

# **CULTURE** **SHOCK** **AT UCT**

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**Ukukhula  
kukubona izinto.**

**To grow is to see things.**

(One grows through experience.)

isiXhosa proverb







# WELCOME TO UCT!

Coming to UCT can mean that you are thrown into a totally new cultural and social environment – an environment that may not be as inclusive or supportive as what you had when growing up. As a first-year student, you may be finding that UCT:

- Is very different from your school.
- Is far away from your family and friends, and your entire social support system.
- Is in a new city or even country, or in a part of Cape Town that's very different from your part.
- Forces you to interact with people, cultures, religions, accents and food that you may not have encountered before.
- Is highly competitive.

How do these environmental characteristics make you feel? Are you excited about new opportunities? Or maybe you're experiencing culture shock or a mix of uncomfortable emotions that you don't quite understand. Or both. This chapter will help you understand and manage your UCT experience. And, if you're not experiencing these things, then this chapter is a window to understanding those who are – so keep reading ...

While it's important to celebrate your incredible achievement of being accepted to this prestigious institution, it is equally important to take a moment to reflect how UCT's culture impacts the thousands of students that walk the steps of Sarah



Baartman Hall. In this chapter, we briefly explore what is meant by culture, culture shock, identity crisis and imposter phenomenon. The ultimate goal of this chapter is to help you navigate the UCT environment successfully, so that you can succeed as a student. We end the chapter with some tips for handling culture shock.

## SO, WHAT IS CULTURE ANYWAY?



Culture is like water – we can be so immersed in our own culture that we can't see it. We don't consciously observe which elements of our day-to-day routine are part of our culture. Culture is present in our customs, traditions and all aspects of our lives. Although culture is inevitable and helps us function in society, most cultures advantage some people at the expense of others. So, let's jump out of the water and take some time to think critically about the cultures in which we find ourselves.





## Cultures in South Africa

The Constitution of South Africa is intended to 'establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights' and 'free the potential of each person' [1]. South Africa has benefitted greatly from many cultures, including those of indigenous nations and people who were brought as slaves for the wine farms of the Cape or as 'indentured labourers' to work on sugarcane farms in Natal. Because of colonialism and the mixing of cultures, we have many different groups of people with different cultures, described as a 'rainbow nation' by the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Under apartheid, many cultures were not respected, with Black Africans being the most oppressed in all aspects of their lives. Since 1996, our Constitution protects all people, and allows them to practice their cultures and religions freely.

*In my culture, it's really important that we have an idea or dream that we are working towards that helps us create a plan and path for ourselves and our lives. But at UCT, those plans can be shifted, derailed or altered as you're exposed to a world so much bigger than you.*

Bianca Masuku

As a result of European colonialism and then apartheid, many aspects of South African society have been shaped by Western and capitalist cultural norms. To survive, each person 'must' find a job, earn money, and then exchange this money for food and other goods. We usually don't know the people who grew our food, packaged it or delivered it. Western culture is shaped by a worldview that values individual choice, where the ideal is that people get to choose what they eat and wear, what jobs they do, who they marry and where they live. The result is the consumerist, brand-conscious and competitive society that dominates northern America, Europe and Australia. We should critically assess whether this culture aligns with our values - just because a culture is dominant, doesn't mean it's right! Many aspects of capitalism are unjust and are used to oppress some people: not everyone gets to choose what jobs they do, or even whether they can get a job.



### What is UCT's culture?

Just like a country has a dominant culture that informs how society functions, an institution has an institutional culture, which is shaped by the institution's history and the people in the institution. Let's take a brief look at UCT's history and how that plays out in the people and culture of UCT today.

UCT started in 1829 as a high school with a small tertiary facility (for white male students only) and grew to be a fully-fledged university during the 1880s. In 1886, the head of the Chemistry Department, Prof. PD Hahn, persuaded UCT to admit the first female students. Black students were only admitted from the 1920s, and the proportion of Black students remained very small until the 1980s.

UCT's history has shaped its institutional culture. During the 'Rhodes Must Fall' protests in 2015, students criticised UCT's culture and called for the statue of colonialist Cecil John Rhodes to be removed (which it was). These protests helped many Black students articulate (put into words) their experience of UCT's culture, as Akha Tutu explains below. After the protests, UCT appointed an Institutional Reconciliation and Transformation Commission (IRTC). The IRTC concluded in its 2019 report [2] that 'racism exists at UCT' and 'often demonstrates itself in subtle forms of daily micro-aggressions' (which are comments or actions that subtly, maybe unintentionally, express prejudice against a member of a marginalised group). Student's submissions to the IRTC described their 'almost constant struggle to navigate and challenge the unrelenting colonial, white supremacist, patriarchal and anti-poor characteristics and systems of the university' [2]. These characteristics contradict the principles of South Africa's Constitution, which call for the respect and equitable treatment of all.

Cissie Gool was the first Black woman to graduate from UCT, in 1932. The UCT cafeteria is named after her.





# MY STORY

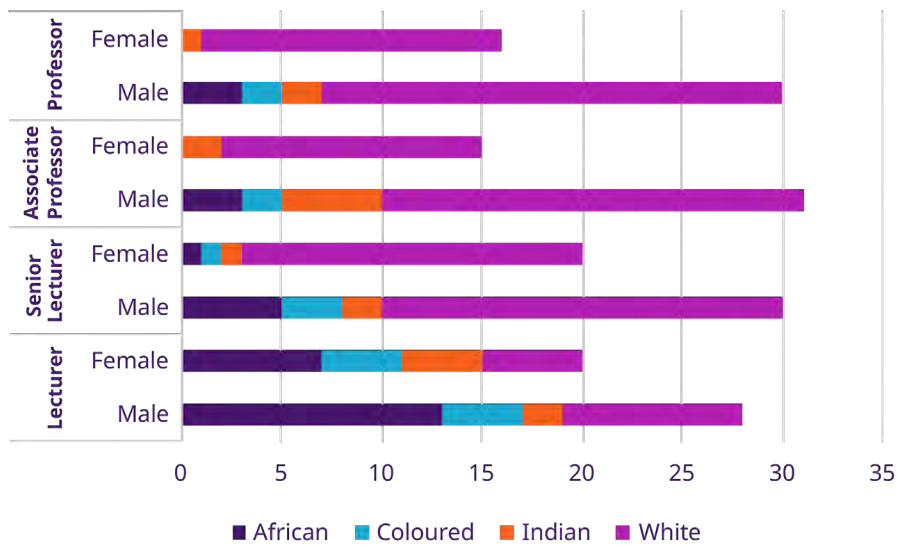
## My experience of Rhodes Must Fall

Akha Tutu *UCT graduate*



The Fallist movement was an eye-opening and life-changing experience. For the first time in my life, I could articulate my frustrations, my feeling like I didn't belong, not seeing myself, my history and the excellence of people who look like me. Through this student-led revolution, I was finally able to articulate all the feelings of inferiority, anger and hurt with precise language drawn from socio-political scientific theory. The Fallist movement characterised the oppressive system that maintains the status quo of our society as 'white-supremacist, patriarchal, heteronormative capitalism'. This characterisation named the source of why I always felt like I did not belong at UCT and helped me understand how the history of our country and continent shaped UCT's culture. It was my first time encountering the idea of decolonisation and that led me to finally see my place, as an equal, in the uncomfortably white UCT academy. Finally, I could see my true worth.

The IRTC also commented on under-representation in UCT's staff. To illustrate this issue, Figure 1 shows how the 2023 academic staff in the Science Faculty identify in terms of gender and the racial categories defined under the apartheid regime.

**Figure 1:** Demographic composition of UCT Science Faculty academics (2023)

### Pause to ponder

How do you see the legacy of UCT's history reflected in this graph? How do you think this demographic distribution affect the Science Faculty's institutional culture?

The good news is that no culture is immutable (unable to be changed) and UCT's leaders are committed to transforming (improving) UCT's institutional culture to be inclusive and equitable. Following the IRTC report, UCT leadership created its Vision 2030 with the objective 'to draw from the extraordinary social and cultural diversity, creativity and capacity for innovation of all our staff and students [in order] to contribute to making the 21st century the Afrikan century'. The aim is to 'unleash human potential to create a fair and just society'. Through Vision 2030, UCT hopes to develop students who are 'resilient agents of change for themselves and in society' [3]. You get to be a part of this vision!







# EXPERIENCING CULTURE SHOCK AT UCT

Every year, many science students experience culture shock. So how does UCT's culture affect students? There are two causes of culture shock, which we unpack in this section.

Culture shock may come from moving from one cultural setting to another, such as the move between countries described by three students below. In a new context, our ideas about appropriate behaviour may be different from that of people around us. This includes protocols around how to address elders, how to dress, body language or help-seeking behaviour. Different countries also have different laws about what is prohibited. The resulting culture shock is experienced by university students all over the world, who usually assimilate (adapt their behaviour to fit in) to some extent. However, assimilation does not mean abandoning your beliefs or your value system, as Forgiveness Jofana explains.





# MY STORY

## Feeling out of place in the world

*UCT BSc student*



Talk science to break the ice.

When I was younger, me and my parents moved to different countries throughout the course of my life. I have lived in three different African countries. It made me feel out of place in the world, since we were constantly moving to places that had different cultures and I had to assimilate into each of them. I had trouble making friends, but most often what would help me start a conversation with people was my love for science and all the interesting facts I knew about it.

When I first came to UCT, I was frightened because it was a new environment and I didn't know anyone. All my friends lived in other countries and my closest relatives lived hours away from me. I was worried about how I would fit in or that university would be too tough for me. My parents being on another part of the continent didn't help this anxiety. Though I still miss home, I have now adjusted to being here and am now falling in love with Cape Town and all it has to offer.



## MY STORY

### I have faith in my culture

Forgiveness Jofana

UCT BCom student



*Vimba nechako, pfuma yenhaka inoparadza hukama.* Have faith in your own things; inherited things have a way of destroying relations. (Shona proverb)

Being a Zimbabwean comes with being more centred in our indigenous traditional ways, such as dress codes and beliefs. Therefore, during my first year at UCT, it was quite hard for me to mix and mingle with other students who were dressed in miniskirts, especially when going up shuttle stairs behind other students. Because of how I was raised back in Zimbabwe, being in such environments was a total turnoff for me. In Zimbabwe, this kind of dressing is not allowed, as it is regarded as unethical, especially in rural areas and some parts of the country. With time I got used to it, but that Shona proverb still applies to me and I have faith in my culture.

## MY STORY

### Navigating cultural differences

Denzel Mtoko

Third-year BBusSc (Analytics) student



In my home country, homosexuality is legally prohibited and culturally frowned upon. Engaging in same-sex relationships can lead to imprisonment. Such convictions, while reflecting deeply ingrained cultural norms, create an environment where the LGBTQ+ community faces significant challenges. The prospect of adjusting to a new culture at UCT, where diverse sexual





orientations are openly accepted and celebrated, added a layer of complexity to my transition into South African university life.

This highlights the challenges faced by international students when the legal and cultural framework that restricts certain practices in one's home country clashes with the more progressive and inclusive atmosphere of the host institution. The fear of not fully integrating into the accepting culture of the host country and adhering to societal norms prevalent at the university can be overwhelming. The struggle to find equilibrium between upholding one's cultural values and embracing the diversity of the academic community becomes a complex negotiation of identity and acceptance.

We have talked about the culture shock that comes from moving from one cultural setting to another. The second cause of culture shock can be an institutional culture that does not affirm and value people like you. Here the problem lies with the institution and it's the institution that needs to change, not you. Transformation is still a work-in-progress at UCT, and transformation attempts may be messy, for example, Tsatsawini Mnisi tells how UCT's efforts at promoting gender equality made her feel that something was wrong with her, because it failed to acknowledge her lived experience at home. The good news is that students can contribute to transforming UCT's culture, as the Rhodes Must Fall protests demonstrated. Vision 2030 gives you permission to be an agent of change, working together with other students and staff who desire a university that fully values the knowledge, experiences and cultures of all its members.



## MY STORY

### Things I found out made me think something was wrong with me.

Tsatsawini Mnisi *UCT final-year computer science student*



Being a young girl from a toxic hood like Soweto, I do not really know much; well, I thought I did, but coming to UCT made me realise that I actually don't. I was so excited on my first day of Orientation, but after hearing about all types of ways one could offend the next person, I became scared of speaking to people. I found it difficult to unlearn my norms and relearn UCT.

The part that gets me is how they introduce these things. Why are all 'culture talks' a thing of: 'This is what things are like at UCT; and should you do this, this and that happens to you.' Sounds like an order to me. If they really had intentions of teaching us about the culture; they would ask questions like: 'How many of you know about this? What does this look like where you are from? What do you think UCT looks like? What do you know that you think could work and help you survive?'

This experience was quite traumatising because most of the things I found out made me think something was wrong with me. Stuff like cat calling, and how offensive it is. I thought that was a normal way of boys complimenting us. And being free? I wish that was doable where I stay. No matter how hard UCT tries to teach what is offensive and is not, for my own safety, I don't even attempt to apply it in Soweto. Imagine telling a boy from Soweto that they are harassing you; that is opening the floor for them to *actually* show you what harassment is.





## Culture shock as a sort of identity crisis

Culture shock can lead to a form of identity crisis, in which you feel like you aren't sure about who you are anymore! Some common thoughts faced by BSc students each year are:



How does culture shock cause an identity crisis? Your identity is how you identify yourself, expressed in words such as 'female', 'hardworking' or 'introverted'. It may seem like your identity is something that you build from within. However, scientific studies by psychologists show that your identity is not simply who YOU think you are, but rather is shaped by who YOU think OTHER people think you are. In other words, your image of yourself is affected by what others mirror (reflect) back to you about yourself [4]. This means you need to re-negotiate your identity in each new cultural context in which you find yourself. When you arrive at UCT, you have an identity shaped by your upbringing and cultural environments. You might have been identified as 'the golden child of the family', but the UCT environment can make it hard to enact this image of yourself. Thabo Maliea describes his experience of such an identity crisis.





# MY STORY

## I felt like I was not smart enough for this place

Thabo Maliea

*UCT BSc student*



I come from a township school that was regarded as the best school in my town. I was an overachiever in my school and my close friends were too. Sometimes I was the one who explained difficult concepts to the class and other times it was my two friends. We were not just friends, we were also competitors. At the beginning of my first year, I ended the rivalry between us by being the first one to win an international prize and get good academic results. That led to me getting a lot of social media attention and praises from my township.

As much as I enjoyed all of that, it also overwhelmed me. I developed a lot of fears and insecurities. I carried them to my first year in university and it didn't go well for me. I feared not knowing things. I feared being wrong. I feared failing. I feared being at the bottom of the class. I feared losing my status. I feared what people thought about me. I feared having to extend my degree. And what I feared the most, was lowering the standards I have for myself in my township and in front of my parents.

During my first term, I met people who got eight or nine distinctions in matric. I met people that were repeating the courses that I was going to do. I met people who told me that maths is very difficult. I met people who were facing funding problems. I met people who were way smarter than me.

All of these things made me feel like I didn't belong to this university. I felt like I was not smart enough for this place. I felt like I had to





be very good to belong to it. I felt like I had to prove myself. At the end of the day, I ended up excluding myself from a lot of opportunities. I was afraid to ask for help when I needed to. Everything that I did was to prove a point: that I am smart. That cost me a lot!

Even if you don't experience an identity crisis, UCT's culture may make you feel like an imposter (as if you are pretending to be something that you are not). UCT philosophy lecturer Olerato Mogomotsi explains the causes of this phenomenon.

## SPECIALIST PERSPECTIVE

### Why do you feel like an imposter?

Olerato Mogomotsia

*UCT philosophy lecturer*



Have you ever experienced feelings of inadequacy or felt that you may be a fraud? Psychologists Susanne Imes and Pauline Clance first coined the term 'imposter syndrome' in 1978 to explain the phenomenon where people consider themselves to be incompetent, despite having evidence that contradicts such feelings. You can think of a typical "sufferer" of impostor syndrome to be someone who doesn't think they are good enough to be a BSc student, despite having received really good maths and science grades in high school. The key difference between someone with impostor syndrome and an actual impostor is that the sufferer of impostor syndrome is wrong in their belief that they are an impostor.

The idea of being wrong in your feelings suggests that there is a failure on your part if you feel like an impostor. There tends to be an idea that



someone who experiences impostor syndrome is being delusional, has problems with self-confidence or just needs to stop being biased against their own success. This really puts the “syndrome” in impostor syndrome, resulting in the idea that with a bit of work on yourself, you could get past your impostor feelings.

There are, however, other possible reasons for why you may feel like an impostor. You may, for instance, feel like an impostor as a result of being ‘impostorised’. When you are impostorised, you are made to develop feelings of being an impostor through your interactions with others and your environment. We can think of impostorism as a kind of gaslighting, where you’re made to believe something that is not true about you. I want you to imagine a scenario where an individual, who is very confident in their ability and has all the evidence to back up their confidence, comes into a space where they are continuously told they aren’t good enough. We can imagine just how quickly this person may have their confidence chipped away and may even stop trusting their own evaluations of their abilities. In the case of being impostorised, the individual is made to lose trust in their own competence by others. How does this typically happen?

Disproportionately, impostorised individuals tend to be from communities that are under-represented in the spaces they are entering. We can think of Black students entering a historically White university like UCT, or women entering a historically male discipline as being vulnerable to being impostorised. These individuals tend to be disproportionately subjected to systemic injustices that function to further exclude them from the spaces from which they’ve been historically excluded.





For instance, we can think of how the legacy of racism and sexism lingers in spaces that historically excluded Black people and women. We can think of how, despite all the progress we have made politically as a society, people still face implicit or covert (intentionally hidden) forms of injustice which continue to foster their exclusion. If a Black student enters an environment that is racially biased against them, they may disproportionately face poor appraisals of their talents and be presumed to be less capable than their counterparts. A female student who disproportionately gets negative comments, is dismissed whenever she seeks to give valuable feedback in a group project, or gets discouraged from participating in discussion by the men in her group is impostorised through being unjustly excluded from participation and contribution. This, in turn, puts her in a position where she believes that she isn't good enough for the space that she is in, and so feels like an impostor.

These are two ways in which impostor phenomenon can come about. It can be set off by a lack of self-confidence and just being biased against your success, or it can also be caused by how you are received and treated in certain spaces. The most important thing you can do for yourself is to know the difference and figure out where your imposter feelings may be coming from.

## DEALING WITH CULTURE SHOCK

If you start to feel 'I don't fit in' or 'no-one here understands me' or 'I don't belong here', then you may be experiencing culture shock.



Culture shock can lead to negative feelings (loneliness, distrust, irritation, dissatisfaction and homesickness) and even illness. Given that culture shock and imposter syndrome may affect your ability to study effectively, it is important to take action to mitigate (diminish) the impact. The good news is that there are practical steps you can take – see Mohammed Kajee’s advice. What’s most important is that you don’t let culture shock affect your self-esteem, define who you are, or impact how you think about yourself.

*u nembelela ha Shamba asi uwa halo.*

*When you’re at your lowest, you won’t stay there forever. (Things always get better.)*

## SPECIALIST PERSPECTIVE

### How to deal with culture shock

Mohammed Kajee

*Science Faculty Student Development*



#### Remind yourself who you are

Constantly and repeatedly remind yourself of who you really are:

- You are one of the most successful matriculants in South Africa.
- You are smart, capable and TOUGH.
- You are an incredible human being that has value to the world, to your family and to yourself.
- Your ability to read, write and speak English have nothing to do with how intelligent you are.
- Your ability to speak other languages provides valuable ways of thinking and communicating.
- You belong at UCT.

Whenever you feel unsure about yourself or your capabilities in the upcoming weeks and months, always keep in mind the hard work and dedication





that brought you to this point. And, even more importantly, remember the reason why you embarked on this journey in the first place.

**Start conversations**

Push yourself to start conversations with students around you, even though communication may be harder because of different accents. Be open to students who are brave and start a conversation with you. Misunderstandings may happen, especially because body language differs between cultures, so maintain your sense of humour – laugh at your own mistakes and forgive others theirs.

**Make friends!**

Making friends (and ‘work besties’) is one of the most effective ways to reduce the impact of culture shock. Try to make friends with people who are from the same background as you, as well as people who are from completely different backgrounds. Maybe find an activity that can help you make new friends, such as residence sport or religious meetings on campus.

**Talk, talk, talk!**

When you are feeling down, talk to anyone that will listen and authentically hold space for you. Talk to your friends, your family, your tutors, and even your lecturers if you feel like you are struggling. Alienation is your worst enemy when it comes to culture shock. Talking is the easiest way to avoid feeling alone. Talking to people about the way you feel is scientifically proven to be one of the best ways to deal with negative emotions.

**Write about it**

Start a journal (a personal notebook) to keep track of your thoughts and feelings and reflect on how you’re doing as you go through this new experience. You can make a list of things you’re



grateful for, write about things you don't like or record fun discoveries. You can try journaling before going to bed or first thing in the morning. You'll find it helps your mental state to take some time to check in on yourself like this.

**Keep an open mind / Be safe**

Try to not always judge something different as negative. At the same time, don't do anything that compromises your own values. Use common sense and be sure to keep yourself safe.

**Look after yourself**

Above all, take special care of yourself so that you are strong in body and mind, and thus best able to cope with the challenges of culture shock. Reassure yourself that it will get better. You have the opportunity to study in a new environment and experience different cultures – both the good and the bad are part of the adventure.

## CONCLUSION

What kind of journey have you been on as you've read this chapter? Some students find that this chapter gives them a new vocabulary for talking about their own experiences (terminology like culture shock and imposter phenomenon) as well as practical steps they can take. Some students get fresh insight into the experiences of their peers, including students who come from other countries. We hope that everyone feels empowered to contribute to the transformation of UCT's culture. Let's treat each other equitably and speak out against discrimination. Let's foster a supportive environment, where respect for diverse backgrounds is nurtured, thus facilitating easier integration for all into the academic





*Truth is, varsity is a journey and you will only learn how to as you go.*

Orateng

community. Together, we can make UCT a place that unleashes everyone's potential to contribute to a fair and just society, in line with the South African Constitution and *Vision 2030*.

## READ/WATCH MORE

If you want to do a 'deep dive' into some of the ideas in this chapter, you can follow up on the references at the end of the chapter or access these resources:

- **Culture:** If you'd like to take a leap out of the water of Western culture, take a moment to watch this YouTube video about the **Nacirema**: a fascinating people that live in the northern region of the Americas, first described by an anthropologist in 1956.
- **UCT culture and the 2019 IRTC findings:** Read this Mail & Guardian **article** that summarises some of the IRTC findings.
- **Imposter phenomenon:** Watch a 30 minute **presentation** that Olerato Mogomotsi gave in 2022.

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