

Classes start early on Monday mornings for the dozens of honours students in Public Administration (Public and Development Management). At 09:00 exactly, their lecturer, Prof Johan Burger, is at the ready. This, however, is a class with a difference: Prof Burger is in Stellenbosch – and the students are in Durban, while more than 150 other students are linked up with the class from centres throughout the country.

# Virtual classroom

## takes SU to students



Stellenbosch University (SU) has been offering various faculties a telematic platform to broadcast interactive lectures to 20 centres in South Africa and Namibia by means of satellite technology since 1998. Since the Division: Interactive Telematic Services (iTS) was established in 2008, this satellite technology is supplemented by cellphone, web-based and video-conferencing technology for even better real-time interaction between lecturer and student.

"The Virtual Postgraduate Learning Support Project is an interactive, technologically supported process that blurs the boundaries between on- and off-campus teaching by increasing students' virtual mobility," says Prof Tom Park, Senior Director of iTS.

"The efficient blending of campus teaching and virtual learning spaces makes it possible for working people to combine advanced studies with a career and to implement their acquired knowledge immediately. If you want to study further but you also have to put food on the table, this technology will enable you to have your cake and eat it!" says Prof Park.

All students on the telematic platform have on-line access via the student portal to the 70 000 journals and approximately 450 databases in the University's libraries, and the services offered by its Language Centre (such as help with academic writing skills) and even its Centre for Student Counselling and Development (such as help with study skills, and time and stress management).

iTS has a modern broadcasting studio and control room on the Stellenbosch campus, from where classes are offered for postgraduate programmes in the following faculties: Health Sciences, Education, and Economic and Management Sciences. This also applies to Business School courses, such as the MPhil in Futures Studies, and the popular programmes offered by the Africa Centre for HIV/ Aids Management.

In 2010, approximately 2 200 postgraduate students (almost 20%) 'attended' class in this way. These figures are in line with the global trend of 21st-


century universities meeting students' increasing need for greater flexibility regarding access to postgraduate studies 'any time', 'any place'.

This initiative forms part of SU's HOPE Project, in accordance with which the University reconciles its activities with international development themes - in this case, the eradication of poverty and related conditions. It is based on research showing that successful participation in higher education helps to create prosperity.

### Interactive learning

"What we're doing shouldn't be confused with educational TV or distance education. We're not just firing academic shots into the air; it's an interactive process," emphasises Dr Antoinette van der Merwe, Director of iTS. "Students can ask questions on-line or via SMS. If you send an SMS with the letter 'H' to the studio, the lecturer phones you so that you can ask your question - and everyone else at all the centres will also hear."

In the learning centres, the students can see the lecturer via the overhead camera; the lecturer can also show a PowerPoint or video presentation, do a demonstration or show an object.

Depending on the students' learning needs, this satellite technology can be supplemented by web applications and by cellphone and video-conferencing technology to create a richly textured learning experience for students. Also, physical campus visits are arranged from time to time, so these students are not completely isolated from the residential university. 

- For more information contact Prof Tom Park, Senior Director: iTS, at 021 808 3077 or [tp@sun.ac.za](mailto:tp@sun.ac.za), or visit [www.sun.ac.za/ite](http://www.sun.ac.za/ite).

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### Virtual learning also available to schools

The Western Cape Education Department approached the Division: Interactive Telematic Services in 2009 to make a telematic platform available by means of which additional learning support could be offered on a trial basis to 10 schools in the Western Cape. At each of these schools, decoders and satellite dishes were subsequently installed so that they could receive the broadcasts, which took place mostly on Sunday afternoons.

The project was so successful that 120 additional schools were included in this initiative in 2010. These schools represent approximately 14 000 Grade 12 learners who received extra learning support in six school subjects. The project will most probably be expanded even further in 2011.



Visit [www.thehopeproject.co.za](http://www.thehopeproject.co.za) for a video clip on virtual learning.

