

THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF CREATING A KNOWLEDGE HUB IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

A conversation with **PROFESSOR MAMOKGETHI PHAKENG**, vice-chancellor, University of Cape Town



The world's knowledge map is heavily weighted towards the global North. When people think science cities, they don't necessarily think of Africa: a continent of great inequality and development challenges. This is visible in its cities, and Cape Town is no exception. But, says the new vice-chancellor of the University of Cape Town (UCT), Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng, cities in the global South also present many opportunities for creating a knowledge hub.

How is the Cape Town knowledge hub different from those in the global North?

The main difference might be the values that are embedded in the way we do our science. Based in a continent that is at the sharp end of many of the world's most intractable problems, development is at the core of our science and innovation. For instance, we have a thriving department of ICT4D (Information and Communication Technology for Development), which, among other things, developed an app to help small-scale fishermen compete with the big fishing companies.

And, like many research universities, we have a raft of scientists from different disciplines working on various aspects of biomedical technology. What is different about ours is their focus on the needs of the developing world, such as a low-cost, long-lasting heart valve that can be inserted without the need for open-heart surgery. Of course, it turns out that the global North is also very interested in innovation that drives costs down and avoids unnecessary medical intervention, which makes what is happening at UCT and in Cape Town attractive to the universities and industry in the global North.

What challenges does Cape Town face, and how does UCT help to resolve them?

South Africa is the most unequal country in the world. Any visitor to Cape Town is struck by the poverty of the informal settlements as they drive towards the high-rise luxury of the city centre and southern suburbs. Cape Town is also a fast-growing city. Our migrant and poverty-stricken population struggles to get the quality of education that is needed for them to flourish, and to contribute to making the city a true knowledge hub.

The good part of that story is the enormous potential that lies in this diverse and growing population. UCT aims to tap into the potential of South Africa and its people, and in doing so provides opportunities in a number of ways. For instance, the Graduate School of Business Solution Space, which works closely with corporate partners to incubate start-ups, is situated at the V&A Waterfront, right on the doorstep of Africa's fastest-growing tech hub. But it has also launched a campus in Philippi Village, in one of the most deprived areas of Cape Town, where we work directly with entrepreneurs in the community.

What makes UCT a valuable partner?

Well, it doesn't hurt that we have one of the most beautiful

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campuses in the world, and are based in one of the most beautiful cities in the world. That means people want to live and work here, and partners want to visit us.

Apart from that, the most obvious opportunities lie in our geographic vantage point. It makes both the city and the university a significant destination for researching questions that are important to South Africa, the continent and the world.

For instance, Cape Town's position on the confluence of three major ocean systems makes it an ideal place for marine research. Its proximity to areas under dark skies without light pollution lends itself to astronomical studies. South Africa's population provides valuable cohorts for studies: into mother and baby health; AIDS and tuberculosis; violence and trauma; and lifestyle diseases.

These vantage points have given us world-leading expertise in a range of research fields such as ornithology,

climate and development studies and life sciences and medicine. But what matters to us even more than being the best *in* Africa is being the best *for* Africa – research with impact. And this turns out to make us an attractive global partner in the current context where major research funding is focused on solving the world's most intractable problems, such as the sustainable development goals.

Does UCT have a close relationship with the city of Cape Town?

Absolutely: in much of our research, we partner with industry and government, which has knock-on effects for the city as a whole. For instance, the recent water crisis that nearly brought our city to its knees was partly averted because of the close cooperation between our scientists, the city and the province, and with industry. There are lessons the rest of the world can learn from us in how we got through the crisis together.



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Best for Africa.

As the leading university in Africa, the University of Cape Town is in a prime position to connect institutions in the global north with its research collaborators elsewhere on the continent: drawing international expertise to Africa, strengthening collaborations within Africa and ensuring an African voice is part of global debates.

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