



RESEARCH INTENSIVE: We can do even more to increase our African footprint in postgraduate education and research, says the writer.

# Building Africa through research collaboration

## Stellenbosch University is working closely with fellow institutions across the continent to find 'African solutions to African problems'

**T**HE PHRASE, "We are Africa", has been used to celebrate the founding of the forerunner of the AU – the Organisation of African Unity – on May 25, 1963. But what exactly does it mean?

More particularly, what does it mean for us, as Stellenbosch University, and a structure such as our Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, which is heavily engaged on our continent?

It would be easy to get lost in endless discussions – so allow me to adapt a famous phrase of Abraham Lincoln and say to my mind it simply means we are a university "of the people, by the people, for the people" of Africa.

I am not excluding anyone by saying this. On the contrary, I am including everyone attached to our higher-education institution here at the tip of Africa. For, as President Jacob Zuma said at the national Africa Day celebrations in Pretoria on Sunday, "whoever is in Africa, is an African".

However, there is more than geography to us saying we are Africa: 14 percent of the student body of Stellenbosch University is made up of people from 117 countries across the world, and 56 percent of them are from African countries other than South Africa.

Our claim that we are Africa also goes beyond demographics. We collaborate closely with fellow institutions and individual researchers all over our continent to find "African solutions to African problems".

This is the goal captured in the AU's Agenda 2063, seeking to mobilise efforts towards "The Africa We Want" in 50 years' time. And health is included in the first of the seven aspirations listed in the agenda, namely to create a "Prosperous Africa". On such a continent, the agenda says, all people should enjoy "sound health and well-being".

This is very important, because on all health indicators, Africa lags behind the rest of the world (KPMG, 2013, The State of Healthcare in Africa). For instance, life expectancy in Africa is only 54 years versus 68 for the world on average. We only have 2.3 physicians per 1 000 people versus the world average of 14. Our under-5 mortality in Africa is 107 versus 51 for the world on average. And maternal mortality in Africa stands at 620 versus the world average of 260.

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**Wim de Villiers**

The reasons are varied and complex, but there is consensus on four main contributing factors: the impact of epidemics that affect Africa worst, such as HIV and Aids; policy and governance failures in the political sphere; war and armed conflict in general; as well as widespread poverty and inequality across our continent.

There has been some progress – coinciding with the spread of democracy and economic growth across Africa – but huge challenges remain.

It is our role as a leading research-intensive university in Africa to help produce the necessary knowledge base and human resources and community engagement to improve the situation.

Since joining Stellenbosch University in April, I have been doing the rounds, and I must say, I am impressed. Looking at the map of Africa, the footprint of Stellenbosch is everywhere. This is either through bilateral partnerships with other universities; or multilateral partnerships in thematic networks; or collaborations between individual researchers and their peers elsewhere on the continent outside of South Africa.

According to our 2014 Annual Report, we have 180 active projects with 760 African partners in 43 African countries. This makes Stellenbosch University an important role-player in research collaboration in Africa.

In March, I was in Dakar for the launch of the African Research Universities Alliance, or ARUA.



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Fifteen leading institutions with strong research and postgraduate training joined ARUA – and I am proud to say Stellenbosch is a founder member. Our focus as a group will be to build African research excellence as a vital precondition for the continent to develop and control our own destiny.

I know we can rely on the foundations already in place at Stellenbosch University. But I welcome the drive for us to do even more to increase our African footprint in postgraduate education and research.

This will help us achieve our institutional goal of becoming more focused on the future that we want for the people of our country and the rest of our continent by increasing our impact on society.

There is something else that I want to draw attention to – we are not dealing with a one-way process here. The change we are seeking to effect in society is also affecting us. The day Stellenbosch University started moving away from serving only a part of the population towards serving society as a whole was the day we started transforming, and that process is ongoing.

As we become more inclusive, opening up access to the university, so we become more diverse in terms of the flow of people and ideas – not only from within South Africa but also from further afield.

With internationalisation, we are transforming our institution into a national and continental and global asset. And I could not agree more with the insight that internationalisation necessarily affects everything we do.

That means we have to be adaptable and flexible at all times, which is why promoting a welcoming culture is such an important goal for us. I want to thank all who are making positive contributions in this regard.

I would like to reiterate my support for the drive to increase Stellenbosch University's African footprint – especially in postgraduate education and research. And we are happy to up President Zuma on his call for all institutions in South Africa to fly the AU flag. We will fly the flag of Africa because we are Africa.

● Professor Wim de Villiers, MD, is Rector and Vice-Chancellor of Stellenbosch University (SU). This is a shortened version of his input at the Africa Day Seminar of SU's Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences on Monday.