
International initiative prepares students for citizenship

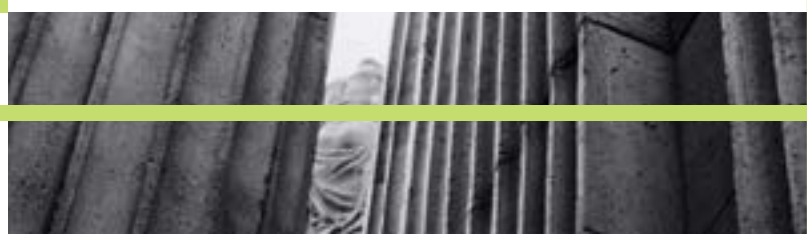
As an indicator of the importance of the collaboration, the Vice-Chancellor of University West, Professor Martin Hellström, headed a delegation visit to UWC in February 2020. During the visit, the leadership of UWC and UW signed renewal of collaboration agreements and held discussions about future prospects for enhancing and extending the international collaboration between the universities. The VC of University West also officially opened a new Zoom Room at the Political Studies department. The Zoom Room is financed by University West, to enhance the future collaboration of the jointly organised Master's Programme, and to improve digitalisation of international education, and thereby promote a sustainable long-term education and research collaboration between the universities.

For the future, we foresee an exciting and expansive international collaboration. We are very proud of the fruitful and productive international collaboration between UWC and UW. Ultimately the intention is to prepare our students for citizenship in a global context by bringing international experience and knowledge to them, as well as equipping them with personal empowerment skills such as organisational ability, leadership and an understanding of their agency.

A joint project of the University West in Sweden and UWC trains students to be responsible and active citizens

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We live in an era of complexity, uncertainty, grave challenges and global development threats. These include extreme poverty and inequality, identity politics, intolerance, societal polarisation and populist politics that promise quick and simple solutions to complex socio economic problems. In this context it is important for institutions of higher education to take up the challenge of educating students in a way that helps them to be responsible and active citizens able to grapple with the complexity of the times. As the UWC Charter of Graduate Attributes for the 21st Century indicates: “UWC graduates should be engaged, committed and accountable agents of social good. They must aspire to contribute to social justice and care, appreciative of the complexity of historical contexts and societal conditions through their roles as professionals and members of local and global communities.”

In essence they need to become “global citizens”.

To this end, the UWC’s Political Studies department initiated an international collaboration with University West (UW) in Sweden in 2015. Initially, the programme director at UW, Professor Per Assmo, was successfully granted a SIDA-funded Linneaus-Palme staff- and student-exchange programme between UWC/UW. During 2015-2020, the programme has funded exchange study periods in Sweden for more than ten students from the political studies department at UWC. In the same way, Swedish students have been given the chance to study at UWC. Equally important, the programme has also enabled teachers from UWC to lecture and collaborate internationally, which over the years has developed into a more formally established a long-term international education and research collaboration between the universities.

As a direct result of the collaboration, Professor Assmo at UW and Professor Laurence Piper at UWC joined forces and successfully compiled a collaborative application for a project that was granted funds from STINT/NRF. The development of an international collaborative Education & Research programme between UW and UWC is based on an identified need to develop an internationally competitive post graduate and research programme, within the broader field of Work-Integrated Political Studies, which embraces scholarship on new forms of “learning through doing” such as experiential learning, action research and participatory methods.

More specifically, between 2018-2020 academic staff from the Political Studies department have, through a series of workshops held at UWC and UW, worked together with colleagues from University West to establish an international Master’s programme in Work-Integrated Political Studies. In the workshops, the international staff group developed, planned, structured, and organised the fundamental questions regarding the programme. Overall, the workshops have been a great success and managed to establish the entire structure of the proposed programme. In the final preparations for the start of the programme, the academic staff are, during 2020,

finalising the research-work placement components of the Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) programme, which will include action-based research, in direct collaboration with key stakeholders.

UW will launch the new, exciting and unique International Master’s Programme in Work-Integrated Political Studies in 2021, and UWC will follow suit later. The programme will contextualise political studies in the field of Work Integrated Learning. This new and unique approach will connect academic studies and research to the realities of working in the public realm, whether in government or civil society, implemented in an international educational environment.

“This programme will connect international academic studies and research to the realities of working in the public realm.” The programme will reinforce research areas broadly linked to the theme of Work-Integrated Learning and Applied Political Studies among, as well as between, the institutions involved. From the South African and UWC perspective, such a programme is a very welcome development. The programme will equip our graduates with important knowledge, skills and learning processes, expose them to international trends in the academy and the increasingly global world of work, and thereby better prepare them for the labour market, and deliver research rooted in the immediate problems of public life.

The need for Work-Integrated Learning is reinforced by the realities of the work environment in South Africa, which is characterised by a high unemployment rate, with it taking many years for some graduates to find work (StatsSA 2018). The Master’s Programme in Work-Integrated Political Studies will connect Political Studies postgraduates with the world of work, with significant potential benefits in terms of academic and personal growth, career skills and social development. By placing students in government and civil society workplaces, the programme will contribute to strengthening the public sector by providing both a pool of potential talented employees, and also assist with the production of practical knowledge needed to govern democratically, to implement policy programmes and to hold the state accountable. This is because the research that students do will be directed towards the needs of the host as well as forming the basis of the student’s dissertation.

The Master’s Programme in Work-Integrated Political Studies allows for a strong international collaboration in terms of module and programme development, and potentially module teaching, thesis supervision and research placements. To this end, Professor Assmo is leading a project entitled “Internationalisation through Digital Education – a digitalisation project to develop an international collaborative educational environment between University West and the University of the Western Cape”, with the explicit goal of developing a long-term sustainable digital education and research collaboration between the partner institutions UW and UWC.