

An African university that cares – UFS engagement on the continent

By Ilse Smalberger

Ghanaian politician and revolutionary, Kwame Nkrumah, famously said: “We face neither East, nor West; we face forward.”

At a time when Africa can be torn between the economic and trade pressures of the East and the political demands of the West, it makes sense that moving the continent forward is a huge priority. This is a belief that lies at the heart of the University of the Free State’s (UFS) 2018-2022 Internationalisation Strategy. This strategy follows the 2020 Policy Framework on the Internationalisation of Higher Education in South Africa, by seeking to further not only South Africa’s interests, but also the interests of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and Africa, among others.

Celebrating Africa Month

As part of celebrating Africa and advancing African unity, the UFS celebrates Africa Month in May, culminating in the Africa Day Memorial Lecture – this year held as a webinar on 19 May. According to Dr Stephanie Cawood, Director of the Centre for Gender and Africa Studies that is hosting the Africa Day Memorial Lecture, Prof Walter D Mignolo, arguably one of the greatest scholars of decoloniality, will deliver the address.

“Since the inception of the Africa Day Memorial Lecture in 2009, we have hosted some of the greatest African intellectuals, including Profs Achille Mbembe, Ali Mazrui, Ngugi wa Thiongo’o, Mahmoud Mamdani, and Paul Zeleza, to name a few,” says Dr Cawood.

As the home of research and study on Africa and its people at the UFS, she believes that it is important for this university to enlarge its footprint on the continent.

“Our destiny is intimately tied to the future of the continent, and there are exciting things happening in academia across the continent in spite of the many challenges,” she says. “For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented opportunities for innovation in Africa, such as the sequencing of the SARS-CoV-2 genome in Nigeria and South Africa. In fact, the UFS was involved in the testing of vaccines.”

UFS engagement on the continent

The UFS has come a very long way towards improving its African footprint in terms of research collaboration and diversifying the African profile of both staff members and students. At institutional and faculty level, the UFS has memoranda of understanding with 14 higher education and research institutions in Africa. Between 2017 and 2021, the UFS collaborated with 285 institutions in Africa, which resulted in more than 2 000 co-authored publications – the top five subject areas for collaboration being Agricultural and Biological Sciences, Medicine, Social Sciences, Physics and Astronomy, and Environmental Science.

The UFS is also an active member of the Association of African Universities (AAU) and the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM). Universities engaging with each other through these platforms contribute to capacity-building and development on the continent.

A rich tapestry of international student life

Staff and students from Africa who enrol at the UFS also contribute to the rich tapestry of the university’s student life. The UFS is currently home to students from as far afield as Egypt, Ethiopia,

and Ivory Coast, but most of our African students hail from our neighbouring countries Lesotho and Zimbabwe.

“Our international students from the African continent contribute significantly to creating a culturally and intellectually diverse environment on our campuses and provide our local students with an opportunity to obtain international experience without leaving the UFS,” comments Cornelius Hagenmeier, Director of the Office for International Affairs.

One of our African students, Deborah Adesokan who was born in Nigeria, is currently pursuing a master’s degree in Criminology while working as an academic tutor in the Department of Sociology. She says her experience at the UFS has been an eventful journey, with plenty of opportunities for personal and academic growth. She is also very thankful for the awards and bursaries she has received.

“I applaud the UFS for giving African students the opportunity to apply for bursaries, as this is a major concern for many African students,” she says. “I am also fortunate to have a job on campus related to my field of interest, which is academia, where I continue to gain valuable experience.”

Adesokan says she is looking forward to seeing the UFS affiliate with more universities in Nigeria by creating exchange programmes.

Knowledge production for the continent

“Furthermore, I hope to see the university create an African community space where African scholars and leading researchers from various disciplines can converge to talk about and conduct research pertaining to the challenges faced by Africa.”

With regard to the specific UFS African engagements and collaborations, there are just too many to mention in one article.

Says Hagenmeier: “Colleagues in our seven faculties and three campuses enrich research, teaching, and engaged scholarship through their African engagements.”

Definitely deserving of mention, is the UFS being part of the consortium ‘Fostering Research and Intra-African Knowledge Transfer through Mobility and Education (FRAME)’, consisting of five African universities that were awarded the highly competitive Intra-Africa Mobility Grant sponsored by the European Union. This project enables mobility of master’s and doctoral students and staff on the African continent.