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President Zuma honours UCT wastewater expert

Respected UCT academic Prof Neville Alexander awarded posthumously

Professor George Ekama, a widely published wastewater expert at the University of Cape Town, as well as the late Professor Neville Alexander, renowned linguist, academic and anti-apartheid activist, and two UCT alumni were awarded National Orders, the highest recognition in South Africa, on Saturday, 27 April, in Pretoria.

President Jacob Zuma bestowed the Order of Mapungubwe, in silver, to Professor Ekama of UCT's Faculty of Engineering & the Built Environment for research that is assisting South Africa in finding answers to its water shortage problems. He researches biological systems that clean and treat wastewater and sewage, and regularly teaches courses for local authorities and industry, both nationally and internationally, on the subject. The research has provided innovative solutions to enhancing and improving wastewater treatment.

Professor Ekama and retired Professor Alexander were honoured together with 36 other South Africans and foreign nationals for their contributions towards the advancement of democracy. These include veteran South African politician Colin Eglin (Order of the Baobab (Silver)) and internationally acclaimed opera singer Pretty Yende (Order of Ikhamanga (Silver)), both UCT alumni. Professor Alexander was awarded the Order of Luthuli (Silver) for "his courageous rejection of injustice and his excellent contribution to the struggle against apartheid in striving to ensure equality for all South Africans".

Professor Alexander, who died last year following a battle with cancer, has a rich and lengthy association with UCT as student, lecturer and professor. In addition to his scholarly achievements, he established the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA) at UCT in 1992.

Professor Ekama says he is honoured to have been nominated for the Order of Mapungubwe, awarded to South African citizens for achievements that have had an international impact and served the interests of the country. He expresses his appreciation for the government's recognition of "such an unglamorous, yet vital area of research". As a civil engineer he is interested in enhancing the country's status in the field of wastewater treatment, and lives by a simple research credo: locally inspired, globally relevant.

He has held a National Research Foundation (NRF) A1-rating for more than 10 years, which recognises him as a world leader in this field. He is widely published and has written more than 150 papers on wastewater treatment in top international journals. He is also one of only four South African academics to be listed on www.ISIHighlyCited.com, an international website of the most cited academics in the world.

Describing his area of research as fascinating, Professor Ekama says: "If you are looking for a biological process that is required for treating wastewater, don't give up. There are bacteria out there that can do amazing things. You are bound to find one."

Professor Ekama has remained at the forefront of developments in wastewater treatment since the 1970s, primarily through a strong research group. He supervised 43 Masters and 24 PhD students and won the Water Institute of Southern Africa's (WISA) Umgeni Award twice for the most significant paper on water, as well as the WISA Piet Vosloo Memorial Prize for the development of mathematical models for wastewater treatment plant design and operation.

Professor Ekama was also a major contributor to the International Water Association (IWA) book, *Biological Wastewater Treatment; Principles, modelling and design*, which in three years became IWA Publishing's second-best seller. It serves as the basis of an Internet-based postgraduate course on wastewater treatment, administered by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization – Institute for Water Education.

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