

Can empathy help drive economic growth and transformation?

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The University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business (UCT GSB) annual Women in Business conference will look at ways in which human connection and experience can strengthen businesses and help to grow the economy in a transformative way.

The [UCT Graduate School of Business \(UCT GSB\)](#) is hosting its 22nd [Women in Business Conference](#) on 20 August 2021 – an annual event that seeks to celebrate women in the workplace and raise funds for a bursary to enable more women to study at the school.

This year's topic is *Coding Heart into the Economy: Turning Empathy into Innovation* and the event will seek to explore how businesses are putting human experience first and integrating humanity into every aspect of business – from product design and marketing to management and workplace culture – to drive innovation and growth.

Tloco Kelebamang, a 2021 MBA student who is part of the organising committee says, "It is important to take a proactive stance and stir conversation about how we can do things differently."

She explains that they chose this year's theme because it resonated in pandemic times. The team believe that a shift is under way towards a more human-centred world in a technology-driven environment. A recently released survey by Accenture shows that Covid-19 has boosted innovative thinking in the consumer and retail industry [worldwide](#). This includes restaurants doing pop-up shops and others changing their business models to adopt disruptive technologies to find new sources of growth. For many organisations, these shifts have been led by their becoming more empathetic and human-centric as they seek to find ways to support their customers and employees during the pandemic.

A belief in the power of education is, of course, a core element of the annual Women in Business conference. The money raised from its annual scholarship has helped fund the studies of more than a dozen financially excluded women over the years. For past scholarship winners, the opportunity to study at the UCT GSB has been a game changer.

Scholarship recipient Shandi Lekgoathi who will attend this year's event says, "While I could never entirely do justice to explain in words the impact of this journey, I embody my strengths of vulnerability, openness and sincerity in the professional setting fully. That, for me, is how we code heart into the economy."

For another winner, Suzette Van Der Walt, the opportunity to study an [MBA at the UCT GSB](#) helped her to see business in a different context. "The likelihood of me achieving my aspirations to affect change has increased significantly due to this programme. I hope to be a part of this process of bringing more excluded voices into the room because their contribution is critical in conversations around the future of business, governance and society."

This year's conference, co-sponsored by Mars, will again be held online due to Covid-19 restrictions and is expected to draw business executives and inspirational leaders from the public, private, NGO and entrepreneurial sector. "The purpose of the conference is to learn and share inspiring stories of change," says Kumesheene West, Director of [Executive Education at the UCT GSB](#). "We want to highlight the power that diversity can deliver in business and create a platform for women leaders because we know that it is only through collaboration and exchange that real change can be made. Events like the WIB conference create a space for conversations about topics that most women are impacted by, grappling with or trying to navigate. It also creates a space for us to share our unique stories, with the understanding that through sharing, we inspire, encourage, motivate and ultimately create new ways of thinking and being."

Helen Joubert, GM of [Mars Multisales Africa](#) concurs. “We need platforms that allow women to inspire, empower and motivate each other. Women make up the majority of our consumers and customers, but even more importantly, they are critical to our business - in our offices, factories and supply chain. It is important for businesses to create platforms that allow women to use their voices so that together, we can help shape tomorrow. Research proves that unlocking opportunities for women bolsters communities, drives profitability and enhances value. At Mars, as part of our [Sustainable in a Generation Plan](#), we are focused on elevating women and truly listening to what they have to say through our #HereToBeHeard campaign.”

Kelebemang adds, “The conference is forward-thinking and this year’s topic ensures that we are staying ahead of the curve. The call to action here is how can women bring soft skills to the table as we stand on the threshold of the 5th Industrial revolution.”

Purchase your ticket for the UCT GSB’s 22nd annual Women in Business conference [here](#).

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