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Professor Phakeng wins inaugural Africa Education Medal

New award, founded by T4 Education and HP, recognises UCT VC for her impact, leadership, and advocacy in the field of African education

University of Cape Town (UCT) Vice-Chancellor Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng has been named the winner of the inaugural [Africa Education Medal](#), launched this year by T4 Education and HP in collaboration with Intel and Microsoft.

Professor Phakeng was chosen from among 10 finalists from across the continent, including former President of Tanzania, H.E. Jakaya Kikwete.

The Africa Education Medal was founded to recognise the work of changemakers who are transforming African education. UNESCO data shows that sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rates of education exclusion in the world. Over one-fifth of children between the ages of six and 11 are out of school, with girls particularly disadvantaged. However, tireless international efforts have seen Africa make great strides in boosting enrolment in the decades leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic. By celebrating the stories of those working every day to expand upon these vital gains, the Africa Education Medal aims to inspire others to follow in their footsteps and bring lasting change in African education.

Phakeng is among the world's leading scholars in mathematics education, having become the first black female South African to achieve a PhD in Mathematics Education in 2002. In the two decades since, she has published more than 80 research papers and five edited volumes that continue to shape mathematics education in classrooms across Africa and far beyond. Her research focuses on language practices in multilingual mathematics classrooms and has proved influential in post-colonial Africa and post-apartheid South Africa in particular.

Her research and community work have won her many prestigious awards, not least the Order of the Baobab (Silver) conferred on her by the President of South Africa in April 2016. She was named the most influential woman academic in Africa by CEO magazine in 2014, and in 2020 she was included in Forbes' inaugural list of the 50 Most Powerful Women in Africa. This year she became the first African to be elected chair of the International Alliance of Research Universities, and is set to succeed Professor Stephen J Toope, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge.

Professor Phakeng has shown exemplary leadership in her field, with her research illuminating how learners and parents are positioned in and by the power of English. Her work explores practices in mathematics learning that harness learners' spoken languages while developing their mathematical English. This innovative work has highlighted those typically disadvantaged by their multilingualism in an English-dominant society and it has embraced the power of languages in learning.

Professor Phakeng said: It is the greatest honour to be recognised for my life's passion. Quality education is the key to Africa's future and I'm so grateful to HP, Intel and Microsoft for this award that I hope will inspire others across our continent to further the cause of African education."

In congratulating Phakeng, VP and Managing Director at HP Africa, Brad Pulford, said: Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng's drive and leadership in transforming education across Africa and beyond stand as a shining example to others all over the continent.

"We at HP can only echo her passion for empowering learners. From a business community perspective, we have a bold goal to enable better learning outcomes for 100 million people by 2025. Only by joining forces between NGOs, government, educators and businesses we can make bold moves towards improving the education environment. A quality education empowers not just individuals, but entire communities. It will skill the next generation to fulfil their full potential in a world being transformed by technology."

Quality education will help African countries grow and prosper, added Vikas Pota, Founder and CEO of T4 Education. "And it will help Africa produce the public leaders of tomorrow who will go on to grapple with the continent's greatest challenges from inequality, to climate change, food insecurity and disease.

"Congratulations to Professor Phakeng, a great example of someone working every day to make that vision a reality. I have no doubt leaders from across Africa will be inspired to follow in her footsteps."

Nominations for the Africa Education Medal opened in April 2022 for individuals working to improve basic and higher education who are either educators, school administrators, civil society leaders, public servants, government officials, political leaders, technologists or innovators.

The winner of the Africa Education Medal was chosen by a [jury](#) comprising prominent individuals based on rigorous [criteria](#) from among 10 finalists:

- H.E. Jakaya Kikwete, former President of Tanzania and Chair of the Board of Directors of the Global Partnership for Education
- Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town, South Africa
- Basuti Bolo, Founder and CEO of GoToSpace, Botswana
- Cyrille Nkontchou, Founder and Chairman of Enko Education, Ivory Coast
- Felix Malombe, Executive Director of STEAM Labs Africa, Kenya
- John Mugo, Executive Director of Zizi Afrique Foundation, Kenya
- Folawe Omikunle, Chief Executive Officer of Teach For Nigeria
- Jide Martin, Founder and CEO of Comic Republic, Nigeria
- Musu Bakoto Sawo, National Coordinator of Think Young Women, Gambia

- Noella Coursaris Musunka, Founder and CEO of the Georges Malaika Foundation, the Democratic Republic of Congo.

CONGRATULATORY MESSAGES FOR PROFESSOR PHAKENG

Alan Winde, Premier of the Western Cape

“The Africa Education Medal recognises the importance of education in transforming a country, helping to lift people out of poverty and inequality. This is what Professor Phakeng stands for: helping those less fortunate to rise above their circumstances and achieve their goals.”

Dr Mamphela Ramphele, former UCT Vice-Chancellor

“Congratulations to my sister Mamokgethi Phakeng. She is a dedicated visionary leader in education. As leader of UCT, she has led courageously in a difficult national context. May she grow from strength to strength and model what transformative feminine leadership looks like.”

Adrian Gore, Founder and Chief Executive of the Discovery Group

“Professor Phakeng is a remarkable individual and incredibly deserving of this recognition, as she exemplifies the principles underpinning the Africa Education Medal: she is an inspirational advocate for quality education on the continent, she has led some of our top tertiary institutions with passion and skill, and she remains committed to uplifting our country’s young people through both her personal and professional efforts.”

Professor Stephen J Toope, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge

“She brings that inspirational leadership and academic rigour to everything she does. And it is for her impact in a variety of fields that she is being justly celebrated today. She is a university leader, a pioneering researcher, and the founder of an NGO — and in each of these roles she shows us, through careful study and thoughtful advocacy, not just that equity is the foundation for excellence, but also how to achieve it. She truly captures the spirit of the Africa Education Medal, and I congratulate her for having this honour bestowed upon her.”

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