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UCT student entrepreneurs top in South Africa

The University of Cape Town (UCT) has been named the winning university in the 2019 Entrepreneurship Intervarsity, thanks largely to three innovative students whose out-of-the-box business ideas bowled the judges over at the competition finals this past week.

Mvelo Hlope and Denislav Marinov emerged top of their respective categories while Tamir Shklaz received a runner-up award in his category. The judges also named Hlope as the overall winner of the competition.

UCT Vice-Chancellor Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng, who attended the event, congratulated the students on a "great job" and on making the campus community proud.

A total of 26 universities and 1 155 "studentpreneurs" from across the country participated in the regional rounds of the competition ahead of the final round which took place in Johannesburg. Finalists were given just three minutes to pitch their business idea to a panel of judges.

The competition aims to identify the top student entrepreneurs at each of South Africa's public universities, to recognise and showcase their businesses, and to attract investment into their enterprises. It also provides a chance for aspiring entrepreneurs whose businesses are still in the ideas stage to pitch their concept.

Marinov topped the existing business: tech category with his business, DMV Designs, which proposes using an integrated, problem-solving approach to teaching by using 3D educational printers.

Hlope's initiative, Zaio, topped the existing business: social impact category. Zaio is a gamified platform that offers open-access learning journeys to students who wish to become upper-end software developers.

Shklaz received the runner-up prize in the existing business: tech category, for his digital one-stop shop, Quillo, that allows students to buy and sell old textbooks online at an affordable price.

Nadia Waggie, head of operations for UCT's Careers Service and the university's Entrepreneurship Intervarsity liaison officer, said the runner-up award was decided on the night of the finals "because the judges simply could not ignore how brilliant Shklaz's pitch was".

"Careers Service is proud to be able to assist the studentrepreneurs on their entrepreneurial journey. We look forward to continuing this journey with our students," she said.

The intervarsity is an initiative of the Entrepreneurship Development in Higher Education (EDHE) programme in the Department of Higher Education and Training and Universities South Africa and is supported by the Allan Gray Orbis Foundation, University Capacity Development Programme and SAB Foundation. The Western Cape regional rounds were hosted by UCT Careers Service.

Linda Dhladhla, youth and communication liaison for EDHE, described Marinov and Hlope as an inspiration to aspiring entrepreneurs in the UCT community, and South Africa as a whole. "They've put hours of hard work into preparing for this competition and an equal amount of hard work into establishing their business. We are very proud of them for making it this far," he said.

Their category prize is R10 000 each, and the funds will be pumped back into their businesses. Because Hlope also won the overall title, he received an additional R50 000.

"We're hoping that this win will provide them with the stepping stone they need to grow and develop their businesses. And most important, we really want them to continue inspiring other students to pursue entrepreneurship," said Dhladhla.

Winners Mvelo Hlophe (left), and Denislav Marinov.

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Photos: Supplied

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Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Thami Nkwanyane
Media Liaison and Monitoring Officer
Communication and Marketing Department
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch
Tel: (021) 650 5672
Cell: (072) 563 9500
Email: thami.nkwanyane@uct.ac.za
Website: www.uct.ac.za