

Community Engagement more than a catch-phrase at UP

As an institution of higher learning, the University of Pretoria is perfectly positioned to use its skill and knowledge base as well as facilities and infrastructure to empower and assist communities.

"The UP sees Community Engagement as a key priority and it is entrenched in our strategic objectives and in our vision and mission statements. We feel it is very important that we are responsive to the educational, cultural, economic, scientific, technological, industrial, health, environmental and social needs of South Africa, the SADC region, the African continent and the global community," says Prof Ramaranka Mogotlane, Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the UP, who oversees the Community Engagement effort at this leading university.

At UP, Community Engagement is not treated as a separate function, but is considered integral to all aspects of learning and teaching. It is therefore incorporated widely in academic programmes, projects and research efforts. The focus is particularly on areas where the university has proven competencies that can alleviate developmental and capacity problems in identified communities.

"Of course we have a responsibility to address past, present and future imbalances and needs in our society," says Mogotlane. "Universities are uniquely positioned to not only share knowledge, skills and facilities to the betterment of all, but in the process, we can also further learning and teaching at our institution. No research or academic

development should exist in a vacuum. Social and environmental responsibilities help us to guide our research and academic focus so that they can contribute to improving the lives of our people and indeed those of the world."

UP has introduced Community Engagement as part of a number of courses after identifying the growing need for expertise in this area in our country. Students in faculties as diverse as Commerce, Science and Humanities can sign up for modules that not only impart the latest academic theories and knowledge on the subject, but also involve a practical component where students do active community work.

On the research front, post-graduate students and lecturers are encouraged to not simply venture

into communities to do research, but to remain actively engaged with them and analyse the information and outcomes of the research to make a positive difference in their subjects' lives.

The university also runs hundreds of community development, empowerment and outreach projects, ranging from support to schools and businesses, to efforts to provide clean water and food security in rural areas.

Faculties such as Health Sciences and Veterinarian Sciences run clinics and support services in South African and African cities and towns; the Faculty of Law runs Legal Aid Clinics on the Hatfield campus and in Hammanskraal, while TuksSport helps communities to establish and run sports facilities

and clubs in a variety of sporting disciplines. Academics in the legal and business professions provide advice and support to individuals and businesses, while UP engineers and scientists ensure that South Africans are empowered to use technology and sciences to their best advantage.

Prof. Calie Pistorius, Vice-Chancellor of UP, concluded: "At the University of Pretoria, we are proud of our academic excellence, but we are also committed to effective, efficient, caring, and innovative approaches to teaching and learning, research, and community engagement. As the pace-setter on the South African academic landscape, we are dedicated to use this leadership position to empower and uplift the communities we serve."

