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ON 19 September 2013, Sol Plaatje University (SPU) was formally launched with its seat in Kimberley and as one of the first truly South African universities.

This was an important milestone for South Africa because this is a university that is completely free from the usual adjectives such as "previously disadvantaged", "historically white" or "bush" university.

Here is a university that must be judged on how it acknowledges and responds to the social damage of apartheid, without asking to be excused because of that brutish past.

But SPU also intends to develop a strong sense of its place in the city of Kimberley and in the Northern Cape, and through this local relevance speak as equals with the finest minds in the world.

During the planning stages, it was strongly argued that the university must be located inside the city.

This was purposely done to ensure that it becomes a part of the economic, political, cultural and intellectual life of Kimberley and its citizens.

Of course, this raises questions about the relationship between SPU and the city as well as the possibilities – or even pre-conditions – for their mutual development.

Also, this association between the university and the city should be much more than the relatively short-term benefits of the infrastructure development.

SPU was truly conceived as a future knowledge partner to the development of the city of Kimberley and to the Northern Cape.

It is easy to recognise that Kimberley cannot and should not envisage itself as a future "university town" such as Grahamstown, Stellenbosch or Oxford.

Instead, SPU prefers to think of Kimberley as an attractive future city where it will be exciting to live and work – like any of the great cities in the world.

And an important characteristic of a great city is that it also has a good university.

Here is the nexus that aligns the development strategies of the city and SPU and that demands of the university that it develop and sustain high-quality, exciting academic programmes that will be attractive to staff and students from the region and beyond to learn, work and live in Kimberley.

Without this, neither the exciting city nor the good university is possible.

Universities bring people into the city who may otherwise not have arrived here.

At present, around 60% of our staff and students are from outside Kimberley and, of the academic staff, most have at least a Master's degree while around 30% hold a PhD.

This is already starting to reverse the usual outward flow of intellectual talent from the city and the province.

But this university "community" also brings new economic opportunities to a city that is trying to re-imagine its future as the mining sector decreases its local economic engagements.

Of course, there may also be concern about the so-called "studentification" of the city.

This conjures up images of hordes of young students playing

AMBITIOUS VISIONS: Sol Plaatje University, Kimberley and the Northern Cape



GOING GREEN: Students and staff receive a university branded bicycle to commute to and from campus at the Sol Plaatje University.

havoc in the city with negative effects such as inner-city deterioration and declining property prices.

While this is a real possibility, it does not have to be so. Many cities have shown that effective integration of students and their needs within the city environs can be positively managed through a deliberate partnership between the university, the private sector, the city authorities and the students themselves.

SPU plans to work hard to sustain a positive approach by our

students and our institutional culture in its relationship with the city as student numbers grow in the coming years.

In developing the focus for SPU's academic disciplines, the university has looked into the unique needs, competencies and characteristics of the Northern Cape region.

This approach brought the current focus areas of teacher education, ICT and Data Science, heritage studies, paleo-sciences and creative writing in African languages to the fore.

Furthermore, in an era of concern about global warming and the more-serious threat to arid regions like the Northern Cape, SPU is developing future programmes in agricultural sciences with a focus on water-stressed conditions.

The availability of physical resources together with the intellectual capacity to deliver such programmes will determine how quickly they can be implemented.

Sol Plaatje University wants to be a serious contributor to the enduring human attempts at giving

meaning to complexity, in the particular context of the region.

To do this, the university will have to form solid and respectful partnerships with social and institutional structures in Kimberley and in the Northern Cape more generally.

It is in these partnerships that the idea of a university in the Northern Cape presents its most exciting prospect.

Professor Y Ballim is the Vice-Chancellor of Sol Plaatje University