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## **Conference Report**

### **The Sustainable Development Goals as Guidelines for Socially Responsible Universities**

#### **Symposium on the Occasion of the 25th Anniversary of the Partnership Between Nelson Mandela University and University of Oldenburg**

**University of Oldenburg, Germany**

**26–30 June 2023**

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This symposium, held at the Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg, Germany from the 26 to 30 June 2023, was the culmination of a successful 25 years of collaboration between that university and Nelson Mandela University. The symposium was attended by delegations from both universities as well as the general public of the city of Oldenburg. The two universities' delegations were led by President Ralph Bruder and Vice Chancellor Sibongile Muthwa, respectively.

The welcoming event of the symposium, held on 26 June, marked the official start of the collaboration celebrations, and represented a further milestone in the 25-year partnership between the two universities with the signing of a joint 5-year roadmap by Muthwa and Bruder. The roadmap outlines the extension and deepening of collaborative specialist and interdisciplinary projects planned for the future of the two institutions within eight central fields of action. The executive boards of the two institutions have adopted the "Roadmap for Cooperation 2023–2028" in a bid to strengthen and expand their collaboration and partnership in research, teaching, community engagement, and transfer.

Ralph Bruder asserted: "Our universities are a perfect match. We share the same values," and went on to point out that both universities were named after Nobel Peace Prize Winners: Nelson Mandela and Carl von Ossietzky. He further stated: "We take responsibility and stand for an open society and tolerance. Together, we are helping to make the future more sustainable." The two universities signed their first cooperation agreement in 1998 and, since then, several students, lecturers, and researchers have taken part in exchange programmes between the institutions. Sibongile Muthwa noted that at the signing of the 1998 agreement, no one could have imagined how successful the cooperation would be. In commending the connection that has developed between staff and students of the two

institutions, she stated: "Without the great commitment of those involved over the years, this would not have been possible."

The two institutions have collaborated on teaching and teacher education, further education, and sustainability research since 1998 and, in 2017, a new collaboration in marine research was established. One of its aims is to develop strategies for more effective management of marine ecosystems. From 2023, the cooperation will be expanded to include the humanities and social sciences, medicine and health sciences, and renewable energies. In the field of the humanities and social sciences, there are various common fields of action, for example, in gender studies or at the interface between art, humanities, and computer science.

The newly signed roadmap, which focuses on eight subject areas, also focuses on knowledge transfer and the promotion of early career researchers. Joint courses for students and young researchers (online and in person) will be part of the new collaboration. The two partners have also explored the possibilities of expanding jointly supervised doctoral theses and exchange programmes in the future to promote international dialogue. In addition, as part of the successful start-up culture at the University of Oldenburg, there are plans to develop instruments that systematically support start-ups across borders.

Higher education and educational science have been an important focus since the beginning of the cooperation. The partners are currently cooperating on, amongst other projects, the Dimensions of Diversity in Teacher Education project funded by the German Academic Exchange Service together with the University of Groningen the NHL Stenden (Netherlands) with the aim of further internationalising teacher education. Educational research approaches and further academic education are the focus of another two projects: the East and South African–German Centre for Educational Research Methodologies and Management (CERM-ESA), and the Digital Initiative for Centres of African Excellence (DIGI-FACE), to which other African countries and universities have become partners. Research and education that benefit the fundamental transformation of our societies in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals are another important focus of the roadmap. The universities also want to exchange ideas and experiences of how they could make their own structures more sustainable and thus future proof.

Commenting on the role of Nelson Mandela University within the international network of the University of Oldenburg since 2005, Karsten Speck, Vice President for Studies, Teaching and International Affairs, and Ambassador for the Cooperation, said: "We work closely and trustingly together. Alongside the University of Groningen, Mandela University is our strategically most important partner university."

The celebrations of 26 June were rounded off with a festive welcome dinner for all delegates at the botanical garden of Oldenburg. The scientific director of the botanical gardens, Dirk Albach, gave an enthralling presentation to enlighten the delegates on the history and culture of botanical gardens.

The symposium on "The Sustainable Development Goals as Guidelines for Socially Responsible Universities" was held on the 27 June. This hybrid event was attended by researchers from both institutions and the public to discuss different dimensions of sustainability, and how universities can play a role in ensuring a sustainable future for all. Sibongile Muthwa and Karsten Speck made welcoming remarks to start the day on a high note. This was followed by a presentation from Speck titled "The University of Oldenburg's Engagement and Transfer Mandate and Activities in Light of the Sustainable Development Goals." Thandi Mgwebi and Bruce Damons then presented a talk on "Advancing the Sustainable Development Goals at the Nelson Mandela University," highlighting how

each of the two institutions had worked towards the attainment of the development goals. This was followed by Bernd Siebenhüner and Anna Kramer whose focus was on “Towards a Carbon Neutral University.” Participants heard about research-based strategies of reducing our carbon footprint and using alternative energies. Then, Carine Steyn and Werner Olivier presented on “University–School Engagement for Quality Steam Education: The Govan Mbeki Mathematics Development Centre at the Nelson Mandela University,” which addressed the work of the centre in advancing science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and arts education in schools—especially in marginalised areas.

The midday session began with a presentation from Herena Torio and Baback Ravenbach on “Renewable Energies: Local and Regional Solutions to the Energy Crisis,” followed by Danai Tembo who talked about “Projects Towards the Sustainable Development Goals: An Example From the Department of Development Studies.” The latter two presentations focused on how universities can be engaged with communities to address energy challenges especially in resource-poor settings. Jorge Marx-Gomez and Jean Greyling then presented on “IT and Entrepreneurship for Sustainability” in which they shared pointers on how technology could be used to promote sustainable entrepreneurial projects within communities. The session closed with a presentation from Mathabo Khau and Ayanda Simayi titled “The Role of Critical Research, Teaching and Engagement: Gender and Sexuality Education Towards Gender Equality and Quality Education” which focused on the importance of advancing gender equality through incorporating Indigenous knowledges in critical research and teaching on sexuality education.

The symposium concluded with a roundtable discussion in the afternoon, titled “The Future of Transformative and Responsive Higher Education Institutions in the South and North-Transdisciplinary Perspectives,” in which the future of education and educational institutions was discussed from a transdisciplinary perspective. The roundtable was hosted by Karsten Speck and Mathabo Khau, and the panellists were Priscilla Mensah and Muki Moeng from Nelson Mandela University and Hans Gerd Nothwang and Hans-Michael Trautwein from Oldenburg University. Some of the questions that the panel members responded to were:

- What is the future of transformative and responsive higher education institutions? What is the role of universities?
- How can we position ourselves as universities to address the challenges of our societies in a meaningful way?
- How can Uni/Comm partnerships become an actor in driving transformation towards more sustainability, social justice, and social change?

These and other questions from the audience created a lively discussion on how universities can become more transformative in their engagements with communities towards the world we want.

The rest of the week was allocated to team meetings between the two institutions, where researchers met with colleagues to plan new collaboration ideas, or establish ways of strengthening existing collaborative projects. After these meetings, on 28 June, the annual International Summer Fest picked up on the anniversary of the cooperation with a suitable theme, and colleagues enjoyed music and dance while sampling cuisine from the diverse nations represented. Finally, on 29 June, participants from Nelson Mandela University were treated to a tour of the cities of Oldenburg and Bremen to explore historical monuments and enjoy a day out with friends.