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UCT launches new initiative to recruit, develop and retain academic talent

The University of Cape Town (UCT) has recently launched a new initiative to advance the development of black academics and to ensure the university expands and accelerates the pipeline to transform the professoriate. The Recruitment, Development and Retention programme (RDR) is an umbrella for a number of constituent initiatives that will furnish academic staff with greater clarity in their career paths and provide targeted support to help them to succeed.

The Next Generation Professoriate initiative is the first of the constituent programmes to be launched. Led by Professor Robert Morrell, a senior academic with many years of experience in research development, its primary goal is to increase the number of black South African staff in the professoriate. Thirty-four mid-career academics have been nominated by their respective faculties to participate in the programme.

A key feature of the programme is the identification of a career path with clearly defined milestones. Cohort members will be supported to achieve these milestones within a collegial culture that features regular, facilitated meetings with fellow cohort members, writing workshops, National Research Foundation rating assistance and lecturing and postgraduate supervision training. The programme will initiate and support a triangular relationship between the cohort member, the head of department and a mentor – a senior academic whose contribution will be elevated and formalised.

In addition to acting as the seedbed for an improved institutional culture, such relationships are intended to assist academics to progress in their careers.

A second cohort of junior academic staff comprises five lecturers who will join UCT in January 2016 as members of nGAP, the New Generation Academics Programme, a project of the Department of Higher Education and Training. They will be located in five different faculties. Each will be given a mentor and dedicated support. The conditions of

their employment include a reduced lecture load that will allow them to concentrate on obtaining higher degrees and developing a body of research work that will launch their professional careers as academics. The university anticipates a second and perhaps third cohort to be funded by the Department of Higher Education and Training in subsequent years.

The RDR will initially focus on these two cohorts, though in time the plan is to roll out the programme to benefit all academics.

Another of the areas of engagement will be the ad hominem promotion process. The intention is, where possible, to increase trust and confidence in the objectivity and fairness of these committees and processes. One element is to make the committees more representative in terms of rank, gender and race. The criteria for promotion will also be spelt out more clearly. The mentoring programmes described above will work to ensure that academics on the promotion ladders have a clear understanding of what they need to do to gain promotion, and that they are given the opportunities to achieve these goals.

As part of the new RDR programme, the existing support programmes for academics, such as the New Academics Practitioner Programme (NAPP), the Emerging Researcher Programme (ERP) and the Programme for the Enhancement of Research Capacity (PERC), are being revisited to see where improvements could be made.

The two new initiatives, the Next Generation Professoriate and nGAP, mark an important step in UCT's reinvigorated programme to address the paucity of senior black academics.

END

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