

# Ghent University and South Africa An overview and new perspectives

2017 has been a historic year for Ghent University, as it has been celebrating its 200th anniversary with a great many number of events, such as the international rectors' conference in March, the creation of the UGent hymn and the city festival on the 8th of October attended by thousands. It has also been an amazing year for the Africa Platform: GAP became structurally embedded in the internationalisation office of UGent and it organised a large number of academic events, thus marking its 10th anniversary. The organization of the Mandela Lecture on October 10th with Antjie Krog and Tom Lanoye – which was attended by close to 400 people – was one of the top events of this memorable year.

The Mandela Lecture was also symbolic of a strong collaborative dynamic between Ghent University and South Africa. The structural and academic-institutional cooperation with South Africa has a long (post-1994) tradition at the university and it includes all 11 faculties. In particular, within the Faculty of Arts & Philosophy there have been a number of noteworthy South Africa-oriented initiatives over the last year.

Everything started some years ago, in 2013, when Ghent University founded the Ghent Centre for Afrikaans and the Study of South Africa. The Centre initiates and facilitates cultural and academic cooperation with South Africa and it promotes the study of the Afrikaans language and literature in the wider multilingual and multicultural context of South Africa. Afrikaans is one of the many indigenous languages of South Africa, with roots in the Netherlands, but also in the Far East and particularly in Africa. While the research team does not restrict its activities to Afrikaans, as it also studies other indigenous languages, it does seek to use Afrikaans as a lever to study South Africa's social, cultural and political history and contemporary society.

Since 2007, Ghent University has offered Afrikaans language and literature in a course structure. For over ten years now, many students have been able to acquaint themselves with South Africa and Afrikaans at Ghent University. The course unit, which generates a great deal of interest among students, is taught by professor Jacques Van Keymeulen (Linguistics), Dr. Annelies Verdoolaege (Languages and Cultures) and professor Yves T'Sjoen (Literature). From the academic year 2018-2019 onwards Ghent University will also offer a Master's course on the subject of Languages and Literatures of South Africa. In addition to these academic course units, research into Afrikaans has also gradually gained in importance, which has resulted in a growing number of Bachelor's and Master's theses. Doctoral research is currently in the pipeline as well. Since 2011, the research

team has organized an international Afrikaans Seminar, which for the past three years, has taken place in the expanded form of an international conference tailored to domestic and foreign students and scholars of Afrikaans. On several occasions the seminars have been described as unique events outside of South Africa. In Ghent, researchers from South Africa and Europe are given the opportunity to present their research in Afrikaans and Dutch, which is exceptional indeed, also for South African scholars. More and more partnerships are being established with South African universities, in which the kinship between Afrikaans and Dutch greatly facilitates student and researcher mobility. The Ghent Centre has evolved as a major player in the academic field of South Africa Studies and serves as a hub in Europe where scholars meet and learn about new research undertaken. Moreover, the Poetry Centre in Ghent boasts the main collection of Afrikaans poetry located outside of South Africa. Ghent is, therefore, a privileged partner for South African universities where Afrikaans and Dutch are taught and studied.

The Centre for South Africa and Afrikaans works closely with other universities in Europe and South Africa. There are institutional agreements in place, and good relations with Cambridge (UK), Olomouc (Czech Republic) and Poznan (Poland), among many others. Moreover, the universities of Leiden and Amsterdam/the South Africa Institute (Netherlands) and Ghent have recently expressed the wish to jointly invite South African guest lecturers and authors to the Low Countries, in other words a contact platform in the field of Afrikaans literature for Dutch and Flemish students. In addition, Ghent University, along with the university colleagues in Leiden and Amsterdam, also intends to launch PhD research, offer workshops and present joint lectures in the field of education and research.

Clearly, the UGent Faculty of Arts and Philosophy considers cooperation with South Africa as one of the key priorities in its internationalization policy. In addition to agreements with Noordwes University (Potchefstroomkampus), the University of Pretoria and the University of die Vrystaat (Bloemfontein), an institutional bilateral framework agreement with the University of Stellenbosch has been in place for more than 20 years. The University of the Western Cape (UWC, Bellville) is another strategic South African partner, a partnership based on over 15 years of intense institutional research collaboration, which has recently been extended to a trilateral partnership, including Ghent University, the University of the Western Cape and the University of Missouri. There is active student and staff mobility to and from these South African universities and a considerable level of shared research: academic researchers at UGent and the South African partner institutes supervise PhDs in partnership, sit on each other's supervision and assessment boards and submit project applications to both FWO-Vlaanderen and the National Research Foundation South Africa. Apart from academic collaboration Ghent University also works together with cultural associations related to South Africa, such as the South Africa Foundation in Amsterdam, the SBA (Stigting vir Bemagtiging deur Afrikaans) and the SASNEV (South African Centre for the Netherlands and Flanders), among others.

Finally, on October 10th of this year the icing on the cake came in the form of the inauguration of a UGent Chair "South Africa: Languages, Literatures, Culture and So-

ciety”. This Chair is the first Chair ever to be established at the UGent Faculty of Arts and Philosophy. The first chair holder, prof. Hein Willemse from the University of Pretoria, gave his inaugural speech in October, in the presence of the subsidiaries who made this Chair possible – including a representative of the Flemish Government, the vice-rector of Ghent University and representatives of the South Africa Foundation in Amsterdam. Each year this chair holder will teach in the course on Afrikaans, he or she will conduct joint research with the UGent colleagues and he or she will give guest lectures in Leiden and Amsterdam, thus fostering the collaboration between Ghent and the Netherlands on the topic of Afrikaans and South Africa.

This overview tells us that South Africa remains an important partner country for Ghent University, also within the Arts and Humanities. In this respect, we are no longer talking about development cooperation, but fully-fledged international collaboration – on equal terms and resulting in a win-win situation for both partners involved. Academic collaboration with Africa, be it on the level of teaching or research, should always be mutually beneficial – and it usually is, as can be testified by our students and staff who travel to Africa for joint research, teaching, internships or fieldwork.

We hope that you will enjoy reading the articles of this issue of Afrika Focus, where we – as always – try to give a forum to young African scholars who have done outstanding research and who are ready to lead African academia into the future.

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