

Higher Education in South Africa

A University of Cape Town Perspective

Introduction

South Africa, with a population of approx. 50 million people, is a country with a deep history, rich in culture, and has risen out of its Apartheid era to become a leading state in Africa. The country has an excellent tertiary education system, with several very good universities to choose from (see below), situated in a number of uniquely different cities. The education system itself is based on the British system of research-based teaching.

While there are several leading universities in the country, including the University of Witwatersrand, Rhodes University and the University of Pretoria, the focus will be on the University of Cape Town. This document acts as a guide for Shiite students who have completed high school and would like to pursue tertiary education at University of Cape Town (UCT). The information includes: undergraduate and postgraduate studies conducted at UCT; student life at UCT; a guide to financial costs, including tuition, accommodation and living expenses; and general information about Cape Town.

Why study at the University of Cape Town?

It's got a Great Education System

University of Cape Town (UCT) is the oldest university in South Africa and is one of the leading research universities on the African continent. UCT is ranked among the top 120 universities in the world by Times Higher Education.

Studying at UCT provides the opportunity to get an **internationally recognised** qualification, being exposed to **some of the best researchers and teachers** in the world. The university aims to prepare leaders for the future and prepare graduates for the globalised world of work. A UCT degree opens doors to opportunities worldwide.

UCT offers undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in six different faculties: Commerce, Engineering & the Built Environment, Health Sciences, Humanities, Law and Science providing a broad and diverse range of degrees.

It's Cheaper

South Africa lets all SADC students pay the same fees as local students. Therefore, Tanzanian students pay local fees. (Kenyan citizens, however, have to pay an additional amount. However, this still ends up being cheaper than most other countries.)

The tuition fees for a typical undergraduate programme, would be R30,000 per annum (approx \$4,500) and accommodation and living expenses add up to around R38,000 (approx \$5,500). This varies greatly from person to person, depending on the degree being studied (Humanities degrees tend to be cheaper) and on their own lifestyle. An extra \$4,000 is charged to all international students (including Kenyan but **not** Tanzanian students.) However, these costs are clearly lower compared to studying in the UK, USA, Canada or Australia. Even some universities in Malaysia tend to have higher tuition fees. While it's perhaps more expensive than studying at home, UCT is clearly cheaper than most other options.

It's Got a Great Religious Centre

Cape Town has an excellent religious centre with weekly programmes, with Dua Kumayl every Thursday and Jumuah Namaz. Led by Hujjatul-Islam Syed Aftab Haider, the Cape Town Shi'a community is extremely vibrant, with Pakistani, Iranian, Turkish and a large local Cape Malay population all participating in various programmes together. Although, the community is relatively small, there are daily programmes during Mahe-Ramadhan and in Muharram and all celebrations and commemorations are religiously observed.

Besides this, Cape Town also has a significant Muslim population, and this makes it easy to find Halal food at supermarkets and restaurants. There's a Halal restaurant virtually around every corner. It's easy to observe Hijab, and the Muslim population is well-respected.

It's a Great Location

South Africa is only a 5-hour flight away from Kenya and Tanzania, with daily flights operating from both countries. It's relatively closer than most other university destinations.

One of the most popular tourist destinations in the world, Cape Town has it all. With beaches, mountains and forests on your doorstep, Cape Town is an historic, cosmopolitan city with a vibrant on temporary culture and a host of sport and leisure activities. The UCT Campus lies at the foot of Devil's Peak in rather plush surroundings.

While there are understandable security concerns, Cape Town is one of the safer cities in the country, boosted by the huge tourist presence there. UCT itself is in an elite neighbourhood, and students have had very minimal security concerns. Of course, just like any other city, it is always wise to be cautious.

What Can I Study at UCT?

UCT offers almost every popular degree. You can take up all major engineering streams or opt for one of the commerce degrees (including Economics, Finance, Accounting and Actuarial Science), a law degree (LLB), one of the science degrees (including Mathematics, Statistics, Biology, Physics, Chemistry, Computer Science, and numerous others), or a Humanities degree (Philosophy, Fine Art, Psychology, Languages, Religious Studies and many more). The list is quite long, and cannot be listed in full here. However, it is certain that the degree that you wish to study, or something very close to it, is presently offered.

However, some degrees just aren't available. UCT doesn't offer Aeronautical Engineering, Pharmacy, Optometry, or Dentistry. It does offer Medicine, but you **cannot** study this at an undergraduate level, because preference is given to South African students. Postgraduate students, however, can study medicine at UCT.

UCT does **not** offer funding, scholarships or any financial aid for any non-South African students at an undergraduate level. However, at postgraduate level, research funding may be available, as well as limited scholarships for international students.

It's important to look at the University Prospectus and investigate in detail all the degrees that are available.

What does the Admissions Process Involve?

UCT typically requires a minimum of A-Levels, (although you can get in sometimes with just AS-Levels). Students having done examinations through both UK Boards (Cambridge, Edexcel) and local boards are eligible to apply. Each degree has different requirements, although most Commerce, Science and Engineering degrees require some Mathematics. Generally, students need a minimum of a B in English (1st Language) at O-Levels, or a pass in the TOEFL exams. Admission requirements are available on the UCT website, and all applicants should check whether they are eligible before applying.

Applications are done online, through the website, and deadlines are typically in September. UCT has an academic year from late January to November, with a month's vacation during July. It's always a good idea to start the application process early, as it's quite long and response times are rather slow. If you choose to live in campus accommodation, you also need to indicate that on the application. (The advantages and disadvantages of on-campus and off-campus accommodation are explained later on.)

If accepted, applying for a study visa is also a long, tedious process that requires you to show proof of medical insurance, proof of financial support and several other procedures. This also needs to be started as soon as possible.

What is life at UCT like?

On-Campus vs. Off-Campus Accommodation

UCT offers several residences typically in all-male or all-female halls. Students can choose a catering option or a self-catering option. Halal food is available if a catering option is chosen, although it must be said that the food served is generally not great. In the self-catering option students typically share flats with two or three other students, with whom they share cooking facilities. All halls require you to share bathrooms and washrooms with other students. Some (catering) halls may also require you to live in a double room, sharing with one other person. It must be noted, however, that when living in UCT Residences one can benefit from a range of facilities and services including PC labs, 24-hour internet, social and sporting activities, and life-skills and peer-tutoring programmes. It's easier to interact with other students and make friends when living on campus. However, it must be noted that people from all walks of life live in campus, and it could result in quite a culture shock for some students. Campus accommodation spaces are very limited, and it's important to apply as early as possible as these are allocated on a first-come, first-served basis.

Alternatively, one can live off-campus. Flats are available close to UCT, and are typically 2-3 bedroom flats, although some studio and 1-bedroom flats are available. Generally, UCT and its surrounding areas are quite safe, and supermarkets and malls are a few minutes away. However, if you are choosing to live off campus, this needs to be organized well in advance. Living in a flat ensures you can keep away from some of the disagreeable activities that may occur in campus accommodation. Yet another alternative could be to live as a 'paying guest' with a Muslim family, and while this is extremely convenient, it's quite expensive, and most Muslim families live quite far from UCT, so transport could be a problem.

Ultimately, it's a personal choice, with students needing to evaluate their own preferences.

Getting Around

UCT has a 'Jammie Shuttle' service that provides regular bus services to students from different UCT campuses and from areas close to UCT. They are generally the primary mode of transport for most students daily travel needs. However, it is also safe to walk to close-by destinations.

However, to go to other destinations that the Jammie Shuttles don't go to students can either use public transport in the form of minibus taxis ('daladalas'/'matatus') or trains. However, it is much safer, although more expensive to use a metered taxi. You can generally get to most destinations in Cape Town for less than R150, and considering that you can share with up to 4 other people, this does turn out to be the best option.

Social Activities

While in Cape Town and at UCT, there are numerous activities you can indulge in during your spare time. UCT offers a diverse range of sports clubs ranging from cricket, soccer and squash to fencing and judo. There are also numerous societies one can choose from, with options ranging from the Muslim Students' Association to the Debating Society, to various philanthropic societies.

Besides this, one could always go watch a game at the world-class cricket, football or rugby stadiums, hike up Table Mountain, visit the massive malls, or go to the pristine beaches. Cape Town has a lot to offer, and there's something of interest for everyone.

Student Jobs

International students in South Africa are allowed to work a maximum of 20 hours every week. There are always opportunities for tutoring, becoming computer lab assistants, and various administrative jobs at UCT that students can apply for. This is a good source of income, and can help offset some of the costs of living expenses. You cannot, however, rely on student jobs to pay your way through university.

Where do I get more information from?

The UCT website, <http://www.uct.ac.za> has a wealth of information about all aspects of UCT. There are details about each degree programme, the fee structures, admission requirements, information for international students, career advice, campus accommodation and a wealth of other valuable information. It should be the first port of call in case of any question. The website also has the contact details of different departments. If you need information, for instance, about Computer Science, call or email them, and they will generally get back to you.

For more information about the Cape Town Shi'a centre, you can visit <http://www.afosa.org>. You can also download valuable resources, such as the Namaz timetable from this site.

For more information about the **matriculation exemption**, a document required to convert your 'foreign' school qualifications to a South African equivalent, you can visit <http://hesa-enrol.co.za>.

Also have a look online at the other South African universities websites. While UCT is undoubtedly the best, other universities have some very good degree programmes as well, particularly in some fields.

Finally, perhaps the best resource you have are the Shi'a students who are presently studying at UCT, Stellenbosch and Witwatersrand University (Johannesburg). Contact them, and they will give you all the help they can.

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