

SPECIAL REPORTS

UKZN and UN agency partnership paves the way for access to medicine

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The University of KwaZulu-Natal has partnered with The International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology to advance biotherapeutics

The International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB) and the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) this week signed a ground-breaking agreement that will see the university partnering with local companies to develop advanced biotherapeutics to be used in the treatment of various conditions including diabetes, arthritis, cancer and others.

The ICGEB was created by the United Nations in 1983 to facilitate biotechnology developments in the developing world. The organisation's council of scientific advisors comprises the world's leading scientists, among them Nobel prize-winners for medicine.

The ICGEB has three global centres: one is in Cape Town, and the others are in Trieste in Italy and New Delhi in India.

ICGEB Director-General Dr Lawrence Banks said during the signing ceremony that the partnership with UKZN is perfect, as the two organisations have lots of shared values and aims.

Dr Banks said the cornerstone of the collaboration is to ensure that state-of-the-art technology and science can bring benefits for all people in the world. He said this should begin with education, which forms the core mandate of the UKZN.

He said they must ensure that nobody is left behind in the partnership, and that this will be done in practical ways. He said they will ensure that they have fellowship programmes that will bring people not only from South Africa, but also from across the continent to work on state-of-the-art programmes within the life sciences.

“What we do is not only for South Africa, but for the entire continent,” said Dr Banks. He emphasised that the partnership must ensure that the fruits of modern biotechnology reach the people who need it.

“At the end of the day, you can have wonderful therapeutics, but if it’s not affordable to the people it’s a complete waste of time,” he said, adding that the partnership with UKZN is fundamental in bringing this about.

Dr Phil Mjwara, Director-General of the Department of Science and Innovation, said the partnership was in line with the White Paper on Science, Technology and Innovation adopted by the government in 2019.

The White Paper introduced a number of policy shifts, which relate to, among others, increasing the focus on inclusivity, transformation and linkages in the NSI; enhancing the innovation culture in society and government and improving policy coherence and budget co-ordination across government.

UKZN’s Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Research and Innovation, Professor Mosa Moshabela, and the Dean of the School of Clinical Medicine, Professor Ncoza Dlova, will be responsible for conducting clinical trials within the next year.

The partnership is set to allow poor people to access expensive life saving medicines for the first time. The collaboration will be facilitated by AfricaBio through its President Dr Nhlanhla Msomi.

AfricaBio is an independent non-profit stakeholders’ association which represents the interests of all stakeholders involved in the biotechnology sector throughout Africa. It focuses on agriculture, health, industrial, environmental and marine biotech.

Dr Thami Chiliza, Microbiologist at the School of Life Sciences, UKZN, and a stakeholder of AfricaBio, said the partnership with the ICGEB will ensure that expertise rubs off onto students in an easier way, exposes them to what is out there in the world of science, and contributes to job creation.

“I really believe this will allow students to gain more exposure and experience in terms of the biotechnology sector,” said Dr Chiliza.

It is expected that the collaboration will soon include other partnerships with the universities of Limpopo, Venda and Walter Sisulu.

Researcher Dr Thandeka Khoza said the partnership fits in with the UKZN’s mission statement and goals, which include achievement of excellence in teaching and learning, excellence and high impact in research, innovation and entrepreneurship.

She said the university has various innovative research projects lined up that can offer various solutions to various diseases, and they have identified products from natural products from plants for use in cancer and TB research.

“If we have ICGEB on board, these projects can move faster towards the project development stage so we can have a wide door of opportunities for all members of the university,” said Dr Khoza.

“What it does is, it bridges the gap between academic research and product-driven or industry-based research, which is what we are at this point in time, gearing ourselves towards and also attracting skills that position us for such research. So, we are confident that in no time our research will be applied research, and it will also be cost effective. We are going to have graduates that are fit for purpose,” she said.

UKZN Deputy Vice-Chancellor Professor Mosa Moshabela said the partnership underlined the reality that institutions must work together: “Ivory towers have to come to an end; we need to flatten the hierarchy, we have to get into equal partnerships with different stakeholders, we have to create a culture

of sharing, and we must have the humility to learn from others. There is no way we can advance by working in isolation.”
