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UCT academic's stint as Health Systems Trust CEO bridges gap between theory and practice



Prof. Salome Maswime and Dr Shenaaz El-Halabi Photo: Supplied

Professor Salome Maswime, head of the [Global Surgery Division](#) at the University of Cape Town (UCT), was seconded for three months as the Chief Executive Officer of the Health Systems Trust (HST). The HST is a non-governmental organisation formed at the dawn of South Africa's democracy to improve access to healthcare and health outcomes in South

Africa and beyond. The secondment has been beneficial to HST, Maswime and UCT; and had a positive impact on Soth Africa and the continent at large.

"The experience has served as a practical example of how academics can provide leadership to their disciplines and sectors at a time when their expertise is required; and also a practical example of bridging the gap between theory and practice, and fulfilling our social responsibility," said Maswime, who is also the director of UCT's World Health Organization Collaborating Centre for Integrated Clinical Care.

Maswime is not new to the HST. She joined the HST board in 2020 and became the chair of the Research and Implementation Science sub-committee, and in 2023 became the board chair until March this year. She was then seconded as CEO of the organisation for a three-month's stint in May following the retirement of the previous incumbent Dr Themba Moeti.

"With the knowledge and expertise I had gained over the five years having worked very closely with the CEO, it made a lot of sense to be seconded for this role, as I had quite a good understanding of some of the executive functions and the strategic vision of the organisation," she explained.

UCT Department of Surgery not affected by arrangement

This is the longest break Maswime has taken from UCT since she joined the Department of Surgery in 2019. "We were all quite anxious about the impact of taking special leave to do a secondment.

"Dr Simon Le Roux is the acting head of the Global Surgery Division currently, and has really done a remarkable job, running the division and ensuring that all of our academic programmes and research continue to run well in my absence."

"Our team far exceeded my expectations and has shown great leadership during this time. I have continued to supervise my postgraduate students during this time and have tried to ensure that the students are not affected by my special leave. Most importantly, what I have gained from this experience is the front-line experience of leading public health programmes, and leading a public health organisation," she said.

Valuable practical experience

For six years, Maswime has been teaching about health systems strengthening in the context of Global Surgery, with programmes in the Surgery Department, Public Health Department and the Graduate School of Business. "I have developed and taught about frameworks which I did not have an opportunity to test as an academic, and the experience of sharing some of my own frameworks with HST on improving health systems was a rare opportunity that one seldom gets outside of the classroom," she said.

Maswime said the new CEO of the HST has already been appointed and will commence her term in this role on 1 August 2025. "I will support the handover and transition until 31 August 2025 and will return to my position as head of the Global Surgery Division on 1 September".

She said as she comes to the end of her role as the interim CEO, she is pleased with the work that she has been able to do, and grateful for the new relationships that she has formed at the HST, which she believes will last for many years.

Maswime said it is important that public health students and academics should get the experience of working in NGO's, multi-lateral organisations, and in departments of health, even if it is to gain experience and knowledge.

Stepping in at a time a time of geopolitical uncertainty

Maswime took her interim position at the HST at a very volatile time.

"With the loss of global health funding this year, not only from the US, but also from other countries, it has been a challenging time for public health organisations, with some organisations and programmes coming to an end, and many health workers getting retrenched. I certainly accepted the role to do this secondment at a time where it wasn't attractive at all to take an executive leadership job with a public health organisation, and I hope that even in this short time I was able to bring a sense of stability, and confidence in African NGOs who are supporting governments in building health systems we can trust," she said.

In her three-months stint, Maswime focused mainly on strategy, business development and communications. "Raising the profile of the HST for South Africans and beyond was one of my priorities. I spent a lot of time and efforts on establishing new and strategic stakeholders across sectors," she said.

"Bridging the gap between public health theory and practice, was a major priority for me, and we have engaged with at least four universities. Our branding, visibility and positioning have been important targets for us. A big highlight in this time has been new grants that have been awarded to the HST on climate health, HIV/TB programmes expanding our reach to more districts and provinces, and the launch of our South African Health Review on mental health, with a policy dialogue on cancer care next month," said Maswime.

She thanked the dean of [Faculty of Health Sciences](#) Professor Lionel Green-Thompson and the head of the Surgery Department Professor Lydia Cairncross for granting her the opportunity to do this secondment.

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