

Using global partnerships to combat local issues: University of San Diego's visit to the University of the Free State



USD delegation and UFS staff at the Centre for Environmental Management symposium, held at the University of the Free State on the 6th of June 2025.

On 6 June 2025, the University of the Free State Centre for Environmental Management hosted a symposium with a delegation from the University of San Diego (USD), consisting of students and staff members. This visit to the University of the Free State was part of the USD's tour to South Africa as part of their study abroad programme. The expectation for the students on this tour was to gain exposure to South Africa's environmental and socio-economic challenges, with the intention of integrating these experiences into their academic work and receiving credit or marks upon completion of the tour. The cohort of students from different disciplines – from politics to environmental science – proved to be a much-needed fusion of disciplines to combat the common environmental challenges by viewing them from different lenses.

With the two countries sharing the most critical environmental challenges, such as water scarcity, waste management, and disaster management, the tour provided a platform for experts from the two institutions to share their knowledge, research, strategies, and policies to combat these challenges. These are long-term challenges; thus, combating them will also take time.

However, such discussions could shed light on key focus areas that higher education institutions and government organisations can focus on to deal with these challenges. The emphasis was on being proactive instead of being reactive in dealing with these challenges.

Such connections do not happen randomly, but through institutional collaborations and partnerships. This collaboration was the result of Prof Shola Ololade's sabbatical visit to the Department of Environmental and Ocean Sciences at the USD from August 2022 to January 2023. This visit prompted the need for interdisciplinary interventions to combat the challenges facing the two countries.

Prof Ololade alluded that she hopes this visit will strengthen the ties between the two universities and that the UFS will be the first choice for the USD's study abroad programmes/offerings. Prof Ololade further emphasised on how such engagements not only play a role in combating global challenges but also enhance the institution's (UFS) visibility, encouraging international visitors to consider the University of the Free State as an academic institution, thus broadening the university's global footprint. Equally, these engagements foster collaborations through signed MOUs with different institutions, which will further strengthen collaborations on research, student and staff exchanges, and joint degrees.