



14 October 2020

UCT executive provides update on response to COVID-19

The University of Cape Town (UCT):

- has had an increase in both undergraduate and postgraduate applications,
- will commence the 2021 academic year on 15 March 2021,
- will propose to Senate for its approval that the first semester be completed online, and
- has, despite the complexities posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, responded with extraordinary commitment to support each other and complete the academic year.

These were some of the updates shared by the UCT executive when Vice-Chancellor Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng hosted an online staff assembly on 13 October 2020. The session was attended by over 2000 staff members from across the university.

It was an important opportunity for the vice-chancellor and her leadership team to engage with staff, recognise the tremendous work done and thank everyone.

Professor Phakeng and other members of the UCT executive provided updates on the university's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly as it relates to alert lockdown level 1 and how this affects the staff and student community at the institution. The executive members included the three Deputy Vice-Chancellors – Associate Professor Lis Lange (Teaching and Learning), Professor Loretta Feris (Transformation and Student Affairs) and Professor Sue Harrison (Research and Internationalisation) – as well as the Chief Operating Officer Dr Reno Morar and the Registrar Royston Pillay.

Professor Phakeng started off by offering words of comfort and encouragement. "COVID-19 is a human tragedy that has hit most people personally, through the loss of family members, friends and colleagues. Behind every statistic is a person whose loss is felt with deep sadness".

She commended staff for their resilience and efforts in continuing the operations of the university. "I am committed to safeguarding and continuing the academic project as tasked

by Council with your support.” Professor Phakeng also noted how UCT’s international ranking continues to rise during this period.

Dr Morar encouraged staff to continue following lockdown alert level 1 regulations. He emphasised that those who are able to work from home should continue doing so, and that we should continue to adhere to health protocols to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Associate Professor Lange shared that the university will be completing the year via remote teaching and it will be proposed to Senate for its approval that the first semester of the 2021 academic year be completed online.

“There is no doubt that the university was able to rise to the occasion in extraordinary ways,” she said. She stressed that providing resources to students cannot make up for their personal circumstances which have a direct effect on the success of online learning. A conducive learning environment is important and thus the university continues to assess the situation and return vulnerable students to campus.

Professor Harrison shared new rules and regulations which have been put in place regarding funding, deliverables, fieldwork and access to labs for those conducting research. She spoke to the extension of deadlines and fee waiver dates for those doing postgraduate research.

“We are working as hard as possible to keep the research going even if there is a second wave and thus it is important for staff and students to follow all new operating procedures. For example, we are working in shifts, but our research is getting done,” she said. She also commented on the great contribution of UCT researchers to COVID-19 research.

Professor Feris indicated how the university has “prioritised students who are vulnerable during lockdown.” There were 3 900 students currently in residences while a further 2 200 were invited back but opted not to return. She commended the online tutoring and mentoring services available to students and a tracking system that has been implemented to analyse this data in order to understand both “equity and access”.

The Registrar, Pillay, spoke about how the “academic programme has continued with huge effort and resilience. Credit must be given to staff and students for their role in this.”

He shared that most examinations and assessments will be conducted online with very few on campus. The exam block will continue until 9 December 2020.

The 2021 academic year at UCT will commence on 15 March, with some postgraduate course starting earlier. Both undergraduate and postgraduate applications for enrolling at UCT in 2021 are already higher than in the same period last year and the university will be hard at work assessing these applications.

Professor Phakeng ended the session by thanking the executive and all staff for the hard work that they have put in. She expressed how everyone needs to support one another for the university to be successful in the work that it does.

[View: Full video recording of the online staff assembly, including the updates shared by members of the UCT executive and the Q&A session.](#)

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