FORMIDABLE PARTNERS

Stellenbosch and Leipzig universities have been in a collaborative partnership for nearly 20 years. When visiting the German institution, the many similarities between the two universities are evident.

By WAYNE MULLER

Like many European cities, Leipzig’s city centre has its fair share of centuries-old buildings and cobble-stone streets. But on the Augustusplatz, once the site of the university church (inaugurated in 1240), which miraculously survived World War II, but was destroyed in 1968 by the communist regime, one finds the imposing glass buildings known as the Augusteum and Paulinum.

Today, these impressive glass structures house Leipzig University offices, as well as a hall in the style of the Pauliner Church of old. The buildings also serve as a landmark in the city – similar to Stellenbosch University’s distinctive “Ou Hoofgebou” (or Old Main Building).

Leipzig University is old indeed. It was established in 1409 and has over the past six centuries grown into one of Germany’s leading academic institutions. But even though Stellenbosch University (SU) is some five centuries Leipzig’s junior, the two institutions appear to have much in common. Like SU, Leipzig University too is spread across the central city, with a central square serving as a place for students to unwind and air their views, much like SU’s Rooiplein.

But the similarities go much deeper than that. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the unification of Germany, Leipzig University – which from 1953 to 1991 was known as the Karl Marx University Leipzig under the communist regime – had to reposition itself. This was the very era when South Africa embarked on its journey to democracy, similarly requiring SU to reposition itself.

Since 1997, these two universities have been building a partnership that today includes student and staff mobility, research projects, joint degree programmes and special academic appointments. Nearly 20 years later, SU is still Leipzig’s only South African partner institution.

According to Dr Svend Poller of Leipzig University’s International Centre, the search for a South African partner started in 1996, when a delegation from Leipzig visited the country. “In the 1990s, Leipzig University opened its windows to the world. At the time, South Africa was in a similar situation than Germany, although from a slightly different perspective. The keywords were societal transformation. That is why we decided on South Africa and SU as our partner in this transformation process,” Poller explains.

Robert Kotzé, Senior Director of SU’s Postgraduate and International Office, says the impact of the partnership on SU is especially felt at the institutional level, as it has resulted in new thinking about joint and dual degree programmes. It has also led to ties with other European universities, such as the universities of Graz, Ljubljana, Bologna, Utrecht and Antwerp.

To Poller, the success of the partnership goes beyond the programmes and projects in the various disciplines. “On the one hand, it’s about a combination of institutional and sustainable collaboration, particularly with regard to joint degree programmes. On the other hand, however, it is also about a deep understanding of people, of friends, which has developed over the years. That seems to be at the heart of this partnership.”

As highlights, both Poller and Kotzé mention the joint master’s degree
in German as Foreign Language, the joint PhD in Global Studies by Stephanie Baumert, who wrote a thesis on internationalisation at SU under supervision of Prof Jan Botha, as well as various rector’s visits and workshops.

“But it’s not so much the highlights, but rather the continuity and variety of exchange programmes that make this partnership special,” Poller says.

Campus debates on diversity similar to those currently happening in South Africa are also taking place at Leipzig University. The day before my departure from Leipzig, I took part in a panel discussion on diversity – the agenda included the role of women in academia, first-generation working-class children entering university studies, as well as the impact of Syrian refugees in Germany.

“It turned out to be an insightful debate that foregrounded various views on diversity. Undoubtedly, SU and Leipzig University have a whole lot in common – very possibly due to our similar histories – which we will still be able to jointly debate and reflect on for years to come.

Rita Griebenow and Mikail Barnard

Rita Griebenow and Mikail Barnard are two SU students who have had a student exchange experience at Leipzig in 2016.

Griebenow, who lives in Metanoia residence in Stellenbosch, spent a semester in Leipzig, where she worked on her master’s degree in Engineering.

“It was an educational and enjoyable experience. Life in Leipzig is easy, but as a South African, you do miss the diversity and the openness with which we speak and address issues.

“I must admit, Leipzig is a quiet city in general – people are quiet on the streets – compared to the jovial South Africans,” she says.

Barnard, who is studying towards his master’s degree in Global Studies, also finds the exchange opportunity enriching.

He started in October 2015 and will be spending two years in Leipzig.

“It was extraordinary to spend Christmas here. And they do have some diversity, particularly in terms of music and the arts,” Barnard says.

According to Jane Moros of Leipzig University’s International Centre, they try to create a welcoming environment for international students.