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UCT doing its bit to improve poor mathematics and literacy levels at local schools

MSEP 4 – 6 July and 100 UP 11- 13 July 2011

While the rest of the country's learners take a well-deserved winter break from school, the University of Cape Town is set to remain a hub of activity when learners from surrounding communities descend on Upper Campus to attend the Maths and Science Education Project (MSEP) on 4- 6 July and the 100-UP project, on 11 – 13 July.

Organised by UCT's Schools Development Unit (SDU), MSEP is a collaborative project between the Western Cape Education Department and UCT, designed to help develop a model for high-quality mathematics and science learning and teaching. The 100-UP project aims to build the intellectual, social and cultural capital of top-achieving high school learners from disadvantaged backgrounds in Cape Town.

Reports released this week by the Department of Basic Education show that South African learners perform poorly in numeracy and literacy compared to their counterparts in other countries. MSEP and 100 UP provide for a two-pronged approach to find long-term solutions to skills issues affecting both learners and teachers in disadvantaged communities.

Speaking on the importance of these programmes, Dr Jonathan Clark, Director of the SDU, says: "The MSEP programme focuses primarily on teacher capacity-building." He adds: "The underperformance of our education system first manifests itself in the disappointingly low literacy and numeracy levels recorded by learners in primary schooling. In the majority of schools outside of the ex-Model C sector, very few learners achieve meaningful passing grades in key subjects such as mathematics and the physical sciences. Whereas poverty and poor socioeconomic conditions have a huge impact on academic performance, we know that schools can and do make a real difference. We believe then that it's important to focus

efforts on building teachers' content knowledge, pedagogic and classroom management skills. This in turn will lead to sustainable improvements in learners' academic achievement."

100-UP, on the other hand, focuses on the learners themselves; particularly those who are identified as having academic potential. "Unfortunately," says Dr Clark, "there's no way we can reach all those who are deserving of our help; but we believe that we have to start somewhere. To this end, we have chosen in the pilot phase of this project to focus on the 20 secondary schools serving the Khayelitsha community, and have recruited five Grade 10 learners in each of the schools into a three-year programme which will focus on enhancing their academic and life skills in order to better prepare them to compete for places at UCT once they have successfully completed matric at the end of 2013."

To date, MSEP has helped 45 learners from the five schools to enrol at UCT in maths, sciences and health sciences faculties. These are learners who previously would not have considered studying at a place such as UCT. The effectiveness of the programme is also due to the significant amount of school-based teacher and management support provided to staff at the five participating schools over the past three years.

This year, 75 learners will participate in the MSEP holiday camp, while 100 grade 10 learners from all the 20 high schools in Khayelitsha will take part in the 100 UP pilot programme. The five schools participating in the MSEP programme are Spine Road High in Mitchells Plain; Sophumelela High in Philippi; Harry Gwala in Khayelitsha; Thandokhulu High in Mowbray; and Rhodes High in lower Mowbray.

Dr Clark also noted that the school holidays are a busy time for other teacher development programmes run by the SDU. "We have just completed our winter holiday block teaching on a number of the Advanced Certificates in Education (ACEs). More than 250 teachers, many of whom are primary school Foundation and Intermediate Phase teachers, are registered with us here at UCT for these two-year part-time programmes." As Dr Clark noted, "with a delivery model which links teacher learning with classroom support, it is these teacher professional development programmes that lie at the heart of the Unit's work. And it is here where we are confident that we will be able to make a positive impact on numeracy and literacy performance in schools throughout the province."

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