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## **UCT celebrates its female executive leadership**

To celebrate its women leadership, the University of Cape Town (UCT) held a webinar titled, A Women-led UCT. For the first time in its history, UCT's executive team is predominantly led by women, and several women are serving as deans and executive directors.

The webinar provided a platform for some of these women to reflect on their leadership journey, their experiences as women leaders and their vision for the future of the university.

On the panel were Associate Professor Shose Kessi, dean of the Faculty of Humanities; Associate Professor Linda Ronnie, dean of the Faculty of Commerce; Professor Alison Lewis, dean of the Faculty of Engineering & the Built Environment; and Dr Catherine Duggan, director of the UCT Graduate School of Business. The virtual discussion was moderated by Professor Puleg LenkaBula, the vice-rector for Institutional Change, Student Affairs and Community Engagement at the University of the Free State.

"I think women often find it difficult to step forward and don't think they can do things. This idea that you have to be overqualified to be good enough to apply for a position is a particularly female trait," said Professor Lewis, reflecting on a trait that has stood out for her about the reluctance on the part of women to take on leadership roles. She advised young women entering their careers and leadership spaces to "go for it" and step up to the challenge – even if they feel they may not be completely prepared.

Dr Duggan, who obtained her PhD at Stanford University before going on to head up the Harvard Business School (HBS) and found the African Leadership University School of Business in Rwanda, agreed on this point and added that women often find the most success in being themselves. "When I was teaching at the HBS, one of the things I was systematically told early in my career was that I was too energetic, that I was speaking too loudly, that I was taking up too much space in the room – and that I was too opinionated.

"Eventually, one of the things I did was to find people who supported me and to tune out the people who felt I was 'too much'. And it turns out that if you're energetic and opinionated and loud in an MBA classroom, even – maybe especially – at Harvard, the students really like it. So, in the end, that's how I found success, by being myself."

Associate Professor Ronnie said leadership is about values and being authentic. She pointed out that, in her experience, leadership is a service. "Often people think about leadership as

some sort of promotion, but I don't. I think of leadership as a service, and I think when one thinks of it in that way, you give in a certain way," she said.

Expanding on this idea, Associate Professor Kessi added that there is a level of care that must be applied when leading others, an outlook that can only be achieved with major institutional change. "There have often been tensions, with the idea of excellence being contradictory to the idea of care. These are the things that are at the centre of what we need to be challenging in a university like ours that is transforming. We need to think of these values as intrinsically tied together," she noted.

This idea spilled over into the discussion surrounding the inclination of academics and academia to remove emotions from the pedagogy, "separating head from heart". Said Lewis, "I do believe in the necessity for this balance between head and heart, but I think that sometimes there's an assumption that women bring the heart. There's danger in that, as the extrapolation is then that men have got the brains. For me, what is really important is the value of diversity. Having women on boards or in the leadership of an organisation leads to a better bottom line, it leads to better decision-making, and I think it leads to a healthier organisation".

Duggan provided further insight on this: "Research in management studies has shown that having diverse boards makes companies more profitable because it's harder than having a group of people who all think the same. What makes us successful is when we all think differently and are willing to jump in and push one another. Part of the value of diversity is in being confident enough to bring your unique viewpoint, asking those hard questions, making the observation and recognising that even if that pushes people, that's what actually makes us all better and particularly makes us all better as a group."

Duggan said "I think that when we talk about empathetic leadership, we need to keep in mind that our empathy is not always received as people being nice to everybody all the time. Sometimes we have to push one another, and that's a really important part of education at all levels."

Talking about key aspects of leadership that have shaped how they express, teach and research as leaders, the women raised the same four points: Anyone who aims to be a successful leader must allow themselves to be challenged by others, must be true to themselves and their values, seek out and provide mentorship, and keep open lines of communication.

***ENDS***

***Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department***

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