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Over 70% of the NSTF's top science matric learners choose UCT as their home

The University of Cape Town (UCT) is home to 72% of the top learners from the National Science and Technology Forum's (NSTF) Brilliants Programme.

UCT's academic Professor Salome Maswine recently addressed an NSTF event attended by all the learners in the programme. Maswine, head of Global Surgery at UCT's Faculty of Health Sciences, addressed the learners as part of the forum's Motivational Talks Programme.

Each year, the NSTF recognises 18 students – two from each of South Africa's provinces – who received top marks in mathematics and physical science in their Grade 12 National Senior Certificate examinations and have gone on to study science, engineering or medicine at university level. In 2023, 13 of the cohort are UCT students.

Addressing the students, Maswine delivered a talk titled "Outliers, living with success", which centred around the challenges that come with being a high achiever. The obstetrician and gynaecologist is well positioned to explore this topic considering her long list of successes, which include being a professor, mother and chairperson of the Health Systems Trust Board, as well as receiving numerous awards for her contribution to research around maternal and women's health.

"When I put this talk together, I decided to call it 'outliers' because I really wanted to speak about exactly that, being an outlier," she explained.

"I believe that many of you in the room might be outliers or might feel like outliers. That's not unusual when you're young and you're successful, and perhaps you're the only woman in the room or the only black person in the room. Or perhaps the only black woman in the room.

"Many of you will find yourselves in spaces where your classmates aren't the people you grew up with or whose lives don't resemble yours in any way. Some of you might be struggling with imposter syndrome because of this. Some of you might be asking, 'What's next?' or 'Will this be sustainable?' or 'Am I the right person?'

“Outliers are often these excellent people who are celebrated by their community and the world. People might already be able to see your success and they might already be talking about it.”

Inspiring and motivating top performers

It is well known that top results in matric do not necessarily guarantee success later in life. Many top-performing school leavers and university graduates struggle to find appropriate work and direction in their lives after studying.

This is a major concern for the science, engineering and technology (SET) industries, as well as the NSTF, and was the impetus for the creation of the Brilliants Programme. Through this scheme, the NSTF aims to encourage students to study as far as possible while also motivating these young people to find their way into a position in the National System of Innovation, which includes SET industries.

Previously known as the Education Recognition Programme, the Brilliants Programme was designed to inspire and motivate the students identified as top performers. The young people who take part are not only made aware of various opportunities available to them but are also introduced to role models and educated about the importance of personal and professional development.

NSTF executive director, Jansie Niehaus, noted the importance of interacting with and learning from more experienced academics and professionals for those who wish to excel in their chosen fields. “When I started studying, I didn’t realise how important it is to talk to older, more experienced people at the university. Who you know, who you have interactions with, is extremely important because there is so much to learn from others. The more you can learn from them and follow their example, the better off you will be in the rest of your life,” she explained.

“You can learn life lessons from other people – from their examples and from the interactions you have with them. So that is what the Brilliants Programme is all about.”

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