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MEDUNSA’S INSTITUTE OF COMMUNITY SERVICES — and the concept of the rusty bucket
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THIS SEEMS TO BE A GOOD OPPORTUNITY TO WISH ALL OUR READERS A VERY SUCCESSFUL AND PEACEFUL 2010. It’s a big year for South Africa – and that’s not only if you’re a soccer fan. Far more than the excited expectation of Africa’s first World Cup, there seems to be a groundswell of optimism spreading through South Africa. Perhaps it’s because the international recession appears to be subsiding. It might also be a renewed determination among many South Africans to support and build their country in a fundamentally fluid and uncertain world. We have much to be grateful for at this southern end of our continent, but this does not mean that we can afford to be complacent.

With regard to determination and the willingness to build, there’s ample evidence of these qualities in this issue of Limpopo Leader.

The main focus is on research at the university, not so much on individual research projects, but on the development of a coherent framework into which such projects can be fitted for maximum support and impact. Developing research capacity – in other words, the ability to do high-quality research – and the delivery of improved postgraduate support (after all, postgraduates are responsible for a sizeable proportion of the university’s research output) also come under the spotlight. There are certainly some highly motivated people involved in these areas where improvements are planned.

The same can be said of those academics profiled in this issue who are looking to expand the influence of their separate spheres. Professor Cosmas Ambe will occupy the new Nedbank Chair of Accounting on the Turfloop campus – and head the new School of Auditing and Accounting that comes with it. Professor Jo Nel as CEO of Edupark also has a healthy dose of determination – this time to install a hotel school in a suitable spot on the university’s steadily expanding ‘city campus’ in Polokwane.

The activities at Medunsa are not neglected. The work of the Medical Illustration and Audio-Visual Services, a highly sophisticated and multi-faceted professional department, is examined; and readers are taken into the developmental work being accomplished by the Medunsa Institute of Community Services. Determination and dedication to the highest professional standards shine through the descriptions of these special Medunsa-based units.

With regard to Limpopo Leader’s Reader Survey, which was launched in the magazine’s last (19th) issue, it has been decided to delay the closing date until early April to ensure the widest possible participation. Staff, students, alumni, friends – anyone, in fact, is urged to tell us what they think. There’s a form stapled into the centre of Limpopo Leader 19, or it’s available on the university website, www.ul.ac.za.

Let’s all make 2010 a year of excellence and continuing development for the University of Limpopo.

WHAT’S THE CONNECTION BETWEEN SOUTH AFRICA’S ARCHBISHOP DESMOND TUTU AND THE AMERICAN BIOLOGIST JAMES WATSON? One answer is that both are recipients of Nobel prizes. Tutu was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984. Watson, together with his British colleague Francis Crick, had received a Nobel Prize twenty-two years earlier for their discovery of the molecular structure of DNA. But there’s another, more important, connection in which the University of Limpopo has played an important part.

Intrigued? Don’t miss Limpopo Leader 21, due out in May this year.

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Research

THE SECOND PILLAR IN THE BASIC STRUCTURE OF THE UNIVERSITY

In Limpopo Leader 19, readers were briefly introduced to the concept of research as being one of the three pillars of a healthy university, the other two being teaching/learning and community engagement. Readers were also introduced to Professor Rachmond Howard, the new Director of Research Development and Administration at the University of Limpopo. He was quoted as saying: ‘In many respects it is the research component that provides the glue. Teaching without vigorous research is all too often impoverished teaching; and if community outreach doesn’t lead to new areas of research into the needs of real people, community programmes become mere philanthropy.’

It was pointed out that the vision of the University of Limpopo acknowledges the importance of research. The vision states clearly that the university seeks to be a world-class African institution which responds to education, research and community development needs through partnerships and knowledge generation. Really, when one thinks about it, knowledge generation defines the research function perfectly. Teaching is knowledge transmission and community development is knowledge in practical use. So it seems appropriate to call research ‘the second pillar’ since the others lean substantially upon it.

It came as no surprise therefore that research output was also a means of establishing the quality of a university. It was certainly being used, among many other elements in a university’s size and performance, to determine the amount of funding that flows into the university from the State.

How does the University of Limpopo fare in the research stakes? The simple answer offered in Limpopo Leader 19 was: not all that well. But this reply needed to be placed in its proper historical perspective.

‘Historically,’ explained Howard, ‘the main focus of the University of Limpopo, like most other historically disadvantaged universities (those racially exclusive institutions that had been created in the 1960s and 1970s to support separate development), was on teaching and learning and far less on research. Compared to the old historically advantaged institutions (the mainstream English and Afrikaans universities), research organisation, research infrastructure and facilities – especially in the now much-needed areas of science and technology – still remain largely underdeveloped.’

Howard quoted from a 1997 report entitled South Africa: a science and technology profile which states unequivocally that ‘most research capacity is confined to the previously white universities. The historically black universities have only recently been able to start developing their research capacity’.

Howard continues: ‘While this 12-year-old report indicates some move towards developing capacity, the reality is that much remains to be done to build the research capability at institutions like the University of Limpopo.’

In pursuit of building and guiding research at both Medunsa and Turfloop, and within 12 days of his appointment as Director of Research Development and Administration, the newly-installed Howard produced a document entitled Draft guiding framework for improvement of the research office and research.

In the pages that follow, Limpopo Leader examines this document in greater detail, looks at the need to develop research capacity and how this should be achieved, and answers two important questions. Who exactly is Professor Howard? What is the relationship between the numbers of postgraduate students and research output capacity?

Now read on.
Unplanned and unco-ordinated research activities, most of which are not aligned with provincial, national, SADC or African needs and priorities

A general neglect of the arts and humanities in the research agenda

These difficulties and deficiencies are well known to South Africa’s government planners. Howard has compiled a list of government expectations with regard to research and innovation. The National Plan for Higher Education states unequivocally that a strategic objective is ‘to sustain current research strengths and to promote the kinds of research required to meet national development needs and which will enable the country to become competitive in a new global context’.

Here is Howard’s composite list of government expectations:

- To significantly increase the output of high-quality postgraduates at masters and post-doctoral levels especially in science, health, engineering and technology.

- Generally poor research infrastructure and facilities
- High percentage of academics without a doctoral qualification
- Low throughput rates of masters and doctoral students
- Lack of objective measurement tools to determine the quality and relevance of research
- Low number of accredited subsidised publications
An example of research activity at the University of Limpopo: state-of-the-art research projects into energy storage devices and metal alloys (in particular those involving platinum) and polymers are conducted at the Materials Modelling Centre on the Turfloop campus. This picture appeared in Limpopo Leader 11 in the autumn of 2007.

An example of research activity at the University of Limpopo: controlled by Medunsa’s Department of Microbiological Pathology, research has been conducted into the use of the microbicide Carraguard Gel as a female-controlled HIV prophylactic. This picture was published in Limpopo Leader 6 in the summer of 2005.

An example of research at the University of Limpopo: selective breeding of South Africa’s numerous breeds of indigenous chickens will improve their productivity. A quantitative geneticist on the Turfloop campus is conducting this research. This picture was first published in Limpopo Leader 5 in the spring of 2005.

An example of research at the University of Limpopo: the Medunsa-based Diarrhoeal Pathogens Research Unit has done groundbreaking work on the development of a vaccine to counteract the deadly rotavirus. This picture was published in Limpopo Leader 6 in the summer of 2005.
HOWARD’S DRAFT GUIDING FRAMEWORK

• To increase research outputs and to create new centres of excellence and niche research areas. *(National Plan for Higher Education)*

• To contribute to the National System of Innovation (NSI). This system is the driver of government policy and investment strategy relating to research and development, and universities are expected to enhance the NSI by producing more postgraduate skills, by increasing the country’s intellectual property through copyright and patentable new knowledge, and generally to improve the quality of life for all South Africans through growth and wealth creation. *(South Africa’s National Research and Development Strategy)*

• To contribute to a transformed society and a healthy, sustainable environment. *(The Constitution)*

It is interesting to note that in the light of these expectations, the university’s rural context, previously seen largely as a severe weakness, now has potential as a definite strength. As Howard observes, ‘these expectations, particularly those relating to research niches and speciality knowledge, present the university with an opportunity to carve out a unique research focus that will contribute to the success of a developmental state – not only in southern Africa but in the rest of Africa as well, and in other countries in the developing world’.

But how to get there, that is the central question; how to become a world-class university, doing cutting-edge, groundbreaking research in the developmental field. That is certainly the question that underpins all others in Howard’s Draft Guiding Framework. And he provides some comprehensive answers.

While stressing that a ‘guiding framework’ is just that – neither a policy nor an implementation plan but a basis of information and clarification – Howard proceeds to isolate ten ‘key areas’ that should form the basis for a structured approach to research and innovation on both campuses. The key areas relate to the university’s attractiveness to high-quality staff and students, to research facilities and infrastructure, to productive research partnerships, to commercialisation of research, but first and foremost to the identification and clear definition of the university’s research niche areas.

To a large extent, this has already been done through the development of the university’s Institutional Operating Plan (IOP), which was the result of a process (comprising round-table discussions and specific interventions) that was begun in 2008 and completed last year. According to the IOP report, the university possessed definite pockets of research excellence, but that these tended to be fragmented and not strategically driven. More generally, the IOP found that the university was involved ‘in too many small fragmented research areas and therefore is overstretched and cannot deliver’ in terms of the government’s expectations. The solution, said the IOP report, was ‘to streamline and consolidate research into specific limited areas’ in which proven capacity and strengths existed.

Which areas were these? Howard declined to name them. ‘The whole debate,’ he insisted, ‘must involve much wider university consultation and be guided by the contexts and imperatives highlighted in the national research agenda.’

But won’t this setting of the research agenda at the national level mean an end to curiosity-driven research, or pure research, or non-applied research as Howard calls it, and a loss of academic freedom as universities are steered more towards applied or strategic research that aligns with the country’s short-term socio-economic imperatives?

Howard refers to the national *Science and Technology Profile* which believes that there is currently too much curiosity-driven research in South African tertiary institutions. ‘Unless the tertiary sector can transform from mainly curiosity-driven research to a more project-based, demand-led approach, the overall infrastructural decline (of state-funded research) will continue,’ says the Profile.

‘This does not mean the end of curiosity-driven research,’ Howard replies. ‘But it does mean that support for most curiosity-driven
Howard suggests a wide array of improvements that will be dealt with in the article on page 11, Developing Research Capacity. Suffice to say here that compared to other universities, even those previously disadvantaged institutions operating in an urban setting, the University of Limpopo fares poorly. For example, exactly half the full-time academics at the University of the Western Cape have doctoral qualifications. According to the University of Limpopo’s Strategic Plan 2008 a target of 35 percent of academic staff with doctorates was set for 2010. That year has now dawned, and the target is still some way off.

Then there’s the question of attracting high-quality postgraduate students and improving postgraduate throughput rates; and the question of providing state-of-the-art research facilities; and also the question of raising the on-campus consciousness of the importance of research in the establishment of a viable future for the university.

So Howard’s Draft Guiding Framework unfolds. As he insists, a framework is neither a set policy nor a specific implementation plan, but it does form the basis for discussion. But will it ever move forward from discussion into action?

Howard replies: ‘There will be four roll-out stages from here on in. First, the imperative is to get stakeholder buy-in, starting from the highest executive levels and filtering all the way down through the staff hierarchies. The second stage will consist of prioritising issues, especially with a view to drawing up and implementing a medium-term plan for the utilisation of already allocated research funding. Thirdly, it will be necessary to further develop those areas not included in the medium-term plan but that fit into the university’s overarching “niche areas” research vision. It should be obvious that most of these new areas cannot simultaneously be rolled out, since current capacity and financial resources will simply not allow it. Indeed, significant funding will have to be raised from external sources before the more expensive areas can be addressed.

‘Finally, a research road show, armed with our new coherent research vision, must be assembled. The first visits should be to relevant government departments and research councils.’

Howard’s Guiding Framework seems likely to stimulate wide interest on both campuses of the University of Limpopo, and among the university’s external partners as well. Above all else, it offers a coherent and consistently optimistic way through the ‘previously disadvantaged’ morass.

‘I would like to add in conclusion,’ says Howard with a wry smile, ‘that the real challenge is not so much in the details of the plan that I hope will emerge from the framework, but in the implementation.’
early teens. That time we really did end up in the bundu outside town.’

Because of a lack of suitable segregated facilities, Howard was obliged to move to Middelburg and then to Pretoria to complete his schooling. In Pretoria he attended the Eersterus Senior Sekondêre Skool, where he became head prefect during his matric year. His marks were excellent, and he dreamed of becoming a doctor. But the family couldn’t afford the fees, so he chose the biological sciences instead. After gaining his undergraduate degree in 1988, he worked as a school teacher for a while before launching into his studies once more.

When pressed on his early experiences of forced removals, Howard admitted that they had contributed greatly to his politicisation. ‘That’s why I was attracted to Turfloop. The university there had a great reputation for resistance against the apartheid state. Bitterness? Not really? A lot of us chose to bury the thing in the recesses of our minds. My belief has always been that one shouldn’t harp too much on the past, but rather get on with the present.

‘That’s why I want to stop talking about myself, and get on with the job of promoting my Research Office and my Draft Guiding Framework for research and innovation at the University of Limpopo.’
Research

DEVELOPING RESEARCH CAPACITY
A SUM OF R34-MILLION HAS BEEN ALLOCATED FOR RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LIMPOPO. But what does research development actually mean? In a nutshell, it means developing the capacity at a given institution to do worthwhile research.

Not so difficult to establish the key elements that would need to be targeted to improve research capacity at the University of Limpopo. Professor Rachmond Howard, the new research director, groups them under several main headings.

• The first is enhancing the institution’s ability to attract, motivate, support and retain high-quality staff.
• The second is improving the institution’s attractiveness to postgraduate research students, either from the University of Limpopo itself or from other tertiary institutions.
• The third is developing the research infrastructure, from improved laboratories and equipment to the acquisition of new books and manuals.
• The fourth is ensuring that research conducted at the university is relevant to community development.
• The fifth is to upgrade the research office and its support services to the status of ‘a centre of excellence’.

All five categories need a certain amount of elaboration.

With regard to the attracting and retention of high-quality staff, Howard cites the example of the University of the Western Cape which identifies talented but under-qualified academic staff, and then pays both her/his normal remuneration and the fees for further study at high-quality institutions in exchange for a contractual obligation for a certain number of years. ‘While this strategy is financially intense, it has the advantage that several staff members can be simultaneously qualified within a shorter period – and in focused research areas of strategic importance to the university,’ says Howard. ‘Also, to pay for selected staff members to train at top universities around the world, provides an opportunity to pave the way for future research collaborations.’

Such a programme seeks essentially to improve the qualifications of academic staff, but of course this is not the only problem faced by academics and researchers. Additional interventions are also required.

Howard identifies an important intervention when he says: ‘Mentorship programmes are a good way to further develop talented young researchers. At the same time, a definite research culture is stimulated at the institution, and the partnering of young researchers with retired professors and other senior academics could increase the production of publications, through joint publications arising from the various mentoring relationships.’ Howard points to UCT’s ‘Visiting and Retired Scholars Mentorship Programme’ (funded by the Mellon Foundation) as a good example of the potential of this sort of intervention.

Other interventions designed to enhance research skills and output include staff exchange programmes, in-house research and writing skills workshops, and the development of specific support structures.

With regard to the last mentioned, the institutional audit requirements imposed on universities by the Council for Higher Education calls for evidence of how the institution supports previously disadvantaged groups and individuals active in research. Women academics are a particular target, and the University of Limpopo Women’s Academic Solidarity Association, first established on the Turfloop campus, ‘should now be formalised across both campuses into a structured, properly funded programme managed from the Research Office’, according to Howard.

‘There may be a need,’ he adds, ‘to have similar support groups for academics and researchers from other previously disadvantaged groups, especially for young black junior staff, for example, who are struggling to get established in research or are finding it difficult to complete research attached to specific qualifications.’

In addition, Howard suggests an English editorial service to assist students and staff whose home language was not English but who are obliged to write their theses and other materials in English. Taking Stellenbosch as an example, Howard points out that no publication leaves the university without having been edited and laid out in a style that is consistent with the institution’s corporate image and standards.
Also to be considered by the University of Limpopo is a laptop loan or subsidy scheme for its researchers.

Other ways of attracting and retaining high-quality staff include the introduction of research excellence awards and an accredited subsidised publication (SAPSE) output incentive, travelling grants and incentives for steady throughputs of postgraduate students.

To improve such rates – meaning that masters and doctoral students could be assured of a timeous conclusion to their studies – would also be a major incentive for these students to use the University of Limpopo for their postgraduate studies.

‘While our undergraduate throughput rates place us in the top three in the country, our postgraduate throughput rates are poor,’ Howard admits. ‘This translates into high dropout rates and a high percentage of bottlenecked postgraduate students. We need urgently to look at short and long-term strategies and programmes to address these problems and to enhance our ability to produce high-quality graduates.’

Among the most important of these programmes and strategies are:

- To establish a dedicated postgraduate office to monitor and facilitate the smooth passage of postgraduate students through the various university systems and requirements.
- To set aside funds specifically for topping up projects where postgraduate students are involved. This will avoid delays. Such funding can also be used for improving the current postgraduate bursaries and scholarships available from the university.
- To limit the number of postgraduate students per supervisor (normally a senior academic on the staff). ‘The university is sitting with a significant number of postgraduate students who have been trapped in the system for many years,’ Howard points out, ‘and one of the causes is that some academics take on more students than they are able efficiently to handle.’

But these improvements, while important in themselves, will be ineffective without parallel improvements in research facilities. Serious funds must now be allocated on the introduction of new and upgraded facilities.

Howard: ‘If it is serious about research, the university must prioritise and provide budget allocations to address this need, and particularly to support the institution’s identified research niche areas. The same principle should apply to the acquisition of capital research equipment. We are aware that, in the past, equipment has frequently been purchased for an individual or department based on the principles of mono-discipline and exclusive use. This has led to duplication and under-utilisation of equipment. It is very important now that the university conducts a detailed inventory of capital equipment and develops a multi-user policy for such equipment within and between the various research niche areas.’

The fourth key element that needs to be targeted to improve research capacity at the university relates to the relevance that any research work has to community development. Although rural development is part of the university’s vision and mission, research attempts in this regard have tended to be poorly defined and ad hoc. However, two recent developments, if seriously supported, will encourage the university to move in the right direction. The first is the mooted Rural Development and Innovation Hub (recently approved and about to be established), which will seek to coordinate and direct a more strategic pursuit of the rural elements of the university’s own vision and which was described in Limpopo Leader 16, page 13.
The second is the university’s involvement in the Limpopo Province Research Forum, a linkage that should go a long way to aligning the work of the mooted research niche areas with real on-the-ground conditions and needs.

Finally, there’s the upgrading of the Research Office. Howard undertook a benchmarking exercise that compared the University of Limpopo Research Office with two South African and two international research offices. The results indicated that ‘our facility has not been keeping track of trends, both in terms of its name and the various activities in which it is engaged’.

When writing in August last year to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Academic and Research, and the University’s four executive deans, to introduce his Draft guiding framework for improvement of the research office and research, Howard outlined his vision for the Research Office as a centre of excellence. It must be geared, he said, to offer professional, quality, efficient and friendly services suited to the needs of all researchers (staff and postgraduate students), as well as donor and funding agencies and other external research partners. It must be proactive in building a nurturing and supportive research environment; and it must as a first priority assist the executive deans to define and shape a 21st century research agenda that is aligned to the university’s local, provincial, national, SADC, and African needs and aspirations.

This is a brave vision from a new leader – and there’s certainly plenty on which to spend that R34-million. So keep reading future editions of Limpopo Leader for regular updates on the crucially important role of research development in the fortunes of the University of Limpopo.

CONTEXTUALISING THE WORLD OF R&D

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT (R&D) IS WHAT MAKES THE WORLD GO ROUND. It’s where scientific knowledge is expanded and then turned to practical use. But what really is the University of Limpopo’s position in the world of R&D?

A useful source of information in this regard is the National Survey of Research and Experimental Development for 2006/07, produced by the South African Department of Science and Technology in conjunction with the Human Sciences Research Council. Here are some of the answers provided by this useful survey.

Let’s look first at the position of the University of Limpopo in the context of the tertiary sector as a whole. In terms of R&D expenditure, it comes 13th out of the total of 23 public universities in the country. In fact, in the year in question, it spent just over R39-million. But this amount needs to be compared to the front runners: Wits, Cape Town and KwaZulu-Natal. These universities spent R535-million, R502-million and R442-million respectively.

In total, the South African tertiary education sector spent R3,3-billion on R&D. That represented 20 percent of South Africa’s total spend of R16,5-billion, the balance being made up of spending by the science councils and government, with business enterprise easily the biggest spender at R9,24-billion.

How does South Africa fare on the international scene? R&D spending at this level is measured as a percentage of the gross domestic product (GDP) of the country involved. Finland tops the world list with a GERD (the percentage of Gross Expenditure spent on R&D) rating of 3,45. Only two other countries – Japan and Korea – exceeded the 3 percent level. The United States weighs in at 2,62, Australia at 1,78, China at 1,42 and Russia at 1,08. South Africa achieved 0,95, while middle-income South American countries such as Brazil, Chile and Argentina all scored lower.

Where should South Africa be aiming? It’s generally acknowledged that around 1,5 to 2 percent would be an extremely healthy level to be at. That leaves a lot of room for improvement in South Africa. But the good news is that our GERD is ascending. In 2001 it stood at a fairly meagre 0,73. The important lesson for the University of Limpopo is that it must grow in R&D strength along with the country.
ANYONE WHO’S SPENT TIME AT TOP UNIVERSITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA AND ABROAD WILL AGREE THAT THE PROCEDURES SURROUNDING THE REGISTRATION AND CARE OF POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LIMPOPO REMAIN CUMBERSOME, TO SAY THE LEAST. There is also a lack of basic policies to guide postgraduate supervisors, who are sometimes overloaded with too many postgraduate students, and who lack clear-cut empowerment parameters to ensure that postgraduate research students receive the best possible supervision which will go a long way to ensuring that these students get through their research in the shortest possible time – but without any compromise of standards.

A review of all these processes and policies is necessary, but that’s not where the improvements should end. Since people doing postgraduate studies comprise an important ingredient in the university’s overall research component, it is essential that something be done about improving the administrative situation as well.

And something IS being done. A dedicated ‘postgraduate support office’ – actually it will comprise two offices, one at Medunsa and the other on the Turffloop campus – is currently in the planning stage, having already been approved by the university executive. It seems likely that the postgraduate support office will report directly to the Executive Deans of the university’s four faculties, but clearly the Research Office will need to be kept in the loop.

This dedicated office will be responsible for postgraduate students from application to graduation. More specifically,
Postgraduate support
IT’S ALL ABOUT THROUGHPUT AND QUALITY

the office will shepherd postgraduate students through the initial procedures where students apply to the various faculties to do postgraduate studies. If accepted, there’s the whole process of academic registration to be negotiated. Thereafter, research titles have to be approved and supervisors selected. Here the postgraduate office will work closely with the Executive Dean of the relevant faculty. Finally, all graduation arrangements will be undertaken by the postgraduate office to ensure that successful postgraduates exit smoothly from the university’s administrative systems.

‘Basically,’ says the University’s Academic Planner, Professor Pieter Mulder, ‘we no longer want to see our postgraduate students queueing for registration with first-year undergraduate students. We must acknowledge their importance to the institution by encouraging them to participate, by guiding them through the administrative maze, by making them feel special – which of course they are. At the same time we’ll be improving throughput rates and encouraging our best undergraduate students to continue with their studies, as well as attracting talented postgraduates from elsewhere.’

But what is the optimum number of postgraduates for an institution like the University of Limpopo? Mulder tempers the urge to press for the international heights. ‘It would be impossible anyway. Our resources, and our current catchment area for new undergraduate students would make it an impossible task. We need, instead, to find our own balance between our three fundamental imperatives of teaching, research and community engagement, bearing in mind our self-defined vision.’

Mulder went on to point out that the Minister of Education had defined a specific target for the university with regard to postgraduate students. This target had been written into the Institutional Operating Plan. It is that the University of Limpopo should aim to have 20 percent of its student body at the various postgraduate levels by 2010.

That’s not an unreachable target. The as-yet unaudited figures for 2009 reveal that 19 percent of the student body were engaged in postgraduate studies. How does this compare with other South African universities? Using figures published in the 2009 SARUA Handbook, the following picture emerges:

At the University of Pretoria, 30 percent of the student population of 53 000 are postgraduate students. At Wits (student population of just over 25 000), the universities of Cape Town (student population around 21 200) and KwaZulu-Natal (student population around 38 000) the comparable percentage is in the region 33 percent. A more telling comparison might be in the actual numbers of doctoral students. In 2007, the University of Limpopo had 155 doctoral students; Wits had 987, UCT 1 002, KwaZulu-Natal 1 162, and Pretoria 1 393.

Mulder sums up. ‘More important perhaps than these comparisons with historically advantaged universities, are the improvements recorded at the University of Limpopo over the past decade and a half. In 1994, postgraduates stood at a mere eight percent of the student body. In the intervening years there have been fluctuations – largely brought about by the increase in state funding that has been made available for ‘taught’ postgraduate degrees – but the overarching increase to 19 percent last year augurs well for the future.

‘Many of us are optimistic that the introduction of the dedicated postgraduate office, and the streamlining and improvements envisaged for the Research Office will bring us over the Minister’s target for 2010. Then the central challenge will be an improvement of quality, and the resolution of that will depend quite heavily on financial inputs into improved research facilities. We need more laboratories; but we also need additional space for proper research where individual computer stations for postgraduate students have become an essential requirement.

‘But overall, the situation is clearly changing for the better,’ Mulder concludes. ‘My belief is that we are slowly getting to where we want to be, and will be able to sustain ourselves permanently as a quality above-20-percent postgraduate institution.’
Research – one practical example
THE PARASITES LIVING ON (AND IN) LIMPOPO FISH
IN THE BASEMENT OF ONE OF THE SCIENCE BLOCKS ON THE TURFLOOP CAMPUS THERE ARE HUNDREDS OF SMALL BOTTLES CONTAINING SAMPLES OF THE COUNTLESS LITTLE PARASITES – SOME OF THEM VIRTUALLY INVISIBLE – THAT LIVE ON THE FISH POPULATIONS INHABITING LIMPOPO’S RIVERS AND DAMS.

This is the Department of Biodiversity in the School of Molecular and Life Sciences. The head of Biodiversity is Dr Wilmien Luus-Powell, a pleasant young woman who was born near Alldays, close to the Botswana border. ‘I was very fortunate to grow up on a game farm. I then went to school in Pietersburg (now Polokwane). It was an agricultural school where I did science and maths and agriculture. So I cannot bake a cake or knit, but I know how to dissect a fish.’

Luus-Powell went straight from school to the Rand Afrikaans University (now the University of Johannesburg) where she did science and education degrees. Honours and Masters degrees followed. ‘While I was doing my final Masters year I telephoned one of the scientists working at Turfloop to glean some information for my dissertation on parasites. That’s when I heard about the job up here.’

She joined the University of the North (now the University of Limpopo) as a lecturer in 1995. She did her Doctorate in parasitology while she lectured. By 2004, she had been promoted to senior lecturer level, and in September last year (2009) she took over as Head of the Department of Biodiversity.

Luus-Powell smiles in her slightly ironical way. ‘Yes, I’m coping, I think. But I must tell you I won’t survive for long if I can no longer go on field trips.’

The thought of field trips returns our attention to all those hundreds of small bottles standing in crowds all over the desks and counters in the basement where Luus-Powell works. Hers is a highly active department. In 2003, a new parasite genus, named *Marmyrogyrodactylus gemini*, was discovered on *maormyrid* fish. And since 2007, two new gyrodactylids from two different hosts, three new *Enterogyrus* species of parasite from the stomach of a fish named *Oreochromis* (Mozambique tilapia), plus a new adult *digenean* parasite from the intestines of a *Schilbe* fish (Silver catfish), and an *Afrogyrodactylus* parasite from a *Micralestes*...
fish (Silver robber) were found at Nwanedi-Luphephe Dams. All these new discoveries are made possible by a very dedicated team which consists of Mr Willem Smit (Research assistant), Mr Moses Matla (lecturer in Biodiversity), Prof Pieter Olivier (Director, SMLS), Mr Hendrik Hattingh (Technician) and several postgraduate students. So the new discoveries, plus their complicated names, accumulate.

All this is quite a mouthful for the layperson; but for Luus-Powell, it’s her everyday language that helps to explain the complex interdependencies between parasites and hosts, and the equally complex interdependencies between both host and parasites and their common environment.

But of what practical value is such intricate knowledge of what seems like such a minor or peripheral subject? The first point to understand is that it’s neither minor nor peripheral.

In the most general terms, everyone should know by now that humans are dependent for their survival on the diversity of species in the biosphere in which we also live. Since all life is connected, the complex relationships of one species with all the rest are crucial to the survival of life in general. Scientists don’t warn of the high rate of species extinctions currently occurring on our planet just for the fun of it. They do so because the very fabric of life, our own included, depends on high diversity and intricate interrelationships. Put another way, the relationships between fish and parasites and environment are all part of the framework that ensures our continued survival. They are part of the constantly evolving web of life at the apex of which stand *Homo sapiens*.

For more specific terms, a glance at Luus-Powell’s ‘Fish health and parasites’ project, funded by the National Research Fund (NRF) and Research Development and Administration (UL), provides a sometimes disturbing picture. The work her small department is doing in the Olifants River and Limpopo River systems, and in selected dam sites in the province, shows that pollution, particularly the presence of heavy metals, as well as gradually rising water temperatures are changing the usual equilibrium between parasites and their fresh-water hosts.

Luus-Powell explains that good quality water will be indicated by parasites living on fish exteriors, while the presence of interior parasites indicates poor quality water and fish. ‘In these conditions,’ she adds, ‘the parasites can cause the fish to die.’

Another problem unearthed by the project is the damage being caused by an exotic tapeworm parasite brought into the country by Carp, a freshwater fish species originally from Middle Eastern Europe. ‘This tapeworm parasite has infested some of our indigenous fish. Our fish and this exotic parasite didn’t evolve together, so the fish have little defence. These parasites may increase to such an extent that the fish can no longer cope with the infection.’

Another slightly chilling observation made by Luus-Powell’s researchers is that mining pollution in a Limpopo tailings dam have caused the fish rapidly to mutate, adapting to cope with the new situation. The adaptation has been in size, so now this particular dam is populated with outsize fish.

On the parasite front, Luus-Powell argues for the preservation of parasites. ‘They’re part of evolution,’ she says, ‘they’re supposed to be there. In an ideal state, they live in equilibrium with their hosts. They defend the host from other less beneficial parasites. They even help to remove harmful heavy metals from the host. But if the equilibrium is damaged by a deterioration in the environment, it is not impossible for the parasites to destroy the hosts in large numbers.’

Even as she spoke, Luus-Powell was busy preparing for a trip north to her department’s field laboratories at the Nwanedi-Luphepho Dams in the former Venda homeland. ‘It’s all in the cause of biodiversity research,’ she explained, ‘and my own survival!’
THE RUSTY BUCKET IS A PROP; A HIGHLY USEFUL PROP FOR DR MATSONTSO MATHEBULA’S OBJECT LESSON TO POVERTY-STRUCK COMMUNITIES ON THE LEAKAGE OF FUNDS OUT OF A COMMUNITY.

‘From the outside, the bucket looks fairly useful,’ he says, holding it up to demonstrate. ‘But when you look inside, you see the rust and holes – and realise that in fact it’s not very useful at all.

‘It’s often the same with small rural communities; they have people who have work and so money comes in, but then it’s spent outside of the community. That doesn’t help at all. The community could be wealthier if some of the funds that “leak” out were saved – or spent at home,’ adds Mathebula, director of the Medunsa Institute of Community Services – Medicos – and co-investigator with the Medunsa Clinical Research Unit – MeCRU.

He cites an example of a village that was sending its children to a neighbouring village to school. ‘Just on transport, the village was losing more than R60 000 a year to other communities.’ After consultations, discussions and negotiations, a small school was opened in the village, which made a real difference to the overall wealth of that community.

Community development is in Mathebula’s blood. He thrives on it. In fact, he gave up private practice to get back into it because it ‘made little sense’ to him to be spending his time and energy on people who ‘didn’t really need him’. He’s been with Medicos as director since 1995 when the Independent Development Trust (IDT) funded the position. He also holds the position of director, trainer and community facilitator in community development for the Medicos-enabled Grassroots Community Development Academy.

Mathebula is a Medunsa alumni, having achieved his MBChB in 1990, by which time he had obtained his Diploma in Public Health from Mmadikoti Technikon. At the moment, he’s putting the finishing touches to a dissertation for his MSc Sports Medicine. Other courses he’s done – and put to excellent use – include Community Leadership Development Programme, Qualitative Research Methods, Community Development, Departmental Leadership, Negotiation Skills and Conflict Resolution, Fundraising, Adherence Counselling for ART, HIV/Aids Clinical Management, and several others.

Medicos has changed its colours from time to time over the years having first been established in 1983 as a day care centre for local mentally handicapped children, while steadfastly retaining its core mandate of partnering with communities to enable upliftment and development. Services over the years have included community development, incorporating student training and community service, mobile clinic services, and extensive HIV/Aids work, both on campus and in the surrounding communities.

Looking back to the early days of this valuable and multi-faceted initiative, Mathebula says, ‘Professor Len Karlsson (then professor in the Community Health Department of Medunsa’s Health Sciences Faculty) was the main driver of the vision for and the establishment of Medicos. He had identified a need in the community and pulled out all the stops to meet it.’

In Karlsson’s memoirs (to be published in South Africa in 2010) he recalls the birth of Medicos. On visits into homes in the community, he had – not infrequently – noticed a mentally handicapped child sitting on his or her own on the floor. ‘Most times there seemed to be no signs of food or water. To be able to survive, both parents were forced to work. With no one to look after the mentally handicapped child they had no option but to lock the door and leave. Day after day, the child would spend on its own without any form of stimulation. The situation was untenable, but was there a solution?

Medunsa’s leadership had often discussed the need for the university to become involved in community
outreach and upliftment, believing it was important for Medunsa not to be viewed as an isolated, elitist establishment with no interest in the surrounding communities. A starting point would be if these handicapped children could be fetched and transported to a centre on a daily basis where they could at least get food and stimulation.

SAB in nearby Rosslyn got heavily involved in the project, and supplied a 16-seat mini-bus, adapted for wheelchair transporting. It also provided funding for a cook and an assistant and food rations for six months. A location was then found for the day care centre in the nearby township of Soshanguve where a pre-school had been vacated. This duly became the centre’s new home.

Various departments within Medunsa also got involved in the project. The Department of Occupational Health helped with stimulation exercises. A physiotherapist was on standby if needed. The Department of Internal Medicine examined all the children. And as word of the centre spread through the campus, staff members donated toys, colouring books, and anything that would delight a child’s mind.

‘In April 1983, the day when the centre was to open its gates for the first time finally arrived,’ Karlsson remembers. ‘A contingent of Medunsa staff and the media were present when the mini-bus and 14 children rolled slowly through the gate. There was applause all around. As the children were helped out of the bus it was clear that they were overwhelmed by what was happening. They stood huddled together, looking down.’

In the weeks that followed, the input from Occupational Health staff was magnificent. ‘Within days we could see the beginnings of transformation. From frightened and withdrawn children they started taking an interest in the toys, books and crayons available to them.’

Karlsson continues, ‘The Medicos centre just grew. The informal teaching was given a boost when the centre became registered as a fully-fledged school with government paid teachers. One portion of the centre had been adapted to serve as sheltered employment for mentally handicapped adults. Firms in Rosslyn and Pretoria were approached for simple assembly work – and for many of these “workers” this was probably the first time in their lives that they had earned some sort of income.’

Within a few years, the centre started bursting at its seams. Government was approached and undertook to build a new, modern facility. Today Medicos Special School serves more than 270 learners from Soshanguve and the surrounding areas, ranging in age from seven to 18. They are being given skills development training in welding, woodwork, upholstery, beadwork, and gardening.

And while the school has been growing, so too has the work being undertaken by Medicos. One of the spin-off programmes from the day care centre for handicapped youngsters was the community-based rehabilitation programme, which was managed by the Occupational Therapy department through Medicos, with the aim of improving facilities and finding sheltered employment opportunities for disabled members of the communities. ‘It made a difference in people’s lives. Wheelchairs were sourced and provided, and repaired if necessary, ramps were built, facilities were developed – and all the time, people within the communities were being taught how to continue the services,’ says Mathebula.

Local mothers and care-givers were also trained in basic physiotherapy exercises for disabled people, protected workshops were developed, and provisions were made for support groups, self-help groups, and for day care facilities for children with multiple severe disabilities. With every project and programme, structures had to be put in place and training provided to ensure that the services were not just a ‘flash in the pan’ but a sustainable venture.

Mathebula says various programmes developed within the Medicos ambit linked in successfully with the government’s ‘Vukuzenzele’ (wake up and do it yourself) initiative.

Medicos also linked in with other NGOs in the area to manage resources more efficiently and to provide training and assistance where necessary. Mathebula himself has spent a lot of time consulting with local communities, discussing their needs, and together determining how best to meet those needs. That’s where his rusty bucket object
been a Medics policy to include students and student training in its programmes, getting them out into the community clinics to provide practical and valuable services. Sadly, this service has dropped drastically in the past year as the mobile clinic was stolen, making it difficult to transport students into the rural areas. In addition, the establishment of the Polokwane teaching activities has created a strengthening of provincial efforts in service provision.

With the increase in availability of funding for HIV/AIDS projects, it made sense for Medics to make itself more available to offer services – both on and off campus – in this field. Mathebula continues to put his skills to good use reaching students and staff to encourage scrutinising of individual behaviour to ensure an HIV-free outcome in their lives. And with those who are HIV-positive, Mathebula says one of the major challenges is to encourage adherence and compliance with the treatment regime. ‘Just swallow, my darling! That’s our heart-cry to all who are on ARVs. It’s too easy to think you feel better and then stop taking tablets. But that’s the slippery slope down – and it’s to be avoided at all costs,’ states Mathebula with his characteristic zeal. He believes that community buy-in to the dangers of non-compliance will make all the difference. ‘If people are encouraged within their own communities to take their medication, they will, I’m sure!’

And as he has spent years ensuring community development ‘from the inside out’, he believes that the same can apply to reducing the effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. ‘Now we are solving HIV/AIDS resistance from communities – from the inside out.’
MIAAVS. This interesting-looking acronym stands for Medical Illustration and Audio-Visual Services – a highly sophisticated and multi-faceted professional department located on the ground floor of the library building on the Medunsa campus that serves the satellite campus, associated academic centres as well as Dr George Mukhari Hospital (DGMH).

MIAAVS has been a part of Medunsa’s offering since the early 80s, when department director, Hoosain Ebrahim was head-hunted for the post from the Charing Cross Medical School in London. His wife, Professor Nazeema Ebrahim, is in the Department of Diagnostic Radiography. She was responsible for starting the first body/brain scanner installed at the former Ga-Rankuwa Hospital, now DGMH.

Hoosain Ebrahim is qualified in the fields of general photography, photographic science and technology, medical photography, motion picture and television production, and has four fellowships and one honorary fellowship in photography. He trained, qualified and worked in Britain for 13 years, and is a specialist in medical, forensic, scientific and research imaging. Ebrahim is the only South African on the National Board of Registration of Medical Illustrators in Britain. One of his most noteworthy recognitions by peers is the British Medical Journal Award for research in ‘Kirlian Photography in Medicine’ awarded by the Royal Photographic Society. Kirlian photography is defined as a photographic process that records electrical discharges naturally emanating from living objects, producing an auralike glow surrounding the object on a photographic plate or film with which the object is in direct contact.

When the Medical Illustration and Audio-Visual...
Services department started at Medunsa, medical photography was still in its infancy, though its importance in the analysis and diagnosis of disease, as well as its value in the teaching of medicine was widely acclaimed. With technology’s explosive advances in the past three decades this discipline now features highly specialised equipment, which means that the scope of services it offers has also increased vastly.

Says Hoosain Ebrahim, ‘This Medunsa campus is ideal for a department such as this as it is home to a wide range of medical disciplines, including orthopaedics, the pathologies, ophthalmology, dermatology, radiology, surgical procedures and demonstrations.’ DGMH too, he notes, is highly suited to medical imaging services as it has unique pathology compared to other hospitals in South Africa by virtue of its size, the area it covers, and the population groups it serves.

MIAAVS is very clear on its mission – to serve, achieve and maintain high standards of quality and performance in the production and dissemination of information and scientific knowledge and to accurately document clinical and research achievements.

The services include clinical photography; medical illustration, art and design; and audio-visual and technical services. The department has a staff complement of nine people – the head of department, two medical photographers, one in the art department, three technicians and two in administration.

Talking specifically about clinical photography, Ebrahim says clinical photographs – taken of patients’ physical conditions – are done for several reasons: research, record purposes, clinical, teaching and publications. He outlines the process that must take place to ensure high standards of quality and ethics.
understood. ‘We also have to remember that the operating theatre environment uses gases. We must make sure that there is never a risk of our lighting or photographic equipment interfering with the carefully controlled theatre environment.’ Hyper-efficiency is called for, as is the ability to work as part of the operating theatre team.

Ebrahim points out that medical photography, as a highly specialised field, must be done strictly according to standardised scales of reproduction to ensure that no inaccurate representation can occur. ‘Clinicians often are under the impression that they can do their own medical photography, sometimes even with cell phones (strictly prohibited), but the fact is that less than 1% of those photos will be done the way they ought to be done. It’s also disrespectful of patients’ rights. Some conditions have to be recorded and monitored over years and comparisons cannot be made without any form of standardisation. Every clinical image has a legal implication.’

Within the ambit of clinical photography, the processes available through MIAAVS include infrared and ultraviolet photography. The ultraviolet spectrum

\[\text{Kirlian Photography}
\]
A high voltage photographic technique used to record the energy fields ( aura) in humans.

\[\text{Scanatron Radiographic Reproduction}
\]
The scanatron image (right) reproduces radiographic images with a well modulated overall contrast revealing all the diagnostic information compared to the conventional method (left).
extends from approximately 10nm to 400nm overlapping x-rays and running into the violet end of the visible spectrum and infrared applicable to photography extends from the termination of the red part of the spectrum at about 700nm to a wavelength of about 900nm, this limit being set by the sensitivity of the recording material. ‘Infrared and ultraviolet photography are investigative tools that enable us to discover new facts about the subject,’ says Ebrahim.

There are two distinct forms of ultraviolet photography, direct ultraviolet and ultraviolet fluorescence. In UV fluorescence, the light emitted is always of longer wavelength than the light causing the stimulation, thus releasing for example green, yellow or pink light. Some applications include vitiligo, fluorescein angiography, pigmented naevi, albinism, ichthyosis, scleroderma, chromatography and forensic investigations. In dentistry, UV fluorescence can distinguish between natural enamel and restorative work and can reveal tetracycline uptake.

Infrared radiation has two useful properties when used for medical photography. Firstly, its ability to penetrate the superficial layers of the epidermis and secondly, to reveal structures beneath them. Some applications include venous studies, ophthalmology, gross specimens, dentistry, dermatology, oncology, liver pathology, transilluminography and forensic investigations.

Ebrahim adds that advances and applications are constantly taking place in these fields. This year is in fact infrared photography’s centenary year and the Royal Photographic Society of Britain is hosting several events to commemorate the publication of the first infrared photograph in 1910.

Other photographic processes available include medico-legal, morbid specimen, and forensic photography, as well as photomacrophography, which will produce an image to life-size and at higher magnifications. Special macro lenses, extension tubes, bellows units, photomacrophographic zoom systems, and other specialised equipment is used to achieve various magnification.

The MIAAVS team also offers professional assistance on producing lecture material in various forms from any original. MIAAVS does graphic design and production of general and research posters, technical graphs and illustrations, lecture material, and much more. Medical illustration and digital imaging is also offered.

The audio-visual and technical services department maintains AV equipment and systems in lecture rooms and classrooms and provides professional assistance for technical support at conferences, workshops and special events.

A developing area for this department, says Ebrahim, is the video recording of movement and behavioural disorders, as well as surgical operations. He would like to develop this offering further with a gait laboratory that can help with the analysis of gait disorders and the progression of diseases such as Parkinson’s. ‘A gait laboratory would be extremely useful, not just to this campus, but to medical teaching as a whole,’ believes Ebrahim. ‘At this stage, there is no medical school in South Africa with its own gait lab. We could be the first; we have the infrastructure for it.’

This takes Ebrahim to another of his many pet subjects: developing a training facility in the discipline of medical illustration (medical photography). At present, Ebrahim does selectives for third-year MBChB students in medical photography which gives them an overview of the fascinating research aspect of medicine and the value of photography as well as other postgraduate medical student teaching, but it’s not enough, he maintains.

‘At this stage, people enter this field through general photographic or graphic design professions. There isn’t enough experience in medical photography and there are no training facilities for it in South Africa.

‘I believe that not only for this country, but for the rest of Africa, we could offer world-class training facilities for this specialised field. It’s certainly an excellent opportunity for the University of Limpopo to further contribute to this country’s medical education.’

Medical photography is a fascinating and highly complex field – represented by an exceptionally competent department at Medunsa – but more importantly, it has made a huge and positive difference in the lives of many patients, enabling improved diagnosis and assessment of often impenetrable cases, while also advancing medical and scientific research. In a word, it’s laudable.
Ambe, still only in his mid-thirties, was born in Cameroon in 1974, in the coastal town of Tiko some 50 km from the country’s major port of Douala. After schooling in Tiko, he proceeded to the nearby University of Buea-Cameroon on the first slopes of Mount Cameroon. There, he gained a BSc Honours degree in accounting. But Ambe wanted more. He arrived in South Africa in 1998 and enrolled at Wits where he completed a Masters in Commerce (Accountancy), while performing lecturing duties at the same time. The Tshwane University of Technology in Pretoria awarded him his Doctor of Technology degree in cost and management accounting in 2008.

Ambe’s personal ambition is plain to see. But it is nicely counterbalanced by a serious concern for the realities existing inside the world of accountancy in South Africa. ‘There are 29 000 chartered accountants in the country,’ he points out, ‘but only 4,8 percent of them are black. Add to this serious racial imbalance the fact that vacancy levels in financial management, particularly in government departments, stand at over 15 percent, and you can see immediately where I want to take the Turfloop School of Accounting & Auditing.’

The drive towards broad socio-economic relevance comes through everything that Ambe says – and it is certainly evident in what he does. One of the first things he organised after arriving at Turfloop was a workshop with his staff to begin planning for the period 2010 to 2012. Central to the ensuing discussions was the new School’s relationship with the Thuthuka Project of the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants (SAICA). This project makes use of the Department of Labour’s National Skills Fund to facilitate the entry of historically disadvantaged young people into the accountancy profession. Since 2007, the University of Limpopo, in partnership with the University of Johannesburg, has received over R70-million for this purpose (2010 inclusive). To promote sustainability of the School of Accounting & Auditing and enhance the process of SAICA accreditation there is need to phase out the support from the University of Johannesburg. Ambe is determined to strengthen the Turfloop contribution to the production of students with BCompt degrees (Bachelor of Accountings Sciences) and to work in active partnerships with provincial governments, accounting firms and corporate business.

‘This is not business as usual, I told my team, but business...
unusual. Business extraordinary. We have over 1,300 students in this School, which makes us the biggest academic unit in the whole university (as a department). We also want to be the best. We want to expand. We’re planning to increase our staff complement from 15 full-time to 25. And we want to tackle head-on the challenges that Limpopo and South Africa are facing on financial skills shortage. Some of my staff are saying that it’s a revolution that is happening here.’

Among the innovations that Ambe is planning to introduce are:

Accreditation of the BCompt degree by SAICA (currently this is done through partnership with University of Johannesburg) by December 2011.

Increased connections with the users of accounting expertise – government and business – which could facilitate new partnerships and new funding for the School, as well as increased placement opportunities for graduates.

The creation of some form of enterprise that mixes theory with practice by placing academicians regularly into the real world, with all the obvious reciprocal advantages, not least an increased flow of third-stream income into the School.

Asked why a successful young academic, who must have many career options open to him, had chosen the University of Limpopo, Ambe replied without hesitation:

‘Of course, it’s personal ambition. A Chair is a very senior position for an academic, and I’ve never been the head of a department before. But I see major opportunities here as well. I have always tried to create a definite footprint wherever I go, and there is such a clear-cut challenge here: to uplift black accountants, specifically, and to counter the negative impacts of pessimism.

‘Yes, Afro pessimism among Africans themselves,’ Ambe went on. ‘There’s a syndrome of being African, of being disadvantaged. Too often, it means a lack of discipline and a negative attitude. Anything will do because we’re African. But if there’s one event in recent years that denies all this most eloquently, it must be President Barack Obama, and particularly his acceptance speech. He’s given everyone the hope that Africans can be excellent. But we have to become advocates of our own importance. We have to espouse passion and drive. We have to take the many challenges on our continent and convert them into advantages. My doctoral thesis defence assessors were Australian and German. Why not Senegalese and Kenyan? We need to get the confidence – that’s the missing ingredient – to be the best in the world. Then we will be.’

Inspiring words from a man whose task is now to build a brand new School on the Turfloop campus. But our conversation was curtailed when Ambe rushed off to another meeting.
IS EDUPARK SOON TO GET A HOTEL SCHOOL?

Ask Professor Jo Nel this question, and he answers immediately in the affirmative. ‘This is my baby,’ he says. ‘The hotel would be an out and out training facility, the only one in the province. I’m determined to bring this particular dream to fruition.’

Nel is the CEO of Edupark, the section 21 company that has brought higher education and training into the heart (or at least onto the outskirts) of Polokwane. Strangely, he’s also a professor of English and General Literary Studies. He did his PhD at Potchefstroom, at one time one of the premier Afrikaans universities in the country, where he studied modern English drama, focusing in particular on such well-known playwrights as Harold Pinter, renowned for his use of understatement and the long pause in dialogue, and Joe Orton whose outstanding black comedies were written and performed in the 1960s.

An obvious question arises. What’s a specialist in 20th century English drama doing managing a facility whose primary client is the University of Limpopo’s postgraduate business school, the Turfloop Graduate School of Leadership?

Nel answers in his affable way. ‘I think I’ve got the best job in the world. I keep my English links – I’m currently supervising two PhD students, a task which is deeply satisfying to me – and here at Edupark I’m as deeply involved in the hurly-burly world of running a business that must sustain itself – in fact, it must grow or disappear. Actually, I was seconded here in October 2003 on a temporary basis, but now I’m definitely permanent.’

Nel tells something of the start of Edupark. It had been intended by the university authorities as a new beginning for the university, a conscious attempt to create a centre for educational excellence in Limpopo province by providing a venue for innovative programmes by various educational institutions, not only the University of Limpopo. The facility came into being, on land donated by the Limpopo local authority, in the late 1990s. The university had put up R20-million. For this reason, the independent Edupark was – and still is – governed by a board chaired by the university’s Vice-Chancellor and dominated by other senior university staff.

One of the reasons why Nel stayed was the high level of support he has received from the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Mahlo Mokgalong. ‘My relationship with him has been crucial,’ Nel admits. ‘He has trusted me, and he’s given me a great deal of freedom to exploit the opportunities that have come our way here.’

He’s also quick to praise the commitment of his staff to explain the success of Edupark under his management. ‘Each person (he has a staff of six) feels that she or he has ownership here. This high level of commitment by the staff has added huge value to the facility and the services we offer.’

Nel’s success in running and developing Edupark can be gauged by looking at the surpluses that were made in 2003 when he took over – R200 000 per annum – in comparison to the R1,2-million projected for 2010. ‘These surpluses,’ he explains, ‘are used to
Zone 06 – HOTEL SCHOOL
EDUPARK MASTERPLAN PROPOSAL
completed his Masters, before enrolling once again at Potchefstroom for his doctoral studies on Orton.

Another plan that Nel has for Edupark is to house within it what sounds like the equivalent of a provincial film office. Nel himself has written several filmscripts and been involved in several productions, and the idea is to create a resource at Edupark that would promote the various settings in Limpopo to film producers around the world, and that would be able to supply visiting film-makers with camera and sound equipment, editing facilities, as well as a pool of locally trained personnel. The economic implications for the province are obvious. Less obvious, perhaps, is that such a development could lead to the foundations of a rural film school being laid at Edupark.

Closer to fruition is Nel’s idea of establishing a hotel training school to add to the facilities at Edupark – and to Polokwane more generally. There’s space enough and to spare. The building of a hotel on the corner of Dorp Street and the Tzaneen bypass, would add significant value to the existing educational centre. Hundreds of students coming in from all over the northern parts of the country as well as the SADC region need to be housed close to the training centre. And Nel points out that the hotel could also serve as temporary doctors’ quarters for the tertiary training hospital that is soon to be built just to the north of Edupark’s existing campus.

When *Limpopo Leader* asks Nel how soon it will be before the hotel will be open for lunch, he replies: ‘Just as soon as you’ve helped us to raise the necessary funding.’

On a more serious note, Nel says concept plans have been drawn up and he’s already meeting with potential funders. ‘Once the money has been secured, it’ll take about two years to realise this part of our dream for Edupark,’ he says. ‘Then, yes certainly, I’ll be happy to invite you to lunch.’

Job-specific education and training; a special focus on postgraduate courses in management and development; a fully operational hotel serving as a training school; a film office with the potential to initiate a rural film school – all this is part of the composite Edupark dream. It’s difficult to imagine a better person to be its custodian.
Secure your future

Tsireledzani vhumatshele hanu
Tihlayiseleni vumundzuku bya n’wina
Šireletša bokamoso bja gago
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