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RESEARCH

# Restoring Africa's place in scholarship

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"CONFRONTING the challenges of our time differently and more purposefully."

With this apt expression at the launch of the Clusters of Research Excellence between leading African and European universities, Professor Ernest Aryeetey of the Alliance of Research-intensive Universities in Africa (Arua), summed up the task at hand to ensure that researchers and scholars on the continent uphold and advance Africa's contribution to the world's generation of scientific knowledge.

Despite considerable growth over recent decades, Africa's share of global science production currently stands at 8%. This is clearly insufficient for a continent of 1.3 billion people whose population is expected to almost double by 2050.

On Africa Universities Day, celebrated across our continent every November 12, we took a moment to reflect on the remarkable progress

made in the field of higher education.

The 20 Clusters of Research Excellence (CORE), an initiative of Arua and the Guild of European Universities, are focused on bringing the best enquiring minds together across scientific disciplines and continental boundaries to tackle some of the most intractable challenges of our time – from preparing the world to fight future pandemics better, to mitigating the devastating effects of climate change.

This collaborative approach for greater societal impact was amplified at the Times Higher Education's World Academic Summit held recently in Sydney, Australia, with the theme: "Collaborating for greatness in a multi-disciplinary world". Delegates from 50 countries explored how institutions can best collaborate both internally (across departments to accelerate transformative and translational research) and externally (to strengthen regional, national and global collaboration) to enhance the role of universities as key drivers of change within society.

A salient feature of the discus-

sions at the summit with reference to research collaboration is the challenge of establishing equitable partnerships in a deeply unequal world.

Thus, transformative research and a wider endorsement of the Africa Charter for Transformative Research Collaborations enjoyed much attention as a means of finding practical solutions to the scientific challenges of our time and building capacity of the next generation of researchers for Africa and the globe.

At Stellenbosch University (SU), doing research "differently and more purposefully" across regional and continental boundaries has become an institutional ethos – underpinned by innovative thinking and significant investment in accelerating the skills capacity of our continent.

The launch of the billion-rand state-of-the-art Biomedical Research Institute at our Tygerberg campus earlier this year is aimed at collaborative research that will exponentially boost the research capacity in biomedical sciences and holds the promise to

revolutionise healthcare on our continent.

Genomic surveillance to control pathogen infections in South Africa, Mozambique, Belgium and Germany are well under way and our Centre for Epidemic Response and Innovation is assisting 44 African countries with training and capacity building through their Genomics Service and Country Support.

Our researchers have joined forces with European and regional counterparts to respond to pandemic and epidemic pathogens such as Covid, HIV, influenza, tuberculosis, malaria and cholera.

The quest to strengthen Africa's presence in the global research arena is further underpinned by the Nobel in Africa Symposia where SU is partnering with the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study in an initiative that has a special focus on Africa and to nurture future generations of scholars and intellectual leaders on the continent.

The Nobel in Africa Symposia bring

together some of the world's top scientists to deliberate on new research discoveries and developments in their field. The first symposium on physics was held in October last year and was followed by an equally formidable symposium on chemistry at the end of last month.

The symposia, with a strong outreach element, are deliberately aimed at university academic staff and students with the objective to inspire the next generation of scholars on the continent.

There can be no doubt that purposeful research collaborations are powerful instruments to deliver greater, scalable impact on the communities we serve – locally, regionally and globally.

This will go a long way in addressing the formidable challenge to level up with Western research and restore Africa's rightful place in global scholarship and research excellence.

*Professor De Villiers is Rector and Vice-Chancellor of Stellenbosch University*

CONSERVATION