

Shaking up the hallowed halls of academia in pink

 By [Nicci Botha](#)

22 Aug 2018

Barely two months into the job, and University of Cape Town (UCT) Vice Chancellor, Professor Mamokgathi Phakeng, looks primed to knock the colonial stuffiness out of the venerable institution and introduce a new school (pun intended) of academic thinking.



Professor Mamokgathi Phakeng, UCT vice chancellor

To illustrate the ingrained patriarchy still very much evident in places of higher education, she told the UCT Graduate School of Business Women in Business conference how she arrived at one of the interviews for the VC position in a pink coat and boots, and was asked by a male member of the executive if her husband had bought the outfit for her.

She also touched on the [deliberate attempt to smear her academic credentials](#) last year, as an example of how various people associated with the univeristy viewed her as a threat to the status quo.

Change starts with yourself

“If you want to change the world you need to start with yourself. How can you change the world if you have no sense of self? A sense of self helps you rally the masses behind your cause.

“Changing the world also requires passion. My journey started with mathematics. I pursued that passion. All I’m doing is getting in the game. You’ve got to figure out why you do what you do. It starts with a vision.”

Having started her schooling career under a tree, Phakeng's CV includes being the first black woman in SA to obtain a PhD in maths education. Before beginning her term as vice chancellor, she had been serving as the deputy vice chancellor for research and internationalisation. Before moving to UCT, she was vice principal of research and innovation at the University of South Africa (Unisa), after serving three years as executive dean of the college of science, engineering and technology at the same university.

She said her achievements are driven by insecurity, relating how disappointed she was in her first research rating of C, and how this pushed her. She is now an NRF B1-rated scientist with more than 60 research papers and five edited volumes published.

“I want my research rating to announce me. All I’m doing is getting into the game. You’ve got to figure out why you do what you do.

“You get in the game, and you learn everything there is to learn, even if it means serving people with the same qualifications as you, build a career,” Phakeng said.

“Either it’s a woman thing or it’s a black thing, but I feel I’m not good enough. It pushes me to work hard. Then I can show them the middle finger. Changemakers do not hand over responsibilities to others. They get things done.”

Courage and conviction

Phakeng said you need courage and conviction to succeed. She blames social media for people not speaking up because they want to fall into a mould. "I have learnt to have the courage to accept who I am. I must make the most of the cards I was dealt. I cannot change these cards. I must move them in a way that makes things better."

She said she is not driven by money. "Whenever I change jobs, I never negotiate for a salary as a rule. I have a different relationship with money. Pursue success, money will follow."

Phakeng's parting words (with a wry smile): I've decided my pink lipstick will do the trick."

ABOUT NICCI BOTHA

Nicci Botha has been wordsmithing for more than 20 years, covering just about every subject under the sun and then some. She's strung together words on sustainable development, maritime matters, mining, marketing, medical, lifestyle... and that elixir of life - chocolate. Nicci has worked for local and international media houses including Primedia, Caxton, Lloyd's and Reuters. Her new passion is digital media.

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