

Making waves at Sol Plaatje University

New vice-chancellor Professor Andrew Crouch tells **Bongekile Macupe** about his plans to put the institution on the world map and create a talent pipeline to help high-achieving matric learners

The vice-chancellor of Sol Plaatje University, Professor Andrew Crouch, started his new job when the global Covid-19 pandemic had just hit South Africa.

When Crouch arrived at the Sol Plaatje University (SPU) on 1 April last year, he had to hit the ground running. There was no time to settle into the job. Already, other institutions were thinking of ways to save the academic year and he needed to come up with a strategy as well.

Within a week of his arrival at the university, which is in Kimberley in the Northern Cape, he had already established three task teams that were given the job of assisting the institution in operating during Covid-19.

One task team was the academic team that focused on, among other things, the readiness of the institution to provide online learning and was responsible for the training of lecturers and students in online teaching and learning.

The university Crouch is leading is fairly new, having only been opened in 2014. In that sense, it comes without the baggage or legacies of inequalities that other institutions are battling, which he says made it less tricky to transition to online learning, with only minor glitches.

The university already had the information and communications technology hardware infrastructure in place and only needed to fill in the software gaps.

All first-year students at SPU are given laptops, which worked in SPU's favour. The institution did not have a device crisis that other institutions — especially previously disadvantaged

ones — had, which led to some failing to complete the 2020 academic year. With everything in place, within six to eight weeks after Crouch arrived the university managed to launch a programme of online learning.

“We were able to manage the academic calendar, we were able to be nimble in our response and, lo and behold, we successfully completed the academic year. We are one of the few universities among the big universities that finished the academic calendar,” says Crouch.

Only nine out of 26 universities managed to finish the academic calendar last year; the rest are set to complete their syllabi this year.

Crouch — who is only the second vice-chancellor to lead SPU — credits his experience in championing online learning at the University of Witwatersrand, where he worked for 11 years before moving to Kimberley, as having been valuable when he arrived at SPU and needed to set up systems for online learning. His last role at Wits was deputy vice-chancellor for academics and he was also responsible for the operational management of the university.

He tells the *Mail & Guardian* that he managed the online teaching and learning aspirations at Wits for five years.

“I worked for a long time at Wits in socialising the idea of online education being the future of education more in a blended mode; a combination of online mode and contact learning. I was singing that mantra for many years at Wits,” he says.

It has been ten months since Crouch has been at the helm at SPU, having taken over from the inaugural vice-chancellor, Professor Yunus



New broom: Professor Andrew Crouch spent 11 years at the University of the Witwatersrand, five of which were spent specifically on online learning initiatives, which he says prepared him well to take on his new role as vice-chancellor at Sol Plaatje University during the Covid-19 pandemic. Photo: Felix Dlangamandla/Gallo

Ballim, and he summarises the time he has spent so far at the institution as “exciting, exhilarating, sometimes tiring; but also fulfilling, in the sense that through all of this I managed to steer the ship through the troubled waters and we managed to achieve at least the academic goals that we set out for the year.”

While Crouch has an academic career spanning 30 years, he says he held no ambitions of becoming a vice-chancellor. In fact, he says he had decided that he was going to go into early retirement this year and “do something else with my life”.

But he ended up in his hometown leading the first university in the Northern Cape. He tells the *M&G* that he initially turned down requests to apply for the job but was persuaded again after the university council could not find the right candidate for the post.

“I had reservations because appointments at this level are known to be played by politics and I have been upfront in saying that I do not play politics; I am an academic. I believe in excellence and quality and those are not always terms that one

“Once they are done at university they need to go back to their towns and villages and make a further impact there”

can associate with politics.”

But now that he is in the driving seat, Crouch has plans that he hopes will put the university on the world map and also assist in uplifting the people of the Northern Cape.

Interestingly, one of the campuses of SPU is on the premises of the old William Pescod Secondary School, which Crouch himself attended as a schoolboy.

“I can point out the classroom where I actually sat, it is still there. My class was the last that used the old William Pescod school before we were evicted,” he says.

Crouch says he has many “passion projects” that he wants to launch before he bows out, one of which — close to his heart — he has termed a “talent pipeline project”. He wants the university to reach out to rural schools in the province to invite the top 10% of learners in grades 10, 11 and 12 to the university over school holidays, where they will participate in enrichment programmes in subjects such as mathematics, physical science and languages and be exposed to other subjects offered at the university, such as diversity studies and forensic science.

The goal is to help learners achieve a matric pass that will be good enough to get them into university, hopefully SPU, and they will also be supported at university level.

“Once they are done at university they need to go back to their towns and villages and make a further impact there,” he says. This pro-

ject will also upskill teachers at the schools where high-achieving learners are sourced, through an educator enrichment programme that would benefit the rest of the school.

“I would like to launch it this year. I call this my pet project and I will make sure it is well established by the time I leave the institution.”

Crouch also wants to establish a centre for part-time studies to provide short courses to the community at large as well as to people working in the public sector in the Northern Cape. Crouch believes that public servants, for example, must not enrol for short courses at universities in other provinces when SPU is there to serve them.

Some of his plans include the establishment of two or three niche research centres, including a research programme in desert studies. No other university in the country has a postgraduate programme in desert studies. The Northern Cape is a semi-desert environment where communities have lived under water-stressed conditions for years. Crouch feels society can learn about how these communities survive through a proper research project.

Other plans include the establishment of other campuses in areas such as Upington and Namaqualand; and further establishing other niche academic programmes.

Crouch is cognisant that he does not have a lot of time at the university but says he will be happy if most of what he plans to do is achieved by the time he departs.