

New Deputy Dean: Research and Postgraduate Studies aims to dynamically escalate Faculty's research status

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Prof Marinda Oosthuizen

"I strongly believe that the postgraduate student experience should be much more than simply graduating. We ideally want our students to graduate with a passion for learning and research, to achieve their research potential, to have built a network of valuable contacts, to have a deep understanding of academic integrity and other professional standards, and to provide them with a skill set useful in a wide range of related careers."

This was the clear message conveyed by Prof Marinda Oosthuizen, newly appointed Deputy Dean for Research and Postgraduate Studies in the Faculty, when she shared her views about the role of the Faculty in enhancing the University's academic stature and its postgraduate education. Appointed with effect from 1 July, Prof Oosthuizen says that, in order to ensure this she would strive to create an environment in the Faculty where its postgraduate students are fully integrated into its research themes and groups. "This has to be an environment that will provide our postgraduate students with effective supervision and mentorship, and more importantly, a clear roadmap with goals and guidelines to ensure that they not only graduate on time, but also produce high-quality research," she says.

Prof Oosthuizen joined the Department of Veterinary Tropical Diseases (DVTD) in the Faculty as postdoctoral fellow in 2003 and was soon thereafter appointed as Senior Researcher. She was later appointed as Senior Lecturer in 2009, promoted to Associate Professor in 2012 and to full Professor in January 2016. Her qualifications, Bsc (Agric); Bsc (Agric) (Hons) and MSc *cum laude* with specialisation in Microbiology (early 90's), and her PhD degree (1998), were all obtained from the University of Pretoria.

As far as she recalls, her passion for animals, has always existed. Not only as pets or companions, but the diseases they carry, constantly fascinated her. She therefore specialized in microbiology in earlier years. Since joining the Faculty, her focus has been in the field of veterinary molecular parasitology. Prof Oosthuizen's research has a strong focus on tick-borne pathogen discovery, molecular characterization of novel tick-borne haemoparasites of domestic and wild animals, including those that threaten endangered and rare wildlife species, as well as molecular diagnostic assay development. She has a special interest in zoonotic infections transmitted from wildlife reservoir species to humans and domestic animals at the human/livestock/wildlife interface in rural South Africa. "I strongly believe that the active surveillance for potential pathogens is much needed in order to predict and combat possible emerging zoonotic diseases", Prof Oosthuizen says.

In collaboration with Washington State University and the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD), she has recently been successful in attaining USA National Institutes of Health (NIH) funding within the International Research in Infectious Diseases in which we are employing

metagenomics approaches to determine the prevalence and diversity of zoonotic pathogens in various hosts in the Mnisi community, Mpumalanga, located at the human/livestock/wildlife interface. According to Prof Oosthuizen, this research project will undoubtedly expand our knowledge base of zoonotic tick-borne pathogens impacting human and animal health in South Africa and will enhance our understanding of the challenges faced by rural communities living at the interface.

Apart from her research interest in the field of veterinary science, postgraduate student supervision and mentorship have always been extremely important to her, and helping students to develop their own skills at problem-solving, conducting research and writing is extremely rewarding to her. Her view is that her role as a supervisor and mentor does not only include expertise in the research area in order to give scientific guidance, advice and to ensure scientific quality, but also include support to the student on both an intellectual and emotional level.

In support of the University's aim of being a research-intensive, visible institution, Prof Oosthuizen emphasises that the Faculty is striving to focus its postgraduate education and research activities on harnessing institutional strengths, embedding institutional research themes and sustaining its research output and impact. Through its comprehensive strategic plan the Faculty aims to have internationally recognized research niche areas and themes, to attract more postgraduate students nationally and internationally, to generate high-impact publications, and to escalate the research status of the Faculty. Prof Oosthuizen plans to take the faculty to another level by furthering the Faculty's vision and strategic plans: "My goals are to promote research excellence; stimulate a progressive increase in Faculty publication outputs; build capacity and foster the leaders of the future through postgraduate degree and diploma programmes; diversify and increase research grant income; promoting international joint degree programmes, and raise the Faculty's international reputation," she says.

This will undoubtedly escalate the research status of the Faculty and will ensure a continued QS World University and Shanghai Global ranking among the top 50 universities for veterinary science in the world.

Prof Oosthuizen holds a National Research Foundation (NRF) C2 rating and is the author of 60 peer-reviewed publications, including papers in leading international journals. Amongst other affiliations, she is currently a council committee member of the Parasitological Society of Southern Africa (PARSA).

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