THE VISION GETS TEETH:
Rural development and innovation hub.

WOMEN OF THE UNIVERSITY
SEE PAGE 18
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PAY ATTENTION TO SCHOOL EDUCATION

I am 18 years old and have just passed matric. Now I am attempting to study further in a science faculty. I have read the article on teacher shortages in Limpopo Leader 7, but I wouldn’t consider following the education career path. In fact, only two out of the 45 learners in my matric class are interested in going into education, and the rest into accountancy, computers, science and mathematics. Why is this? It’s because there’s no money in education (compared to the other careers), and also because the government and the universities are focused on science and mathematics. But the point is that the teaching of science and mathematics has to start in the schools, where teacher shortages, especially in those subjects, have become acute. What is the solution? It is important that school education is not neglected. Don’t you think if a teacher earned as much as an engineer a lot more people in my position would be interested in school teaching as a career? This would mean more high quality teachers and an increase in learner pass rates, not least in those very subjects, maths and science, that everyone is getting so agitated about. Bring attention to education!

Kholofelo Malefahlo
Kempton Park

Editor: Letter condensed.

REQUEST FOR SUBSCRIPTION

I am a former University of Limpopo graduate who is currently working as Principal Auxiliary Service Officer at the Department of Water Affairs, Mpumalanga. I have found Limpopo Leader very informative, and it has awakened me to spread my academic horizons to be a great leader. Please send the magazine to the address written on the covering letter. Thanks for an enriching magazine, and I can’t wait to join you.

Kind regards,
Bambo N Martin

Editor:

Thanks for subscribing. You have immediately been placed on our mailing list, and will receive Limpopo Leader 26 in February/March next year. Meanwhile, we have posted off a few back numbers of the magazine for your enjoyment. We are sure you will also enjoy the new alumni website which should be up and running early in 2012. Make sure you register as a friend on the site’s FaceBook facility, to keep up to date with the latest developments from your alma mater.

Address your letters to The Editor, Limpopo Leader
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EDITORIAL

WOMEN FIND THEMSELVES in the spotlight in this edition of Limpopo Leader. It doesn’t take a dose of rocket science to realise that women represent 50 percent of a country’s intellectual potential. The University of Limpopo has certainly realised that. Even more important, however, is that the university’s women themselves understand the implications and are working to fully emancipate themselves from any lingering discrimination. There is work to be done, as can be evidenced by this statement, with which our coverage begins. ‘Female numerical superiority at student level is reversed in university staff complements. More serious is that the qualification levels of female academics and their contributions to research are substantially lower than those of males.’ But there’s also a lot of positivity and determination expressed in the material presented here.

Also highlighted in this issue is the University of Limpopo’s position in the wider world. Did you know that there are 8 816 public universities in the world, 268 of which are on the African continent. SADC has 76 university, including South Africa’s 23. These figures place our university in a quite sombre perspective, and yet it is a perspective that will of necessity inform our future. We must increasingly consider ourselves to be part of a much larger team. As a prominent academic is quoted as saying: ‘The problems of the twenty-first century can’t be solved by one institution, not even by one country on its own.’

There’s a lot more of interest besides. The Community-Based Service Learning programme launched at Medunsa in 2010 is paying dividends in terms of student learning and dramatic health improvements in local communities. Read about the current situation in a programme that brings together local needs with professional expertise in a new educational dynamic.

Grabbing your attention will be the detailed description of the university’s Rural Development and Innovation Hub, which after years of planning is finally getting into gear. The Hub (the new director is quoted as saying) will give real teeth to our vision and mission. ‘It will provide our province and our SADC region with sorely needed academic attention. And it will enhance our standing internationally, and give real meaning to our intention to be a world-class institution serving the development needs of our continent.’

Of particular interest to educationists will be one of the letters published in this issue. It is from an 18-year-old matriculant from Kempton Park who seems to understand very well the interdependencies between school and university education, and the importance of developing a cohort of high quality schoolteachers to ensure a supply of high quality school leavers to fuel the universities and the country’s economy as a whole. Well done, Kholofelo Malefahlo: we’ve given you two free Limpopo Leaders to keep you interested in these and similar topics.

NEXT ISSUE

WHAT IS WELL-KNOWN is that the University of Limpopo is a rural-based institution, with a largely rural-based student population. Who are these rural students? Where are they from? What are their peculiar disadvantages? And what are their aspirations? Find out by reading the cover story in Limpopo Leader 27.
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GREAT RESULTS for community-based learning for health professionals and LISTEN IN AT A COMMUNITY MEETING
Twice in recent months Limpopo Leader has been mentioned in international dispatches. The first was in a report from someone in New York who came across copies of the University of Limpopo magazine at the South African Embassy in that illustrious American city. And a few weeks later, the Limpopo Leader production team received an SMS from a senior member of the university who reported sightings of several editions of the magazine at the Embassy in Brussels. Several hundred copies of each issue are sent to the Department of Foreign Affairs in Pretoria for distribution into South African embassies and consulates around the world. It’s gratifying to know that the arrangement is working.
THE SIMILARITIES BETWEEN two common English words – ‘university’ and ‘universality’ – provide us with an important sense of the position of institutions of higher learning in relation to the world at large. The similarities suggest that academia, at its best, is not limited by any one political or religious credo; that learning is universal, and that the widest possible interchange of ideas for the building of knowledge is an indispensable part of a university’s function.

As long ago as the 6th and 7th centuries AD, Persian institutions had, by the influence of Greece to the west and India to the east, adopted what some commentators have called ‘a transnational scientific-cultural approach’.

Such an approach has tended to characterise all the oldest universities in the world, where the best brains brought an accumulation of knowledge, from a wide variety of sources, to the search for solutions to the world’s most complicated problems. Of course, it was the success of this approach that gave rise to notions of academic freedom and autonomy from the ruling dogmas of the day. And of course it was these notions that in turn gave rise to the idea that universities were ‘ivory towers’ somehow floating above the general concerns of the societies in which they operated.

Mercifully, the ‘ivory tower’ idea has run its course. Throughout the world, and not least in South Africa, universities are increasingly being seen as transformers of international knowledge for local demand – and at the same time of using local conditions to add to the international pool of knowledge.

The mission of the University of Limpopo – to be a world-class university providing solutions to Africa’s problems – is a perfect example of this trend. In practical terms, the involvement of the university in cutting-edge genome sequencing science for understanding southern African susceptibility to certain diseases shows how an institution of higher learning can focus international scientific advancements onto specifically local conditions.

So the idea of a university’s position in the wider world is of fundamental importance to the performance of the university itself. To rephrase the 17th century English poet, John Donne, to our current purposes: no university is an island, entire of itself; every university is a piece of the continent (of higher learning).
But just how big is that continent? And, as importantly, what is its geology?

The history of learning, which describes the geology, can be traced back to the time when humanity had begun to settle on the land, and then in villages and finally in towns and those cities that gave rise to the great civilisations of the world. The Platonic Academy or Peripatetic School, started by Plato's pupil, Aristotle, was launched 387 years before the birth of Christ, and had a curriculum that included logic, ethics, politics, poetics, rhetoric, biology, zoology and metaphysics.

One Chinese university was established in 3 AD, and the precursor of the still-operating Nanjing University (also in China) was established in 259 AD. The history of Islamic madrassas (educational institutions) dates back to 859 AD when one was established at Fez in Morocco. In Europe, the first university to see the light of day was in the Italian city of Bologna in 1088, nearly 950 years ago, while the first English-medium university was Oxford, established in 1167. Other venerable European institutions include the Sorbonne in Paris (1200) and the university in Lisbon (1290). The majority of European countries had universities by 1500.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the oldest American universities include Harvard (1636), Yale (1701) and Princeton (1746). South African universities are of course much younger, the oldest being the University of Cape Town, which started life in 1829 as the South African College.

Now for that first question about the size of the continent of higher learning to which the University of Limpopo (UL) is attached: how large actually is it?

Let's start at the provincial level. Our university is one of two in Limpopo province, the other being the University of Venda. Nationally, as is well known, UL is one of the 23 institutions that emerged after the post-1994 size and shape debates and the various mergings that resulted from them. The announcement last year that Turffloop and Medunsa, which merged in 2005, will uncouple to become two separate universities once again, means that UL will be one of 24 fully fledged South African higher education institutions. As Vice-Chancellor Professor Mahlo Mokgalong asserts: 'We’re currently one of a team of 23 public universities in South Africa, and we are no less than any of them.'

Now we must see what our ‘continent of higher learning’ looks like at a regional level. In southern Africa, there are 76 public universities operating in the fifteen countries that go to make up the SADC bloc. If South Africa is omitted, that’s 53 universities operating in the 14 remaining countries. Zimbabwe and Tanzania have nine each; Angola seven; Madagascar six; the DRC and Mozambique five each; Zambia three; Botswana, Malawi and Mauritius two each; and Lesotho, Namibia and Swaziland one each.

What about the whole of Africa? As at September 2011, the Association of African Universities (AAU) had 268 member institutions from 46 countries. The actual number of universities could be more, of course, but even taking the AAU membership count means that there are nearly 200 universities in those countries to the north of SADC. Here are some of the country tallies: Nigeria has 49 universities; Sudan, before the recent division, had 25; Egypt and Ghana have 15 each; Kenya has 13; and Libya has eight.

But Africa’s contribution to the world total is very small. In fact, Africa’s 268 institutions constitute only just over three percent of the total number of universities in the world. That figure is given as 8 816 universities across 203 countries – and that’s a pretty large continent of higher learning and knowledge of which the University of Limpopo constitutes one tiny piece.

But just how big is that continent? And, as importantly, what is its geology?
TUCKED AWAY ON the second floor of Turfloop’s main administration building is the University of Limpopo’s International Relations Office. Only two administrative people staff the office: a secretary to the manager, Priscilla Mothiba, and the manager himself, Morwamoche Ntwampe.

The modesty of the accommodation and the staffing arrangements requires some explanation. During the apartheid era, it was widely considered unnecessary for ‘Bantu’ institutions of higher education, when they were established in support of the policy of so-called separate development, to have international relationships. So it was with the University of the North, established as a college in 1959 with 87 students and proclaimed an autonomous university ten years later. Only in the late 1990s was an international relations office established for a university that now has a student population (on both campuses) in excess of 18 000.

Ntwampe takes up the story: ‘I was a senior lecturer in the psychology department when, in 1997, I was asked to manage a USAID project that dealt with tertiary educational linkages. My task was to link the University of the North (now Limpopo) with other universities abroad, particularly in the United States. It was out of this work that the International Relations Office was established. I set it up and ran it myself. Only in 2004 did the university give me a secretary.’

The main objectives of the office focus on two related directions. The first, like the original USAID project, is to connect to universities in other countries, and to maintain existing international relationships. This objective includes responsibility for MOUs, which are generally initiated by individual or faculty groupings of academics, and the logistics associated with the now rapidly increasing student and staff exchanges with various institutions all over the world. The second focus deals with international students who come to the University of Limpopo to study.

‘Currently (at the end of 2011) there are around 350 of these on the university’s books,’ Ntwampe explains. ‘Most come from neighbouring countries and from our
SADC neighbours. But there are also students from further afield: from Gabon, Uganda, Nigeria, the DRC, Ethiopia and Sudan. We also have three students from Turkey and one from India,’ he adds.

The list of what the International Relations Office is able to do for students from other countries is impressive. The Office helps with study permits and health insurance. ‘We concentrate on making them feel that the university is a home away from home,’ explains Ntwampe. ‘We organise a welcoming function every year, and we run a mentoring programme that pairs new students with older ones. We also organise excursions to wherever the students want. In all our dealings with our international students, we emphasise that their difference isn’t the most important thing. Service to others is. The students have responded. Our current international student body has adopted a local orphanage, and are raising support in funding and kind. They also give lessons at schools in the communities surrounding the Turfloop campus.’
There’s a subscription fee attached to joining the University of Limpopo International Students Association, and a small levy is added to the fees paid by international students. A portion of this money is used to finance *L’etudiant*, the international students special magazine.

Odozor Marcus, a 4th year law student from Nigeria, edits the 30-pager, twice yearly magazine. He is also president of the International Students Association. Asked why he had come all the way to Limpopo to study, he replies candidly: ‘Because it’s easier to get into a university in South Africa than in Nigeria.’ In answer to the same question, his vice-president, Samson Mbewe from Zambia, answers: ‘Because there are only limited opportunities for tertiary study back home, and the universities are plagued by a great many strikes.’

For International Students Association secretary, Zimbabwean 3rd year computer science student, Faith Mawishi, says simply: ‘I wanted a new experience.’ And the Association’s project manager, Narcisse Nheta Mbaki, explains that he had ‘got stuck’ in South Africa while travelling through. ‘So I decided to study.’ He’s a 3rd year BSc student majoring in mathematics and applied mathematics.

Ntwampe explains that international student numbers have been rising steadily in recent years, and that he believed they would continue to do so. ‘Our existing students act as ambassadors,’ he says.

There are also major changes afoot, he predicts. ‘The International Relations Office is bound to expand,’ he says. ‘New perceptions of our position in the world are here to stay. Therefore, increasing importance is being attached to international relationships. As an example of this, I accompanied (in 2011) the premier of Limpopo province and a group of provincial businessmen to India. The upshot of this visit was that we, together with the University of Venda and the provincial authorities, signed an MOU with the Punjab Agricultural University.’ Asked if he had enjoyed his visit to India, Ntwampe said he had been enthralled by this new and vital world. ‘But the food was exceedingly spicy. I just could not eat it.’
MEDUNSA’S INTERNATIONAL UL AND THE WIDER WORLD

Timothy Ekosse and Eunice Modiba

MEDUNSA IS AN international student friendly institution – with support structures in place to take care of them from day one, and activities and programmes scheduled for their edification and enjoyment throughout the year.

It hasn’t been easy achieving this status. The post for an International Student Affairs Administrator has been vacant since 2007, which led to a hiatus in international student activities in 2008. Then in 2009, some international students, together with SRC Governance Administrator, Eunice Modiba, who took over the duties of the International Student Officer along with her existing responsibilities, started rebuilding the international student affairs office.

The International Student Affairs programme was then given a boost in 2010 with the huge focus on the Soccer World Cup – and was able to regain some of the ground that had been lost when the office closed.

Over the past couple of years the programme has been largely successful, though with some difficulties, such as decision-making, which is a challenge as all decisions are made on the Turfloop campus and can be held up for any number of reasons.

Programme growth

But the enthusiasm, will and determination of Modiba, International Student Directorate President, Timothy Ekosse, and others, is seeing exciting developments in international student affairs at Medunsa. International student numbers had dropped since the merger to form the University of Limpopo because of uncertainty about the future of Medunsa. Today it has between 200 and 300 international students. Preference is given to students from SADC countries, who make up about 50 percent of the international student contingent, about 30 percent from the rest of Africa, and the remaining 20 percent from the rest of the world. ‘It’s positive for the university to have a strong international student contingent – of about eight to 10 percent of the student population. It ensures the university is represented and marketed globally,’ comments Ekosse.

Ekosse – who comes from Cameroon, has a mother from Nigeria, and grew up in Botswana – is passionate about the legacy that Medunsa has as a medical school in Africa. He was encouraged to attend Medunsa by his cousin, who completed her MBChB degree in 2004, and enthused about the uniqueness of Medunsa with its first world education standards and exposure to third world diseases. He has been at the university since 2007, when he started his B.Pharm. Last year he started his M.Sc (Med) Pharmacy, which he will complete this year.
**Duties**

Between his and Modiba’s offices, their duties include providing support structures for international students; assisting them with integration into the area – culturally and socially; instituting an international student exchange programme; maintaining relations with national and international bodies for international students; planning, organising, and running events and functions for the international students; and trying to ensure participation or attendance at international conferences and seminars – on a number of topics of interest and not limited to medical healthcare.

Last year the exchange programme saw about 20 students from Medunsa being part of exchange programmes with universities in Europe, Africa, and Asia. ‘There are two types of exchange programmes – academic and cultural experiences,’ explains Ekosse. When a student comes to Medunsa on an academic exchange programme, they simply resume classes here, while the Medunsa student resumes classes at the university that student has come from. In a cultural exchange – which is usually for post-graduate students – we show the visiting student our communities, what we do in the clinics and various other aspects of our activities here at Medunsa.

The Medunsa international student body is also responsible for building relations with other international students associations, such as the International Medical Students Association, which hosts about 300 member associations; as well as other international student university associations. Modiba and Ekosse are particularly proud of the fact that Medunsa is the first medical university in South Africa to include South Africans in its international student association. Ekasse explains, ‘It doesn’t make sense not to have the host country represented in an international association. The fact is that international students need to integrate into life in South Africa, which is more difficult if their activities are always separate from local student activities.’

**2012 plans**

The international student affairs team is extremely excited about the activities it has scheduled for 2012 – and everything is in place for successful events.

The main event, which is tentatively scheduled for May, is Africa Day, which will be held at the Sports Complex with indoor and outdoor activities. The theme of the day will be ‘Africa – Pioneers of Tomorrow’ and is already gleaning support and participation from renowned organisations such as World Health Organisation, NEPAD (New Partnership for Africa’s Development), United Nations representatives, various embassies, and many other local and international organisations and representatives. Participants will all be given a certificate of attendance.

The international students will co-ordinate the event and will also have the opportunity to showcase their own countries’ cultures. ‘We’re absolutely delighted that everyone at Medunsa is behind our Africa Day event and is giving whatever support they can. It promises to be an excellent event that we believe will go a long way to asserting Medunsa’s position as a leading, unique, and excellent medical school,’ Ekosse emphasises.

He believes that Medunsa produces leaders because one cannot be a healthcare professional without being a leader. These skills are honed along with the excellent education that is offered at the institution.

**Calling alumni**

Modiba and Ekosse are also determined to reach past international students who are Medunsa alumni, as well as all Medunsa alumni, to actively get involved in activities on campus – such as Africa Day – and to show support for this university that has such a powerful legacy of contributing to health care in South Africa – and around the world. They believe Medunsa has a future that holds promise.

‘We’re living in an integrated society and a global village. It’s up to us to make the most of the opportunities we have. There’s always something we can do to improve the situations we find ourselves in – and it’s a privilege to be able to do it,’ says Ekosse philosophically and with great expectations for big things to happen at Medunsa.
‘GLOBALISATION AS A force has changed the way in which research operates,’ says Professor Rachmond Howard, the University of Limpopo’s research director. ‘The problems of the twenty-first century can’t be solved by one institution, not even by one country on its own.’

In fact, Howard goes on, globalisation has introduced a whole new dynamic into the world: it has made the world much smaller, and countries and blocs of countries more interdependent. ‘To see this new dynamic in action, think of some of the most pressing contemporary challenges. There’s climate change; economic recession and the crisis in capitalism; the HIV/AIDS pandemic; and the problem of diseases of lifestyle, at one time confined to the developed world, which are now sweeping through the developing world as rapidly as the fast-food franchises.’

The new dynamic requires a new strategic response. In a nutshell, this response revolves around an aggressive pursuit of international linkages through partnerships and memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with overseas institutions. There are several such partnerships recently entered into by the University of Limpopo.

Two important recent examples are described hereunder.

In 2010, the University of Limpopo entered into one of the most significant international collaborations ever to involve both main campuses. The Flemish Inter Universities Council University Development Co-operation (VLIR-UOS) programme is a partnership with several universities in Belgium. For an initial five-year period, there’ll be around R34-million available, with the likelihood of a lot more to come from co-funding. The programme forms a bridge between development co-operation and higher education, between highly developed Flanders and the developing South, between policymakers and people on the ground. It brings together academics and experts from different locations and disciplines, and also provides a platform for researchers and development actors in Belgium to interact with their counterparts in Limpopo. The official slogan of the programme is **Human Wellness in the Context of Global Change – Finding Solutions for Rural Africa.** Global change refers to the interlinked changes that are altering the earth at an unprecedented and accelerating rate. Human wellness, in terms of the VLIR programme response, means four special foci in particular: human wellness, societal wellness, environmental wellness and economic wellness. These four
areas describe four of the VLIR-UOS project clusters, the fifth being concerned with management and analysis.

A remarkable partnership has developed between the University of Limpopo and the J Craig Venter Institute (JCVI) in San Diego. This American-based Institute is the foremost human genomics research centre in the world, and the university in Limpopo province is being seen as the key to making the new technologies (of human genome sequencing and interpretation) accessible to many millions of people living in the SADC region of Africa. A high-powered workshop, jointly organised by the JCVI, the USA’s National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease and the University of Limpopo, was held at Turfloop at the end of May 2011. An MOU has also been signed between the university and the JCVI, with several important collaborations in the pipeline. The chances of a topflight human genomics unit, with an emphasis on interpretative skills, being established in Limpopo are extremely high. In fact, one senior university official says candidly: ‘Once our new medical school is operational here, the establishment of a genomics interpretative centre is definitely on the cards. It will be essential for the production of new Africa-centred knowledge. It’s a unique opportunity for us. There can be no doubt that such a centre would put the university’s new medical school immediately and very firmly on the international map.’

There are a great many other partnerships in operation throughout both the Turfloop and Medunsa campuses. Taking only those that have been established since 2010, the list is impressive:

- **The Erasmus Mundus Exchange Programme** has brought the University of Limpopo into direct contact with a consortium of European universities, including Radboud University in the Netherlands; the University of Duisburg-Essen and the University of Munster in Germany; Jagiellonian University in Poland; University of Poitiers in France; and the University of Siena in Italy. ‘This exchange programme provides a great opportunity to advance research capacity at our university,’ Howard says.

- **The Department of Public Health in the School of Health Care Sciences** (Medunsa) has established research collaboration with the University of Eastern Finland.

- **The School of Mathematics and Computer Science** (Turfloop) has signed several international MOUs with institutions in Zimbabwe, the United States and Australia. ‘I believe it is essential,’ says School director Professor Maseka Lesaona, ‘that for a university like ours, operating in a disadvantaged location, that we open ourselves up to influences from outside. This is one of the ways that we can fulfil our mission of becoming “globally competitive”. Our MOUs are resulting in staff and student exchanges that are hugely beneficial.’

Howard confirms this point of view. ‘Staff and student exchanges,’ he asserts, ‘afford the opportunity to local people to work with some of the best academics in the world. Obviously, this enriches the individual student or academic. It also tends to enrich facilities at our own university by increasing a global outlook and entrenching a culture of learning and research.’

Another advantage of looking outwards into the international academic landscape, is that in collaborating with overseas universities, the reputation of the University of Limpopo and its staff is enhanced; it increases the institution’s profile on the world stage; and it opens up a variety of funding opportunities. Third-stream income possibilities are also increased, not only through copyrighted publications and intellectual property but also through the registration of patents and partnerships with manufacturing businesses both at home and abroad.

‘There is undoubtedly a new breath of enthusiasm for research blowing through the University of Limpopo,’ Howard concludes, ‘and an outward-looking stance, a willingness to work with the best in the world all over the world will pay dividends when it comes to measuring the contribution made by our university in the fields of research and the production of higher degrees.’
TO BEGIN WITH, we must remind ourselves of the vision of the University of Limpopo. It is ‘to be a leading African university epitomising excellence and global competitiveness in addressing the needs of rural communities through innovative ideas’. In other words, the university has committed itself to making a contribution to sustainable development in South Africa, the SADC region, and the African continent in general. It aims to do this by producing graduates capable of contributing significantly to development, particularly the development of rural communities. Supporting this intention is a commitment to teaching/learning, research and community engagement that combines to find ‘solutions for Africa’.

The key words in all this are obviously: Africa, rural, community, development, solutions. The university is perfectly positioned, geographically and intellectually, to make significant contributions in this direction. But in practical terms, there’s quite a disjuncture between intent and application.

This was the opinion of the Institutional Audit conducted at the university in 2010 in terms of the requirements of the Higher Education Act of 1997. While praising the seriousness with which the university had prepared for the audit, the audit panel isolated several key areas where improvements needed to be made. The first related to the lack of influence exerted by the university’s avowed vision and mission on the programmes and curricula offered. Leading inevitably from this was the second observation: that any real organic relationship between the three elements of the university’s core business, namely teaching/learning, research and community engagement, was generally lacking. There seemed to be no sustained focus that united the separate elements.

Not so surprising, then, to find a new entity being developed on the Turfloop campus, but encompassing the entire university. It’s called the University of Limpopo’s Rural and Innovation Development Hub. To be fair to the university planners, the idea for the Hub preceded by several years the Institutional Audit. But it was only early in 2011 that planning moved more decisively to implementation – and the most important part of the early implementation stage was the appointment (in February 2011) of the first Hub executive director in the person of Professor Naftali Mollel.

‘Technically,’ he says, ‘I’ve been doing this kind of work – rural development and community engagement – all along. Nevertheless, to develop the Hub into what we envisage for it, is a real challenge.’
Tanzanian-born Mollel is perfectly suited to the job. After gaining a BSc Honours degree in Agriculture at the University of Dar es Salaam in 1982, he went to the United States to further his studies. At the University of Illinois (Urbana) he gained a Masters, and then a PhD in agricultural extension and education. After working in agriculture for some years in America and Tanzania, he came to South Africa in 1996 to join the University of the North (now Limpopo) as a senior lecturer, and finally as a School director and then acting Dean of the Faculty of Science and Agriculture, a position he held until 2008. During his time in the Faculty he successfully launched the university’s Centre for Rural Community Empowerment, and subsequently he has acted as CEO of the Turffloop-based National Community Water and Sanitation Training Institute.

It is interesting to recall that in his Dean’s comments on the Faculty of Science and Agriculture that appeared in the university’s 2008 Annual Report, Mollel referred to the already mooted Rural Development and Innovation Hub by stressing that once it had been established, it should be rapidly consolidated. ‘International networks must be established, and inter-faculty research projects launched. Service learning modules should also be developed: this will take students into the community for degree credits while at the same time delivering community service through practical projects and research. In this way, community outreach becomes part of the curriculum.’

The man who wrote that over three years ago, now has the opportunity to put these ideas into practice.

‘Most universities,’ he says, ‘have similar core functions to ours. But most universities, while concentrating on the teaching/learning and research functions, improving them with constant monitoring and evaluation procedures, tend to relegate the third core function, community engagement, to unstructured and ad hoc activities. This has been the case at our university as well. And here, as we have already seen, there is the added challenge of aligning our teaching and research more closely with our avowed vision and mission.

‘So the Hub’s task is straightforward – and at the same time central to the success of the university as a whole. The Hub’s task is concerned with a more unified inter-faculty focus, with more integration of effort and above all with community engagement that is no longer an optional extra but that is central to the way we teach and do research.’
But how will all these fine (and eminently sensible) ideas be put into practice? In response to this question, Mollel outlines a set of steps that will require to be taken for the Hub to be a success.

The first step will be a motivational workshop (or several workshops) for university academic and administrative staff, intended to create an intellectual foundation for the intended integration of university activities and their closer alignment with the institution’s vision and mission. In particular, the prevailing silo culture in faculties and schools will need to be deconstructed and replaced by a team or interdisciplinary approach. After people have embraced the new mindset, the second step can be taken.

The second step will involve an audit of existing community engagement and research projects. Do they address the vision and mission? Are they relevant to the needs of communities? By conducting an audit, it will be a simpler matter to establish where the gaps in university activity actually are.

At the same time, several key projects across the university will be brought under the direct control of Mollel's Hub. These are:

- The Limpopo IDC Nguni Cattle Development Project, and its Mpumalanga counterpart
- The National Community Water and Sanitation Training Institute, which has trained thousands of people (including around 500 BSc graduates) to work in the water provision sector
- The Water Quality Testing Laboratory, which is a joint venture between the Capricorn District Municipality and the university
- The DST-funded Community-University Partnership Programme, which maps community engagement impacts at Turfloop
- The Centre for Rural Community Empowerment.

‘Just to have these projects talking more directly to one another will be a major step forward,’ Mollel says.

It is intended initially to staff the Hub with two facilitator analysts at professorial level (who have a willingness seriously to explore interdisciplinary approaches, who have proven problem-solving abilities, and a commitment to community); two researchers at post doctoral level; four student assistants (preferably at Masters and Doctoral level); a principal administrative officer (who will double as PA to the executive director) and several administrative officers. The Hub will also have an Advisory Board with representation from all four faculties, as well as from various university service departments.

One of the key initiatives that will provide real teeth to the Hub’s intentions will be to encourage faculties to include active rural development ‘service learning modules’ into existing subjects and programmes. This means that students will be allocated credits for working in communities and with communities. ‘They won’t be conducting
research, but they’ll be finding out what communities feel needs research,’ Mollel explains.

This initiative is coupled to step three in the Hub’s plan of action. This is to conduct workshops with communities, coupled with approaches to provincial government departments and to the national Department of Trade and Industry. The central question behind these activities will be: where can the university be most helpful in applying its new ‘rural development and innovation approach’?

There are already plans afoot to develop a variety of short courses designed to provide strategic skills directly into the community. At the other end of the spectrum, a Masters programme in rural development is being developed through the Hub that will be ‘problem oriented’, ‘hands on’ and ‘research focussed’. The programme will comprise three core modules: research methodology, rural sociology, and rural development policy. Then students will go into the field for several months of what Mollel calls ‘exploratory research’ before deciding on an actual research topic for their Masters dissertation.

There’s a great deal more up Mollel’s sleeve that will manifest as the Hub establishes itself (It became operational in January this year). For a full list, see the insert entitled The Hub’s agenda on the right). Suffice to mention here the plan to establish a Bureau of Consultancy Services inside the Hub. The function of this Section 21 not for profit company would be to generate third stream income for the university and financial self-sustainability for the Hub. The Bureau’s job would be to market the interdis- ciplinary development skills that will accumulate within the university, to tender for government and private sector contracts, and to oversee all design and consultancy contracts that will result from this new marketing thrust.

Last word from Mollel: ‘The Rural Development and Innovation Hub will give real teeth to our vision and mission. It will provide our province and our SADC region with sorely needed academic attention. And it will enhance our standing internationally, and give real meaning to our intention to be a world-class institution serving the development needs of our continent.’
UNIVERSITY WOMEN

SOME BASIC GENDER FACTS

The female numerical superiority at student level is reversed in university staff complements. More serious is that the qualification levels of female academics and their contributions to research are substantially lower than those of males. Why?

‘A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write...’ Thus did English novelist Virginia Woolf begin her famous essay on the unequal gender playing fields for women writers and intellectuals that still pertained in the late 1920s. A lot of water has passed under the bridge since then. The impediments to female achievement and excellence are these days more subtle. We don’t exactly exclude women from our libraries anymore; nevertheless there is something about Woolf’s defiance that must still strike a chord among many women academics working in South Africa today. ‘Lock up your libraries if you like,’ Woolf declared on behalf of all women everywhere, ‘but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind.’

IN THE SUMMER of 2005, Limpopo Leader 6 carried a collection of articles under the generic headline of ‘The New Wave’. ‘They’re young, they’re black and they’re women’ was how the New Wave was defined; and a number of highly qualified academics were interviewed. Their collective voice was unmistakable: they wanted to strengthen higher education in South Africa. ‘Rather than simply benefiting from the transformation efforts of others,’ one New Waver declared, ‘we are seeking to transform the academic world we inhabit.’

Now, seven years and 20 editions of Limpopo Leader later, the determination remains – and there have been significant contributions from women as the University of Limpopo has climbed beyond its own apartheid past.

But a great deal still needs to be done. In the pages that follow, readers will learn about the progress being made to fully integrate women into the research structures of the university; they’ll meet some of the front runners; and they’ll encounter some of the impediments still standing in the way of women taking their full and unfettered place in the world of higher learning and knowledge generation upon which the country and region so heavily depends if sustainable progress is to be achieved.

Dwell for a moment on some of the basic facts relating to the position of women in academia in South Africa and the SADC region more generally.

A glance at student enrolment figures provides a view of the basic terrain. In SADC, male students easily outnumber their female counterparts. According to SARUA’s1 profile of higher education in the region, published early in 2009, the percentage split of total enrolments (excluding South Africa) is 63 to 37 in favour of males. Not surprisingly perhaps, the

1 Southern African Regional Universities Association
more advanced countries (like Mauritius or Botswana) achieve gender parity more readily than those countries still locked into traditional rural mores or social turmoil (like the DRC or Zimbabwe).

When breaking the overall enrolments (excluding South Africa) into the various disciplines some interesting division-of-labour trends occur. Males dominate the science, engineering and technology category to the tune of 72 percent to 28 percent; and the management, business and law category by 60 to 40. The split in the humanities is 59 to 41. Even in the health sciences, women are in a minority with 42 percent of the enrolments.

The figures for South Africa are markedly different. Here, female university students outnumber males by 54 to 46. And only in the science, engineering and technology category do males predominate – but not overwhelmingly.

Upon this foundation of student enrolment we could expect to find far greater gender parity in the academic and research staff patterns at South African universities. But the 54/46 female superiority at student level is reversed to 44/56 in favour of males in university staff complements. More serious perhaps is that the qualification levels of female academics and their contributions to research are substantially lower than those of males.

What are the reasons for this? And what’s happening specifically at the University of Limpopo to redress these wasteful imbalances? Now we invite you to turn the page to discover some of the answers.
DR JESIKA SINGH has been a busy woman since her appointment as the Research Developer at the University of Limpopo. But this hasn’t prevented her from keeping a special eye out for the women researchers on both campuses. It’s one area where the potential for research growth is particularly large; and that’s primarily because the level of research activity among female academics is particularly low.

Here are some of the facts. Although the gender split among the total academic staff complement of 872 (in 2010) is only 55 percent to 45 percent in favour of males, the research performance tells a very different story. Only just over 30 percent of the subsidised research outputs were awarded to women researchers. The faculty breakdowns are equally informative. Women fared best in the Humanities where they achieved 60 percent of the research output. The performances of women researchers in the other faculties were 37 percent in the Health Sciences, less than 2.5 percent in Management and Law, and only 13 percent in Science and Agriculture.

‘In spite of these recent figures,’ says Singh, ‘the trend for women is upwards. Over the past decade or so, the female contribution has risen from a mere 16 percent in 1998/99. And between 2009 and 2010, the number of female researchers actively engaged in specific research projects appears to have increased from 46 to 51, an improvement of nearly 10 percent.’

Singh’s immediate plans to help rectify the still sizeable gender imbalance, includes the following focus areas:

- **Encourage individual women academics to register for higher post-graduate degrees, especially at the doctoral level.** ‘There is an increasing appetite to go further,’ comments Singh, ‘but the women need a lot of encouragement. There are still some women staff members walking around with Bachelor degrees with little thought of doing anything more. Others are keen to continue to develop, but are not sure how to proceed.’
- **Establish and publicise existing incentives for female academics, such as scholarships, bursaries, research grants and greater opportunities for overseas travel.** ‘In other words, show them how they could proceed and what they could gain.’

Dr Jesika Singh, the university’s recently appointed Research Developer

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2 See her story on page 26 of *Limpopo Leader 25*, Spring 2011
Increase women supervisors through special training. ‘Get them more fully involved in postgraduate supervision. This inevitably involves some research activity, sometimes a great deal, and the supervisory role can lead to the stimulation of an appetite for research in the supervisor herself.’

Train and encourage women to write and publish. Workshops have already been held (in 2011) that deal with writing and publishing that first accredited article. There's a lot more to the process than meets the eye, and includes the practicalities of writing, presentation of the manuscript, and matching submissions to the requirements and styles of specific publications. ‘Very often, women academics are simply too diffident to start.’

There are challenges, however, that impede progress towards fuller involvement of women academics in the research drive currently underway at the University of Limpopo. ‘I’m talking about capacity in the research office,’ Singh says with a laugh. ‘I’m talking about my own capacity. I simply can’t find the time to do everything I want to do.’

There are financial limitations as well. Research costs money. Although the spending on research has risen sharply in recent years (from R11,87-million in 2009 to R85,4-million in 2010), still more will be required in the future. ‘It costs a million Rand to get 20 PhD research projects just to the proposal submission stage,’ says Singh. But this doesn’t mean that the research office is sitting back and wringing its hands. Since early 2010, a clutch of procedures and guidelines have been developed – and approved by the University Senate and Council. These include ‘Proposal Protocol Review and Submission Processes for Masters and Doctoral Degrees’; ‘Research Day and Research Excellence Awards Guidelines’; a ‘Code of Conduct for Research’ policy; and a comprehensive policy on ‘Research Development and Support, and Incentives and Awards’.

‘All these policies are paving the way for heightened awareness of research and increased activity at the university,’ Singh explains, ‘and one of the real challenges is to ensure that women academics become more fully involved. They do, after all, represent close to half our intellectual potential.’

To fulfil it, says Singh, more is needed than how-to-do-it workshops. ‘We sorely need expert services as well. We need professional editing services, much as we now have expert statistical services housed in the Research Office. And to encourage more women to enter into the research arena, we need to develop a system of woman-to-woman research mentoring. Such ideas are definitely being addressed by ULWASA3, but their efforts need official university support. The NRF has a dedicated “Women in Research” funding programme, but there’s nothing yet at our university that caters specifically for women in research.’

But these challenges serve to fuel Singh’s determination to change the general mindset relating to women in research. While the university authorities ponder such issues as a more versatile usage of intellectual capacity in the teaching/research mix, a possible new approach to sabbatical leave, and the possible improvement of financial incentives for postgraduate supervision, publishing, and research awards, Singh talks about attitude change among academics generally and among women academics in particular.

‘Attitude change is the key,’ she says. ‘No matter what incentives are put in place, they won’t achieve any lasting results without a change in attitudes. I know it takes time, but our ultimate goal must be to develop a genuine appetite for learning and knowledge. Research will follow naturally out of that.

‘I sometimes feel we’re in a revolution here,’ Singh concludes. ‘The old perceptions of racial and gender deference and inequality are being overturned. We’re forging new perceptions, one step at a time, every day. What is beginning to emerge is the habit of the pursuit of learning, and the understanding that access to this learning is open to all. Once these perceptions bite they are with you forever. And I will be very much surprised if women don’t soon take this revolution forward.’

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3 University of Limpopo Women’s Academic Solidarity Association. See story on page 18 for more information on this association
PROFESSOR SUSAN DIPPENAAR has strong views about researching and the research environment on the Turfloop campus of the University of Limpopo. She’s a zoologist working in the Department of Biodiversity, where she lectures, supervises postgraduate students, and pursues her own research interests.

These interests centre on the general fields of taxonomy and systematics of organisms, but with a particular focus on the symbiotic relationship between parasites and sharks – and also other marine fishes.

‘People often say to me: but Limpopo province is landlocked. You’re hundreds of kilometres from the sea. How can you effectively research sharks?’ Dippenaar’s answer – and her advice to her students – is always the same. ‘People don’t have to do something on their doorsteps. You can do something that’s remote. The main criterion governing the choice of research field must always be your own commitment. If there’s no real passion in the choice, the research effort will in all likelihood fail.’

Dippenaar’s research has most certainly not failed. Clearest evidence of this is her NRF rating. In 2005, she was rated a Y2 researcher, which is a special category for upcoming young academics. Then in 2010 she was upgraded for a further five years as a grade C2 researcher. Category C is for established researchers with a sustained recent record of productivity in their fields, who are recognised as having produced a body of quality work, and who have demonstrated the ability to conceptualise problems and apply research methods to investigate them. Category C2 is higher than C3, but not as high as C1. NRF-rated researchers are eligible for ‘incentive funding’ direct from the Foundation, and of course their national and international profile as researchers is substantially enhanced.

Had Dippenaar encountered impediments to her research career stemming directly from her gender? Her reply is straightforward. ‘I don’t think my circumstances would have been much different if I was a male. I have certainly experienced no gender prejudice. The problems I and many others experience as we pursue our research interests are essentially asexual in nature. But this doesn’t mean that there aren’t any pressures that are applied specifically to women, particularly black women.’

She cites the example of one of her female students now at Masters level, who is under increasing pressure to stop studying and use her undergraduate degree to start earning and support her mother, a domestic worker who sacrificed a great deal to get her daughter into university in the first place. ‘This is a problem for many of our students, the vast majority of whom are black. And for women students,’ Dippenaar adds, ‘there is often pressure from traditional African society to find financial support through marriage and motherhood. I’ve never been married, so I have no direct experience of the kind of pressure that I’m sure occurs in some relationships.’
This did not mean that for male or single female academics there were no impediments to being more active researchers. ‘We hear a lot these days about the desirability of higher research output, more papers in accredited journals, and so on. But real support from the university is sometimes lacking.

‘Let me give you an example,’ Dippenaar continued. ‘We don’t have sabbatical leave at the University of Limpopo. At other universities, academics get a year off for every five years worked. At some universities there are strings attached: at UNISA, for instance, the condition is that two research papers must be produced during that sabbatical year. At other universities, two days can be used every month for approved research projects. It is true that here at Turfloop we can apply to Senate for study leave, but that is normally only granted for academics who are improving their qualifications.

‘There is also sometimes an attitude among academic staff that is hardly encouraging to those who want to do research. “If you have time for research, you’re obviously underemployed,” is an accusation not infrequently heard.’

Dippenaar alludes to the university’s vision and mission – a commitment to finding solutions for Africa’s problems – as being used by some to inhibit research. ‘What has the relationship between sharks and their parasites got to do specifically with African problems,’ she asks. ‘At first glance, nothing. On closer scrutiny, though, much of my research depends on DNA extractions, and this side of it is already being linked into the great genome sequencing strides being made at Turfloop, which in turn will feed into our knowledge and treatment of regionally prevalent diseases in Africa.’

Dippenaar’s work also relates to the research being done on parasites in freshwater fish, and their impact on food availability.

‘The inter-relatedness of research has always fascinated me,’ she admits. ‘It’s like a vast jigsaw puzzle of information and understanding that is continually being added to by innumerable individual research efforts.’

Dippenaar did her schooling in Vrede in the Free State where she was born, before proceeding to the University of Pretoria where she graduated with Bachelors, Honours and Masters degrees in Zoology. She also completed a Higher Diploma in Education at the same university. She taught in a Polokwane high school for several years before joining the staff of the University of the North (now Limpopo), where she completed her doctorate, the title of her dissertation being *Copepod parasites of elasmobranches off South Africa.*


Professor Esther Ramani

‘WHY DID WE start the University of Limpopo Women’s Academic Solidarity Association? It’s a fair question to ask. Why did we end up with ULWASA? There were several very good reasons, I think.’

This is Esther Ramani speaking. She’s the professor of applied language studies in the School of Language and Communication Studies on the Turfloop campus of the university. She was also the driving force and founding chairperson of ULWASA when it was formed in July 2007. Although no longer on the executive, she continues to work behind the scenes for the advancement of women academics at the university.

‘Let me tell you about some of the main reasons why ULWASA came into being,’ she says. ‘To begin with, some of us had become seriously concerned about the under-representation of women in senior university management, and in research. Many women teach, but relatively few advance to positions of authority, or seriously challenge the male superiority in most fields of research. But we weren’t just an organisation devoted to radical feminist concerns surrounding gender equality and so on. We wanted to generate a genuine sense of ethical values around the whole idea of knowledge generation and academic development. Thirdly, we wanted to commit ourselves to maximising women’s potential in the pursuit of excellence, and in this way specifically to challenge the culture of mediocrity that has crept into some areas of South African life.’

The seed for a special academic women’s association was planted by a representative of the National Research Foundation who visited the University of Limpopo to talk about the funding available via the NRF’s Thuthuka Project which channels support to black researchers, as well as women researchers of all races.

‘We heard that a women’s academic solidarity association operates at Rhodes University in Grahamstown had been in existence for several years,’ Ramani recounts. ‘Using a small amount of funding made available by the NRF, two female academics travelled to Rhodes and returned with glowing reports about what might be achieved by starting a similar association at Turfloop.’

The NRF provided the seed money (R30 000) with which ULWASA was established for female staff and students, the only limitation being that members must at least be studying for a postgraduate degree.

The first activity organised by the newly constituted association was a four-day writing retreat for members. There were general sessions on goal setting, time management and assertiveness, but for most of the time the participants were free to spend sustained time thinking and reading and writing about their own specific tasks or projects.

‘The response of the participants was overwhelming,’ Ramani says. ‘We had immediately identified the one great primary need: that women need the opportunity to sit quietly in their own space, away from the conflicting claims of their professional and family lives. I was very powerfully reminded of Virginia Woolf’s essay on women writers, A Room of One’s Own, and the truth, even today, of her assertions about independence and privacy.’

Since the inaugural retreat, similar events are held twice yearly, and are attended by women from both Turfloop and Medunsa. Funding is especially channelled from the Vice-Chancellor’s Fund for this purpose.
THEY’RE HELPING THEMSELVES

Another early activity of ULWASA was to form members into several teams and then commence the writing of a collaborative academic paper on women academics, based on a questionnaire completed by all ULWASA members.

‘The association,’ says Ramani, who was born in India and did post-graduate degrees at Lancaster University in the United Kingdom and at Wits in Johannesburg, ‘brings women together across rank, age groupings and academic disciplines. It provides an opportunity to work in a democratic and collegial way. In that sense, it provides an important apprenticeship for eventual leadership positions.’

WOMEN HAVE DIVIDED LOYALTIES

THE CURRENT ULWASA chairperson, Mapelo Tlowale, is a tutor in the School of Language and Communication Studies, and at the same time is studying for a Masters degree in translation and linguistics. She took on the top job in January 2011, and she has some firm views about the difficulties faced by women academics.

‘The university’s Research Office organised a workshop in 2011 at which women were invited to share the challenges they faced. Why, for example, did it take longer for women than for men to complete their postgraduate degrees? The discussions revealed clearly that many women have divided loyalties. Their families and their careers compete for their time and attention.

‘We have found,’ Tlowale explains, ‘that at our writing retreats, the demands of family continue to encroach. A child has fallen ill; a husband isn’t sure what to do. Our participants used often to slip home for a few hours, thus breaking their concentration, and the continuity of time the retreats are designed to provide. So finally we moved our retreats to more distant venues, to make these sorts of interruptions more difficult. This has helped, but of course there are still the emergency calls on the cell phones.’

In spite of these distractions, many women find the retreats extremely beneficial. Indeed, they have come as a revelation. ‘Women are more and more helping to bring home the family bacon, and yet in many homes they are still left to cook it as well. The truth is that women deserve the chance to enjoy uninterrupted thinking and working time. In fact, they deserve all the help they can get.’

Tlowale refers to the system of mentoring that ULWASA has recently established. Senior female academics have volunteered to mentor postgraduate students and younger staff members who are just starting out on their academic careers. ‘The programme is still small in size, but its impact looks extremely promising so far.’

Asked if women academics were sometimes subjected to direct discrimination from their male colleagues, Tlowale shook her head. ‘But some men did question why we as women were getting special treatment. Our reply is always the same. We started ULWASA because we felt there was a need. If men think the same, it is up to the men themselves to do something about it.’
MEDUNSA HAS TWELVE women professors. Even though it’s not an equitable proportion of the total number of professors at the institution, the women professors (or at least the four who responded to *Limpopo Leader’s* request for input) are adamant that high qualifications and top positions be awarded on merit – regardless of gender.

Participants in this mini-survey included Professors Claudia Noffke, Head, Maxillofacial and Oral Radiology with the School of Oral Health Sciences; Supa Pengpid, HOD: Health System Management and Policy; Nazeema Ebrahim, Acting Director: School of Medicine, Associate Professor, Department of Radiography (Medunsa), and Vice Chair of the Medunsa Research Ethics Committee; and Maphoshane Nchabeleng, HOD: Microbiological Pathology (Medunsa) and Academic HOD: National Health Laboratory Services (NHLS).

Achieving high qualifications was certainly not an easy ride for any of them, but then they acknowledge that it’s not meant to be easy, and certainly isn’t for male academics either. There were however, other circumstances that had to be taken into account. For instance, Noffke, who achieved her MSc Odontology (Cum Laude) from the University of Pretoria in 1993, points out that ‘the degree was difficult to achieve because my post-graduate studies coincided with the early lives of my four children.’

Nchabeleng also concedes that forging ahead with her academic career took its toll on her family life. In fact, when she was a registrar, her children asked her in aggrieved tones why she had chosen to be a doctor. Didn’t she know how hard she would have to work? Why hadn’t her mother, for instance, warned her? She did battle with guilt then, and it continued as her family and her academic career grew. A few years ago she was doing post graduate studies at Stellenbosch when her son, then aged two, was battling with asthma. Her husband, also an academic, encouraged her to go, saying he would cope fine. But it wasn’t easy for any of them.

For both Noffke and Nchabeleng, child care facilities on campus would have made a huge difference, offering peace of mind first and foremost – a vital ingredient in the successful pursuit of academic qualifications.

Ebrahim faced difficulties of a different sort. Her Master’s programme was done by distance education and was based on outcomes with three stages. ‘I had obtained a
Diploma in Radiography in 1969 and had difficulty in obtaining entrance to a local university to further my studies in radiography. I worked in Britain from 1975-1982 and managed to build a portfolio of evidence of courses that I had attended, including a Further Education Teacher’s Certificate.

Pengpid said, ‘No, that would make it as stupid as the society we are in. I believe in fair treatment, hard work, and dedication.’ And Noffke added, ‘Appointment committees today are generally sensitised against gender discrimination. Care should be taken to ensure that the opposite doesn’t take place – discrimination against males.’

All had sage advice for young women in the academic environment.

Ebrahim: ‘It’s very important to have priorities in place. Finding a way to balance family and academic life is key – there is life during and after work. Ensure that you have a hobby because this gives time for reflection and self-confrontation. Choose career paths carefully and wisely. Do not end up being the eternal student and at the end of the day the community does not benefit. Space the academic achievements so that there it time to work and play in between. Acknowledge the child in yourself and allow yourself time-out; don’t get bogged down with work!’

Noffke: ‘I would advise them to persist and improve their CVs in order to achieve promotion on merit rather than on femininity.’

Nchabeleng: ‘Be the best you can be in whatever you do. Don’t be impatient. Appreciate the people who make sacrifices for you. And remember that women are fighters – we are survivors. You will make it if you give it your best.’

Pengpid: ‘Hard work, dedication, and discipline are imperative. Also respect, and trust someone who can offer guidance to you.’

There’s no doubt that these and other women in HOD positions at Medunsa have juggled much more in their lives than careers only – and have achieved their qualifications and positions absolutely on merit. It’s them and others like them that Alan Greenspan (US economist) was referring to when he said, ‘The true measure of a career is to be able to be content, even proud, that you succeeded through your own endeavours without leaving a trail of casualties in your wake.’
MEDUNSA’S REVISED AND expanded Community Based Service Learning (CBSL) programme, which has been running since 2010 with first to fourth year medical students, is an absolute hit with students, the communities, and university staff. It is paying excellent dividends in terms of student learning and it has the potential to contribute to the dramatic improvement in the health profile of the local communities.

The programme, which is constantly evolving as community health needs are identified and assessed, entails medical students spending a compulsory few hours a week working in the communities. It is based primarily in six local clinics – including Madidi, Hebron, St Johns Mercy, KT Motubatse, and Tlamelong – where nurses who are trained in facilitating student learning and assessments form the backbone of the programme. The students stay at the same clinic for the full four years.

Debbie Barnard, Medunsa’s CBSL Co-ordinator, is immensely proud of the way the students have embraced the programme and put in much extra effort to understand the communities they are working in and to alleviate suffering.

Reports are coming in from all quarters about the real difference that these youngsters are making in many lives, and the communities have all but adopted their ‘doctors’ who are helping them. In fact, recently local taxis were intent on pulling the Medunsa mini buses, used to transport the students, off the road because they were competition. In no time at all, the matter was handled by the local community leaders who told the taxis in no uncertain terms to back off because the students were serving the community.

On another recent occasion, one of the Medunsa mini buses had pulled into a service station for petrol when they were spotted by a local shebeen owner who asked them to come in and do health assessments on him and his patrons. The students duly did blood pressure tests and various other basic assessments. Barnard hastily adds, ‘While we definitely don’t encourage our students to go into shebeens, the situation illustrated that the students are known and appreciated for the practical contributions they are making in the communities.’

She says that although it is early days, the responses that are coming in are an assurance that the CBSL programme is working. ‘At the end of 2010, we held a workshop to which we invited all CBSL stakeholders. This included the people of influence in the communities we serve; school principals and teachers, sangomas, heads of churches, local doctors, staff from the clinics, NGO staff, local officials, and others, as well as relevant staff and students from Medunsa. We discussed the programme and how it works and asked for feedback on how effective it is and whether these community representatives felt it should continue. The response was overwhelming. We had report after report on the positive impact that our students are having and the relevance of our activities in the communities where the students are referred to as “our doctors”.

Debbie Barnard
HOSPICE CARE

Gerda Botha, head of the Practice of Medicine Department which runs the CBSL programme, tells of another initiative by the students who were affected by conditions at local hospices. ‘Our third year medical students and fourth year pharmacy students do their Palliative Care Block Practical in four rural hospices, two of which are in the Winterveld/Soshanguve area and two in the North-West Province in Bojanala health district. During their visit in June 2011 they found that these hospices are struggling to make ends meet. They told their block co-ordinator, Margaret Hugo, and together they decided to make the plight of the hospices known in an effort to collect blankets and food to help the hospices care for the patients during winter.

‘Family and friends of lecturers got involved and, together with the Facebook group “Caring Divas and Dudes”, the students collected enough blankets for all four of the hospices.’

Professor Errol Holland, Executive Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences, accompanied the group to the hospices for the handovers where he emphasised the need for students to learn and become aware of the needs of patients and caretakers alike when it comes to healing and the management of incurable diseases. ‘The challenge is to have good care flowing from tertiary institutions to the primary places of care such as hospices and homes.’

The hospices staff really appreciated the donations as they often have to run their institutions on the barest of resources. The students, too, were extremely excited about the project and the progress that was made within two weeks of them having reported the problem. They recognised that they were ‘health advocates’ in a very effective way. They’re continuing to collect food and other necessities for the hospices. ‘In fact,’ adds Botha, ‘it is amazing to see even the poorest of our students coming forward with tins of food for these hospices.’

As part of the carefully structured programme, each student is allocated a patient or patients with a chronic illness with whom they stay throughout their training. They form relationships with the patients and familiarise themselves with the living conditions, assessing factors that affect the patients as well as their families. They also visit neighbouring houses to assess environmental and living conditions in the area as a whole.

EXPANDING PROGRAMME

As the programme expands and grows, the students are moving into new areas where they can be effective. For instance, they are now visiting schools where they address issues such as teenage pregnancies and counsel learners on taking responsibility for their own health. Says Barnard, ‘These school visits are leading to more and more youngsters wanting to become doctors. The youngsters are opening up towards the medical students and many new problems have come to light through these revelations.’ The students, with the help of their Learning Facilitators, have appropriately referred these learners and are following up on their progress.

The students are also visiting local rubbish dump sites to assess health risks. They found that the workers at the dumps had no protective clothing so they initiated a project to try to source protective clothing for them.

‘There are few areas in these communities that the students aren’t touching in some way or another. They have even become involved in trying to improve the literacy rate in one of the particularly poor areas through the Madidi Book Project. Community leaders had started a library in an effort to improve the situation, but they are stuck without books. The students have initiated drives to collect books for the project. Though we still need many more to establish a really effective library,’ says Barnard.

Barnard adds that workshops of this nature will be held annually to ensure that the CBSL activities remain effective and relevant and that useful feedback can be given to the involved university departments to provide guidelines for strengthening the CBSL programme.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMME IS SHOWING GREAT RESULTS

Gerda Botha
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT CONFERENCE

With the ever-increasing focus on community engagement, students from various universities were asked to give presentations on ‘Community engagement as part of learning’ at the South African Association of Health Educationalists (SAAHE) annual conference from 30 June to 2 July 2011 at North-West University's Potchefstroom campus. The theme of the conference was ‘Teaching to cure – teaching to care’. Three medical students and two pharmacy students gave a powerful presentation that earned them a standing ovation at the session. Two of the medical students who presented, Fortune Masango in second year and Sydney Mondane in third year, were excited about their presentation and the response.

“We talked about our community experiences. We gave a broad overview of the conditions we encounter and how we interact with the people in the communities. We also mentioned the places we visit such as abattoirs and rubbish dumps where we can make sure that the workers are not exposed to unhealthy situations,” the students reported.

“We could also talk about the families we visit and how they are implementing our advice on healthier living conditions such as increased ventilation in their homes and better hygiene practices.” The students were approached by several doctors after their presentation who congratulated them and told them how they had been touched by their stories of community engagement and impressed by how their learning translates directly to effective healthcare.

The students, who believe that Medunsa’s is the most advanced CBSL programme in the country, maintain they are ‘extremely lucky’ to be a part of the programme. ‘Because of this programme, we know what’s happening out there and we’re becoming good and practical doctors. We’re interacting constantly with people in the community and we are doing our best to help them live healthier lives.’

Also part of the Medunsa delegation were 21 lecturers who gave a total of 24 poster and oral presentations on various topics in health sciences education ranging from how students are taught and assessed; how the programme is quality assured; how the curriculum is implemented; to feedback from students and communities.

INTEREST GROUP MEETINGS

Barnard says that to keep all stakeholders in the university aware of the developments within CBSL, a quarterly CBSL interest group meeting is held. ‘The response from the different disciplines has become “How can we help; where can we get involved?” It’s extremely encouraging and it’s contributing to the rapid growth of our plans for the short- and long-term future of the programme.’
A WELL-ATTENDED and successful Community Feedback Meeting on Community Based Service Learning (CBSL) was held at Medunsa on 11 November 2011, with more than 100 representatives from NGOs, schools, clinics, municipal departments, and other organisations as well as students and CBSL staff, sharing their learnings and experiences from Medunsa’s community-based programme over the past year.

The purpose of this annual meeting is to facilitate feedback from the community and feedback to the community by students. In welcoming the delegates, Debbie Barnard, Practice of Medicine (PoME) CBSL Co-ordinator reiterated that successful training takes collaboration and that the community was a highly effective collaborative partner in the training and education of Medunsa’s medical students.

The meeting got off to a rousing start with a lively song and dance performance by talented and enthusiastic youngsters from the Soshanguve Secondary School.

In his opening address, Professor Errol Holland, Executive Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences, said that this community meeting was the most important meeting of the year on campus and was in line with Medunsa’s clear vision for each of its students to graduate as ‘whole’ people; people who are committed to social justice.

‘If anything is going to make a difference to the way service learning and community engagement is done, it has to be listening – for us as a university to listen to the community. This is what will shape service-based learning.’

To illustrate the importance of listening to and consulting with communities before implementing initiatives, Holland related an anecdote from a conference – Community Engagement: The Changing Role of South African Universities in Development – held in East London in early November. One of South Africa’s prominent universities reported on a community development initiative where they had failed to consult with the community before implementing the project. Several Nguni cattle had been donated to the community to facilitate local development. ‘But because cattle traditionally do not belong to a community, but to households or individuals, no one took responsibility for the livestock and the project was a dismal failure.’

He reiterated the importance of faculty members, students, and community leaders to listen and talk to the community as partners and equals. ‘We must understand the voice of the people and we must remember not to tell each other what to do, but to discuss and plan together. That’s why meetings such as this one are so vital to the progress of CBSL.’

Students representing different clinics gave reports on community activities they had been involved in. Their reports reviewed the communities in terms of municipality, electricity and water supply, latrines, roads, transport, schools from preschool to high school, and the clinic, as
well as social problems facing the respective communities. In general, these problems included poverty and high unemployment, older people and children exposed to abuse within their families, teen pregnancies, and alcohol and substance abuse.

The reports also reviewed the activities within the clinics that the students are involved in. While each clinic was different, in general, first year students were involved in patient history taking, measuring and interpreting vital signs, testing glucose, and giving talks on health issues such as pollution and environmental health. Second year students also did patient history and vital signs, as well as home visits where all factors relating to the health of the family were taken into account; talks at schools on substance abuse, teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs); and visits to dump sites where staff were given information about protecting their health.

Fourth year students added ear, nose and eye check-ups to their responsibilities, analysing clinic statistics, and giving talks on topics such as TB and HIV, hypertension, diabetes, epilepsy, and arthritis.

The student groups also assessed the strengths and weaknesses of the clinics where they’d spent their time, and presented recommendations on improvements to better meet the needs of the respective communities. Suggestions were also made by the students on ways to reduce social problems in their respective communities, such as sports and recreation facilities, youth groups, old age homes, community gardens, flushing toilets, increase in doctor visits to clinics, and improved refuse management.

St Johns Mercy Clinic in the Winterveldt earned a special accolade from its student group because of the large vegetable garden it maintains as part of its nutrition programme. The clinic also manages a feeding scheme for destitute, as well as other social welfare activities.

KT Motubatse Clinic in Soshanguve serves one of the fastest growing townships in Gauteng. Unemployment, illiteracy, and illnesses such as hypertension, TB and epilepsy are rife in the area. Pollution is a disease-causing problem, as are the pit latrines, and the fact that the recreation available in the area is limited to taverns. The clinic, whose staff members were friendly and helpful and were doing their best to engage with the community despite minimal resources, provides an excellent range of primary health care and dental services.

The HIV Block student group gave a presentation on their involvement in the care and counselling of HIV patients within the community, and learning about aspects related to HIV patients such as non-adherence to HIV medication, traditional healer involvement, social stigma and other problems of lifestyle. The student group was surprised to find a high level of ignorance about the disease, which motivated them to find out more. They also felt that the HIV block should extend its activities to schools and so target HIV negative youngsters to help them stay that way.

The Palliative Care Block student group was passionate about its activities and the terminal patients they care for. In winter the students had initiated a collection of blankets and food for the four struggling hospices within the local communities, which had made a massive difference to the staff and patients of the facilities. Their focus is on taking care of the patient – until the last breath – physically, psychologically, and socially.

The group said that in this block, students learn how to help patients develop hope; how to take care of patients in their last 48 hours; how to develop open, caring, sensitive and communicating attitudes; how to break bad news to patients and families; how to be a valuable part of health care service provision; and just how important quality of life is until the last moment. ‘A patient always has worth,’ they said.

Several other Medunsa departments that conduct community training discussed their activities, such as the Department of Pharmacy, Occupational Therapy, Speech & Language Pathology and Audiology, the Mobile Science Unit, and Nursing. Dentistry and Physiotherapy have community programmes too, but were unable to present.

Members of the community came forward to offer their thanks to the students for their services. Mema Violet Kekana from an old age home in the Winterveldt simply said in Afrikaans that she was ‘so thankful’ to the students. The glass workers in the community, who had been advised on protective gear and other health issues, stated that they were very happy with the medical students who taught them well. ‘We listen to them.’ The Madidi Book Project was thrilled with the commitment and contributions made by the students.

Debbie Barnard, co-ordinator of the MBChB/POME CBSL programme, gave feedback from a survey that had been...
conducted among the community leaders on community health issues and the programme. 123 responses were received.

Health issues identified by the respondents were HIV/AIDS, TB, malnutrition, diarrhoea, hypertension, diabetes, arthritis, and psychiatric disorders. Social problems were listed as unemployment, poverty, lack of housing, child-headed families, lack of basic services, unsafe sexual practices, stigma of HIV, abuse of children and elderly by family members, crime, drug and alcohol abuse, the selling of ARVs, and access to social grants. The respondents identified community needs for 24 hour clinics, wider distribution of ARVs, and more doctors and nurses.

Responses to the medical students’ activities in the communities were extremely positive. They were seen as hard-working and motivated and showing initiative. Respondents reported a change of attitude within the communities which now felt that someone cares. The home visits were identified as extremely successful as patients are seen in their homes and not in a controlled clinic environment. It was helping the students to think critically and understand the patient environment.

Do students make a difference? Responses included:
• They are truly interested in the patients
• They listen to the patient; that means a lot.
• The offer opportunities to patients to verbalise their feelings.
• They are enthusiastic and motivated, which motivates patients to attend the clinics.
• The students are definitely role models for children in the communities.

Recommendations included increased home visitation, more assistance in training health care personnel such as home-based carers, more frequent contact with community leaders, university staff to visit communities, reduce concentration on chronic diseases which are covered by the clinics, health promotion campaigns at schools, more frequent visits to schools and old age homes, and more.

Certificates of appreciation were handed out to clinics, schools, NGOs, and other organisations which had contributed to the development of the CBSL programme.

Holland closed the meeting with the question, ‘where to from here?’ He proposed that the respective communities get together without the university to decide for themselves what’s important and what needs to be done. ‘We’re looking for your own ideas as to what you believe is important in your own communities.’

Holland promised that the university will help to facilitate the meetings, but will not take over and dominate the proceedings. From these meetings, he suggested that reports be written on what issues have been agreed as being important for the community. Once all the participating communities had compiled their own reports, the university would study a composite report and together with community representatives, plan its activities based on the report. ‘This programme needs to keep developing and evolving according to needs in the communities, and we rely on you as extremely important contributors to our training, to keep our CBSL programme successful.’

Professor Errol Holland presenting a certificate

Performing students from the Soshangwe Secondary School

Positive feedback at community meeting
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