue their dreams, uplift their families, and make lasting contributions to their communities. The Mastercard Foundation is proud to build upon the scholars program's legacy of transformative impact with the launch of the AHEHC, a groundbreaking 10-year initiative to revolutionise primary healthcare across the continent.

Africa, home to 16% of the world's population, currently faces a significant shortage of skilled health workers, with only 2.2 skilled health workers per 1 000 population – one-third of the global average. By 2030, there will be a shortage of about six million skilled health workers. This, combined with the fact that the health sector in Africa contributes only about 5% to the continent's GDP (compared to the global average of 10%), underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions to unlock the sector's untapped economic potential.

UCT Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research and Internationalisation, Professor Sue Harrison, said the university was proud to be part of the collaborative, which aligns with its endeavour to contribute towards finding African solutions to Africa's challenges.

"The AHEHC brings together collaborating partners from universities in Africa and beyond our continent, all of them working together to address some of the primary healthcare challenges we face. At UCT, we endeavour to make meaningful, transformative and sustainable contribution towards addressing primary health care and similar challenges in a way that delivers societal impact, changes lives and delivers new knowledge centred on our

context – all simultaneously. This collaboration is another opportunity for us to make such contribution,” said Harrison.

Associate Professor Tracey Naledi, the Deputy Dean of Social Account and Health Systems in the Faculty of Health Sciences (FHS), highlighted the importance of this collaboration.

“As the Faculty of Health Sciences, we are so pleased to be part of this health collaborative that we anticipate will be a massive catalyst for our social accountability strategy aiming to address the priority health concerns of the communities we serve. We are excited to partner with other faculties at UCT (Humanities and the Graduate School of Business); the Western Cape government, civil society and communities in Klipfontein, Saldanha and George/Knysna/Bitou sub districts.”

Explaining the focus of the programme, the Head of Department: Primary Health Care Directorate in the FHS Professor Steve Reid said: “We have named the project ‘Healthy Futures South Africa’ because our focus is on youth, health and employment, and it will be housed in the new Department of Family, Community and Emergency Care. This collaboration and funding is a fantastic opportunity to make a sustainable difference in the health of young people through training and education, at the same time strengthening primary health care systems in the three learning sites.”

Peter Materu, the chief programme officer at the Mastercard Foundation, explained that the AHEHC sought to leverage universities to address the critical challenges facing the health sector in Africa and in the process create work opportunities for young people. “By strengthening primary healthcare, enhancing workforce development, and promoting entrepreneurship and innovation, we aim to create a sustainable impact on population health and unlock significant economic growth across the continent,” he said.

The AHEHC is anchored in the principles of partnership, emphasising respect, inclusivity and collaboration among all stakeholders. By co-creating solutions and embracing diverse knowledge systems, the collaborative aims to foster a shared vision and culture of collective impact. Furthermore, the collaborative aims to develop a dynamic, sustainable, and robust network of leading African universities, alumni, government agencies, start-ups, and not-for-profit and private sector partners to create dignified and fulfilling work across the health sector.

The AHEHC focuses on three pillars of work to achieve its objectives:

- **Health employment:** Enhancing institutional capacity across Africa to train skilled workers for primary healthcare, meeting the growing demand, and contributing to the extension of systems that employ and retain this primary care workforce.
- **Health entrepreneurship:** Optimising entrepreneurial ecosystems within African universities, AHEHC will support the launch and scaling of health start-ups, creating jobs and driving innovative solutions to address healthcare challenges.

- **Health ecosystems:** Collaborating to engage with broader health sector actors and enabling African students to acquire advanced skills across diverse disciplines crucial for sustainable and transformative growth in the health sector.

The AHEHC recognises that unlocking the full potential of the health sector requires addressing barriers that hinder progress, particularly in primary healthcare. These barriers include poor human resources capacity and access to health services, weak incentive structures, unaffordability of care, poor access to health services and fragmented health systems.

The collaborative envisions a transformative impact on primary healthcare across Africa through strategic interventions. This includes equipping 30 000 skilled health practitioners and community health workers to deliver innovative and high-quality primary healthcare services, fostering overall community wellness, and contributing to economic transformation.

Additionally, the collaborative aims to nurture over 10 000 innovative and sustainable health ventures, creating a vibrant network of health entrepreneurial ecosystems. Working collaboratively with a shared vision, AHEHC seeks to build a robust network of partners, sharing best practices and lessons to create healthier and more prosperous communities.

The partners in this collaborative include Amref International University, Addis Ababa University, African Leadership University, African Institute for Mathematical Sciences, Ashesi University, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science & Technology, Moi University, UCT, and University of Toronto.

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