

CALL FOR APPLICATIONS

UWC–VUB Caroline Pauwels–Jakes Gerwel Joint PhD Scholarship (2027)

Towards a Compassionate University: Co-creating Supportive University Structures and Cultures for Serious Illness, Death, Bereavement and Caregiving in South Africa and Belgium

The University of the Western Cape (UWC), in partnership with Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), invites applications from suitably qualified South African candidates for a joint doctoral scholarship.

The doctoral project will examine how serious illness, death, bereavement and caregiving are understood, experienced and addressed within a South African higher education institution. It will investigate the formal and informal support structures available to students and staff and contribute to the development of a contextually appropriate Compassionate University model.

This is a full-time doctoral position. The successful candidate will be expected to complete the PhD within the prescribed four-year period. Scholarship funding is limited to the approved funding period and will not be extended beyond this timeframe.

The research will be conducted under the joint supervision of Prof. Anita Padmanabhanunni and Prof. Marichen van der Westhuizen at UWC and Prof. Sarah Dury and Dr. Hanne Bakelants at VUB. The broader supervisory team includes: Dr. Laetitia Permall, Ms. Rone Gerber, Prof. Luc Deliens, and Prof. Filip Vandroogenbroeck .

Research focus

The successful candidate will undertake a mixed-methods, participatory doctoral study involving:

- Narrative and focus-group research with students and staff concerning experiences of serious illness, death, bereavement and caregiving.
- Interviews with institutional leaders, human-resources personnel, mental-health practitioners and other relevant stakeholders.
- Analysis of institutional policies, practices and support structures.
- Participatory co-design of a contextually grounded Compassionate University framework.
- Qualitative and quantitative evaluation of the feasibility and effectiveness of the co-developed initiatives.
- Comparative engagement with Compassionate University and Compassionate Communities initiatives in Belgium.

Eligibility requirements

Applicants must:

1. Be a South African citizen or permanent resident.
2. Hold a completed Master's degree in a cognate discipline (e.g., Psychology, Social Work, and Public Health) with a final average above 70%.
3. Have demonstrated competence in both qualitative and quantitative research methodology, including research design, data collection, and data analysis.
4. Be able to undertake a mixed-methods and participatory research project.
5. Demonstrate strong academic writing, critical thinking and independent research skills.
6. Be able to work sensitively and ethically with participants discussing potentially difficult subjects, including serious illness, loss, bereavement and caregiving.

7. Be willing and eligible to register jointly at UWC and VUB and comply with the academic and administrative requirements of both institutions.
8. Be able to devote the time required to doctoral study and complete the degree within the prescribed timeframe.
9. Be able to undertake the required periods of residence and research training in Belgium.

The successful candidate will be jointly registered at UWC and VUB and must be available to spend a total of approximately ten months in Belgium:

- Six months during Year 2, focusing on participatory and co-creative research training, methodological development and engagement with VUB's Compassionate Communities expertise.
- Four months during Year 4, focusing on comparative analysis, synthesis, dissertation completion, publications and dissemination.

Applicants should consider their personal and professional circumstances carefully before applying, as participation in both international research stays is an essential requirement of the scholarship.

Application documents

Applications must include:

1. A 1-page motivation letter explaining the applicant's suitability for the scholarship and interest in the project.
2. A comprehensive academic CV.
3. A copy of the applicant's South African identity document.
4. Certified copies of all relevant degree certificates.
5. Complete academic transcripts, including the final Master's results.
6. A 3-page doctoral research proposal (see guidelines below).
7. Three academic reference letters.

Three-page research proposal

Applicants must submit a maximum 3-page proposal (excluding the reference list) explaining how they intend to develop and undertake the doctoral research.

The proposal should contain the following:

1. Provisional title: A focused working title reflecting the applicant's proposed area of investigation.
2. Background and research problem: A concise explanation of the problem to be investigated, its relevance to South African higher education and the gap the proposed research will address.
3. Aim, objectives and research questions: One overall research aim, followed by clearly formulated objectives and proposed research questions.
4. Conceptual or theoretical framework: The principal concepts or theoretical perspectives that may guide the study, such as compassionate communities, institutional care, social justice, intersectionality, ethics of care or public-health approaches to bereavement and caregiving.

5. Proposed methodology:

- The proposed research design.
- The intended participants or data sources.
- Qualitative and quantitative data-collection methods.
- Proposed data-analysis strategies.
- How qualitative and quantitative findings will be integrated.
- How participatory or co-design methods could be incorporated.

6. Ethical and feasibility considerations: The principal ethical issues associated with researching serious illness, death, bereavement and caregiving.

7. Reference list: A complete reference list in APA format.

Applications will be assessed jointly by representatives of UWC and VUB. Shortlisted candidates will be invited to a structured online interview assessing their methodological knowledge, analytical ability, ethical sensitivity, research independence and readiness for international doctoral study.

Use of Artificial Intelligence in Applications: Applicants may use generative artificial intelligence tools for limited language-editing or formatting support. However, the proposal and all other application materials must reflect the applicant's own ideas, reasoning and scholarly work. Any substantive use of AI must be disclosed. Applicants remain fully responsible for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of all submitted material, including references. Applications containing fabricated information, unverifiable citations, plagiarism or undisclosed AI-generated content may be disqualified.

Submission Format

Applications must be submitted as one consolidated PDF document in the following order:

1. Motivation letter (1 page)
2. Comprehensive academic CV
3. Certified copy of South African identity document
4. Certified copies of relevant degree certificates
5. Complete academic transcripts, including the final Master's results
6. Three-page doctoral research proposal & reference list
7. Referee reports
8. Declaration of any use of generative artificial intelligence in preparing the application

The PDF should be clearly labelled using the following format: **Surname_Initials_UWC-VUB_PhD_Application.pdf**

Closing date: 16th October 2026. Late or incomplete applications will not be considered.

Submission and inquiries: Applications should be submitted electronically to **Mr. Arthur Chikware:** achikware@uwc.ac.za

Applicants will be informed of the outcome of their application by 20th November 2026. If an applicant does not receive feedback regarding the outcome of their application, kindly consider the application unsuccessful.