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Distinguished UCT academic honoured for excellence in teaching



Associate Professor Elena Moore

Photo: Je'nine May

The University of Cape Town (UCT) has recognised Associate Professor Elena Moore, head of department of Sociology, for her outstanding teaching and contribution to the promotion of teaching-and-learning excellence. She is the recipient of UCT's 2021 Distinguished Teacher Award. It is the highest accolade awarded to teaching staff at all levels within the university.

For Moore, a good teacher is someone who creates learning spaces where the end goal is not about getting things right or finding solutions to complex problems – not yet at least. Rather, the end goal is about piquing students' interests, encouraging critical thinking, ongoing learning, engagement and reflection.

Commenting on the significance of the award Moore said: "For me, it is critical to give recognition to teaching in a higher education system that often values research and research outputs over teaching. This award reminds us that teaching is a valued practice, and this recognition comes from students, colleagues and the institution."

She has been teaching since her final PhD year, which is just over 12 years now. She counts her lecturers at Trinity College in Ireland as her inspiration. Several overlapping challenges have shaped her as a teacher over the last decade.

"I don't think we can separate the student protests (2015–2017) and the political acts of decolonisation – the questioning, challenging and overthrowing existing systems of power and knowledge – from the ongoing post-pandemic moment. Upon reflection, the 2015–2017 South African higher education students' movements recentred what I had been experiencing but failed to address."

She started to consider how she was shaping a neo colonial project in her praxis.

"In 2016, I was asked by a third-year black student who I thought I was to be teaching at UCT. I had to take individual action to transform what I taught and how I taught. I needed to ask myself: How come I see things the way that I do; how did I get to occupy this space as a lecturer in this faculty and at this university? In 2018 this re-surfaced as I was asked to take up a research position at the university. And again in 2020, the pandemic threw light on the inequalities inherent in the hierarchisation of the teaching and learning environment."

Students state that it is her dedication to learning, thinking and teaching within a community of practice that supports decolonial praxis, and that has been most impactful in shaping their own scholarship and academic careers.

Describing about what she loves most about students, she said: "I love their curiosity, enthusiasm and inquiring minds. Students at UCT and in South Africa generally are very sharp, have such great ideas and make wonderful, thought-provoking contributions to our discussions. For the most part, most students understand sociological concepts really well and live through the social issues and inequalities we discuss in class."

Story by Niémah Davids, UCT News.

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