Research at UCT

We are committed both to protecting and encouraging curiosity-driven research that has a real impact on our communities and environment.

15% of SA’s NRF-rated scholars

The National Research Foundation (NRF) allocates ratings based on a researcher’s recent research outputs and impact, as perceived by international peer reviewers. In 2018 UCT again recorded the highest number of NRF-rated researchers in South Africa. 541 of UCT’s academic staff are rated by the NRF, against 514 in 2016 and 276 in 2008.

15% of SA’s A-rated scholars

A third (42) of the country’s NRF A-rated researchers, who are international leaders in their fields of research, are at UCT.

19% of SA’s SARChI chairs

A total of 39 (19%) of the country’s SARChI chairs (South African Research Chairs Initiative) are held by researchers at UCT.

Research and innovation in numbers

28 600 students and 4 544 staff

In 2018 UCT was home to 28 600 students (17 552 undergraduates, 11 048 postgraduates) and 4 544 staff (1 208 academic and 3 336 professional, administrative support and service staff). Over the course of the year, anywhere between 100 and 1 000 students are employed by the university.

125 active inventions, with 72 patent applications filed in 2017

1 250 people are employed by the university.

191 classrooms were upgraded as part of the Classroom Renewal Project, which was finalised in 2017. 88 classrooms now have lecture recording facilities, 37 have induction loop technology, and 79 have custom-designed motorised lecterns.

Massive open online courses (MOOCs)

15 MOOCs are currently running at UCT, and have attracted more than 230 000 people from over 100 different countries across the globe.

The Centre for Higher Education Development partners with the six faculties to ensure students don’t just gain access to UCT, but also succeed here. They work to improve UCT’s teaching and learning environment.

8 062 undergraduates

- nearly 50% - received financial support in 2018.

90 classrooms were upgraded as part of the Classroom Renewal Project, which was finalised in 2017. 88 classrooms now have lecture recording facilities, 37 have induction loop technology, and 79 have custom-designed motorised lecterns.

100+ student research contracts are active on campus, divided into five categories: academic, national/cultural, ethics, special interest and political. Students can choose to participate in almost 40 sporting codes, including jiu jitsu, fencing, rowing and rugby.

25 km²

is the total area of UCT’s campuses, including upper, middle and lower campus in Rosebank; the health sciences campus in Observatory; the Hiddingh Campus in Gardens; the Graduate School of Business (GSB) Breakwater Campus on the Atlantic Seaboard and the GSB Solution Space in Philippi.

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About UCT
Welcome to UCT

UCT aspires to become a premier academic meeting point between South Africa, the rest of Africa and the world, driving advantage of expanding global networks and our distinct vantage point in Africa, we are committed, through innovative research and scholarship, to grapple with the key issues of our natural and social worlds.

We aim to produce graduates whose qualifications are internationally recognised and locally applicable, underpinned by values of engaged citizenship and social justice.

Did you know?

1. UCT is the South African university with the longest history.
2. It is also home to five Nobel Laureates: Max Thubel (Medicine), Rabie Bacha (Peace), Sir Aaron Klug (Chemistry), Allan McLeod Cameron (Medicine) and JH Coetzee (Literature).

3. UCT was ranked first in Africa and 156th in the world in the 2021 QS World University Rankings, with the QS Subject Rankings putting UCT first in the world in Business & Economics, 2nd in Communication and Media Studies, 2nd in Education, 4th in Chemistry, 5th in Civil Engineering and 12th in Social Sciences.


5. UCT is a member of a number of global university networks, including the Association of African Universities, the Association of Research Universities (IARU) and the Worldwide Universities Network (WUN).

The story of UCT

What began as a humble high school has evolved over the course of three centuries to become Africa’s top-rated university.

1829-1873: An unsteady start

Starting in 1829 as a private secondary school for boys, UCT’s predecessor, the South African College (SAC), waxed and waned for over 40 years until 1872. The establishment of the sub-continent’s first university, the University of the Cape of Good Hope, in that year gave SAC the incentive to prepare its senior boys for post-matriculation study and eventually for a degree for the first time. This put it on stable footing and provided it with its more junior classes to the newly created SA College School (SACS).

1873-1918: Higher aspirations

Fuelled by the transformation of southern Africa through the discovery of diamonds and gold in the interior, the SAC grew steadily. In 1887 it admitted women for the first time. By 1900 it had transferred its academic functions to SACS, in effect becoming a university college under the University of the Cape of Good Hope. After the South African War (1899-1902), it set its sights on independent university status, free of the constraints of the University of the Cape of Good Hope.

1918-1950: A teaching university on the Grootte Schuur Estate

Elevated into a fully-fledged university with its own charter in 1918, the University of the Cape of Town began teaching its first priority. To meet the needs of emerging professions in the country, it created five new faculties. In 1928 it also acquired the bulk of its campus to two sites on Cecil Rhodes’ Groote Schuur Estate. As a result of these burgeoning facilities, its student body swelled by 65% in this period to 4,258 students, while the 2018 Quacquarelli Symonds rankings put it first in Africa and 210th in the world.

1950-1968: Passive protest amid active research and teaching

During these years UCT began to give active support to teaching and research in the fields of medicine, engineering and science. At the same time a gradual imposition of apartheid took place on student admissions, barring black students from enrolling at UCT except with government permission. The formal public opposition which this policy elicited from many students and staff had little effect. By 1960 the number of black students at UCT had fallen to 41, from 552 ten years earlier. When UCT, under pressure from the government, agreed to revoke the appointment of a black lecturer in 1964, student outrage boiled over, producing a nine-day sit-in at UCT’s administrative headquarters, Bremner building.

1969-1985: Active protest amid hyperactive research and teaching

Parallel to the rising tide of resistance to apartheid across the country, a growing number of UCT students raised the level of their opposition to the policy barring black students from enrolling at UCT. The Sharpeville Massacre and the 1962 student protests prompted it to shed its more junior classes to SAC, and in effect becoming a university college under the University of the Cape of Good Hope. After the South African War (1899-1902), it set its sights on independent university status, free of the constraints of the University of the Cape of Good Hope.

1985-2019: An unfinished revolution

The wrenching of apartheid removed racial restrictions on student admissions and staff appointments even before democratic elections in 1994. This opened the way for an escalating transformation of the student body and, belatedly, of the staff profile. UCT’s 2016-2020 Strategic Planning Framework has been developed against the backdrop of widespread social action on campuses throughout the country, which has focused on inequalities, prejudices and structural disadvantages that continue to characterise South African society. The Strategic Planning Framework is organised around five broad goals – teaching and learning, research, social responsiveness, while infusing all of these with a focus on making real change happen, to fund students so that its opportunities are available to everyone with high academic potential, irrespective of their background. This is a time that brings the prospect of making real change happen, of contributing to solutions that might guide other institutions and organisations across our nation to do the same. UCT’s place in the world is to be at the cutting edge, to forge into the unknown and the unfamiliar.

Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng
Vice-Chancellor

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I believe that this is a great time to be at UCT. Across South Africa and even the world, the higher education sector is seeking ways to be more inclusive, to fund students so that its opportunities are available to everyone with high academic potential, irrespective of their background. This is a time that brings the prospect of making real change happen, of contributing to solutions that might guide other institutions and organisations across our nation to do the same. UCT’s place in the world is to be at the cutting edge, to forge into the unknown and the unfamiliar.

Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng
Vice-Chancellor

“... and when they graduate they are welcome anywhere”

After graduating, UCT students take up positions in every sector of the economy, around the world. UCT’s Development and Alumni Department is in contact with over 170 000 alumni in 131 countries, some 121 000 of whom live in South Africa.