

How UCT's Garden Route teaching platform is transforming health sciences training

Every year since 2016, as part of a pilot teaching and learning programme, a small group of UCT Health Sciences students have spent the final year of their MBChB living and studying in the scenic Garden Route District located within South Africa's Western Cape Province. Students and alumni agree that there are enormous benefits to being immersed in the community they serve.



In line with national and provincial health imperatives, UCT's Health Sciences Faculty has been expanding its clinical teaching platform for medical and health and rehabilitation students to include the secondary and district hospitals as well as smaller clinics in rural areas. The Garden Route District (GRD) presents an ideal opportunity in this regard.

UCT's Faculty of Health Sciences' Health Teaching Platform Manager, Dehran Swart, explained that the initiative initially came about because both national and provincial health ministers have urged all medical schools to significantly increase their output of medical doctors. In the Western Cape, the Department of Health has specifically asked UCT and Stellenbosch University to assist in achieving this objective. There is also a need to decentralise placements of students to under-served, rural and semi-rural areas.

This is not just about numbers though: the world-renowned quality of health science education at UCT is a critical element said Swart. "Great care is taken to ensure that our final year students in the GRD are able to get hands-on experience under the supervision of experienced clinicians and clinical educators, along with the added support and training by visiting consultants from Cape Town."

The GRD was selected because it allows students to practice medicine and rehabilitation health sciences in a diverse community that includes patients from rural and urban areas. This mirrors more accurately the environment that most graduates will encounter during their internships

and community service away from the major metropolises. Swart explains that students complete half of their rotations in the secondary referral hospital in George, and the remaining rotations in smaller, district hospitals situated in Oudtshoorn, Knysna and Mossel Bay.

"This gives them an advantage over their classmates who stay in Cape Town," said Dehran. "They have the opportunity to work as generalists in a rural context and this really helps them integrate their theoretical knowledge with practical skills, providing them with a firm foundation for their internship and community service."

The final year programme in the GRD first started in 2016. Every year since then a group of students have been able to contribute to the provision of health services by working in clinical teams, whilst also learning on the job. Swart points out that this final year experience combines academic and professional benefits with the opportunity to learn the softer skills of working as part of a team, interacting with patients and becoming familiar with local communities.

The success of the programme has seen the project grow from a handful of students at its inception, to 20 in 2021. For the past two years up to 14 final year physiotherapists have joined this project and are housed with their medical counterparts. This facilitates inter-professional engagement in a less formal setting, observed Swart.

Swart noted plans to double student numbers by 2024 and expand rotations to clinics and district hospitals in Oudtshoorn,

Mossel Bay, Knysna and Beaufort West. UCT's Health and Rehabilitation programmes (occupational therapy, physiotherapy, speech therapy and audiology students) plans to introduce a similar model in the region in the near future.

"This reflects the reality of what interns and community medical officers will be dealing with after graduating. It equips them to cope with both a wide range and high caseloads outside the metros."

Although currently led by the Faculty of Health Sciences, this initiative will in time include other faculties and bring great benefit to George and the surrounding areas. UCT hopes to expand its activities in the area, partnering with the community in research projects, co-hosting UCT's courses for Summer School, and exploring other opportunities for collaboration.

Swart reported that the Covid 19 pandemic had caused applicant numbers to decline in 2020 and 2021, as some students did not feel comfortable leaving their families. However, the reduced size of the student groups also had unforeseen benefits – developing tighter and better relationships with supervising clinicians, and cultivating stronger and more empathetic relationships with their patients.

"With fewer students interacting with clinicians during the past two years of the pandemic, the students had more opportunities to assist with operations, and it improved their understanding of the importance of the continuity of care," said Swart. He added that because the students got to know

the patients and understand their health issues in a more holistic way, they became stronger advocates for patient care.

Swart explains how the project has promoted hands-on experience and the development of excellent generalist skills. "This experience is much closer to the reality of working in most regional communities where hospitals are much smaller and not as well-resourced as Groote Schuur for instance. It prepares them to work in a clinical setting that is not well-resourced."

He used the example of a student working in a female ward who on any given day will assist with an appendectomy and a Caesarian section in the morning and in afternoon observe or assist with a tonsillectomy – a range of experience that would be rare in a more specialised urban facility.

Like any fledgling teaching and learning programme at UCT, GRD project has undergone extensive research and evaluation to ensure the new approach brings value and excellence to health sciences training. As part of the assessment process, Professor Steve Reid, Head of UCT's Primary Health Care Directorate interviews current and past students to ascertain how the programme has helped in preparing students for internship. Reid also conducts interviews with participating supervising clinicians to gain further insight into what students require in terms of training.

These clinicians really enjoy their interactions with students, said Swart. "This type of student engagement fosters a productive academic work environment in

which everyone benefits. "We have even had some clinicians say that students help them 'up their game'," he recounts.

"We think this is the way to go and we would like to upscale," says Swart. "We are fortunate to have seed money and are developing a fundraising proposal with UCT's Development & Alumni Department to raise the funds we need to expand the programme in line with our vision."

Expanding the programme would mean more participating students and thus greater demands on the existing accommodation. "UCT owns some property near the residences in George and is looking at the possibility of building additional accommodation and a resource centre which would hold a lecture theatre, computer laboratory, library and administrative offices."

Other sites in Oudtshoorn, Knysna and Mossel Bay are also being explored as are plans to extend the programme to Beaufort West, which would require a new mini residence near the hospital premises.

UCT has an agreement with the Western Cape provincial government (WCG) to have access to clinical training teaching hospitals. The university also approaches specific clinicians to teach and supervise health sciences students. The clinicians are then employed in joint UCT-WCG positions.

An important component of the health sciences programme in the GRD is the opportunity to gain experience through voluntary work. Students are encouraged

to volunteer in community-based organisations in the surrounding area. Medical and physiotherapy students, for example provide palliative care in Bethesda Hospice in Rosemore, George and also support the work of the non-governmental organisation (NGO), Ithemba Lobomi, assisting the NGO with health and social development related projects. This typically extends to TB medication compliance and caring for orphans.

Students also provide educational support to local learners who attend the Inkubeko Youth and Science programme based in Thembaletu. "Students participating in these programmes have expressed that these experiences have been extremely rewarding. Their participation not only brings self-fulfillment, but they in turn serve as role models to the learners – helping to inspire and motivate them," adds Swart.

To ensure the emotional and psychological well-being of the participating UCT health sciences students, a mentorship system has been in place for several years. Thanks to communication technology, mentors don't have to be living in George or the surrounding areas. "Students choose their own mentor, and it can be a member of staff, or the person's religious or spiritual advisor. Because everything is online, students also have access to UCT's Student Wellness Services and other student support structures should there be a crisis."

HEALTH SCIENCES ALUMNI REFLECT ON GARDEN ROUTE LESSONS

UCT Alumni News spoke to two UCT alumni, Luvo Mbobo and Ashleigh Merry, about their experience of living and studying in the Garden Route District (GRD)

Learning how to be a thorough and accountable health practitioner and understanding how to work more effectively in teams are two of the most profound lessons learned by Drs Luvo Mbobo and Ashleigh Merry during their final year in the GRD.

Mbobo graduated in 2018 and spent that year in the GRD, while Merry is graduating in 2021 and has just completed her final rotation at Knysna Hospital

Mbobo, who is currently completing his community service working at the Makhado military base in Limpopo, says his experience in the GRD was thoroughly worthwhile: "Given another chance I would do it again – without hesitation!" he exclaims.

Merry, who will graduate with her MBChB in 2021, concurs with Mbobo. "It's all about showing initiative. If you want to do something or learn something new, there is an abundance of people willing to teach you," says Merry.

"My favourite part has been the people. Friendly people make the work better, and I find I have had the opportunity to grow academically, emotionally and professionally. The teams are a lot smaller, so there is more accountability. I have enjoyed being out of the big city and being able to have slow outdoorsy weekends without the pressure of staying in a metro, as well as the lack of traffic has been a bonus," she added.

Merry has just heard that she has been placed at George Hospital for her internship in 2022. In the longer term she may specialise as she is interested in palliative care, as well as dermatology. "The lovely thing is that there are many avenues to pursue in medicine. However I think getting through internship and community service is the first milestone!" Merry chuckled.

Merry will be following in Mbobo's footsteps who was also placed in George for his internship during 2019 and 2020. "It was a highlight of my career!" he declared. "More than anything it was a time to reflect, and compare my student years with finally being a doctor in one place. Surprisingly the only difference I noticed was a presence of salary at the end of the month," he laughed.

"Everything else felt more or less the same to a degree. The consequence of completing the final year in the GRD equipped me with all the necessary tools and skills to transition from being a student to a professional doctor," Mbobo maintains.

"My long-term plan is to become an orthopedic surgeon and then take my expertise to the rural areas. This is ultimately my goal – to see improvement in health and other services provided in rural areas. From service delivery to access to specialist health care," he adds.

Merry and Mbobo also say that with fewer students there was more responsibility to shoulder, but that there was sufficient supervision. Mbobo says this was invaluable when he did his year of internship. "I needed exposure

that simulated what a normal day would be like for an intern. Working in a tertiary institution mostly exposes you to already differentiated patients, and complex or rare pathologies which limit your involvement in cases."

"Working in a district hospital meant that we see more undifferentiated patients, clerking them from scratch, making an assessment, developing a management plan and also implementing treatment. This helps in developing clinical reasoning, but is also a more accurate reflection of what doctors see on a day-to-day basis. We also got to witness how the health care system works in rural areas," Mbobo recounts.

Both alumni add that, academics aside, there is so much to see and do in the area. From spectacular hiking views and amazing landscapes on trails, coffee houses and beach walks, George and the neighbouring towns have a lot to offer.

To UCT medical students currently studying for their MBChB or those studying health and rehabilitation sciences, Mbobo advises: "If you want to eliminate the anxiety of internship, and ensure your preparedness for the professional world, think George!"

For Merry the ease of access to Plettenberg Bay, Storms River, Wilderness, Sedgefield and Knysna, has meant many memory-making weekends away. "This area is beautiful, don't forget to explore". Her final advice to prospective final year students? "The Garden Route is famous for its cheesecake – best to try them all!"