

NEWS RELEASE

UP's Prof Hettie Schönfeldt selected as UN Hub Chair for SDG 3



Professor Hettie Schönfeldt, the newly appointed Hub Chair for the United Nations Academic Impact Sustainable Development Goal 3

PRETORIA – [Professor Hettie Schönfeldt](#) of the [Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences](#) and [Faculty of Health Sciences](#) at the University of Pretoria (UP) was recently appointed as the Hub Chair for the United Nations Academic Impact Sustainable Development Goal 3 (UNAI SDG 3) – Good Health and Well-Being.

Prof Schönfeldt holds the SARChI Chair in Nutrition and Food Security at UP, is a member of the [UN High Level Panel of Experts](#) on Food Security and Nutrition of the Food and Agricultural Organisation, and was elected in October 2024 to serve on the World Health Organisation Food Based Dietary Guideline Group.

She was selected after a rigorous process, during which more than 330 applications from higher education institutions around the world were reviewed. According to the UN, UP was selected for “its leadership role in promoting health management and sustainable food systems across Africa”. Prof Schönfeldt will serve a three-year term, until December 2027.

“Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the world has not been doing well in delivering on SDG 3,” she says. “The main

reason for this is that the price of healthy food – including fruit, vegetables and animal-sourced protein – is extremely high, and the consumption of carbohydrates and fast food has concurrently sky-rocketed.”

This, she says, has led to many more people suffering from malnutrition and non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, cancer and obesity.

“SDG 3 is very closely aligned to SDG 2 – Zero Hunger,” Prof Schönfeldt says. “The work we’ll be undertaking in UNAI SDG 3 will integrate both.”

Good food, good health, good life

According to Prof Schönfeldt, muscle health, skeletal health and gut health are all closely linked to overall body and brain development and achievement during the full life cycle, from pre-birth to infancy to active growth, adulthood and old age.

“Eleven of the 17 underlying causes of premature mortality and morbidity are directly related to malnutrition,” Prof Schönfeldt explains. “Malnutrition contributes to a vicious cycle of poor health and low productivity and an impaired ability to concentrate and learn, trapping families in poverty and eroding economic security. Healthy dietary choices and better nutrition decreases ill health and improves the ability to work, earn and progress.”

Fruit, vegetables and animal-sourced food provide key nutrients such as vitamin A; minerals like iron, zinc and iodine; and amino acids, which are necessary to build the immune system and feed the brain.

“In South Africa, which is a good example of what’s happening in middle- and lower-income countries, most people are eating less than 40g of protein a day, instead of the 90g requirement for good health, as they simply cannot afford to,” Prof Schönfeldt says. We’re also seeing an increase in children experiencing wasting and stunting due to a consistently poor diet. These kids are unlikely to achieve their full potential as adults if they haven’t received the right amount of nutrients during periods of active growth and development. Whereas South Africa’s stunting figures before the pandemic were going down, from 24%, they are on the rise again because people are battling to put healthy food on the table.”

Compounding this is the prevalence of cheaper fast food that’s high in sugar, salt and saturated fat.

“It has led to a situation where much of the food we consume is heavily processed, unhealthy for us and the environment, and is contributing to an array of non-communicable diseases.”

Addressing SDG 3 with consumer education and partnerships

“We have to encourage healthy eating, and get governments on board to raise awareness and promote the importance of healthy diets and clean, safe water,” Prof Schönfeldt says. “As a matter of urgency, governments need to reduce the price of healthy foods, by, for example, making sure they’re tax-free, farmer friendly, locally sourced (to ensure sustainability) while at the same time limiting the number of fast food outlets in any given area.”

She emphasises the need for governments to partner with universities and research institutions to address SDG 3. An example of this sort of collaborative intervention is Prof Schönfeldt’s research into what children up to age six are eating. She’s been conducting this research in collaboration with early childhood development centres since 1999, evaluating and advocating for the improvement of the nutrient quality of school feeding programmes. About 8.5 million children in South Africa are benefitting from these programmes. Prof Schönfeldt voluntarily spends most of her National Research Funding on improving such programmes. Six years ago, breakfast was added to the mid-morning meal provided in the Gauteng school feeding programme as part of the pilot study. This is

now being rolled out in Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal.

Universities around the world are involved in various impactful programmes to achieve SDG 3, but some are not explicitly identified as such. Prof Schönfeldt will be encouraging them to highlight what they are doing to address this particular goal and to communicate it to more people.

“This contributes to scaling change as awareness of what can be achieved together increases,” she says.

Universities are also making inputs into high-level policy in terms of advice and analysis to help governments and society meet the SDGs.

“We need to accelerate the growth of regional and international partnerships and collaborations between our universities, industries, the private sector and governments to respond to the complex, interconnected crises that the SDGs highlight,” Prof Schönfeldt says.

Sustainable food production

All food production systems are deeply entwined with other systems, such as energy, water, land use and soil fertility, all of which are over-exploited and at risk to climate change. Food waste is another issue.

“We need to be producing and marketing healthy, sustainable, affordable food, and implementing sustainable food production solutions, such as regenerative agriculture, which includes soil, landscape and water conservation based on innovative farming models that exist but need to be promoted, as do indigenous foods,” Prof Schönfeldt says. “The entire system requires a dramatic change in policy, systems and finance – we are duty bound to achieve this.”

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on its Hatfield Campus in Pretoria. This 115-year-old institution is also one of the largest producers of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the [Gordon Institute of Business Science](#) (GIBS). It is the only university in the country with a [Faculty of Veterinary Science](#), which is ranked the best in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 56 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes. It has the most academic staff with PhDs (70%), NRF-rated researchers (613).

The 2025 Times Higher Education subject rankings placed UP first in South Africa in the fields of [Accounting](#) and [Finance](#); [Architecture](#); [Electrical and Electronic Engineering](#); Law; Sport Science; and Veterinary Science. UP's Faculty of Law has been ranked as the top law school in Africa for a remarkable eighth consecutive year.

Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) ranked the University among the top five in Africa, as part of their [2024 World University Rankings \(WUR\)](#). UP was the only South African university featured in the [2023 World University Rankings for Innovation \(WURI\)](#), falling within in the 101-200 range of innovative universities.

For more information, please go to www.up.ac.za