

MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR VAC

By

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**Maña a mutukuna a
si vhumatshelo hawe.**

Your upbringing does not
define how you will turn out,
as you can grow and change.

(Tshivenda proverb)





YOU SURVIVED, NOW WHAT?

Can you believe that you've reached the end of the first semester of your university career? And you're still standing! The past semester was intense and next semester will be too, so you need to spend your mid-year vacation wisely in order to be well prepared for the second half of the year. This chapter will help you to be the hero in your own life story. Whether you're looking forward to the break or dreading going home, be sure to read the parts of this chapter that are relevant to you:

Read what you need.

- **'The long road back home'** is for you if UCT is far from your home.
- **'Vac essentials'** is for everyone, with details of what you need to do during the vac.
- **'Stop to think'** gives important metacognition advice for everyone.
- **'Facing up to failure'** is essential reading if you have any mark under 50%.


We suggest that you read this chapter (or at least scan through it) before you leave your term-time accommodation, to ensure that you have the necessary resources (such as textbooks, notes and downloaded resources) that you need in order to prepare for next semester or possibly a supp exam.



Download checklist

If you don't have good connectivity at home, then download these resources while you're still on campus:

To revise material (for a supp exam or to consolidate your foundation for next semester):

- **Amathuba modules:** Use the download icon  in the top right corner of the screen. (This produces a zipped folder of resources, with the lesson pages as html files. The formatting is not great, but the content is all there.)
- **Other relevant material**, e.g. online textbooks, YouTube videos or other videos (like Khan Academy).

To prep for next semester:

- **The Science Handbook** at **UCT handbooks** so you can see what's in your courses.
- **Free online textbooks**, for example **OpenStax**.
- **Science is Tough (But So Are You!)** chapters released during semester 1.
- **Internet pages:** Click <Ctrl>P (to open the print dialogue box), and then choose 'Save to PDF' or similar.

If you're not enjoying your courses:

- The **UCT Prospectus** gives other options.
- **The Humanities Undergraduate Handbook** at **UCT handbooks** gives the rules for humanities degrees (where you can take science majors without having to do maths and stats). You can transfer to Humanities at the start of the second semester.



THE LONG ROAD BACK HOME

If home is far away, how are you feeling about going home? Many students find the road back home rather bumpy, for various reasons. This section is here to help you navigate going home as smoothly as possible. Start by checking in with your feelings, using this checklist:

Feelings checklist

Different students feel differently about going home. Which of the following apply to you?

- ☐ I'm looking forward to switching my brain off.
- ☐ I can't wait to see my grandmother / cousins / friends / animals.
- ☐ At UCT, I have my independence but at home, yoh!
- ☐ I've become too used to the soft life in res: hot showers, three meals a day, unlimited Wi-Fi, not having to collect water and having my own room.
- ☐ I'm dreading the toxic environment at home. UCT has been such an escape.
- ☐ I'm ashamed of my results. I can't wait to get away from UCT!
- ☐ I am the first in my family to go to university. When I left home, I was a hero for getting into UCT. What will I say back home?
- ☐ I am the eldest in my family. I must be a responsible role model back home.
- ☐ I feel the pressure of my older siblings' success at university.
- ☐ I have very mixed feelings.



What will you say about UCT?

It may be difficult to talk to others about your UCT experience while you're still trying to make sense of it yourself. If coming to UCT was your ultimate dream, it may be difficult to admit that it's been more nightmare than dream, or not quite the heaven you thought it would be. Remember that this is largely due to the nature of UCT and is not your fault. Nonetheless, it can be difficult to be honest about a less-than-golden experience, especially if you are the 'golden child' of your family. What can you do about this? Here are some practical suggestions.

First, be honest with yourself about how things have gone. As always, it helps to write things down, especially from your own perspective and in your own words. The truth is, UCT's been a mix of good and bad. Make a list of the good and a list of the bad.

Second, think of one person with whom you can be completely honest – a cousin, aunt, schoolteacher, grandparent, friend or someone else who cares about you and whom you can trust. If you are not sure who this is, then ask yourself: which person is willing to take time to listen to me? If you have doubts, test the waters – tell a selection of people a small part of your UCT journey. Tell them something positive (e.g. I enjoyed...) and something negative (e.g. I only made one friend this whole semester) and notice whether their responses are compassionate. Another way to test the waters is to say, 'I know someone who ...' and then talk about your UCT experience as if it happened to someone else. On your way home, you can have an imaginary conversation with this trusted person, in which you're authentic about your UCT experience. This imagined



We all grow up with certain assumptions about the world, shaped by our upbringing and environment. University throws those assumptions into the fire. You'll encounter ideas that clash with your existing beliefs, forcing you to re-evaluate them.

Oriphulusa Nyadzhiwa



conversation might make it easier for you to talk about when you get home. If you talk about any traumatic experiences you've had, this will lessen your burden. You can also ask their advice about what to say to the rest of your family.

Third, be as honest about UCT as you can. Tell people at home both the good and the bad. Tell them that UCT is tougher than you or they could have imagined: the workload is heavy, and the pace is fast. Tell them that the assessments are so tough that the average first-year course mark is usually only 50–60%, even though all BSc students are highly talented academically. Tell them about any discrimination you've experienced. You can also use the letter to family and friends found later in this chapter. You don't want to set up false hopes for younger relatives hoping to go to university – do what you can to prepare them for success by giving them realistic expectations. When you first get home, you won't yet know your final results, but you can lay the groundwork for your family to be impressed by a mark that is 'only' average.

Reverse culture shock

If you experienced culture shock when you arrived at UCT, then you may experience a phenomenon known as 'reverse culture shock' when you get back home. This is easier to manage if you are prepared for it. Reverse culture shock happens because you've acclimatised to the new culture (you had to, in order to survive), and this means you now see your home culture through new eyes. You may find that you're now critical of behaviours or beliefs that you previously took for granted or considered to be normal. You may also discover that you no longer feel like you belong in your own home and that you have to code switch in order to fit in with your family and friends.

To code switch is to change from one language or cultural norm (code) to another, or from one way of behaving to another, in order to be more 'acceptable' to the groups that we are with.



If you do experience reverse culture shock, what can you do about it? Here are some suggestions. First, remind yourself of *who* you are – you are an incredible human being who has value to the world, to your family and to yourself. Second, reflect on how the UCT experience has changed you (see the '**Stop to think**' section later in this chapter). This self-awareness will help you to be more conscious of how the changes in you might affect your relationships with family and friends back home. Third, stay in touch with university friends who may be having the same experiences as you. Fourth, lean on the powers that you developed in the first term to help you to acclimatise to UCT's culture. You can use those same skills to help you to adjust to being back home. Finally, accept that this is a complex situation with no easy fixes – breathe deeply and do the best you can.

At home, a hero is someone who makes it out the 'hood', does not succumb to peer pressure, and does not let being called is'thipa (fool) stop them from accomplishing their goals. Even with all they achieve, they still get bullied and told: 'How you think you are better?' The crazy thing is that everyone looks forward to your downfall, because that is the only norm they know.

Tsatsawani Mnisi

Be understanding

All cultures and their associated values and beliefs should be understood relative to their context, rather than judged by norms and values from the outside. Be careful not to judge your family and community unfairly for what they don't know. They haven't had the experience that you have just had. Your viewpoints may have changed, but those back home are expecting you to be the same person as you were before you went to UCT. Try to be understanding and not too confrontational. Be wary of thinking of yourself as better than others; arrogance will not get you very far. You do not deserve special treatment just because life has given you good opportunities. Remember and appreciate the good in your community and family. You could also share with them what you've learnt from engaging with diverse people in a new context. Sayuri (not their real name) explores the complexities of feeling like an aloe amongst proteas.



MY STORY

An aloe amongst the proteas

Sayuri

BSc graduate



Being the eldest meant that my younger siblings could make mistakes, but I could not because I had to set the path for them. I had to be responsible and help my working parents. I often felt like an aloe in a garden of proteas – out of place and out of sorts.

I went abroad to pursue a degree. Long story short, I did not get that degree and I had a traumatic experience. I thought I would get the support of my family when I returned home, but it turned out not to be so. I returned back home with anxiety issues and when I tried to tell my parents about it, I got told: 'Well, just get over it.' I remember feeling such shame after hearing those words. I felt like a failure, that all the bad that had happened was because of me and something I did or said. It would take me three years to get to the stage where I could forgive myself for what had happened. It would take a further two years to realise that I have self-worth – that it is okay to be an aloe amongst the proteas. The aloe has its own beauty and purpose.

I also came to realise that my parents were once children too – maybe they did not receive love and validation from their own parents growing up. My parents are just trying to do the best they can with what they know and the only 'how' they know. They are the reason that I am here writing this: for all that they did and did not do, for all that they said and did not say, it has made me who I am. (I am also fortunate to have other people in my life who have my back, who encourage me and appreciate me.)



That being said, I am still unable to communicate with my parents. We live in the same house, but are disconnected from each other, only talking about the weather and TV shows. I do hope one day to communicate better with my parents, but the truth is that once years have passed, it becomes harder to bridge that gap. Please learn from my mistakes: try to bridge that gap now – it makes the journey ahead much easier if you have the support of those who raised you.

VAC ESSENTIALS

How are you expecting to spend your vac? Maybe you'll be busy working in the fields or helping with chores at home? Maybe you're hoping to sleep for five weeks! Whatever you do, be sure to read this section, because there are some things you *must* do.

Look out for your results

Once your exams are marked, your course convenors should send email announcements about your 'provisional' results. These results are the combination of your exam and coursework marks. These provisional results are unlikely to change, but are only formally finalised when the Faculty Examinations Committee meets, after which the results are published on PeopleSoft, usually about mid-July. (If you don't receive provisional results, ask your class rep to ask the convenor or the Head of Department).

If you can't access email or PeopleSoft from home, make an alternative plan. You could ask a friend to check your results and send



you an SMS. Don't wait until you return to UCT because you might miss the opportunity to write a supp exam (explained in the next section). If you do get a supp, you'll need to find out details of the supp – perhaps a friend could email the course convenor to ask for details, and then inform you by SMS? You can also return to res as soon as it opens, so that you can catch up on all important announcements.

Supplementary exams

A supplementary exam (commonly known as a 'supp') is an exam that you may be invited to write if you fail a course, but receive a mark close to passing (usually between 45–49%). In this case, your result on PeopleSoft will show as 'FS' (Fail, Supp granted). In these instances, you're given a second chance to pass the course. Supps happen at different times for different courses: they may be in the last week of the mid-year break, in the first week of the new semester, or in January next year. Your course convenor will email details of the date, venue and content of the supp. Note that the supp exam might only examine part of the course content. Your final result for the course will be based on how you do in the supp, although the exact way in which the supp mark is combined with your coursework mark differs from subject to subject.

Don't underestimate how much work is needed to prepare for a supp! It's not enough to just cram for a few days before the supp exam; after all, that didn't work for you last time around. You need to redo the course from scratch. If you work through a week's worth of content every day, then it will take you 12 days to prepare plus a few more days of working through past papers.



Prepare for next semester's courses

Now that you know what UCT is like, you can use the vac to prepare, so that you can start the second semester on your best foot. The sciences are hierarchical subjects, where knowledge builds up vertically. You can't build a good science 'building' on a shaky foundation. The reality is that a mark of 50–60% is not a great foundation, so it's a good idea to take some time to strengthen your first semester foundation. Maybe you can find a friend to take up the challenge with you of doing some calculus every day for a week.

You should also start to work ahead for the second semester in at least one of your courses. This will reduce the pressure when you return to UCT. You can find out what's in your courses from the UCT Science Handbook (see the link at the end of this chapter). Maybe you have a textbook or maybe there is already material up on Amathuba. You can always turn to Khan Academy or Wikipedia for content. You obviously enjoy learning new things (otherwise you wouldn't be at university!) and the mid-year break is your opportunity to do so at your own pace, without the stress of the UCT environment.

Look after yourself

You have just spent the past five months in a stressful and unfamiliar environment. The vac is your opportunity to recover and to get back to full strength (physically and mentally) so that you are refreshed, relaxed and ready for the new semester. Try to prioritise self-care and your well-being although this may be tricky amongst the demands that your family places on you. Remember the importance of sleep and exercise for your overall well-being. Try to do things that bring you joy, such as



spending time outdoors, being creative or even singing while doing chores.

Also try to find a healthy balance between time spent alone and with others. Time spent alone will give you a chance to think about your UCT experience (more about that in the next section), but too much time alone can contribute to depression. Some recreational screen time watching movies and social media can be relaxing, but an excessive amount of scrolling and binge-watching series can fry your dopamine circuits, which is not healthy. Be sure to connect with old friends and family who missed you whilst you were busy at UCT; it's good to reconnect with your roots.

Seek opportunities to give back

You're on your way to becoming one of the privileged 14% of South Africans fortunate enough to have a university degree [1]. That privilege comes with the honour of making a contribution to society. The vac is an opportunity to start your lifelong contribution. You can share what you have learnt as a UCT student with school learners. Maybe you can tutor someone in your community or neighbourhood. You'll find it intrinsically satisfying to help others learn. At the same time, you'll clarify your own understanding of the topic and discover which parts you still need to work on. The questions that learners ask can broaden your own understanding of a subject. That's why it's often said that teaching is the best way to learn.

Need help?

If you have reasonable connectivity, the vac is a good time to seek help. Just because you're on holiday doesn't mean that UCT

A hero is someone who is willing to assist others, is not selfish to share information, and believes in the concept of 'ubuntu' – I am because you are.

Humbelani Netshithuthuni



staff are: UCT staff only get about four weeks of vacation leave per year. Many UCT staff are less pressured during the vac, so may be more able to give you the help you need during this period. However, the mid-year break is also when academic staff attend conferences and travel for work purposes, so they may be completely unavailable. If you would like help with your curriculum, mental health or general struggles, reach out to the support available in the Science Faculty.

STOP TO THINK

The UCT pace leaves you with little time to think, but the vac is a great opportunity to take stock of your life. Now is a good time to engage in some metacognition. Even if you are busy with chores at home, your brain can reflect on your UCT experiences and what you are doing with your life. Distance from UCT helps you to think more objectively. In this section, we identify some things you should pay attention to, and provide some exercises for doing so.

You've changed!

Almost certainly, you aren't the same person you were six months ago. Your mind has experienced a growth spurt, learning much about both science and life. You've had new experiences, learnt a lot about other people and probably changed your mind about some things. Perhaps your belief system has shifted. Maybe you've got new ideas about what's acceptable behaviour and what's not. This change is not a bad thing and is a normal part of the university experience. As you change, your relationships with your family and friends may also evolve. It's helpful to make a list of ways in which you've changed, as Oriphulusa Nyadzhiwa has done.



Hamba juba bazokucutha phambili. Fly away little dove, they will pluck you wherever you land. (Ndebele proverb).

Although this is often used as a cautionary statement about the fact that life will teach you big lessons if you don't heed the advice of your elders, I see this proverb more as advice that you need to leave the nest (your home, your neighbourhood, places of comfort) to really experience what the world has to offer you, good or bad.

Bianca Masuku



MY STORY

How UCT changed my perspective

Oriphulusa Nyadzhiwa *BSc (Hons) Environmental and Geographical Sciences*



- My perspective regarding science changed. In high school, science was just a standard curriculum that was impossible to debate against. University exploded that perspective, from philosophy questioning the nature of reality to literature exploring different cultures and experiences. This exposure made me question existing worldviews and ask critical questions about what I thought I knew.
- Critical thinking became a daily thing in my life. University professors don't spoon-feed information like it's done in school. They expect you to analyse, debate and form your own well-reasoned arguments. I learnt to dissect information and identify biases.
- I started to appreciate complexity. The world is rarely black and white. University dives deep into complex issues, exploring historical context and social factors. This taught me to appreciate the multifaceted nature of problems and solutions. I learned that there are more than two sides to a story. I learnt to foster intellectual humility and open-mindedness.
- I'm hooked on the concept of Lifelong Learning. University equipped me with the tools to independently research, analyse and synthesise information. This skillset invokes a curiosity about the world. The world now feels like my classroom, and my education has become a lifelong journey. This led me to apply for a postgraduate degree.



- The transformation talks and activities made me spot aspects that people back at home should consider. This includes effective communication, normalising consent, and eradication of ageism, racism, tribalism, and other forms of discrimination. I saw the possibility for transformation talks to be held in villages.
- University exposed me to diverse cultures. I learnt to see the world through the eyes of others. This newfound empathy transformed my personal relationships. I became a better listener, a more understanding friend and a more patient partner. I learnt to navigate conversations with respect, even when viewpoints clash, and this allowed for stronger connections with people from different backgrounds. This mostly occurred within spaces of group-work assignments.
- I started seeing indigenous and local knowledge as valuable. I used to feel like I knew better than my elders because of my school knowledge. Now I acknowledge that my elders possess more knowledge than me because they have been living in this world for decades before I was even born.
- Before university, I was not interested in politics because I didn't realise that politics influences almost everything that surrounds me. At university, I was exposed to social and political issues from a multitude of perspectives, prompting me to question the status quo and critically examine the systems that govern our lives. I participated in peaceful protests and engaged in constructive dialogues about pressing issues. This empowered me to become an active participant in shaping a better future for myself and my community, even at home.



Think about your degree and career

The vac gives you an opportunity to think about your degree and future career. Using the metacognition skills you have gained, you can think critically about who you are as a person, what you really enjoy doing, and who you ultimately want to become in the future. Are you doing this degree because it's what you really want or because you're trying to please others? (If you're trying to please others, try to find your own voice. Ask for help from someone you trust, or a Student Advisor.)

If you aren't enjoying your degree or you are really struggling with certain subjects, then now is the perfect time for you to consider changing your electives, your majors, your degree or even your university. Do not be afraid of this sort of change! Look at the UCT Prospectus to get a feel for the different majors and degrees at UCT. Remember that your curriculum is your responsibility and is ultimately your decision.

You can transfer into the Humanities Faculty from the start of next semester, and register for a Bachelor of Social Science (BSocSc) or Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree. You'll get credit for the courses you've already passed. You can still take Science Faculty majors in these degrees but maths and stats are not compulsory (unless specifically required for a particular major that you want to do). BSocSc majors include African Studies, Anthropology, Economics, Gender Studies, Philosophy, Politics & Governance, Psychology, Social Development, Sociology and Study of Religions. BA majors include Art, History, Film & Television, Media & Writing and eight languages.



If you're worried about the overall length of your degree, look at the BSc degree rules summary (from orientation) to see which other majors are possible with your current subjects. Also note that you can switch to Archaeology now without adding any extra time to your degree. Similarly, you can switch to Environmental and Geographical Sciences, provided you got 50% for Geography in Grade 12. These two majors are recognised as both BSc and BSocSc majors.

If you're unhappy at UCT, beware: by the end of the year, it will be too late to apply to other universities. Now is the time to find out what is required to transfer to an institution whose ethos and culture you might find more appealing, and what the closing dates are.

If you have connectivity, book an online appointment with Careers Services, who will help you to figure out what career path you want to follow. Thereafter, you can contact a Student Advisor (in Science or Humanities) to advise you on adjusting your curriculum to fit your chosen career path. The vac is less busy for the Student Advisors, so you may be able to get more detailed advice and help in figuring out your courses for next semester.

Think about your habits and routines

Think about what worked and didn't work for you last semester. Are there any changes you want to make to your study habits and daily routine? How was your time management – would you make any changes there? Write down the changes you would like to make and tell an accountability partner so as to increase your chances of sticking to your plan. Make sure that your resolutions are all realistic.



Write your story

Stories help us make sense of ourselves and how we fit into the world around us. They help us make sense of difficult times and the pathways we carve out in the changing world around us. Stories are important in all cultures and we each have a story to tell.

We invite you to write your story, as if someone else is telling the story of you, at the end of your life. This exercise will help you to clarify your life purpose, reconnect to your goals and dreams, and integrate your UCT experience into your life story. Here are some suggestions of things you might want to include in your story:

- Describe the family you were born into.
- What were you like as a child?
- Did any events change the course of your childhood?
- Were there any people who influenced you significantly?
- What made you decide to do a science degree?
- Describe what it was like when you first came to UCT and experienced orientation and lectures. Did you feel as if you were in the right degree? Were your courses what you expected?
- What did it feel like to be home for the mid-year vac?

For the rest of your story, you can use your imagination. Tell the story of the life you would like to live:

- What kind of person were you when you finished studying?
- Describe what you did with your life.
- What sort of work did you do? What environment did you work in?
- What role did your faith play?
- What was your contribution?
- What was your favourite motto / saying / proverb?



Your story will change as you change and as you gain more life experiences. This is normal and part of you growing as an individual. Once you have written your story, consider whether you would like to share it with someone who is special to you.

FACING UP TO FAILURE

A hero is someone who does not give up regardless of the obstacles life presents. Someone who always does what needs to be done when it should be done. Someone who walks by faith and not by sight.

Blessing Gumbu

For many first-years, university provides a first experience of failure: 30% of UCT BSc first-years fail at least one course in their first semester, despite their amazing school results. This is not the end of the world (although it may feel like it). If you happened to fail any courses this semester, then there are four things you need to do. First, put your failure into perspective. Second, think about what you will say to your family. Third, adjust your curriculum. Finally, take steps to avoid failing again. Let's tackle each of these in turn.

'Failure' in perspective

Failure is a socially constructed concept, where we judge performance relative to some arbitrary criterion. Whether you 'fail' or not depends on the criterion used. The criterion depends on the context (for example, a mark of 40% counts as a pass at school, but is a fail at university). The more ambitious the criterion, the greater the likelihood that you might not meet it. Yet we're socialised into believing that failure to meet an arbitrary criterion, however ambitious, is shameful. This is crazy, right?

What really counts is whether we're progressing towards our long-term goals, however we get there. When our goal is learning and developing ourselves, we



A person who never made a mistake never tried anything new.

Albert Einstein

make mistakes ('fail') along the way, but we understand that these mistakes are an inevitable part of learning and happily learn from our mistakes. The most successful people in the world have made many mistakes and learnt from them.

A 'fail' mark doesn't mean you learnt nothing; it just means that your performance in assessments doesn't yet meet UCT's requirements (in part, because the assessment methods are not ideal). Your marks don't define who you are as a person or the trajectory for the rest of your life. You might need to redo the course and your degree may take slightly longer, but your goals and dreams are still achievable. It is not your current marks, but rather what you do after receiving a 'fail' result, that will determine how well you do in life, as Mohammed Kajee's story illustrates.

MY STORY

My first failure

Mohammed Kajee *PhD student and Science Faculty Student Development Officer*



My first year at UCT was way back in 2012. It was my first time away from home. I felt completely lost in a new city. I struggled to set boundaries with friends, went out too much and didn't have enough money to survive. But mostly, I just couldn't figure out how to learn in a university setting.

As a result, I supped MAM1005H, failed CEM1000W, and got a DPR for STA1007S. I barely scraped through the courses that I did pass. I had been the smartest kid in my high school, but now I couldn't even qualify to write the Stats exam. It was the first time



I had ever failed anything in my life, and I was terrified of what my friends, parents and teachers would think of me.

I didn't have the courage to tell my parents the truth about just how bad my results were. I settled on telling them that I had narrowly failed chemistry, but lied and said that I didn't know what DPR stood for and that I had emailed the Faculty Office to find out. Having partially admitted to my family that I was 'a failure', I expected them to be really angry. But they weren't mad at all. Instead, they were just sad and felt sorry for me. The sadness in their eyes made me feel even worse. I wished that they would scream at me, so that I could start a fight with them about how unsupportive they were, but their support just made me feel like I was a massive disappointment. I believed that I had let them down. Their golden child was now just a mediocre failure who was wasting both his own time and his parent's hard-earned money.

I used their disappointment as motivation for my academic recovery. I made myself a promise: no matter how hard things would get in the future, I never wanted to see that sadness in my parents' eyes again. Returning to UCT for my first year 2.0, I was determined to fix things. I figured out what I did wrong and what were the main reasons I had failed. It took a lot of courage, determination, and hard work (I even lost an entire friend circle in the process), but I have not failed a single course since then. I ultimately went on to get my BSc degree and I'm now about to submit my PhD thesis. I have also been employed as a UCT staff member for the past four years, first part-time (as the BioScience tutor) and now full-time (in the Science Faculty).



What will you say to your family?

Talking to your family about your results can be tricky. Your school results were amazing (that's how you got into UCT!), so it can be hard for your family to adjust to the new reality. Let's start with four important truths:

- You have nothing to be ashamed of if you gave it your best shot under the circumstances and did all you reasonably could, given the demands you were trying to balance.
- Every adult (including every parent) has failed something at some point in their lives.
- Next semester's courses will be just as tough as the first semester.
- If your family knows that you are finding your studies challenging, they may be able to better support you.

While it may seem tempting to hide the truth about failing, this can trap you in a complicated web of deceit that you can't get out of. Being less-than-honest may save some discomfort now, but the long-term effects can be devastating, as Jacob discovered – see his story below. As difficult as it may seem in the moment, telling the truth may be better in the long term.

I realised my parents are just trying to do the best they can with what they know and the only 'how' they know.

Sayuri





MY STORY

Jacob's web



Jacob (not his real name) lied to his family when he failed some BSc courses in his first year at UCT. His family, who live far away, did not discover the truth, so Jacob found it easy to keep on lying about courses he failed. This went on for four years. In his fifth year, Jacob was academically excluded (i.e. he was not allowed to register at UCT again because he had failed too many courses). He could not bring himself to tell his trusting family that he had been dishonest for four years, so he told them he had graduated. Jacob now lives alone in Cape Town, working part-time jobs to survive, all the time tormented by the anxiety of living a lie.

So, what will you say to your family? We'd like to encourage you to be as honest as you can safely be. Your family may be more understanding than you expect. Here are some strategies you could try:

- Read the section on 'What will you say about UCT?' near the start of this chapter, which gives three great recommendations: be honest with yourself; start by talking to someone with whom you feel safe; and tell your family about the challenges of the UCT environment.
- Ask a trusted person for advice on how to approach your family. You can also ask them to be present when you tell your family.
- Test the waters by talking about your results in only one subject or use the 'I know someone who ...' approach.
- Give the letter below to your family. (You can also find it on the Science is Tough Amathuba site in the following languages: Afrikaans, isiXhosa, Setswana and Tshivenda.)

A hero is someone who shows up for the people in their lives in whatever ways possible.

Bianca Masuku

Science is Tough (But So Are You!)



Make the most of your vac



Adjust your curriculum

If you failed an F-course (a first semester course), you need to change your second semester curriculum, as shown in Table 1. This will not happen automatically – it's up to you to make the changes by submitting the ACA09 form on PeopleSoft. A Student Advisor will approve your change or make other suggestions. You may also consult a Student Advisor beforehand for advice. Try to make the change before the semester starts, so that you get access to the relevant Amathuba sites. The latest date for changes is the first Friday of the semester.

* Note that BIO1000H, MAM1005H and PHY1023H are extended courses, which may only be taken with the permission of the course convenor.

Table 1: Curriculum changes for failed courses

Course you failed	Course to add (if needed for your majors)	Course to withdraw
BIO1000F	BIO1000H*	Any elective
CSC1015F	CSC1015S	CSC1016S
GEO1009F	Any course needed for majors or any elective	GEO1006S EGS1003S (unless you got 50% for NSC Geog)
MAM1004F	MAM1004S	MAM1008S / STA100xS
MAM1031/33F	MAM1005H*	MAM1032/34S
PHY1031F	PHY1023H*	PHY1032S

Note the following:

- In general, an F-course is a pre-requisite for the corresponding S-course (second semester course); for example, PHY1031F is a pre-requisite for PHY1032S (i.e. you must pass PHY1031F before you can take PHY1032S). However, this is NOT true for Biology: you can continue with BIO1004S even if you failed BIO1000F.
- Only two F-courses are repeated in the second semester: CSC1015S and MAM1004S.



For other courses, you have to wait until next year to redo them.

- If the extended course convenor agrees, it may be possible to move into an extended course from the start of next semester. However, you will need to take responsibility for catching up what you've missed.
- It's not compulsory to repeat courses that you fail, unless they are a requirement for your majors.
- Overall, you may not take more than four subjects in the second semester. If you take MAM1034S, then you may only take three subjects.
- If you failed MAM1005F/1031F/1033F, you are likely to continue to struggle with maths and the courses that use this maths (particularly Applied Maths, Physics and Astrophysics). There are many other BSc majors which you may find interesting and less of a struggle. You can switch to Archaeology now without adding any extra time to your degree. Similarly, you can switch to Environmental and Geographical Sciences, provided you got 50% for Geography in Grade 12. To consider your options, look at the summary of BSc rules that you received during orientation.
- At the end of this year, you must pass at least four science half-courses (or three if your programme code is SB016), where a 'W' course counts as two half-courses. If you don't, then you will be 'excluded on academic grounds' (i.e. you won't be allowed to return to UCT).
- You can take a mixture of second-year and first-year courses next year, provided that you meet the pre-requisites and co-requisites for all your courses.



Prevent further failure

You can't change the past, but you can change the future, or at least those aspects that are in your control. You don't have control over the workload, pace and assessments of your courses, although you may be able to initiate some changes through your class reps. However, you have control over yourself, so we recommend you use Carla's recipe for future success.

You can't change the past, but you can change the future. Carla Coetzee provides some practical steps towards future success.

EXPERT PERSPECTIVE

A recipe for success

Carla Coetzee

PhD student and Science Faculty Mentor



1. Don't fear failure

Failure is a word that causes so much panic, anxiety and a whirlwind of emotions when it is spoken; yet excellence results from the experience of failure, not the flight from it. If you fear failure, you'll be too scared to try to achieve your goals. Failure is the necessary companion of an ethic of achievement.

2. Sit with it: Allow yourself to feel

When we fail, we experience a range of uncomfortable emotions, such as shame, disappointment, sadness, anger or even resentment. These emotions are unpleasant and generally avoided. However, a study found that students who suppressed their emotions after a failure were dissatisfied and unhappy. Humour, acceptance and positive reframing were the three coping strategies that resulted in the most improved satisfaction rate amongst students.

3. Failing and forgiving

To redeem a failure, you must forgive yourself. Without forgiveness, you remain a victim of your own



failure. Has a friend ever wronged you, but you still preserved the friendship? Have your parents ever said something in a moment of anger? You might recall countless times where you have said 'I forgive you'. So, why do we not forgive ourselves?

4. Find out why you failed

The most important thing is that we learn and grow from our past failure. You need to ask yourself 'What can I learn from this?'. This is probably the most important step to getting back on track and succeeding. Take a step back and try to identify the reasons why you failed. Were you not prepared for the material? Did you have trouble managing your time? Were you struggling with personal issues? Once you know the reasons for your failure, you can develop a plan to address them. Make sure that your goal is realistic.

5. Change your routine

It is important to figure out what parts of your lifestyle may be negatively impacting your academics. Are you spending too much time with friends? Are you spending all night watching Netflix? Are you falling in love too often (or getting your heart smashed)? Do you lack motivation and procrastinate all the time? Identifying which general habits may be adding to your problems is the first step towards changing your routine.

6. Get help!

There are various avenues that you can take to get help at UCT. For any struggles that you may be facing, there are people at UCT that are here to help you. You can make use of support in the Science Faculty or join the Science Mentorship Programme or contact Student Wellness to talk to a counsellor or reach out to your friends, tutors, demonstrators and lecturers. Asking for help is a good way to get over this speed bump on your journey towards graduating from UCT.



IT'S UP TO YOU!

In this chapter, we've given you some tips and advice on what to do during the mid-year break, such as checking your results, preparing for next semester, and spending time thinking about yourself and your degree. It's now up to you to decide whether you will take the advice. As always, it's your job to take responsibility for you! Do what you think is best for you and your future as you continue to learn and grow as a young scientist.

READ/WATCH MORE

Resources for rethinking your degree:

- Look at the **UCT Prospectus** for descriptions of all degrees and majors.
- Know the BSc rules: **BSc Rules for first year** and **BSc Rules summary**
- Book an online **Careers Service Appointment**
- Contact a Student Advisor: **List of Science Faculty Student Advisors**
- The Humanities Undergraduate Handbook at **UCT handbooks** gives the rules for BSocSc and BA degrees, where you can take science subjects without having to take maths and stats. You can transfer to Humanities at the start of next semester.
- How to transfer now into **Humanities**
- Use the **ACA09 form** to request curriculum changes on PeopleSoft.

**To prepare for next semester:**

- Find the Science Handbook at **UCT handbooks** so you can see what's in your courses.
- Get free online first-year textbooks at **OpenStax**
- Browse the **Science is Tough (But So Are You!)** chapters that you haven't yet had time to read. Don't read everything - only read the parts that are relevant or interesting to you. (Note: click 'Download', not 'Explore more content'.) The chapters are:
 - **Next-level time management** (principles & strategies for managing your time)
 - **How to succeed in BSc tests** (including hacks for some subjects)
 - **Culture shock** (with strategies for dealing with it)
 - **Metacognition: your key to success** (find the gold and fail forward)
 - **The shape of your well-being** (and how to keep yourself in good shape)
 - **How does your brain work?** (and how to take advantage of how it works)
 - **Acing exam season** (which brings together much of the above).

Counselling:

- To book online counselling: **SWS Appointments**



REFERENCE

[1] Mamphokhu Khuluvhe & Elvis Munyaradzi Ganyaupfu (2022) Fact sheet: highest level of educational attainment in South Africa. <http://www.dhet.gov.za/>

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