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UCT academic recognised globally for anti-corruption scholarship and ethics education



Dr Marianne Camerer has won the 2025 International Anti-Corruption Excellence Award. Photo: Supplied

Dr Marianne Camerer, a senior lecturer at the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance (NMSPG), has been recognised internationally for her sustained contribution to anti-corruption research and public ethics education. Dr Camerer recently received the International Anti-Corruption Excellence (ACE) Awards in Doha, Qatar, marking a significant global endorsement of her nearly three decades of work on corruption, accountability and ethical leadership.

Camerer received the award in the Academic Research and Education category, jointly with Professor Nikos Passas from Northeastern University in the United States. The ACE Awards are held under the patronage of the Amir of Qatar, His Highness Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani, and are organised by the Rule of Law and Anti-Corruption Centre in partnership with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

The awards recognise individuals and institutions making exceptional contributions to combating corruption at local, regional and international levels.

"It felt incredibly humbling," Camerer said. "You realise that you are part of a global community of people who refuse to give up – even in contexts where corruption feels overwhelming."

Camerer's academic career has been shaped by a long-standing interest in public power: how it is exercised, how it is abused and how it can be restrained. "Corruption is often defined as an abuse of entrusted power for personal gain," she explained. "It is inherently an ethical issue, and it has profound consequences for development outcomes and state legitimacy."

She holds an MA in Political Philosophy from Stellenbosch University and an MPhil in Comparative Social Research from the University of Oxford. Her professional career began as an applied policy researcher at the Institute for Security Studies during the early years of South Africa's democracy, where she worked on crime, policing and justice policy. With a focus on white-collar crime and corruption, she completed her PhD in 2009 at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) under the supervision of Professor Tom Lodge. Her doctoral research, titled *Corruption and reform in democratic South Africa*, examined the Arms Deal as a case study.

Before joining UCT in 2014, Camerer co-founded Global Integrity, an international non-governmental organisation that worked with local academics and investigative journalists to assess whether countries' anti-corruption systems functioned in practice.

"Our research asked uncomfortable questions," she said. "Not just whether laws exist on paper, but whether they are actually effective in addressing abuses of power and are accessible to citizens."

Teaching ethics to those who govern

At UCT, Camerer found a strong alignment between her work and the mission of the NMSPG, formerly the Graduate School of Development Policy and Practice. Referencing the thinking of the late Emeritus Professor Francis Wilson, she argues that the quality of leadership and decision-making directly shapes development outcomes.

She currently co-convenes the school's professional master's programme in development, policy and practice. The mid-career programme attracts public servants, policymakers and practitioners working in demanding governance and development environments. Camerer has taught ethical leadership and public accountability at UCT for almost a decade.

"My focus is education," she said. "These are leaders working under immense pressure. If we can give them conceptual tools and ethical frameworks, it helps them navigate often very difficult ethical dilemmas."

Rethinking corruption, accountability and trust

In January 2026, Camerer co-hosted a two-day Public Ethics Network South Africa workshop at UCT, in partnership with the Wits School of Governance. The workshop brought together academics, practitioners, whistleblowers and civil society actors from South Africa and abroad.

The discussions examined how language shapes public understanding, particularly in the aftermath of the Zondo Commission, and explored concepts such as accountability, whistleblowing and state capture. Participants included representatives from universities, the Ethics Institute, and key whistleblowers during the state capture period, including Cynthia Stimpel and Themba Maseko.

"We often end up focusing on scandal and blame," Camerer said. "But if we focus on building institutions, leadership integrity and public ethics, we open up spaces for intervention and reform."

A core strand of Camerer's research focuses on public trust, which she identifies as central to democratic stability. "If people believe that corruption goes unpunished, that impunity is normal, then trust collapses – and democracy is under threat," she said.

Recent data highlights the scale of the challenge. The National Anti-Corruption Advisory Council's 2025 report, drawing on the Human Sciences Research Council's South African Social Attitudes Survey, found that only 22% of South Africans trust the police. This figure was recorded before the establishment of the Madlanga Commission of Inquiry into Criminality, Political Interference and Corruption in the Criminal Justice System. Despite these trends, Camerer resists despair. During a recent sabbatical at Oxford, she engaged with research that reframed hope as action rather than optimism.

"Hope is a disciplined moral commitment to resist despair and work for a better future," she said. "We can't give up. We have to channel our energy into building something better." She also points to growing awareness of conflicts of interest in the public sector and the potential role of new technologies, including artificial intelligence, in strengthening accountability systems. "If we engage these technologies with our eyes open, they can potentially improve efficiency and detection," she said, citing the use of data analytics to combat illicit financial flows.

Recognition beyond borders

For Camerer, the ACE award is both a personal milestone and a reminder that South Africa's governance challenges are shared globally. "We often think we are exceptional," she said. "But corruption exists everywhere. What matters is how societies respond."

Standing alongside awardees from Afghanistan, Nigeria, South Africa, Zimbabwe, The Gambia, Greece, Slovenia and Spain reinforced the importance of international solidarity. "You see people working behind the scenes, often at great personal cost, and you realise you're not alone."

In partnership with UNODC, the ACE Awards promote mentorship and youth engagement, which Camerer sees as essential for long-term reform. "We need to support the next generation of researchers, activists and public servants who are committed to integrity."

As she prepares to welcome a new cohort of master's students, Camerer remains focused on the role of universities in public life. "A key role of universities is to be convening spaces for critical thinking," she said. "We bring people together, we create shared understanding, and we undertake research to support evidence-based reform."

Her work, she emphasises, is grounded in real-world impact. "Research has to matter in the real world. It has to influence policy, practice and leadership choices."

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