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UCT places wellbeing at the core of its mission with new centre



Mr Sean Abrahams
and Associate Professor Anita
Campbell co-chaired the first
Wellbeing and Flourishing
Conference.

Photo: Lerato
Maduna.

The University of Cape Town (UCT) has reinforced its commitment to holistic higher education by launching the Centre for Wellbeing and Flourishing. The centre was unveiled during the university's first Wellbeing and Flourishing Conference recently hosted at the [UCT Graduate School of Business](#).

The gathering brought together academics, students, practitioners and partners from South Africa and abroad to explore how wellbeing could be embedded into every aspect of university life.

Professor Elelwani Ramugondo, Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Transformation, Student Affairs and Social Responsiveness, described the event as a turning point for UCT.

“I know this is a baby that we are giving birth to here at UCT with a lot of excitement and anticipation. We have grown to appreciate that student success, staff wellbeing and flourishing are everybody’s business,” she said.

She highlighted that flourishing must be understood as more than wellness. It is about belonging, dignity, meaning and achievement in contexts where inequality and social breakdown often undermine these values. “Our villages are in distress for many reasons, including failures in service delivery, and our young people grow up in places where they do not feel their dignity is affirmed. As a university, we cannot ignore those realities.”

Professor Ramugondo added that resilience and responsibility were central to this vision. “Sometimes success comes from failure, when students recognise when they need help and reach out to their peers and staff. At UCT, student success is non-negotiable, but it is inseparable from staff flourishing, too. When staff feel that they belong at UCT, supported by an institutional culture that sees their humanity, then UCT succeeds.”

Origins of the initiative

The idea for the centre developed within UCT’s Residence Academic Development Committee, which has promoted living-and-learning programmes in residences for many years.

Sean Abrahams, learning and innovation specialist in the [Department of Student Affairs](#) and the strategic lead for the new centre, said the project grew out of discussions held last year.

“At the time, Professor Ramugondo challenged us to think strategically about wellbeing,” he recalled. “There were already pockets of practice across the university – research on sleep, interventions for disability inclusion, programmes for resilience – but they were happening in silos. The question was: how do we connect these efforts, learn from one another, and take UCT’s [Vision 2030](#) goal of unleashing human potential seriously? The answer was a dedicated centre and a conference to bring everyone together.”

Abrahams, whose doctoral research examines grit and perseverance in higher education, said the conference showed the appetite for moving beyond isolated projects towards systemic change.

The event drew strong participation. Over 20 presentations were delivered, spanning topics such as sleep, resilience and disability inclusion. Attendees included undergraduate students, doctoral candidates, researchers and practitioners from other institutions such as Stellenbosch University and the University of the Western Cape, as well as international alumni.

“It was intergenerational, multidisciplinary and global,” said Abrahams. “We thought it would just be a teaching-and-learning space, but it turned into something much bigger. People

flew in, and for many, it was the first time they had permission to bring their work on flourishing into an academic forum. That, in itself, was powerful.”

Participants valued engaging in what Abrahams described as “radical listening”. “We listened deeply to each other’s perspectives on wellbeing and flourishing,” he explained. “But one day was not enough. People wanted more time and more engagement. Clearly, this will need to grow into an annual conference with workshops and parallel sessions.”

Growing impact

The event's success has already generated interest from other universities in South Africa, with some exploring ways to adopt the approach. UCT has also been invited to help co-host the African Positive Psychology Conference, which will showcase African perspectives on wellbeing to global audiences.

“This is first-mover advantage for UCT,” Abrahams said. “We’ve set the tone that flourishing is not a luxury or an add-on, it is central to what it means to be a university on this continent.”

The centre plans to establish networks and fellowship opportunities connecting students, staff and external partners. These efforts will build a sustainable platform for research, collaboration and practice.

For Abrahams, the vision is rooted in shared responsibility. “Trauma, healing, redress and transformation are fundamental ingredients,” he said. “This is not just about students, but about the entire community. We need to think about what it means to flourish together – to move towards interpersonal flourishing,” he concluded.

Story by Myolisi Gophe, UCT News.

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