



Probably the longest long-distance relationship in the world

Leipzig and Stellenbosch celebrate 20 years of cooperation

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Nowadays, long-distance relationships are not uncommon: In Germany, one in eight couples live far apart from one another. While some of these relationships are characterised by loneliness, longing and conflict, many partners do in fact pass the challenge of geographical separation with flying colours. One prime example of a stable long-distance relationship is the partnership between our university and Stellenbosch. Despite the 9500 kilometres that separate them, both universities are celebrating the 20th anniversary of their partnership this year.

To mark the anniversary, a partnership forum was held in Leipzig between 18 and 23 June 2017. Eleven colleagues from South Africa took part. "For Leipzig University, getting married to Stellenbosch University was an act of love," remarked Svend Poller, Director of the International Centre, as the forum kicked off. Since their marriage in 1997, both universities have systematically developed their strategic partnership. The repertoire now includes three integrated study programmes, three binational PhD programmes, research projects in nine different subject areas as well as teaching cooperation and the exchange of students, scholars and administrative staff.

The partners seem aware of the fact that a healthy long-distance relationship thrives primarily on shared challenges: "After 20 years, any partnership needs livening up. That's why both universities have set themselves the task of incorporating more young academics in the coming years and finding new subjects for our exchange," continued Poller. This is why invitations to the partnership forum were sent in particular to young scientists from Stellenbosch who had not yet had any contact with the German university. The participants came from the fields of psychology, entomology, chemistry, the Botanical Garden, the Research Development department and the medical library.

During the week of the forum, the guests from Stellenbosch met with their colleagues from Leipzig in their respective subject areas and discussed the possibilities of joint research and teaching as well as academic exchange. "We were really impressed by the Early Childhood Research master programme, which our students can also enrol on here," explained Chrisma Pretorius from Stellenbosch's Department of Psychology after meeting Robert Hepach, Junior Professor of Research Methods in Early Childhood Development. Together with her colleague Bronwyne Coetzee, Pretorius also talked to colleagues from the Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences.

At the German Centre for Integrative Biodiversity Research (iDiv), on the other hand, Rene Gaigher and James Pryke found out about the different research areas and experimental platforms in the context of potential collaborative research projects. Martin Smit from the Botanical Garden in Stellenbosch and Matthias Schwieger, the technical director of its Leipzig counterpart, had an endless number of things to talk about. Their lively exchange

ranged from cultivated and native plant species here and in Stellenbosch, to the form and structures of the gardens, and even the botanical gardens' activities on social media.

It is clear to see how beneficial this week was: "The partnership forum was a fantastic means of preparing for the next years of our cooperation. I think that we have now strengthened the relationship between Stellenbosch and Leipzig even further – new people and new subjects will enrich our collaboration in future. And who knows, perhaps in three years there will even be a double degree with the Early Childhood Research master programme. I do hope so, that would be great," explained Robert Kotze, Senior Director of the Postgraduate and International Office in Stellenbosch. And so the universities of Leipzig and Stellenbosch have shown once again that distance really can keep a relationship fresh.

Lina Hörügel