

VICE CHANCELLOR'S DISTINGUISHED AWARD
FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

2017

Prof Jacqueline Akhurst
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Professor Akhurst's early career was as a teacher of geography in schools in what was then Natal. While she was teaching, Prof Akhurst was also completing an Honours level qualification in psychology by correspondence, and it was presumably because of this that the head teacher of one secondary school approached her to ask if she would take on the role of School Counsellor. Her decision to accept the Head's invitation led her to qualify as a professional psychologist and changed her life forever.

Prof Akhurst entered academic life by taking up a position at the then University of Natal in 1992. In 2004 she moved to the United Kingdom and worked for two years at the Higher Education Academy Subject Centre, a body that is concerned with improving teaching in British universities, in York and then moved to York St John University (YSJU) as a Senior Lecturer. She was promoted to a Principal Lectureship in Psychology at YSJU in 2008 and then became Professor in Community Psychology in March 2014.

Prof Akhurst's love for South Africa had never left her, however, and, shortly after her promotion to the rank of full professor in the United Kingdom, she decided to return to her home country taking up a position at Rhodes University as associate professor in order to do so. Back in South Africa, she was soon promoted to the position of full professor and many on the stage behind me will remember her second inaugural lecture, since she also gave one at York St John's University, delivered at this University towards the end of last year.

Community psychology is a relatively new field notable for the way it offers 'bottom up' and participatory approaches to contemporary societal challenges. Given the area of her academic expertise, it is not surprising that, once back in South Africa and located in a town with enormous social challenges, Prof Akhurst quickly began to consider how she could engage local communities both to serve them and, importantly, to learn from them.

Prof Akhurst's work in community engagement spans the breadth of what is often termed the Community Engagement continuum and has included volunteerism, service-learning, and engaged research.

In 2015 and 2016 student protests across South Africa were marked by calls for the 'decolonisation' of the curriculum. Prof Akhurst has responded to this call by drawing on her capacity to engagement with communities to learn from others in order to co-create new knowledge. In order to do this, Prof Akhurst has built partnerships with multiple non-governmental and community-based organisations across Grahamstown, not only to offer essential services, but to grow the pool of both learners and teachers, involved in a more democratic knowledge economy within the discipline of psychology.

One of the places where this is most evident is her work on the Fort England Hospital Buddy Programme, where partners from Fort England now co-facilitate student briefing and debriefing sessions, and her service-learning courses in community psychology, where students work with, and learn from, over six different community based organisations.

One of Prof Akhurst's colleagues commented on her work in community psychology as follows:

We had a gap in the 'Community Psychology' specialisation in the Psychology Department for some years, with teaching and supervision of community-based learning taken up by a succession of staff, in bits and pieces, here and there, from this approach or that. Professor Akhurst's leadership and hands-on engagement has quickly steadied this focus, and the depth of her experience, professional standing in the field and theoretically grounded approach has produced coherence in and between courses, projects and research studies . . . It is extraordinary what she has achieved.

Counselling and psychoeducational support has been inaccessible for most of Grahamstown's youth, and this has been expressed as a source of concern by community-based organisations for several years. In 2016 Prof Akhurst took this concern seriously and developed and championed the Ithemba Peer Counselling Program. This has involved Prof Akhurst working with Masters students to train and supervise undergraduate students in psychology who then work as pairs providing counselling support at the Joza Youth Hub and Ntsika Secondary School. In just two years, the programme has gained such momentum that 62 additional

psychology students signed up to join Ithemba initiative for 2018, allowing the programme to broaden counsellor availability to 4 days a week.

In forming mutually beneficial partnerships across Grahamstown, Prof Akhurst has listened profoundly to what communities have told her and has practiced deep social responsiveness in developing programmes that focus on sustainability. Prof Akhurst has run five distinct programmes with the Lebone Centre, who say that her approach to their relationship as follows:

It has been one of ensuring sustainability and honouring the principles of reciprocity and mutual benefit. She has consistently applied a developmental approach to her interactions with us as a community partner.

Prof Akhurst's work is too extensive to detail in full, but these highlights of her major programmes serve to illustrate the extensive impact of her work. Despite her immense expertise and academic acumen, Prof Akhurst's work remains deeply reflective in nature, and she has cultivated a rare kind of academic and personal humility. One community partner reflected on their engagement with Professor Akhurst saying:

Her approach in developing meaningful relationships and programmes which support under-resourced communities, while always remaining humble, has been outstanding.

