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Deborah Roberts gets honorary doctorate for her work on climate change



Dr Deborah Roberts (centre) with UCT Chancellor Dr Precious Moloi-Motsepe and Interim Vice-Chancellor Prof Daya Reddy.
Photo: Lerato Maduna/UCT

World-renowned climate change activist Dr Deborah Roberts has received a University of Cape Town (UCT) honorary doctorate to acknowledge her ongoing work to make the planet a better place.

The South African scientist is the head of the Sustainability and Resilient City Initiatives Unit in the eThekweni Municipality in KwaZulu-Natal and is a leading practitioner working on climate change and urban issues. She accepted her degree of Doctor of Science (*honoris causa*) during the Faculty of Science's evening graduation ceremony on Tuesday, 28 March.

UCT confers honorary doctorates on individuals who have excelled in their respective fields, and while doing so have made a marked difference and contribution to the country, the continent and the world.

Dr Roberts has been at the forefront of climate change action and research in South Africa and abroad for more than two decades. In 2014 she received the African Climate Research Award, and in 2015 she became the first South African scientist to serve as co-chair of Working Group II during the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Working Group II assesses the impact, adaptation and vulnerabilities related to climate change globally.

University Orator, Professor Alison Lewis, said: "IPCC is dominated by university and research scientists with a tendency to stay in the abstraction of their discourse. Roberts is known for bringing these IPCC scientists down to earth, for fostering dialogue between ministers and scientists, and – crucially – for giving the Global South a voice in climate change. Her focus on social justice informs her substantial body of work in an area that is too political for technocrats and too technical for politicians."

Roberts has a list of other impressive achievements. In 2019 she was included in the political inaugural list of the World's 100 Most Influential People in Climate Change Policy; she has served as an advisor for the Global Commission on Adaptation; for United Cities and Local Governments – an umbrella organisation committed to defending the interests of local governments on the world stage; and during the United Nations Secretary-General's 2019 Climate Summit.

In 2022 she received an honorary doctorate from the University of Twente in the Netherlands, and she currently serves as an honorary professor at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in the School of Life Sciences.

To date, Roberts has produced exceptional scholarly work on urban environmental governance and climate change action in cities, and through this work she has made a significant impact through thought leadership and practice. Her research has shaped global conversations on climate change and cities – both for research and practice – and her work over the past two decades has contributed to setting new priorities for urban research globally by powerfully increasing the focus on climate change, especially for cities in the Global South.

She has influenced many urban scholars who work in the field of climate change, resilience, adaptation and governance at UCT's African Centre for Cities, as well as in the rest of the country, the continent and the world.

Roberts is regarded as a global catalyst for change and her values and ideals align closely with UCT's Vision 2030. Her tireless work in the field of climate change is an example of how best to unleash your human potential to create a fair and just society.

- [Watch the awarding of the honorary degree to Roberts.](#)

Story by Niémah Davids, UCT News.

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