

YUNUS BALLIM

AS a new university, Sol Plaatje University (SPU) started its academic activities on a strong note at the beginning of 2014.

In deciding on the academic programmes and qualifications to be implemented, SPU has been guided by the need to ensure that its curricula strongly reflect its sense of place.

This is being achieved by implementing academic programmes that draw on the unique features of the Northern Cape, while at the same time developing high-level intellectual capacity in areas of most need in the region, and for the country as a whole.

The three academic programmes that were first implemented were developed with very generous support from academics and senior leadership at the University of the Free State and the Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

One of the early programmes was the Bachelor of Education, which had been designed to focus strongly on the development of teachers' content knowledge and practical skills for teaching at the senior phases in schools (grades 10, 11 and 12), in line with the prescripts of the Department of Higher Education and Training 2011 "Policy on Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications". SPU was one of the universities to implement a teaching programme aligned to the new policy.

Since then, the university has further expanded its involvement in teacher education to include programmes for teaching at the intermediate phase of schooling.

One of the often repeated concerns in the region is that the Northern Cape offers much opportunity for social and economic development but few intellectual and entrepreneurial skills to take advantage of such opportunities.

This encouraged SPU to implement a diploma programme in Retail Management that has now developed a strong partnership with the local business sector, which provides bursaries to students and gives them employment opportunities in their work-integrated learning sessions.

The more general Bachelor of Commerce was introduced this year and it is intended that this programme will include a strong thread of entrepreneurship in its curriculum structure.

A related area that will require particular focus is Public Management.

The concerns about proper service delivery in a large and sparsely distributed region such as the Northern Cape certainly have technical dimensions but the solutions will also demand application of management minds that have been appropriately educated with empathy for the human and environmental development needs of the region.

SPU has aspirations to offer this as a postgraduate programme as soon as possible, pending approval and accreditation processes.

The third programme, introduced in 2014, was a diploma in IT Applications Development.

This was seen as a necessary and developing field in the world of information technology and the employability opportunities for successful graduates make this an attractive programme to students.

However, by far the largest

opportunity in this field is presented by the establishment of the Square Kilometre Array (SKA) radio telescope in the Northern Cape.

There is concern that the African mining experience may be reproduced with a large data collection – in other words, that locals will collect the data while the use-value of the data will be developed by people who are

outside the country or continent.

SPU's response to this concern was to introduce the first BSc in Data Science in Africa (as far as we know) last year.

The programme focuses on major streams in pure Mathematics, Applied Mathematics (algorithm development) and Statistics, with strong supporting courses in software engineering

and computer science.

The university is ambitious about engaging in the relatively new world of "data science" across a wide range of economic and social sectors.

Kimberley and the general Northern Cape region hold a remarkably rich archive of human and natural heritage. This archive exists both in formal collections and

in informal communal and natural environments.

Kimberley hosts five good-quality museums and galleries, including the McGregor Museum and the Africana Library collection.

Located in this rich narrative that has yet to be told, SPU is presented with a unique opportunity to make a global contribution to intellectual development and understanding in this field of study.

The university therefore introduced a one-year higher certificate in Heritage Studies last year and a BA programme with a strong focus on archaeology and heritage studies this year.

A further area of curriculum development at SPU has been in the field of creative writing in local African languages.

This represents one of the important areas of damage caused by apartheid that post-1994 South Africa has yet to recover from – the neglect and stunting of the development of local African languages.

In the formal sense of language development, African languages were ossified in the racial and linguistic geography of the apartheid imagination and left to stultify as English and Afrikaans became increasingly hegemonic.

Of course, in the informal setting, African languages developed unfettered and in exciting ways – as all languages routinely do.

However, without formal support, these developments were not captured or codified in the more conventional forms such as creative writing – both in original form or in translation. The result is that the majority of South Africans cannot read their own archive in their home languages.

SPU has already appointed an academic to infuse this approach into the existing academic programmes such as teacher education and the general BA.

In the short to medium term, it is expected that a postgraduate programme in Creative Writing in African Languages will be introduced in the near future and in a manner that draws on SPU's work in Heritage Studies.

SPU is also aware that, as climate change becomes an increasing reality, arid regions such as the Northern Cape are likely to feel the impact earlier and more severely.

In assisting to defend the agricultural sector and food security in the region, SPU plans to implement qualifications in Agricultural Sciences with a particular focus on agriculture under water-stressed conditions.

The importance of such intellectual development is further emphasised by the fact that the farming sector is the single largest employer of people in the Northern Cape.

SPU was established as a Comprehensive University – that is, its academic focus is meant to be a mix of general formative academic programmes and technology-focused professional programmes with a balance towards undergraduate levels of study.

An important measure of the success of the university will be the keenness with which employers and other established universities seek to receive our graduates for employment or for further postgraduate studies.

SPU will certainly be monitoring this marker as the university matures.

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

A SENSE OF PLACE

Fresh curricula for new challenges at Sol Plaatje



NEW BEGINNINGS: Professor Yunus Ballim, Vice-Chancellor of Sol Plaatje University.



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