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A&M University partnership benefits Qwaqwa schools

What began as an academic engagement at the University of the Free State's (UFS) Qwaqwa Campus has grown into a partnership that is creating meaningful opportunities for learners in surrounding communities.

Through a collaborative initiative led by the Faculty of Education, the Directorate for Community Engagement, and the Directorate for International Partnerships and Relations, learners from seven local schools around Qwaqwa have received new school shoes, demonstrating how international partnerships can extend beyond scholarship to respond to community needs.

The initiative was inspired by Dr LS Spencer, Clinical Professor and Program Co-coordinator for Educational Administration Programmes at Prairie View A&M University in Texas, United States of America. Following his previous visit to the Qwaqwa Campus, where he was introduced to the University's strong commitment to community engagement, Dr Spencer donated US\$1 250 towards the purchase of 72 pairs of school shoes for learners from seven local schools around Qwaqwa.

Reflecting on the partnership, Dr Spencer said it reaffirmed his belief that universities have a responsibility that extends beyond teaching and research. "International partnerships should be about much more than academic collaboration. While teaching, research, and scholarly exchange are essential, I believe the greatest partnerships are those that also leave a positive and lasting impact on the communities they serve."

Partnerships that extend beyond the classroom

For the Faculty of Education on the Qwaqwa Campus, the initiative reflects a commitment to strengthening relationships with schools that play an important role in preparing future teachers.

According to Dr Brian Shambare, Acting Subject Head in the Teaching Practice Directorate, schools that host student teachers are valued partners in the Faculty's mission to prepare future educators.

"This initiative aligns strongly with the Faculty's priorities, particularly our commitment to the values of care and societal impact. Supporting our partner schools reflects our shared responsibility to contribute positively to learner well-being and educational success."

The initiative also reflects the University's broader approach to community engagement, which prioritises partnerships that are developed collaboratively and respond to identified community needs.

Moodi Matsoso, Community Engagement Coordinator at the Qwaqwa Campus, explained that the initiative was developed through consultation with school principals to identify genuine needs and align support with each school's realities. "The programme reflects the University's commitment to partnerships that seek equitable and sustainable benefits for both communities and the institution."

Bulelwa Moikwatlhai, Assistant Director in the Directorate for International Partnerships and Relations, said the initiative demonstrates how internationalisation can create value beyond academic collaboration. "International partnerships are most meaningful when they create opportunities that benefit both the University and the communities it serves," she said. "This initiative reflects the power of global collaboration to address local needs while building relationships founded on shared purpose, mutual respect, and sustainable impact."

For Dr Spencer, meeting the beneficiaries reinforced the importance of investing in young people through practical support. "Something as simple as receiving a new pair of shoes can have a profound impact on a child's confidence, sense of dignity and readiness to learn," he said. "Seeing their excitement and hearing their stories reminded me that even small acts of kindness can make a significant difference."

The partnership has since grown beyond the shoe donation initiative. Following visits to community organisations in the region, Dr Spencer also committed to supporting a local orphanage, reflecting a shared commitment to building relationships that continue to benefit communities beyond a single project.

Looking ahead, Dr Spencer expressed his hope that the project will continue to expand its reach. "I hope this partnership continues to grow in ways that strengthen academic excellence while also creating meaningful opportunities to serve local communities. Education has the power to transform lives when it is combined with compassion, service, and a genuine commitment to making a difference."

As South Africa commemorates Nelson Mandela Month, the initiative serves as a reminder that lasting change is often achieved through partnerships rooted in compassion, collaboration, and service. The UFS Qwaqwa Campus demonstrates how international relationships can extend beyond academic exchange to create a meaningful and enduring impact in the communities the University serves.