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UCT names maiden Rhodes Must Fall Scholarship recipient

In a landmark moment for the University of Cape Town (UCT), the institution has named student activist and Master's candidate, Ayabulela Mhlahlo, as the first recipient of the Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) Scholarship.

Mhlahlo recently accepted her scholarship from Professor Elelwani Ramugondo, UCT's Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC) for Transformation, Student Affairs and Social Responsiveness.

"I am really honoured to be the first recipient of this award," Mhlahlo said.

The RMF Scholarship Fund is a student-led initiative and is supported by UCT. It seeks to ensure that the next generation of activists, theorists and scholars have access to financial support for postgraduate study programmes that contribute richness and diverse voices to the decolonisation of higher education. The scholarship was launched in 2021 on the sixth anniversary of the removal of the Cecil John Rhodes statue from its prominent position on the university's main campus. The RMF campaign and the subsequent removal of the statue sparked months of protest action around the country and gave rise to related movements such as Fees Must Fall (FMF) and End Outsourcing.

Professor Ramugondo, the Chairperson of the RMF Scholarship selection committee, congratulated Mhlahlo on her achievement. She said Mhlahlo had impressed the committee with her abstract application during its rigorous selection process for a scholarship recipient. Mhlahlo ticked all the right boxes, including the committee's four key pillars: Pan Africanism, Black Consciousness, Black Radical Feminism and Intersectionality.

"The significance of this moment is not lost. The significance of this moment lies in who becomes the first recipient of this scholarship. It has to be Ayabulela, who embodies in many ways the four pillars at the centre of what this scholarship aims to promote," she said.

Ramugondo said the power of this scholarship lies in the fact that it is a student-led initiative, and demonstrates the university's shared commitment to developing a pipeline of young academics who can lead the university further into the future. The only challenge, she added, is that UCT's Vice-Chancellor, Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng, remains its only donor. Therefore, she urged UCT staff members who were involved in the RMF movement –

on the periphery and inside – to “put our money where our mouth is” and contribute to the fund.

To show their support, she said several academics, including herself, have pledged a percentage of their salaries to support what Professor Phakeng has started.

Mhlahlo, a scholar in African Literature at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) and current UCT Master’s candidate, told the audience that she is proud and honoured to be the first recipient of the RMF Scholarship. She thanked the committee for considering her worthy of this endowment. More than that, she also thanked RMF activists, who in 2015 called for the fall of the statue. She stressed that their bravery and activism changed the trajectory of the higher education landscape in South Africa.

“When we saw your bravery and how you conceptualised the idea of RMF as primarily decolonial and black consciousness, we sped up FMF movements at Wits. Without what you guys did, without your sacrifices, we wouldn’t have this scholarship or the future that’s coming our way – and the future is ours,” she told RMF activists in attendance.

“RMF and FMF were instrumental because I solidified my commitment to black academia. [I could not participate] in these movements without the support of scholars who believed in what we were doing [at the time] and also without the support of people who [saw] the vision of transforming education. And when we say transforming education, we don’t mean diversity in the faces you see in classroom. But [it’s about] what we teach our students and the world we want to construct in memory of our ancestors.”

[Donate to the RMF Scholarship Fund.](#)

Story by Niémah Davids for UCT News



Ayabulela Mhlahlo (right), is congratulated by DVC for Transformation, Student Affairs and Social Responsiveness Prof Elelwani Ramugondo.
Photo: Lerato Maduna/UCT

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