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UCT's Professor Chibale elected to prestigious US National Academy of Sciences



Professor Kelly Chibale

Photo: Je'nine May

Professor Kelly Chibale of the University of Cape Town (UCT), one of Africa's foremost scientists in drug discovery, has been elected an international member of the United States National Academy of Sciences (NAS) – one of the highest honours awarded to scientists globally.

The Neville Isdell Chair in African-centric Drug Discovery & Development at UCT, Professor Chibale joins a distinguished group of 30 international members elected this year, alongside 120 US-based scientists. The NAS acknowledged his "distinguished and continuing

achievements in original research,” particularly his pioneering work in developing treatments for diseases that disproportionately affect African populations.

The NAS announced that the total number of international members has reached 556. These members, though non-voting, are globally recognised leaders in their scientific disciplines. The NAS, established in 1863 under a congressional charter signed by President Abraham Lincoln, serves as a vital advisor to the US federal government on matters of science, engineering and health. Its membership is one of the highest marks of excellence in the scientific community.

“I was working a night shift on 29 April when an email from a US colleague popped up at 20:15, replying to a message I sent back in 2021,” Chibale recalled. “The message simply read, ‘I just wanted to say congratulations on being elected to the US National Academy of Sciences!!’ I thought he’d made a mistake and was referring to my election to the National Academy of Medicine last October. But then the congratulatory emails started pouring in. That’s when I realised it was real breaking news. Apparently, my US colleagues had learnt about my election that afternoon, US time.”

This recognition closely follows Professor Chibale’s 2024 election into the US National Academy of Medicine, making him one of the very few African scientists to be honoured by both prestigious institutions.

A scientific trailblazer, Chibale is the founder and director of the [Drug Discovery and Development Centre \(H3D\)](#), Africa’s first integrated drug discovery centre, based at UCT’s [Department of Chemistry](#) and the [Institute of Infectious Disease and Molecular Medicine](#). Under his leadership, H3D has delivered several breakthrough innovations, including the first small-molecule clinical candidate for any disease researched on African soil by an African-led team.

“This recognition is a great honour and a responsibility,” he said. “I intend to contribute meaningfully to the academy’s mission, advising on science matters and helping shape science policy. I also want to bring prominence to scientific entrepreneurship. Science should not only satisfy curiosity but also drive development and create jobs.”

Reflecting on his inspiring journey, Chibale added: “I’ve always believed in making the most of every opportunity, staying consistent, and using my God-given talents. Challenges are inevitable, but I see them as opportunities.”

A passionate advocate for youth and innovation, Chibale emphasised the importance of basic science research and the nurturing of future scientific entrepreneurs: “Young scientists need to be incentivised to think entrepreneurially. Supporting young basic scientists better, ensuring their career progression and supporting scientific entrepreneurship can help move the African continent forward. In a world that is increasingly polarised, science is a unifier. It knows no boundaries and belongs to all of humanity.”

Story by: Myolisi Gophe, UCT News.

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