FROM COUNTRYSIDE TO CAMPUS –
NEW STUDENT NEEDS AND UNIVERSITY RESPONSES

MEDUNSA LOSES JOUBERT
TRIBUTES TO AN EXTRAORDINARY MAN
SUBSCRIBE NOW!

to LIMPOPO LEADER and be informed by the province's most dynamic magazine

Students SUBSCRIBE NOW and SAVE 50%

Subscribing to LIMPOPO LEADER magazine for ONE YEAR costs just R50 per annum for Students & R100 per annum for Alumini and local subscribers!

- **Students subscriptions** MUST include your student number
- Subscribe by post and include your proof of payment
- Subscriptions can be paid directly to DGR Writing & Research's account
- Or by cheque made payable to DGR Writing & Research
- Proof of payment faxed with subscriber's full details to:+27 11 - 791 2390

Account Details:
Bank: First National Bank
Branch: Cresta
Branch code: 254905
Account number: 6236 586 658
Account name: DGR Writing & Research CC
Reference: Sub (+ your initials & surname)

Contact: Gail Robbins
Tel: +27 11 - 792 9951  Fax: +27 11 - 791 2390  Cell: +27 82 - 572 1682
Email: dgrwrite@iafrica.com
Postal address: P O Box 2756, Pinegowrie 2123, Gauteng, South Africa
GETTING THE FACTS STRAIGHT

I wish to point out that in Limpopo Leader 26 (Summer 2012) in the article ‘Meet the only NRF-rated woman researcher at UL’, the impression is given that I conduct research on freshwater fish parasites. In fact, my colleague Dr Wilmien Luus-Powell is personally involved in this important research. In addition, I taught at Welkom-Gimnasium in Welkom and not at a Polokwane high school, as stated.

Professor Susan Dippenaar
Department of Biodiversity
University of Limpopo

Editor: We normally send all articles back to our sources before publication. Somehow, this one slipped through the net. Apologies.

IMPACT OF MIGRAINES ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

The International Headache Society has published a peer reviewed medical study describing the impact of migraines on academic performance in students. Three hundred and forty-four university students participated in the study. The Headache Impact Test (HIT-6) and the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale were used to measure the severity of the migraines in each student. Absenteeism, performance coefficient (grades) and number of failures were then measured, and mapped against the data on the severity of the migraines. From the sample group 8.7 percent (30 students) sought emergency services, 30.8 percent (106 students) missed class, and 30.8 percent (106 students) had a reduction in their productive capacity. Multiple linear regressions showed that ‘serious’ and ‘very serious-impact’ headaches and migraines are significantly related to greater number of failures and absenteeism. A high headache impact on a student’s life was associated with worse academic performance. For free computer posture download visit www.headacheclinic.co.za or speak to a specialist nurse consultant on the hotline 0861 678 911.

Migraine Research Institute

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Preference will be given to short letters. Aim for a maximum of 100 to 150 words, otherwise expect your epistle to be edited. Please give contact details when writing to us. No pseudonyms or anonymous letters will be published.

Address your letters to The Editor, Limpopo Leader
PO Box 2756, Pinegowrie, 2123, South Africa.
E-mail: dgrwrite@iafrica.com    Fax: +27 11 - 791 2390
EDITORIAL

THE COVER STORY  in this issue of Limpopo Leader takes a close look at that frequently unnerving journey from the protection of home and high school to the freedoms and responsibilities of life in academia. One first-year student quoted in this edition says candidly: ‘If you make a mess, you have to clean it up yourself.’ Another, commenting specifically on the first few weeks on the Turfloop campus, remarks: ‘It’s not a paradise. In fact, at first, it’s a desert for you.’ Nevertheless, each year thousands of first-years get by – but not without an array of carefully designed support systems offered by the institution itself. Read all about the strange new undergraduate world of the university campus, and what the university is doing to help.

The death of Professor Herman Joubert has been a sore loss for the University of Limpopo, and particularly for the Medunsa campus where he served as the acting Deputy Vice-Chancellor. A tribute to his quality, as man and academic and administrator, heads up the articles in this edition.

Is there a crisis in the supply of nurses in South Africa? Some say ‘yes’ and some say ‘no’. There are nursing departments on both campuses of the University of Limpopo, and the work going on in each is set against a generally turbulent and sometimes contradictory health care environment. Read, for example, about some of the unintended consequences of the emphasis on primary health care and district health care models in the post-apartheid era.

Women continue to make their mark on university life. The old gender-based glass ceiling for women academics continues to give way, layer after layer, as competent women academics get promoted into increasingly higher levels of management and control. Specifically, of the 16 Schools spread across the four faculties, five are headed by women directors. Three of these, all relatively recently appointed, are interviewed in your latest Limpopo Leader. Their views make for inspiring reading – perhaps more particularly for women aspiring for higher positions and influence.

Finally, there’s some interesting material on the University of Limpopo’s steadily improving research performance. Vice-Chancellor Mahlo Mokgalong had some interesting things to say about ‘African research’ at the annual Research Awards banquet in December last year; and this is followed by interviews with two award-winning researchers from the Turfloop campus.

Don’t hesitate to make use of our letters page if you disagree – or agree – with what you’re reading in the pages that follow.

NEXT ISSUE

South Africa’s Limpopo province is mineral rich beyond most of our wildest expectations. It makes sense, therefore, that the University of Limpopo should be aiming towards the establishment of a School of Mining – including an eventual department of Engineering and all the other necessary requirements for such a school. One essential ingredient, of course, must be Geology, and just such a department is burgeoning on the Turfloop campus. Find out more about this important development by reading the cover story in Limpopo Leader 28.
IN THIS ISSUE

COVER PHOTOGRAPH:
(From left) Karabo Maredi, Kgwerano Mpamonyane, Reitumetse Nchoe: three of the thousands of first-year students who poured onto University of Limpopo campuses at the beginning of 2012.

PAGE 4:
FAREWELL TO PROFESSOR JOUBERT: a tribute

PAGE 6:
FROM COUNTRYSIDE TO CAMPUS: it’s a new world for thousands of students every year

PAGE 8:
MEET THE FIRST-YEARS

PAGE 10:
Centre for Academic Excellence (CAE) – THE UNIVERSITY RESPONSE to student needs

PAGE 12:
Student support: LEARNING ABOUT SCIENCE

PAGE 13:
Student support: FINDING RELEVANT INFORMATION

PAGE 14:
Student support: OPENING UP THEIR WORLD WITH ENGLISH

PAGE 15:
Student support: FEEDING THE HUNGRY

PAGE 16:
Nursing in SA: IS THERE A CRISIS OF SUPPLY?

PAGE 20:
The women directors: WOMEN ARE PLAYING THEIR PART

PAGE 21:
The women directors: FIGHTING OFF THE ISOLATION

PAGE 23:
The women directors: I’M NOT IN A POPULARITY CONTEST

PAGE 25:
The women directors: SHE BRINGS A WEALTH OF SKILLS TO THE SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

PAGE 27:
AFRICAN LEADERSHIP, GLOBAL EXCELLENCE: the surging research effort at UL

PAGE 29:
Research profile: HE’S BUILDING A PLACE FOR HIMSELF

PAGE 31:
Research profile: THE GOOD NEWS AND THE BAD
FAREWELL TO PROFESSOR JOUBERT

A TRIBUTE

THE OUTPOURING OF grief at the loss of Medunsa’s Professor Herman Joubert spans effortlessly across the spectrum of age and race groups, societal status, and education levels – as he so clearly and compassionately did throughout his almost 32 years at his beloved institution.

All who grieve his passing are acutely conscious of the void he has left; in individual lives, in the institution, in the greater healthcare sector, in associations and committees that he attended to so diligently, and most poignantly in his family. He leaves his wife, Retha, and his daughter Marissa.

Again and again, this gentle academic, teacher, and leader has been hailed as ‘a great man’ – not one who strove after greatness, but one who had greatness thrust upon him.

On 18 April 2012, a communique was sent out from the desk of the Vice Chancellor and Principal of the University of Limpopo, Professor Mahlo Mokgalong that announced, ‘with great sorrow and sadness’, the passing on of Professor Joubert due to illness.

‘Professor Joubert joined the staff of the University of Limpopo, Medunsa campus, on 1 July 1980. He has dedicated 32 years of his life to the service of the University, among others as Head of Department of Chemical Pathology, Director of the School of Pathology and Pre-clinical Sciences, and currently as Acting DVC (Medunsa campus). He not only acquitted his duties and responsibilities with distinction, but with enviable dedication and profound passion for his profession.’

Professor Tshepo Gugushe, Director of the School of Oral Health Sciences, who has known Joubert since he joined Medunsa in the early 1980s, said he had ‘served this university with unequivocal commitment. We shall be forever thankful for his noble contribution to academic medicine and the overall administration of the institution.’

Joubert’s first position at Medunsa was in the Chemical Pathology Department. He came, says his past student, colleague and friend, Professor Phindile Mntla, Head of Cardiology, ‘fresh from university, armed with a cum laude in Chemical Pathology’, as the youngest professor on campus. ‘With vim and vigour and unflinching resolve, he began to build a world-class laboratory and a department. Blessed were the students he encountered six months into their programme.

‘Enter my class; a group of young activists, triggered into instant action at the slightest provocation. Professor Joubert strategically managed to calm us down and persuade us to focus on our studies. He encouraged and enthralled us with his love of excellence rather than mediocrity. He planted seeds for surgeons, physicians, paediatricians, cardiologists, obstetricians and gynaecologists, radiologists, nuclear physicians, MECs, a deputy minister of health, and many others. He spoke well of everybody; he had the character and self-control to be understanding and forgiving. He knew that the way to develop the best in a person is with appreciation and encouragement. He was a good listener and he knew too that the road to a man’s heart is to talk to him about the things he treasures most. He made other people feel important. He did it sincerely.’

Mntla served with Joubert in the Deanery when Joubert was Acting Dean of Medicine; on the HPCSA Continuous Professional Development Committee, and in the ECS and Senate Committees; and together they ran successful annual refresher courses.

Dr Jocelyn Naicker, representing the Expert Committee in Chemical Pathology, said Joubert had been the first chair of the committee in 2003 until 2011. In her regular interaction with him, she and her colleagues found him to be a deeply committed professional whose opinion was always valued. ‘He was modest, kind-hearted, patient, and respectful in all his dealings with students and colleagues – the true measure of a man of great worth. His contribution will be deeply missed.’

Professor Fran Clarke, HOD of the Department of Biology and long-time colleague and friend of Joubert’s, reflected on the vast role he played in the life of the university.

‘As Director of the School of Pathology and Preclinical Sciences which included seven disciplines as well as English Proficiency, Herman Joubert was a dynamic leader, always striving to improve and build the School. Right up to the time of his death he was involved in negotiations with the HPCSA to introduce a postgraduate course in Clinical Pathology.’

‘I will always remember him clad in his blue denim jeans and his white jacket; down to earth and without any pretence, yet respected by all.

‘Herman always had time for colleagues and students...’
alike. No matter who came to him, no matter when, he was prepared to listen and consider without prejudice, discuss, advise, and assist – far beyond what was expected of him. Even when he was totally snowed under with work, he would make time for a student or a colleague.'

Although a Clinical Pathologist, Joubert’s knowledge extended far beyond his field of expertise. An example of this is the capable way he administered the DOE-fund as well as his strong contribution in the construction of the Skills Laboratory and the recent refurbishment of some of the campus buildings.

Clarke added that Joubert was always prepared to rise to a challenge. He made decisions and accepted responsibility for them. Under his leadership, things happened.

Over the past year, Joubert had known he was terminally ill. Yet he was prepared to take on the position of Acting DVC. He continued with his daily duties as HOD, Director of the School and DVC as if there was nothing wrong. ‘It was his wish that we continue with our work in the same manner and with the same dedication as he taught us to do.’

Clarke spoke for everyone when she closed, ‘I can only admire his courage, his perseverance and his loyalty to Meduns. It was a privilege to work with him and he touched the lives of all of us. We will surely miss and remember him.’

Karin van Staden, Principal Medical Technologist in the Department of Chemical Pathology, wrote a poem for Joubert on the day he passed away.

---

**Remembrance**

Familiar footsteps forever faded chair behind layered desk forever empty. Footprints left in hearts, careers, minds forever embedded amongst memories of many a conversation shared in tearoom at braai-fire’s light A bakkie in the parking lot, that pipe! Laughs… Poultry, camouflaged greens Wisdom, A vast knowledge, shared Empowering. Always time to listen, Katryn… Never too busy, Meraai…

Prof, you are missed! Not only by man, but best friend too What you were will comfort, remain ‘til that day When time comes for us too to depart.

---

Professor Herman Joubert
AT THE BEGINNING of each academic year, thousands of new students stream onto the two main campuses of the University of Limpopo. The total student enrolment at the beginning of 2012 was just over 21 500, of which at least a quarter are first-years. For many of them it’s a wrenching transition from a deep rural background to the increasing sophistication of the rapidly developing campuses at Medunsa and Turfloop.

But the days when it could be accurately stated that all new students on Turfloop are under-prepared to begin a university education are waning fast.

‘There’s a positive trend emerging,’ says Dr Segopane Seroka, the university’s Dean of Student Affairs. ‘In line with this trend, I would say the ratio of under-prepared to prepared now stands at around 60/40. Does this indicate a gradual improvement in the quality of schooling in the province? Perhaps. I think it certainly suggests that the university’s outreach efforts into local high schools are beginning to bear fruit.’

Seroka explains that the tendency for the cream of Limpopo school leavers to join the big five urban-based South African universities1, while still going on, was not always the blanket rule. ‘Increasingly,’ he adds, ‘the university’s Turfloop campus is becoming the institution of choice for many students. This is because the university is offering more accredited programmes – for example, in accountancy and pharmacy, and from next year we’ll be enrolling our first fully-fledged medical students.’

So the University of Limpopo can no longer realistically be considered a B-stream ‘bush’ institution. There’s simply too much evidence to the contrary. Apart from the arguments given above, sometimes real brilliance shines through.

Consider the case of Regina Maphanga. She grew up and went to school in a remote village to the west of Polokwane. The village had no electricity (until 2010), and her high school had no laboratories or computers. Nevertheless, she sailed through her BSc degree at Turfloop, majoring in mathematics and physics. Until this point, Maphanga had never touched a computer; only during her postgraduate studies did her computer experience begin. Nevertheless, working in Turfloop’s Materials Modelling Centre, she was soon so proficient in the computer-simulated modelling of alloys that she was sent to Cambridge (in the UK) where she linked more than a hundred processors in parallel to establish the optimum operation of various battery materials. Maphanga was 26 when she was awarded her doctorate, and four years later she won a major NRF award as a ‘distinguished young black female researcher’.

Is Maphanga an exception to the rule? Almost certainly. Perhaps that is why so much emphasis has been placed on bridging programmes, foundation years, and now on extended degrees which have a foundational/bridging component built into the additional first year. Some of the solutions for under-preparedness that have been devised at the University of Limpopo (and at the University of the North and Medunsa before the merger) are the most comprehensive in the country.

Professor Monie Naidoo, head of the university’s Centre for Academic Excellence, was quoted in 2010 as saying: ‘The university plays an incredibly important role in providing students from one of the poorest provinces the opportunity to get into higher education – while showing total understanding of how disadvantaged their schooling has been. We see students who haven’t had access to water, electricity, laboratories, or proper schooling. Our constant focus is on the way we invite these students to join our community.’

Dr Seroka explains what this means in practical terms. ‘We try to make entry into the university a really positive experience. Obviously, this begins with registration, when crowds of students converge on our campuses. We try to deal with the busloads of foreign students who come down from our SADC neighbours. We provide them with catering facilities where they can cook their food, and we make sure they have access to water and toilets. We also have special assistance for students who are at risk of being excluded for various reasons. Some are at risk academically, others for financial reasons, and some on social or psychological grounds. Among the last category are the disabled, whom we can assist through the registration process and offer permanent on-campus assistance. Other services we offer on the spot are one on one counselling and financial assistance, including advice on available bursaries and access to student loans.

‘Then, after registration, we take new students on a one-week orientation programme, which includes an introduction to the Students Representative Council, a tour to familiarise them with the campus environment, as well as lectures on study techniques and rules of academic

---

1UCT, Stellenbosch, Wits, and the universities of Pretoria and KwaZulu Natal
conduct when such issues as plagiarism and cheating are dealt with, but in a deliberately positive and proactive way.'

But Seroka admits that a major remaining challenge concerns on-campus student accommodation. As the student population has grown, the available places in the residences have not. The current situation on the Turfloop campus is that 73 residential units provide accommodation for 6 590 students, while at Medunsa, 12 units accommodate 3217 students. These figures mean that at least 75 percent of Medunsa’s students are satisfactorily accommodated on or near the campus, while the situation at Turfloop is that only around 30 percent of the current student population can be accommodated on the campus.

Visitors to Turfloop will notice the privately owned accommodation that has proliferated close to the university gates. Much of this is rudimentary, failing to comply with the minimum standards laid down by the university, and students making use of these off-campus alternatives, have been susceptible to crime, exploitation, and even several instances of rape.

‘Our response to this challenge,’ says Seroka, ‘has been to explore the possibility of using private-public partnerships (PPPs) to make up the shortfall. The university has plenty of land. So the idea would be to invite private companies to build and operate residences for a profit, but without pricing the accommodation beyond the reach of the student market. After a set term, say twenty years, full freehold ownership of the facilities developed in this way would revert to the university.’

Seroka said that a sum of R700-million had been made available from the Department of Higher Education and Training to ease the accommodation crisis on campuses across the country, but with a bias towards the previously disadvantaged institutions. ‘With our share, I’m sure we will be able to get the PPP idea off the ground,’ he adds. ‘In fact, we’re hoping to have new accommodation ready as early as the beginning of 2013.’
MEET THE FIRST-YEARS

IT’S A NEW WORLD

MEET KGWERANO MPMONYANE

Meet Kgwerano Mpmonyane, a super-assured 17 year old from Lebowa Kgomo, erstwhile capital of the old Lebowa Bantustan. She went to the well-known private school at Eagles Nest where she earned two As and five Bs in her IEB matriculation exams. She’s studying for a B.Com Accounting degree in Turfloop’s recently SAICA-accredited School of Accountancy.

MEET REITUMETSE NCHOE

Meet Reitumetse Nchoe. She was born in Tzaneen, but her parents divorced when she was only two. So she moved a lot, finally doing her matric in Randfontein. Her mother moved to Polokwane in 2010 to manage the local facility of the South African National Blood Transfusion services. After taking a ‘gap year’, she enrolled at Turfloop where she’s studying for a Bachelor’s degree in Administration and Local Government.

MEET KARABO MAREDI

Meet Karabo Maredi, who was born into a loving and staunchly Christian family in Leydenburg. Later they moved to Tzaneen, where Karabo went to school, emerging finally with two As, two Bs and a few Cs in her matriculation exams. Her stepfather is a pastor in the Lutheran Church and her grandmother a councillor. Karabo came to Turfloop to study for a Law degree.

MEET THE FIRST-YEARS

THEY’RE BRIGHT, THEY’RE confident; they’re fashionable – and they’re on the cover of this edition of Limpopo Leader. These young women, all in their late teens, started their academic careers on the Turfloop campus at the beginning of 2012. They’re studying law, and accountancy, and local government. They’re all living in campus residences, and they’re an impressive advertisement for the increasing quality of students being attracted to the University of Limpopo.

Meet Kgwerano Mpmonyane, a super-assured 17 year old from Lebowa Kgomo, erstwhile capital of the old Lebowa Bantustan. She went to the well-known private school at Eagles Nest where she earned two As and five Bs in her IEB matriculation exams. She’s studying for a B.Com Accounting degree in Turfloop’s recently SAICA-accredited School of Accountancy.

Meet Reitumetse Nchoe. She was born in Tzaneen, but her parents divorced when she was only two. So she moved a lot, finally doing her matric in Randfontein. Her mother moved to Polokwane in 2010 to manage the local facility of the South African National Blood Transfusion services. After taking a ‘gap year’, she enrolled at Turfloop where she’s studying for a Bachelor’s degree in Administration and Local Government.

Meet Karabo Maredi, who was born into a loving and staunchly Christian family in Leydenburg. Later they moved to Tzaneen, where Karabo went to school, emerging finally with two As, two Bs and a few Cs in her matriculation exams. Her stepfather is a pastor in the Lutheran Church and her grandmother a councillor. Karabo came to Turfloop to study for a Law degree.

Meanwhile, Kgwerano Mpmonyane says: ‘I’m here at Turfloop by choice. The accreditation of the School of Accountancy makes the University of Limpopo a very attractive option. I am one of five girls in my family. I have a twin sister who is at the moment studying at Wits. I could have applied there, but I chose Turfloop. Education has always been very important in my family. My parents were politically active during the struggle. My father had to go into exile. But they knew that education was vital for our futures – and for the development of a healthy democracy.’

Reitumetse Nchoe agreed that expertise in her chosen area of study, administration and local government, was sorely needed in a country with so many dysfunctional town and city municipalities. ‘My local government lecturer is very supportive,’ she says. ‘He really cares about his subject, about the country – and about his students.’
The young law student, Karabo Maredi, spoke about life on the campus, the strangeness after the safety of home, the seemingly unstructured management of time. She says: 'you are thrown into independence and you have to be very disciplined. If you make a mess of things, you have to clean it up for yourself. Personally I found the church structures on campus very helpful. The prayer groups and discussion groups and other church-related activities provide a foundation around which to build your new university life.'

One of the students observes that the first experience of living on campus is 'like a desert' for first-years. 'It certainly isn’t paradise.' But generally they agree that the orientation offered to first-years is very comprehensive, longer in duration than the orientation offered at UCT, as someone says. The young women also agree that the systems of peer councillors, mentors and tutors developed on the Turfloop campus are effective and provide considerable reassurance as newcomers try to fit in.

Nevertheless, loneliness is a widespread problem. Drug taking offers a ‘quick fix’, as do boys for lonely girls. Some male students deliberately prey on first-year girls, ‘doing the rounds’ of the first-year female residences. Some have cars and money, which enables them to offer trips into Polokwane and other treats.

Is there sexual harassment on campus? The girls smile. ‘Yes, of course,’ they reply, ‘but it isn’t always blatant. They sit and watch you going by. They’re very observant, nearly always noticing if you’ve changed your hair.’

When it was suggested that male students who too obviously chased any girl in sight simply identified themselves as unsuitable for stable relationship, let alone marriage, Karabo and Reitumetse and Kgwerano laughingly agreed.

Behind the jokes and the youthful confidence, all three young women seemed anchored in a deadly serious sense of purpose. This position was epitomised by something Kgwerano had said. She was the one studying to become an accountant–ant. ‘But after that, I would like to take law. I think that one day I would like to serve as a Judge in the Constitutional Court.’

Here’s an example of big dreams on a campus that is increasingly equipped to help fulfil them.
IT'S A NEW WORLD

CAE OFFERS EFFECTIVE STUDENT SUPPORT ACROSS THE BOARD

ALL UNIVERSITIES IN South Africa are concerned about the large numbers of students who either take many years to complete their qualifications or drop out of university without completing their degrees. This is a greater problem at the undergraduate level and the University of Limpopo has introduced a number of mechanisms to confront these challenges head-on.

The university’s Centre for Academic Excellence (CAE), which operates successfully across both campuses, is constantly revisiting its programmes and structures to ensure that it is up to date as far as student development and support needs are concerned – whether they are social or academic.

‘Firstly, the management of the University acknowledges that most of its first-entering students come from educationally-disadvantaged backgrounds and need various forms of additional support to succeed. Many students have the potential to succeed, but lack the fundamental academic skills that they should have acquired at school,’ explains Professor Monie Naidoo, Head of the CAE.

‘The university has ensured that there are many different departments offering training, development and support to equip the students to cope with the challenges of university life. Student mentorship and first-year orientation programmes are useful strategies for assisting students to cope with the transition from school to university and to adjust to different social and academic environments.’

She says that the image that the University of Limpopo strives to portray ‘is that we care – from the highest level down; that every student is important; and that our desire is to help them succeed to their best potential. The aim is to ensure that from the very first day, students are given or made aware of the tools they need to develop holistically in their new environment, whatever their scholastic or home backgrounds.’

The university’s approach is multi-faceted. The CAE offers study and information management skills training on aspects such as goal setting, study methods, time management and organisational skills and the Library offers skills training on information management. CAE, the Department of Information Communication Technology (ICT) and the Department of Computer Science offer training in computer literacy. CAE and the Department of English offer training to students on academic writing.

One of the most successful strategies for addressing academic under-preparedness is the extended degree programmes (EDPs), which are offered in six degree courses and are available for about 10 percent of students. These are MBChB, BA, LLB, BA Media Studies, BSc, and B Com Accountancy. In these programmes, the academic support is integrated into the curriculum and students do other foundation modules in the discipline. Some research conducted at the University of Limpopo shows that EDP students’ academic progression is better when compared to that of students in the particular regular programme.

‘Students receive the greatest support from lecturers within each programme,’ notes Naidoo. ‘Astute academic staff use a variety of mechanisms to assist struggling students. Tutorials are organised and mentors also offer some guidance. Some lecturers use an early warning test to identify students at risk early in the year. Their early intervention and regular monitoring of students’ progress has helped to reduce the high failure and dropout rates, particularly among first-year students.’

While the university provides development and support systems, students also need to be guided towards taking greater responsibility for their learning and life choices, values and goals to prepare them for responsible citizenship. Attendance of lectures is important and students are trained on note-making. They are also trained in the use of Blackboard, the learning management system used by the university. An increasing number of lecturers post their learning guides and develop additional on-line material for students to use before and after lectures.

Student support services play an important role in addressing the various economic and psychosocial factors that negatively affects students’ academic performance at all levels of study. These support services are more effective when they form part of a comprehensive integrated system for student development and support that caters for the academic, health and wellness, and financial support of students in all years of study. Early identification of students in need of assistance, referrals, monitoring
and tracking student progress and academic performance provides a useful safety net to reduce student failure and dropout.

The university has also ensured that life skills training and support is offered by many different departments, such as the Department of Counselling and CAE, to provide information and to help students cope with issues such as managing relationships, unplanned parenthood, drug and alcohol abuse, HIV/AIDS and sexually-transmitted infections that negatively affect students’ academic performance. Early identification of needs and provision of training and support are needed to address such challenges. Lecturers, matrons and wardens of residences, and peer counsellors trained to identify such needs, play an important role in identifying students with problems at an early stage.

It’s what Naidoo calls ‘scaffolding their learning’. She adds that it involves steadfastly avoiding a silo approach to student support and working closely with other departments and structures in the university.

At the end of 2011, a new structure for the CAE was approved by the University of Limpopo’s Executive Management Committee which specifies the principles and focus of the CAE as academic development and support for teaching and learning; academic staff training and development; alignment of activities to the development and support needs of the faculties; and balancing centralisation and decentralisation of functions between faculties and the CAE.

The three broad performance areas within the CAE’s mandate are:

**Teaching and Learning Support**
- Access and admission of students including administration of the National Benchmark Test, and alternative admission through Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)
- Co-ordination of Extended Degree Programmes (EDPs)
- Management of the evaluation of learning and teaching
- Management of the Reading and Writing Centre
- Supplemental Instruction
- Promotion of scholarship of teaching and learning

**Student Academic Development and Support**
- Academic orientation and lifeskills
- Co-ordination of activities that promote student academic excellence, such as student excellence awards
- Management of Student Referral and Support System
- Management of the Peer/Mentorship programme

**Academic Staff Development**
- Facilitate academic staff orientation and induction
- Manage teaching and learning development
- Co-ordinate and promote staff Teaching and Learning Excellence Awards

Naidoo is excited about the potential for greater effectiveness in more students’ and staff members’ lives by the CAE with its new structure. She emphasises that the centre’s activities and related programmes will be monitored and evaluated continuously for the highest levels of efficiency and effectiveness.
LEARNING ABOUT SCIENCE

IT’S A NEW WORLD

HUNDREDS OF LIMPOPO students attempting science or technology degrees walk into a laboratory for the first time in their lives only when they start their university studies. In a province where nearly 90 percent of the population still live in a rural setting, it follows that many first-year students are from under-equipped schools where under-qualified teachers probably taught them. This has huge implications for the production of high-quality science graduates, particularly from a rurally situated campus like Turfloop.

One important response to this situation by the University of Limpopo was the establishment in 2007, of the University Science Centre, a facility that offers informal learning experiences in all aspects of science, technology, engineering and mathematics through interactive exhibits and displays as well as interactive educational programmes.

The Centre spends a considerable amount of time attempting to stimulate the interest of school children into the excitements – and varied career opportunities – presented by the sciences and applied sciences. This is done in two main ways: senior school learners visit the Science Centre on the Turfloop campus; and the Science Centre visits outlying high schools, sometimes staying for as long as a week.

Hundreds of Grade 10, 11 and 12 learners visit the Centre each week. They come in busloads for a taste of a simple laboratory experiences coupled to their syllabuses, and for special lectures and video screenings on science related subjects. Although the Centre possesses only a single outreach vehicle, it is kept busy with school visits, where the focus is on the most under-resourced schools, often with unopened science-in-a-box kits that the teachers don’t know how to use. ‘Often classes are held out of door, under umbrellas,’ says Centre manager, Annelize Potgieter, ‘it’s remarkable that some of our first year students know as much as they do.’

The Centre also devotes attention to the many science and technology students already studying at Turfloop. This takes the form of ‘media round tables’ where scientists and media people have a public dialogue on some aspect of science; of ‘cheese and wine cocktail lectures’, and regular ordinary lectures. ‘We encourage all students to attend, not only those studying some aspect of science,’ Potgieter says.

Some of the subjects covered recently include nano-technology, stem cell research, and the advances currently being made in hydrogen fuel cell technology.

Six postgraduate NRF and NSTF science interns, usually at Masters level, staff the Centre, and cope with the interactions at school level, teaching both learners and under-qualified teachers. And for the last four years the centre has also been awarded a volunteer from Japan who assists with exhibit building.

In addition to working with senior school learners and university students, the Science Centre hosts several important annual events: most notably the National Science Week, Antarctica Month and Astronomy Month. These more general activities, designed to stimulate interest in science generally and thus to prepare communities in Limpopo province for the world of the twenty-first century, also serves as an important tool to encourage talented school learners from South Africa’s most rural province into the growing ranks of science and technology undergraduate and postgraduate students at the University of Limpopo.
IT’S A NEW WORLD

FINDING RELEVANT INFORMATION

‘IN THE PAST,’ says the University of Limpopo’s executive director of libraries, Makgabela Chuene, ‘we’d put all the first years in a hall and talk to them about the importance of the library and about the services it offers. These days, our approach is much more detailed. We actually bring the new students into the library and sit them down at the computers. When you see how many of them actually lift the mouse off the table and point it directly at the screen, you realise how much work you’ve actually got to do before these young people will be able, gainfully, to make use of the databases and search functions with which our libraries are now equipped.’

This hands-on introduction to library computing is supplemented by a video that shows a young student going through the whole process of borrowing a book, as well as personal interaction with the various subject librarians. (The Turfloop library has a subject librarian for each of the eleven schools in which students can be enrolled on that campus.)

More and more, though, it is the computer and the OPAC (Online Public Access Catalogue) that provides the first line of investigation. The Turfloop library is currently equipped with 70 computers for student use, and Chuene is hoping to be able to afford a further 80 in due course. ‘I want students to see the library as a classroom away from the formal lecture halls,’ she says. ‘But students must have enhanced access to information for this to happen.’

At the moment, subject categories, books and authors, can be located on the library hardware. In addition, there are around 40 online databases containing hundreds of journals and other periodicals. New software – called Federated Search Software – is shortly to be tested that will enable users to search for specific information in various databases simultaneously. New databases, especially subject-specific ones, are also on the Chuene must-have list. ‘We are trying to ensure regular updates and enrichments of our electronic resources. Funding is often the problem. But this should not be allowed to divert our attention away from a central fact that access to information is a cornerstone of academic education, and that this access is increasingly dependent on computers.’

The library has also designed a comprehensive Information Literacy course that is beginning to be incorporated into the first year curricula of some (but currently not all) faculties and schools across the campus. The course begins by answering two fundamental questions. What is information, and where is it to be found? From that starting point, the course explains the various information sources available in a library and the steps to be taken to gain access to them. Search strategies and the evaluation of sources are explained; and the course ends with attention being paid to academic integrity, copyright, referencing techniques and styles, and care of the library as an irreplaceable resource.

The course, and simpler instructions on how to use the library, are also available online, through the distance learning software called Blackboard. So it’s back to computers once more.
It’s a new world lower. This means that during the first quarter, much of the work done in the English Department is catching up to try to bring the youngsters to the level they should have been at.

According to the results of the National Benchmark Test in 2011, only 24 percent of Medunsa’s first-year students passed the literacy component. The department also runs its own comprehensive language proficiency test to determine the strengths and weaknesses, as well as to identify 25 percent of the youngsters who need the most help and are selected for special support.

In the second quarter, Academic English is introduced, specifically content-based reading and academic reading conventions. Medical students are also taught ‘medical language’, which includes learning thousands of new words, often in Greek or Latin, and learning how to decode those words.

At the same time, the weakest students will get support intervention to bring them up to the required level, because a fail in English in first year, means failing the year.

Other interventions undertaken by the department include identifying youngsters with learning difficulties and referring them to the Centre for Academic Excellence, identifying students with personality-related learning difficulties and referring them to the Psychology Department; and offering computer literacy to students who have had limited or no access to computers.

The e-learning laboratory, which has 30 computers and is in the process of being upgraded, is also used to help students improve their language skills. Three software programmes are available – general reading; grammar-based English word power; and software developed by the department based on identified needs – and extra learning time is allocated to students who have demonstrated special needs in any of those areas.

‘These youngsters, far more than in other universities, are up against the odds with the disadvantages they have faced in life. But what never ceases to amaze and delight me is how they cope. The overwhelming desire to succeed is evident among the majority of the students – and that’s why we are prepared to go the extra mile with them, day after day.’

‘The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.’ Austrian Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein emphasised the great value of proficiency in one’s language to enhance the ability to communicate one’s learnings and understandings. That’s also the *raison d’être* for Medunsa’s English Department.

‘It’s a crucial course in the first-year curriculum. To become good doctors, researchers, scientists, or healthcare workers, it’s imperative to have a high proficiency level in your language of study. You must be able to fully understand the material and translate it comprehensibly,’ says Dr Valayil Gheevarghese, HOD of the Department of English at Medunsa.

His department, which has a staff of four, is responsible for improving the English skills level of 750 first-year students with the aim of building an understanding and appropriate use of academic English. Medunsa’s first-year students all attend English classes, with the exception of BSc students, but this is due to change next year.

The first two months are used for improving general English. This is often where difficulties come in, notes Gheevarghese, as students are expected to be at level 4 in English (proficient), but because of the standard of education and the lack of facilities in many of the disadvantaged schools that they come from, their language skills are often much lower. This means that during the first quarter, much of the work done in the English Department is catching up to try to bring the youngsters to the level they should have been at.
It's a New World
Feeding the Hungry

No one can concentrate on their studies on an empty stomach. There's no getting around that. Yet, despite various bursaries, funds, and structures in place for students on the Medunsa campus, there are still some students from underprivileged circumstances who struggle to feed themselves from one day to the next.

Some of these students might have bursaries that cover fees and books, but not support; or their funds for meals are limited and run out; or — as is quite common — many might be repeating a year and finding it extremely difficult to source support as empathy tends to run low for students who have ‘failed’.

This situation came to the attention of Deidre Pretorius, Social Scientist and Lecturer in the Department of Family Medicine and PHC at Medunsa when she first joined the university in 2002, lecturing on the subject of child abuse. The nature of the subject encouraged students to come to her to talk about their problems — all sorts of problems, including hunger.

‘Taking R10 out of my purse every so often to help a student just wasn’t a sustainable answer,’ says Pretorius. Working with the SA Medical Students Association, they started fundraising to help students who were battling to meet their own basic needs. The initiative gained ground and soon there were about 25 students being supported.

Then Pretorius started sourcing unofficial sponsorships on and off campus and distributing funds among the neediest students. But that created its own set of complications as far as looking after and disbursing funds was concerned. The next step was to link students with sponsors so that emotional support could be added to the financial support.

The ‘food for hungry students’ initiative has evolved through various stages, responding to developments and needs as they arise. It’s what Pretorius calls, ‘co-ordinating goodwill’. Students who are given assistance are assessed by Medunsa’s Financial Aid Officer, Karen Herman, who has access to all student records and background information, ensuring that ‘chancers’ don’t drain the much-needed funds.

At this stage, about 52 students are receiving regular support, with about 30 on the waiting list. Support has dwindled as the economic downturn has hit sponsors’ pockets. About six years ago, more than 120 students were being helped.

But there is hope. The initiative is taking a big step forward. Sheila Nkobeni, a member of the Medunsa Institutional Forum (IF), has joined forces with Pretorius and the initiative is being transferred to operate under the auspices of the IF within a sub-committee. ‘This is encouraging. The people on the IF are like-minded and passionate about helping students in need. This move will also make it an official Medunsa project; enabling a cost centre to be established and opening doors for further sponsorships and donations,’ adds Pretorius.

Important too, is that the team makes it a priority to find sustainable options for ensuring students are not forced to face their demanding studies on empty stomachs — such as planting food gardens, including one meal per day in residence fees, or finding part-time work for students.

‘It makes a difference to students if they don’t have to worry about where their next meal is coming from,’ is the bottom line for Pretorius and her compassionate colleagues.
IS THERE A CRISIS OF SUPPLY?

According to the World Health Organisation the worst-case ratio for registered nurses to population is 1:500. Although South Africa as a whole falls within the acceptable range, there is considerable variation between provinces. Limpopo, for example, has a nurse to population ratio of 1:630. Gauteng, on the other hand, enjoys a ratio of 1:371.

There are other factors as well that need to be taken into account when deciding on the scale of our national nursing crisis:

- No one knows how many of the country’s registered nurses are dormant, but the number might be substantial.
- South Africa’s health services continue to be placed under strain by large numbers of migrants from SADC countries.
- South Africa has one of the highest rates of HIV/AIDS in the world, and the epidemic continues to overload the health services across the country.

The combination of a high disease burden, ageing nurses, and the fact that possible maladministration of public hospital funds leads to a vicious cycle where disease burdens increase because of inadequate care. ‘This,’ according to the Solidarity Research Institute report quoted above, ‘is a reflexive cycle that must be broken.’

But how does all this impact on the nursing departments on the Medunsa and Turfloop campuses of the University of Limpopo? The short answer is ‘considerably’. Now turn the page to discover the detail.
**THE PASSION FOR excellence** in the Department of Nursing Sciences at Medunsa is palpable after just a few minutes of discussing its activities with a cohort of the department’s stalwarts. Lecturer Baile Selaledi; Lecturer Mary Madumo; Senior Lecturer Dr Joyce Mokoena; and Senior Lecturer Dr Malmsiy Sengane are keen to share the progress they have seen in the past couple of years – not least of which is their move to spanking new premises in the basement of Medunsa’s Skills Centre.

The department has a staff complement of 20 (including four skills facilitators), with one full professor – HOD, Professor Elsie van Aswegen – three with a PhD, six registered for a PhD, one lecturer busy with a Master’s Degree, and several other highly qualified and committed team members, such as the Jubilee Learning Centre Manager (Anna Mkowenya, University-based Nursing Education SA - UNEDSA - PhD Scholar); and DOE Skills Facilitators (Marietjie Theron and Yolinda Uys, UNEDSA PhD Scholars). Probably even more notable than the impressive array of qualifications in the department, is the tendency towards long-service. The years that have been invested in the Medunsa Nursing Sciences Department by the staff amount to hundreds – and it shows.

The basic course offered is the four-year B Cur degree, which incorporates general nursing through all four years, community health nursing from the second to fourth years; and psychiatric nursing and midwifery for the third and fourth years, all of which is in accordance with the SA Nursing Council Regulations. About 40 students graduate with B Cur degrees from Medunsa each year.

Then onto the topic of post-basic training and the conversation gets more interesting. The team talks about having re-organised themselves – specifically to accommodate the needs of students, as well as the needs of the profession to provide a more comprehensively needs-based training programme.

New to the programme is a post-basic course for a Diploma in Occupational Health, which is run part-time over two years for nurses who want to work in the private sector, running clinics and managing healthcare centres. It’s popular and is attracting students from SADC countries, as well as from Nigeria, West Africa, Eritrea, and Rwanda.

A project for providing UNEDSA scholarships, which Medunsa shares with the University of Pretoria, is linked to the postgraduate programme, which will, the enthusiastic team believes, ‘increase our research output’. Focus areas for research for scholarships are related to healthcare problems and needs that have been identified, such as:
- Peri-natal and maternal and mortality
- Reproductive health, including teen pregnancies
- HIV/AIDS and Malnutrition
- Gender related violence

‘Our post-graduates studies are expanding to keep up with changes in the nursing environment and with needs in the healthcare sector,’ explains Mokoena. ‘We are adapting the way we run these courses as well as the curricula content to ensure that our graduates are well equipped to meet the challenges they will face in the workplace.’

Other post-basic courses that remain popular include Nursing Administration; Nursing Education; and Community Health. At any one time, the department has about 40 students in its postgraduate programme.

Professor Elsie van Aswegen
International collaboration going back for many years also adds to the richness of the department’s offering and includes affiliations with Jönköping University, Sweden; Caledonian University, Glasgow, Scotland; Lovinseberg Diakonale College in Oslo, Norway, and the University of Wales in Swansea.

Nursing summit
But while this department clearly operates as a pocket of excellence within the greater healthcare environment, it is not an island, and is inextricably linked to the nursing profession. Reflecting on this, the team is encouraged by the National Nursing Summit that took place in April 2011 to critically reflect and discuss key issues that affect nurses and the profession. Nurses came from far and wide to talk about issues they face – such as salaries, nursing education, workplace support, and more – and how these issues could be dealt with.

A task team was set up and there is a real sense that progress was made and that nurses are working hard behind the scenes to overcome the problems facing the profession; there is also the conviction that a sustained and positive voice should be heard about nursing in the media which reflects the excellence and diligence within the profession and not just the problems and shortcomings. To that end, Dr Khanyisa Nevhutalu, DoH Director for Health Research, was appointed to the position in an Acting capacity until a full-time person can be appointed.

A Ministerial Task Team looking into the needs and position of Nursing Colleges within Gauteng has also been appointed and Dr Joan Dippenaar, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Nursing Sciences is an active member of this Task Team.

The team believes that the Nursing Summit heralds the way to a brighter future for nursing in South Africa – both for the patients and for the nurses themselves.
A CRISIS OF DISTRIBUTION?

WELL, DO YOU think there’s a crisis of supply? ‘Yes, there is an inadequate supply of professional nurses,’ replies Professor Masamo Lekhuleni, head of the Department of Nursing Science in the School of Health Sciences on the Turfloop campus.

Professor Lekhuleni and her colleagues provide this sobering explanation. After 1994 and the advent of a new approach to healthcare provision in the country, attention (and funding) turned very specifically to the provision of Primary Health Care (PHC) and the District Health Care model which placed additional emphasis on preventive and promotive healthcare, as well as curative services to every geographical corner of the country. Many clinics were built to make healthcare accessible to the rural communities. PHC training was then introduced and professional nurses were taught health assessment, treatment and care. Rural allowances and OSD (Occupation specific dispensations) were also introduced to encourage professional nurses to work in the clinics.

Prior to 1994, hospital-centred healthcare ensured an unequal distribution of healthcare services, with hospitals more staffed than clinics. Now, 18 years into democracy, the reverse has become true. Nurses clamour for jobs in the clinics, to be eligible for the OSDs. The result is a periphery that is stronger, certainly in terms of nursing staffs, than the centre, a situation that causes considerable strain to the healthcare system as a whole.

Nevertheless, it is with remarkable cheerfulness that the eight lecturers in the Turfloop’s Department of Nursing Science are committed to the education and training of nurses so as to provide quality and equitable patient care.

‘We are given a student quota by the University of Limpopo that is based on the Department of Higher Education and Training directives,’ Lekhuleni says. ‘In 2010 our quota was 70 first years. In 2011, the quota had to include 55 Grade 12s. We try to comply, but inevitably our intakes shrink as the year progresses. At the moment in 2012, we have 57 first years, 56 second years, 55 third years and 30 fourth years.’

Therefore, the number of graduates does not meet the demands of the Province. It was explained that the intakes were limited by the capacity of the clinical and academic facilities available at Turfloop and Mankweng Hospital. ‘There’s also the problem of financial support. There are no bursaries and no stipend available from the provincial government. So many students drop out along the way.’

The basic nursing degree course on offer in the Turfloop-based Department of Nursing is the four-year Bachelor of Curationis (B Cur), which incorporates an Honours qualification. On the postgraduate side, an M.Cur is now available and a PhD degree could be available in the near future. Also available is a one-year postgraduate diploma in primary healthcare.
WOMEN ARE PLAYING THEIR PART

Women directors at the university's Department of Human Nutrition and Dietetics, is the non-senate academic representative on the university Council.

But what is happening at Faculty, School and departmental level? The four faculties at the university are headed by executive deans, all of whom are male and three of whom are black. The picture changes somewhat at School level. Of the 16 Schools spread across the four faculties, five are headed by women directors (although some of these are acting in that capacity; and quite a few of the 72 departments operating in the schools now have female heads.

It needs to be remembered, however, that this is a significant advance on the situation which pertained 25 years ago (say in the late 1980s when apartheid was in the process of collapsing) when it is to be doubted whether any black women would have been found even at head-of-department level.

But what's it like at school director level, which is about the highest level women have climbed to thus far? And who are the women who have scaled these heights?

In the pages that follow, readers will find profiles of three women directors working in schools as diverse as Health Sciences and Mathematical & Computer Sciences on the Turfloop campus, and the huge ten-department School of Medicine at Medunsa.
FIGHTING OFF THE ISOLATION

‘WHEN I FIRST started in my position as Director of the School of Mathematical and Computer Sciences, I was confronted head on with one of the most pressing problems facing the teaching of maths and science at a university like ours. I’m talking about the quality of both students and staff, and also about the tendency for students to be underprepared.’

This is Professor Maseka Lesaoana talking. It was in January 2009 that she was appointed as Director of this crucially important School, which teaches the vast majority of students studying for their various degrees across the entire spectrum offered by the Faculty of Science and Agriculture on the Turfloop campus.

‘Most of our students have matriculated from rural or township schools,’ Lesaoana continues. ‘Many of these schools are under-equipped and desperately short of properly qualified maths and science teachers. Of course, in spite of such handicaps, potentially brilliant students do emerge from the rural areas. The tendency, though, is for these to be attracted to the big five universities in the cities – which means that we get left with the second level.’

Lesaoana knew that she would have to tackle this challenge very vigorously if she was to be successful as director of this important school. She made use of everything in the university that could help her: extended degree programmes, special support packages for students, as well as the kind of partnerships that already existed between the university – which is comparatively well equipped and staffed – and surrounding high schools. She turned her attention to the quality and motivation levels of her academic staff. She asked why the School’s research output was low. She encouraged staff to improve their qualifications and to engage in the university’s general efforts to develop a dynamic research and scholarship culture.

But in every aspect of the status quo that she tackled, she recognised a common thread. There was a sense of isolation that pervaded many levels of her School’s activities. Whether emanating from its rural setting or its apartheid past or its sense of being second best and disadvantaged, and the idea of being isolated from the main mathematical stream in the country, tended to devalue the host of interventions at her disposal to improve both the teaching/learning and research outputs from the School.
In September 2010, the School hosted the national conference of the Operations Research Society of Southern Africa, one result of which was invitations to four lecturers and four students from Turfloop to present research papers at the 2011 conference held at the Victoria Falls.

Another MoU has been signed with the Louisiana Technical University (in the USA) which has opened up exchange possibilities and brought the Turfloop School into direct contact with the well-known statistics and operations research expert, Professor Jim Cochran, who has visited Turfloop, given a keynote address there, and is co-supervising a Turfloop-based PhD student.

In July 2011, four representatives from Lesaoana’s School went to Australia to attend the triennial conference of the International Federation of Operations Research.

An MoU recently signed with the CSIR has resulted in the appointment of two additional part-time lecturers at the School of Mathematics and Computer Sciences, courtesy of the CSIR.

The internal response to all this fresh new air in the School is described by Lesaoana as ‘wonderful’. ‘The students’, she says, ‘have even established a club called COSMA whose main concern is rectifying the poor reputation and poor performance of the School. This is extraordinarily encouraging and convinces me that the School is in the process of reinventing itself.’

Last word can come from Professor Hlengani Siweya, executive dean of the Faculty of Science and Agriculture in which Lesaoana’s School is situated. Writing in his annual Research Report for 2011, he observes that ‘the School of Mathematical and Computer Sciences is making steady progress and will need support, both human and financial, to become a productive school in the future’.

Clearly, the Faculty helps those who help themselves.
I’M NOT IN A POPULARITY CONTEST

THIS STATEMENT – I’M not in a popularity contest – says a lot about Dr Nonceba Mbambo-Kekana’s management style. And her follow-up assertion – but I do have empathy – says even more.

Mbambo-Kekana was appointed to the position of Director of the School of Health Sciences on the Turfloop campus in 2010. The physiotherapy academic previously from the University of the Witwatersrand had big plans for the School, and she needed all the empathy she could muster to gain the confidence of the seven departments under her care.

‘My method during my first year in this job was straightforward,’ she said, ‘I did a lot of listening to the concerns and aspirations of departmental heads and staff. But I knew as well that I had to be prepared to say yes or no, and to make difficult decisions. I needed staff to have confidence that I was on their side but also needed them to play their part.’

She also quickly realised that there needed to be a paradigm shift both by herself and the staff. Developing a good working relationship with the heads of departments was of utmost importance to her in those early stages. ‘I can proudly say that we are now on the same page – and we’ve achieved a lot in a short space of time.’

The School held its first joint oath-taking and prize-giving ceremony in 2011 which was achieved through teamwork of the different departments led by their HODs.

Mbambo-Kekana had joined Wits in 2002 as the head of physiotherapy department. By the time she left to come north she had completed her doctorate in physiotherapy education through Wits – which was awarded in 2009. Her dissertation examined the predictors for academic success of African physiotherapy students. ‘The success of students is important to me’ she said. Wits afforded her the opportunity to develop her skills in research and leadership and to learn to use challenges as growth opportunities.

‘One of my main goals at Turfloop,’ said Mbambo-Kekana, ‘has been to ensure that we provide our students with good quality programmes which are relevant to the South
African context, and that our graduates can stand their ground in the world of work.’

To that effect, after not many months in her new job, Mbambo-Kekana facilitated a three day workshop for School staff. The fundamental question that was discussed was: given this emphasis on relevance and excellence in teaching and learning, what must be put in place to get where we want to be – which is to be the premier School on the Turfloop campus. A long list of priorities emerged, which included throughput rates of students, staff qualifications, increases in research output, evaluation and quality control mechanisms, and accreditation of all programmes.

Mbambo-Kekana smiled. ‘It certainly was a long list and it needed a firm commitment,’ she said. ‘But I’m a person who likes to do new things. I have to be challenged; that is why I always keep my eyes on the ball. One of the things that my move to the University of Limpopo has offered has been a definite opportunity to be so much more than an administrator. It has enabled me to tackle the deepest challenge of all, which is the changing of mindsets, and where necessary to take academics out of their comfort zones.’

This approach has paid some dividends. For instance, the Department of Pharmacy, which had challenges with regard to accreditation, was now able once again to admit first year students. More recently, the Optometry Department has had a generally successful accreditation visit by the HPCSA. These successes are due both to hands-on leadership and academics who were prepared to do things differently.

Mbambo-Kekana was born in Langa township, Cape Town. Early in her life she took advantage of a student exchange programme that enabled her to complete her grade 12 year at the Ricky River High School in Ohio in America.

‘On my return in 1982 I was refused admission to Wits (I couldn’t get the necessary permit) so in 1983 I went to Medunsa instead, qualifying as a physiotherapist there in 1986. From there I worked at Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town and Frere Hospital in East London, before returning to Cape Town to work as a junior physiotherapy lecturer at the University of the Western Cape.’

By 1993, she was back at Medunsa as a lecturer. Two years later she took on the responsibility of acting as head of Medunsa’s Physiotherapy Department, a position that became permanent in 1997 and which she held until 2002 when, as we have seen, she headed for Wits.

Asked whether she was glad that she had given up the city to come to the rurally situated University of Limpopo, Mbambo-Kekana laughed. ‘Of course, I’m glad. The university, and the School of Health Sciences, has provided me with challenges galore. This is why I took on the job in the first place. I have set myself goals here, and I think I’m achieving them.’

Theodora Phalane, a pharmacist at St Rita’s hospital, the first disabled woman pharmacist trained at Turfloop campus

Optometry students do vital community outreach in the villages surrounding Turfloop
She brings a wealth of skills to the School of Medicine

BE CAREFUL WHAT you wish for; it could just come true, says Professor Nazeema Ebrahim with a smile as she recounts the bold step she has taken from her position as Associate Professor in Medunsa’s Department of Radiography to her new position as Acting Director, School of Medicine.

’I had felt that the time for a change was imminent, but this is a far bigger change than anticipated,’ she adds. It is big. The School of Medicine is the University’s largest school – with 28 departments – but it follows a sound and valuable investment of 29 years in Medunsa by Ebrahim.

It does, however, signify a new era in Ebrahim’s career and she’s excited about the new challenges she faces. She’s never shied away from challenges before in her life and is clearly unlikely to start now. A born and bred Capetonian, she started her training in radiography at Groote Schuur Hospital in 1969 as one of the first five ‘people of colour’ to be accepted – and graduated with a Diploma in Radiography and the Best All Round Student in Radiography Award.

After five years at Somerset Hospital, in 1975, Ebrahim left South Africa to study and work in Britain. In fact, she left just two weeks after marrying Hoosain Ebrahim (Director of Medical Illustration and Audio-Visual Services – MIAAVS – at Medunsa and featured in Limpopo Leader no. 25) as he had been admitted to the Polytechnic of Central London to study Photographic Science and Technology. After two months of acclimatising, Ebrahim obtained a post at Middlesex Hospital on Mortimer Street, London.

In December 1981, Hoosain was invited to present his research on Kirlian Photography at Medunsa, Nazeema accompanied him, and was invited to return to South Africa to start the first Body and Brain Computerised Axial Scanning Machine at Dr George Mukhari Hospital (then Ga-Rankuwa Hospital). At the same time, Hoosain was asked to start the MIAAVS Department at Medunsa. This department started working in July 1982. In January 1983, Ebrahim was appointed as a Lecturer at Medunsa and was subsequently promoted to Senior Lecturer.

She elaborates on some of her subsequent challenges...
and achievements. 'Throughout my years in Britain I built a portfolio of evidence of courses that I attended, including a Further Education Teacher’s Certificate. Then with my position at Ga-Rankuwa Hospital and at Medunsa, I started publishing. I had also developed a postural support stand for patients undergoing radiographic examinations of the hip joint, for which I subsequently obtained a patent and which helped Medunsa formulate its policy on Intellectual Property. As a result of all these factors, I was allowed to enrol for my MSc Radiography (Diagnostics) Anglia Polytechnic, Cambridge, UK, now the Ruskin University, Cambridge, which I did by distance education and which was based on outcomes.'

In 2003, Ebrahim was appointed Deputy Dean: Allied Health and Nursing Science; a position she held for six years, and a year later was appointed Associate Professor, which was an ad hominem promotion based on her research work.

Over the years, Ebrahim has produced 19 publications, six of which are on evidence-based practice, and in 2001 was awarded the Research Excellence Award at Medunsa.

Having achieved her Masters in 2003, she started focusing on another of her passions – research ethics. Funded by Fogarty International, Ebrahim achieved her postgraduate Diploma in International Research Ethics from the University of Cape Town in 2004. She has since served on the Medunsa Ethics Committee and has been Vice-Chair of the committee since 2007.

'In 2008 I was approached by the Brits-Hartebeespoort Hospice to serve on the Board of Directors as their Ethics Advisor. I now serve as Secretary and Ethics Advisor, which has given me an opportunity to serve the community and also understand the role of palliative care in medicine,' says Ebrahim.

Ebrahim believes that all the experience she has gained over her years at Medunsa has more than equipped her for this new role at the head of the School of Medicine. One of the strengths that she believes she brings to the position is that she is not a clinician in the joint establishment and is therefore not committed to the hospital to offer a service. All her attention is here – at Medunsa, on the school.

There are other key elements that also indicate to Ebrahim that she is equipped to handle this post. 'I have maturity on my side; I have the ability to patchwork my day; I make sure I look after myself through the day; I am patient; I maintain, as I always have, an open-door policy; I listen; I have an extremely positive outlook on life – and I have an extremely positive outlook on the future of Medunsa. The proposed demerger will give people a much-needed sense of security and will offer us opportunities to build. It’s good.'

A few short weeks into her new role, Ebrahim had more than rolled up her sleeves and was tackling the new responsibilities with verve and vigour, while coming to terms with the reality of 28 departments. 'I’ve been dealing with curriculum development and presentations for the accreditation of the undergraduate programme; finding out about the staffing and the registrar programmes and building a mentoring programme; as well as building research in response to our social accountability policies and our aspirations towards achieving the government’s 10-point plan for higher education and training, among other tasks. It has been a whirlwind start to the year and it’s very gratifying. Every day I go home feeling satisfied.'

She concedes that she is on a steep learning curve and that it will take some time to get to understand fully what the job entails, but in the meantime, she is getting excellent input from her new team of staff members, and from staff who have previously held this position.

But even in the early stages of this learning curve, Ebrahim is thriving at the thought of overcoming new challenges. Such as encouraging innovation in research; tangible product research with real community benefits. And that idea is no doubt the start of a myriad of developments and ideas that will stand the school in good stead in years to come.

However, Ebrahim’s overarching aim – and one that she already seems to be well on the road to achieving – is to bring a sense of stability to the school.
WHEN WAITING TO be put through to a University of Limpopo telephone extension, very often callers will hear a rich velvet voice giving contact details for both campuses and then announcing, almost seductively, that the university is reaching for ‘African leadership and global excellence’.

Are these empty words or legitimate claims?

Twenty years ago, as the old University of the North languished under the dying embers of apartheid, with soldiers on the campus and a virtually non-existent research output, of course they would have been empty words. But no longer. Everywhere on both campuses these days there’s a rising sense of purpose that extends across all three legs of the institution’s core business.

Community outreach has been given a definite boost by the multi-discipline co-ordinating role of the recently established Rural Development and Innovation Hub. The health of the teaching and learning component is amply illustrated by the increase in students attempting postgraduate studies.

But it is in the research component of the institution’s core business that perhaps the best evidence of the university’s rising sense of purpose can be seen. The dramatic increase in research funding since 2009 provides one means of calibrating the move towards ‘African leadership and global excellence’. But there is another meaning in the phrase that warrants closer scrutiny. It implies external contribution far more than it does internal improvements. And right at the heart of the phrase lies a determination to contribute to the African research situation.

What is this situation? The University of Limpopo Vice-Chancellor, Professor Mhalo Mokgalong, answered this question pretty accurately during his address at the Annual Research Excellence Awards held in December last year.

‘Our researchers have a specific obligation to fulfil,’ he said. ‘Their research has, mostly, to be African centred. Why is this important? Because it helps to position Africa as an independent centre of intellectual activity, a hub of
knowledge that owes no allegiance to Western conceptions of consultancy-based research.’

Mokgalong quoted Professor Mahmood Mamdani of Uganda’s Makerere University as saying that the global research market tended to relegate Africa to providing data to outside academics who process it and then re-export their theories back to Africa. The result of this trend was that African researchers tended to be reduced to the role of assistants, and that this lack of real collaboration with Africa had led to a general impoverishment of theory and debate.

‘We live on a continent,’ Mokgalong continued, ‘that has been historically demonised, denigrated, humiliated, used and abused by empire builders and megalomaniacs. Our people have had to face the scorn of not being held with the intellectual regard they deserve.’

But as Africans in our own continent, he concluded, were uniquely situated to do meaningful and relevant research, and to challenge the prevailing paradigm which (quoting Mandani again) had turned the dominant Western academic experience into a model which ‘de-historicises and decontextualises other experiences’.

‘We do not need to continue to follow our international counterparts. We are definitely able to lead, and to produce good African-based research. After all, the well-known dictum reads: Africa sempre aliquid novi offert – Africa always offers to our notice something new.’

Three University of Limpopo academics who are adding to the drive for original African research were honoured at the Annual Research Excellence Awards at which Mokgalong spoke. They were Dr Gloria Selabe and Dr Chantelle Baker, highlighted in the box on this page.

Recipient of the best overall upcoming researcher award, Professor Peter Masoko, is profiled on the pages that follow, as is Professor Lily Cherian, who has won the prestigious Clute Institute’s Best Paper in Session Award.

THE RESEARCH AWARD WINNERS FOR 2011

TURN TO PAGE 29 for a profile on the winner of the best overall upcoming researcher award, Professor Peter Masoko. The other two prize winners honoured at the banquet were:

Dr Gloria Selabe of the Department of Medical Virology at Medunsa who received an award of R10 000 for being adjudged the Best Overall Female Researcher in the university for her work on viral hepatitis B and C and HIV co-infections. The research investigates the genetic diversity of these viruses on diagnosis, therapy and vaccine design. With the advent of antiretroviral regimens capable of controlling HIV replication and prolonging the life of HIV-infected patients, co-infection with the hepatitis viruses is an emerging clinical problem. All three viruses share major risk factors and can potentially be transmitted together, and it is likely that liver disease from chronic hepatitis B will emerge as a serious problem.

The researcher who generated the largest research income was Dr Chantelle Baker who also received an award of R10 000. Baker, who is director of the Electron Microscope Unit at Medunsa, raised more than R5,5-million from the Department of Science and Technology and the National Research Foundation for the purchase of a Supra 55 Variable Pressure Field Emission Scanning Electron Microscope. This instrument is for high-resolution imaging and has a magnification capability of up to 1 000 000x. Baker is currently the Director of the Electron Microscope Unit on the Medunsa campus, and is also serving as the Vice-President of the Microscopy Society of Southern Africa.

Mahmood Mamdani is Director of the Makerere Institute of Social Research and the Herbert Lehman Professor of Government at Columbia University in New York.
Professor Peter Masoko has told *Limpopo Leader* that he is currently engaged in building a house for himself in Polokwane. *Limpopo Leader* was interviewing Masoko as the winner of the University of Limpopo’s ‘best overall upcoming researcher award’ for 2011. The interview soon revealed that he was building a place for himself in this province in more ways than one.

Masoko is a microbiologist in the Department of Biochemistry, Microbiology and Biotechnology on the Turfloop campus of the university. His chief research interest is in the field of ethno-biology: in other words, he’s applying his science to the herbal medicines being widely used across Limpopo, which is South Africa’s most rural province. More about this later, but first let’s describe the man.

He’s a well-spoken and charming 38-year old, having been born in May 1974 near Zeerust in the Western Transvaal (now the North West province). He matriculated in 1993 at the Motswedi High School in the homeland of Bophuthatswana. He came to the then University of the North, where he graduated with a BSc Medical Sciences degree in 1998. This was followed immediately by a Masters in Microbiology, with Professor Rachmond Howard, currently the university’s Director of Research, in the supervisory role. He worked as a contract lecturer and research assistant at Turfloop for four years before moving south to the University of Pretoria to undertake his doctorate.

His focus now homed in on phytomedicine, which is the scientific name for the medicinal properties of plants, and his dissertation dealt with the antifungal compounds isolated in the *Terminalia* and *Combretum* species of plants growing widely in Limpopo. He was awarded his PhD degree in 2006, whereupon he returned to Turfloop where he took up a position of postdoctoral fellow and continued his research into the healing effects of antifungals, particularly in the presence of infection. He began lecturing again in 2008, becoming a senior lecturer in 2009 and a full professor in August last year, a signal achievement in an academic so young.

‘I enjoy teaching,’ Masoko says, ‘but research is my first love. Teaching takes up too much of my time,’ he adds.
with a laugh; ‘it’s a distraction that tends to break one’s train of thought as a scientist.’

Nevertheless, he’s managing to keep a reasonable balance between the two activities. He’s already published 27 peer-reviewed research papers, and as a bridge to basic teaching is currently supervising four Masters students and one who is working towards that coveted PhD degree.

It’s interesting to glance at Masoko’s list of published researches. Here’s a paper entitled *Medicinal and value-added uses of plants: a chemical, biochemical and ethno-botanical perspective*, and another called *Biological activities of Typhaceae from Limpopo province*. Among the long list of titles, there’s plenty of references to antifungal properties and activities in specific traditional herbal medicines, in vitro and in vivo testing of antifungals serving the purpose of antibiotics, and the genetic characterisation of these processes.

Simply put, Masoko’s research has taken him deep into the world of traditional medicine where he has isolated the substances in naturally growing plants that perform the medicinal benefits that tradition has ascribed to the whole plant. How has he done this?

‘During my PhD research,’ he explains, ‘I developed a method for doing assays (chemical analyses) on a variety of plants. It then became theoretically possible to isolate the beneficial chemical compound and to enhance its efficacious properties. I then began to conduct experiments in the laboratory and on the bodies of small animals. We actually created wounds which are then treated by applying a variety of enhanced antifungals to establish the most effective formula.’

It was at this point in the interview that Masoko said he was building a house in Polokwane. Did this mean that he would be staying permanently in Limpopo province? Masoko smiles. He replies to the question by saying that the potential of working in his chosen field in Limpopo was ‘immense’. Nearly 90 percent of the population still lived traditional lifestyles, and the distribution of traditional botanical remedies was widespread and plentiful. ‘It is here in this province, in the back yard of this university, that the potential is most accessible,’ he says.

‘The oral tradition,’ he explains, ‘is naturally subject to variation. But this doesn’t invalidate it. Now black scientists are beginning to unearth – and to enhance – the deep wisdom it contains.’

It was also important to understand that the ongoing research into antifungals, and ultimately into other traditional medicines, would serve a much wider purpose than a merely remedial one. After the in vivo tests had been completed, it would be necessary to involve the pharmaceutical companies to undertake market related research on how most effectively to dose, and how most economically to mass-produce the product.

These developments would in turn lead to serious considerations relating to the conservation and mass-production of the species. ‘The initial research is multi-disciplinary in nature, involving inputs from Botany, Chemistry and Veterinary Science into the original microbiological research. And it would remain multidisciplinary during the next phase, when pharmaceutical companies would become involved, as would conservationists, agriculturalists and forestry people, as well as economists and marketing specialists concerned with the self-sustainability of the economic spin-offs. ‘So you can see what we’re doing here at the UL is just a cog, but admittedly an important one, in a much larger machine,’ Masoko says.

Small wonder, therefore, that the National Research Foundation has recently rated Masoko as a Y2 researcher, and featured him on the NRF website as an ‘emerging researcher’. Without doubt, he is building for himself a place of honour in the scientific affairs of his adopted province.
THERE’S GOOD NEWS and there’s bad news concerning the School of Education’s Professor Lily Cherian. For 20 years she’s been a familiar figure on the Turfloop campus of the University of Limpopo. After completing her undergraduate degrees, a BSc in Zoology, Botany and Chemistry, and a B.Ed, both at Kerala University in her native India, she did a Masters in Science Education and Educational Psychology at the University of Wales in Cardiff. After spells with the schools and universities of Zambia and then the Transkei, she came to the University of the North (now Limpopo) in 1992. At Turfloop she completed her doctorate in Educational Psychology in 1996. In July 2004 she was appointed acting director of the School of Education, but she turned down the position in favour of research and teaching.

This decision has paid off handsomely. Her list of research publications is impressive; and she has several times been recognised with awards for her work. Latest is her winning of the ‘Best Paper in Session Award’ at the Clute Institute’s conference held in Las Vegas in October 2011. Her paper, entitled Substance use among secondary school pupils in South Africa, was one of 200 presented at the conference.

Listen to some of her other (but related) research interests. Her doctoral dissertation examined the attitudes of grade 12 learners at Limpopo schools towards the sciences. More recent directions have included: the effects of corporal punishment on learning; literacy levels among school dropouts; and a comparison between matriculation exemption standards and university entrance tests (hardly 40 percent of those achieving a matric exemption are passing the university entrance tests) and then coupling this comparison with first-year university performance. Cherian has also examined Limpopo teacher and learner attitudes towards HIV/AIDS, uncovering some disturbing misconceptions and myths.

Her award-winning paper on substance abuse revealed some equally troubling results. Of her sample of over 212 high school learners in the Mankweng area (adjacent to the Turfloop campus), more than 40 percent used alcohol, 13 percent smoked tobacco, nearly ten percent used inhalants, and just over seven percent smoked or ingested dagga. Not surprisingly perhaps, males had higher prevalence rates than females.
Another research project in which Cherian is currently engaged examines young children's attitudes to their teachers and other aspects of their experience of school. Cherian invites children in grade R to grade four to take photographs of their schools, and then she analyses their choice of subject. The result is qualitative insights into the effectiveness of individual schools, as well as into the way in which the education process impacts on individual children.

Asked why her interest in research had been so strong and sustained, Cherian replied: 'I suppose there are four main reasons. First, I want to make a contribution to the society in which I live. I can best do this by investigating aspects of my specialities and making recommendations aimed at improving existing situations. My second reason is because research generates money with which to do more. In other words, it becomes financially self-sustaining. Thirdly, my research activities have enabled me to see a great deal of the world. I'm a globetrotter, and a by-product of this is that I have developed a worldwide network, and not only in my specialities but also in understanding so many different cultures and values.

'Finally, I do research because I find it so rewarding. It is deeply self-fulfilling, I suppose because it constantly reminds me that I exist in the fullest sense largely in relation to others.'

Cherian told how one day a struggling student had admitted to her that if she (Cherian) had not been at the university 'I would have left'. 'That was one of the most valuable comments ever made to me,' she admitted warmly. One postgraduate student named her daughter Lily to remember her lecturer.

The picture that emerges of this talented and indefatigable academic is undoubtedly GOOD news for education in South Africa generally, and more particularly for the University of Limpopo. So, what's the BAD news?

In a nutshell: After 40 years in Africa, Professor Lily Cherian is leaving. She’s going home to India.

'No,' she said, 'not retiring. Not at all. My family runs a school and college in Manipal, a coastal town near Bangalore. Attached to the college is an education research institute. That’s where I’m going, when I leave towards the end of next year (2013). But I’ll continue to supervise postgraduate students from my School of Education here at Turfloop if needed.'

It should come as no surprise to anyone who has understood Cherian's passion for research that she has recently published a paper in the Stellenbosch-based South African Journal of Higher education entitled Pupil control ideology in South African and Indian schools: a comparative study.

'It was published earlier this year,' she explained. 'Actually, I must tell you about that particular edition of the journal. Here on Turfloop in July 2011 we held a workshop for staff of the School of Education to encourage an interest in research. The result was that 12 research papers were written. For some of our academics, this was their first research publication of their careers. It was remarkable, and made especially so when all 12 of our papers (including mine on Indian and South African pupil control ideology) made it into a special University of Limpopo edition of the South African Journal of Higher Education.'

Here’s more evidence of the quality of Cherian's continuing contribution to educational research, a contribution that now switches from African imperatives to those of her native country. But what had her forty-year stay in Africa ultimately meant to her?

'A great deal,' she responds. 'I came when I was very young, and Africa provided me with a chance to do my Honours degree and eventually my doctorate. I have gained a wealth of knowledge from this continent. In fact, it has taught me everything.'
Secure your future

UNIVERSITY OF LIMPOPO
TELEPHONE: +27 15 - 268 9111