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The last two weeks in January each year is the time when the University of Cape Town (UCT) campus swarms with adults considerably more mature than the average student. This is the time of the Summer School, when the university opens its doors to the wider public, offering courses, workshops and lectures on a variety of subjects, as well as lunchtime talks, excursions, films and exhibitions.

I have just spent the last two weeks attending a workshop on *The writer as editor*, listening to lectures on the Orwellian use of words by politicians, and a series entitled *The spell of words: JRR Tolkien and JK Rowling as world makers*. Each morning for a week I sat spellbound listening to a series on *The thinking universe*, in which world-class scientists explained the place of human consciousness in the universe - in terms which I could follow and understand.

There were many other courses I would have liked to attend, had they not clashed with those I chose: an evening series on *Mozart*, for instance, and something called *Narrative, trauma and forgiveness*, in which Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela discussed her book on Eugene de Kock, **A human being died that night**, and JM Coetzee's novel **Disgrace** was examined in the context of literature's role in working through trauma. There were courses offered on *Ancient Chinese art; Dutch cities and their artists: the golden age of the 17th century; Film and novels; Shakespeare's masculinities; Understanding climate change; and Are genes all in the mind?* There were also a number of practical workshops on offer: Perspective sketching for amateur artists; German, Italian and functional Xhosa for beginners; and various computer courses.

When the brochure arrives in late October, all the courses look so exciting that one is tempted to fill the day with lectures, in order to soak up as much as possible.

One has to be careful, however, not to get carried away when registering, as 'Summer School Fatigue' can set in after two weeks of concentrated lectures.

In between the lectures, there is time for discussions over coffee, and reunions with old friends, often only seen on these occasions. The school has a wide following, with the 'students' drawn not only from Cape Town, but also from other parts of the country, and even other parts of the world. There are many 'swallows' who count the Summer School as one of the major highlights of their stay.

The lecturers, too, come from all over the world - this year, in addition to the UCT staff, there were lecturers from the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Italy and Belgium, as well as local bodies like the South African Institute for International Affairs, PRAESA and the National Botanical Institute. Many are old stalwarts who attract a huge following: the courses given by art historian Edward Saunders are sold out on the day booking opens. Professor Elaine Newton, from York University in Toronto, has been lecturing at the Summer School since the early 80s. I remember her introducing me to the novels of Robertson Davies when he was relatively unknown in this country, and every year her lectures on selected works of contemporary fiction are packed out. I have heard her on **Atonement**, **The blind assassin**, **The life of Pi**, and Michael Ondaatje, and every time she has deepened my understanding of the work under discussion. One of

the best parts of her course is her distribution of a reading list of the best novels she has read during the previous year.

The Summer School has a reputation for being frequented by the 'Blue Rinse Brigade', and certainly, many of those attending are retired. They, after all, have the time for these pursuits. But there are also many younger people at the courses. My friends and I have been coming since we were young housewives, and when I worked I sometimes took leave to attend Summer School. The evening lectures, too, are filled with business and professional people, all keen on widening their knowledge.

The School is run by UCT's Department of Extra-Mural Studies, established in 1950 with the aim of providing continuing adult education through public lectures, conferences and colloquia, refresher courses and Summer and Winter Schools. It has a permanent staff of ten, whose salaries are paid by the University. All other costs of the Summer School, however, must be financed from the course fees.

In 1953, the first distinctive Summer School with a broad popular appeal was arranged. On the theme *Southern Africa in perspective*, speakers such as Professor Monica Wilson, Dr RE van der Ross, HF Oppenheimer, and advocate DB Molteno surveyed the region from historical, religious, political, social and economic perspectives. 126 people enrolled, and by the final evening, 500 were crowded into the Science Lecture Theatre. Since that modest beginning, the school has grown enormously both in its scope and popularity.

It has not been without its share of controversy. In 1973, a course on *Die Sestigers* went ahead without the approval of the University's Department of Afrikaans and Nederlands, which was unhappy with the political nature of the writings to be discussed. Despite this, the course proved to be a landmark event, with 489 people attending.

The school has been criticised from time to time for being too 'white' - a criticism difficult to avoid in the light of the prevailing government policy preceding 1990.

Post 1990, as a result of the new educational conditions, and in attempt to correct the imbalances caused by the preceding regime, the focus of the Extra-Mural Studies Department shifted. Emphasis was placed on the developmental provision for a less well-educated 'untraditional' audience, and provision of policy forums for specialised interest groups. In line with this shift in focus, the period of the annual Summer School was reduced from three to two weeks. Instead, in collaboration with the South African Museum, a third week of natural history courses was offered. This year, however, this was not incorporated into the UCT Summer School, although the Museum continues to offer a separate programme of lectures, day outings and weekend excursions.

Despite these changes, the UCT Summer School remains hugely popular. Throughout, its aim has been to teach a wide cross-section of the population in terms of age, to bring together learners of diverse disciplines and perspectives, and to promote understanding of economic and social issues. The courses are open to all, regardless of educational qualifications. They are for non-degree purposes and do not involve examinations or certificates. From its modest beginnings in the 1950s, it has developed into an extremely popular event with a justifiably proud reputation. At the 55th Summer School in 2005, over 50 courses were on offer, and these were attended by more than 3,000 people.