

Working outside the box: A “public squares” initiative to advance transdisciplinary research at Stellenbosch University

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Who is Stellenbosch University?

Guided by our vision ...

... of being Africa's leading research-intensive university, globally recognised as excellent, inclusive and innovative, where we advance knowledge in service of society.

Led by our values ...

Excellence
Compassion
Equity
Respect
Accountability

Steadfast in our mission ..

... as a research-intensive university where we attract outstanding students, employ talented staff and provide a world-class environment; a place connected to the world, while enriching and transforming local, continental and global communities.

SU research as a "cityscape"

SU's diverse research environment can be viewed as a cityscape:

- **High-rises:** Schools, Institutes & Centres tackling global challenges
- **Medium buildings:** Research Chairs & smaller entities
- **Foundations:** Traditional academic departments
- **A vibrant mix of disciplines** → **interconnected yet siloed**

Challenge: Researchers & students need to collaborate across boundaries



Aerial view of Stellenbosch University

The challenge

“Universities can play a pivotal role in generating knowledge to tackle society’s complex challenges. For academics to become agents of change within and beyond their institutions, they must learn to navigate boundaries, collaborate effectively, and secure resources to sustain their initiatives.”

Astrid Treffry-Goatley (2023)

Why Transdisciplinary Research?

- **SU Vision 2040: Research for impact**
→ **knowledge in service of society**
- Global challenges require **inter- and transdisciplinary (TD) approaches**
- Traditional silos make collaboration difficult
- **TD research:**
 - Includes **end-users early** (communities, government, industry, NGOs)
 - Creates **actionable solutions** for complex societal problems



The Public Squares ...



Our vision is to develop research capacity, spark collaborative work, support impactful ideas, generate competitive grant proposals, and foster fresh transdisciplinary research areas at Stellenbosch University.



Our mission is to build skills in collaborative research, foster knowledge across disciplinary and societal boundaries, develop competitive grant proposals, and source external funding to cultivate new transdisciplinary focal areas

Specific Objectives

Create 11 new Public Squares



Build skills for engaged, transdisciplinary research



Support ideas through workshops & community input



Enable strong grant applications



Integrate Squares into SU structures



Share outputs: papers, presentations & public sessions

Where are we now?



**The Social &
Environmental
Determinants of Health**



**Data & A.I. Ethics for
Africa**



**Break Free, Grow Tall,
Reach Far**



**Combating
Misinformation in Africa**



Science for Justice (S4J)



**Trashed & Toxic
Transitions**



**Early Intervention and
Child Mental Health**



**Public Square in Gender
Research**



**One Health Approach to
Find Solutions for
Infectious Diseases**



**One Health
Collaborative Hub on
Migration and Disease
Dynamics**



**Metal Production from
Primary & Secondary
Resources**

o by Stefan Els

Preliminary Results

2024

Event Type	Amount
Brainstorming	8
Lectures	6
Workshops	6

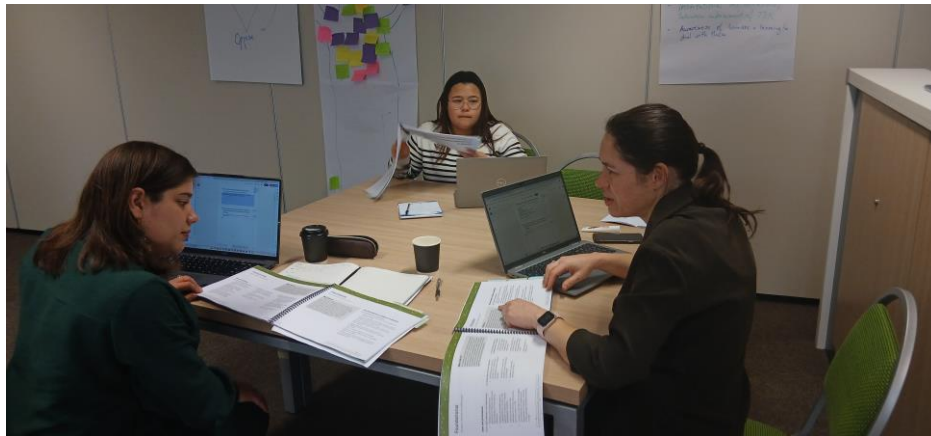


Images from our Lecture on Co-Production in Transdisciplinary Research

2025 (September 2025)

Event Type	Amount
Research Funding	3
Goal Setting	7
Lectures	3
Workshops	4
Panel Discussions	2
Conference Organization	1
Conferences Attended	1

Train-the-Trainer



Feedback

“Something that stood out for me was Professor Joubert’s emphasis on public engagement and how it is needed within the sciences, whether that be hard sciences or the soft sciences. Science does not exist in a vacuum, and it always needs consultation with the public”.

Solomzi Mphambo, BA
Philosophy, Political
Science and Economics
(PPE) student

“I really like the concept of engagement and co-creation. I think that is definitely the root that science communication on early life research needs to take. So, it was very inspiring. I really liked the message about telling stories, acknowledging people’s emotions, sharing your own uncertainties, etc. as a researcher”

I enjoyed the lecture. I particularly appreciated the emphasis on working with stakeholders and co-producing research that can translate into action, policy and practice. Collaboration and context is key.

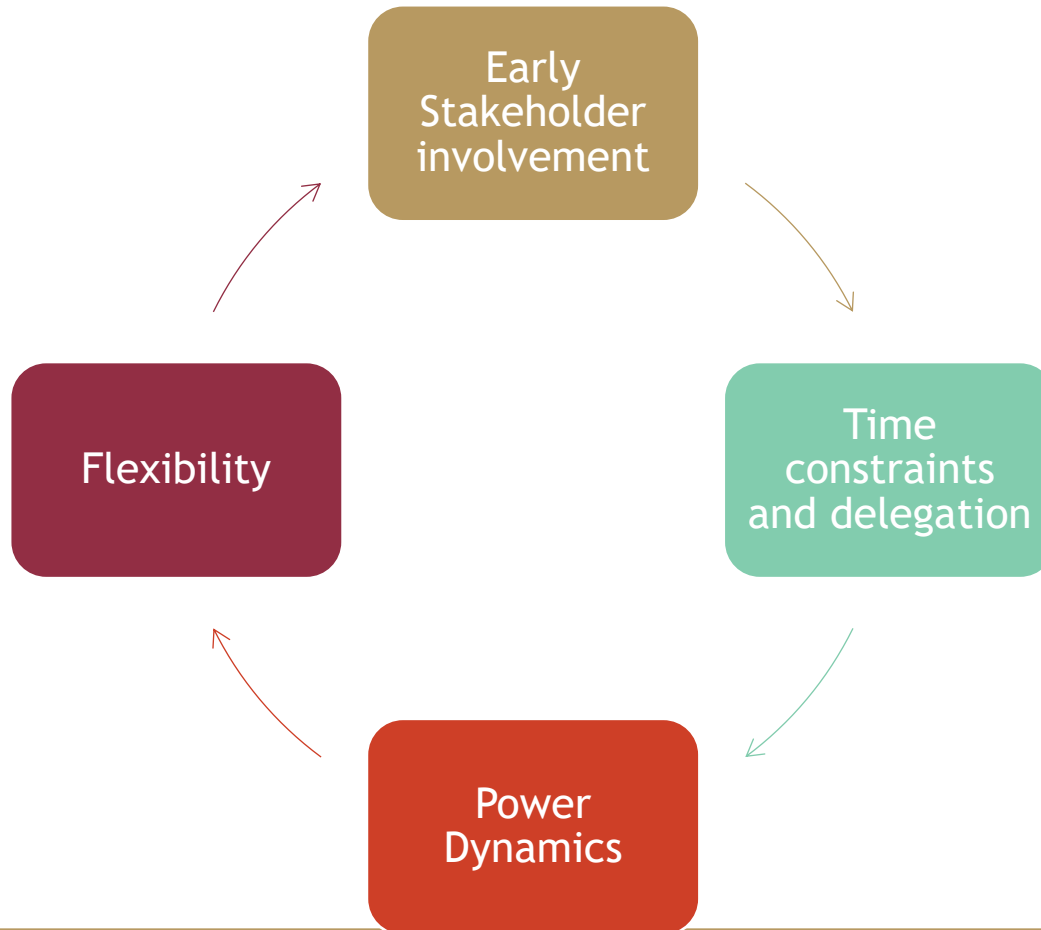
Mr Inganathi Khewana,
Community Member

Dr. Berna Gerber, Senior Lecturer in
Speech-Language and Hearing
Therapy at Stellenbosch University
and member of the Public Square on
Early Intervention and Child Mental
Health

Lecture on Key Participatory Methods for Effective Community and Public Engagement in Transdisciplinary Research

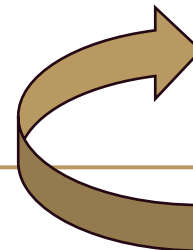


Lessons Learnt



Moving Forward

- Two upcoming workshops to end of 2025.
- Create Conference in October 2025
- Reworking our 2026 programme based on the feedback received.
- Aim to continue expanding our reach to students and community members through Public Square Picnics.



SCAN ME

Thank you for listening

I would like to Thank and Acknowledge The Strategic Fund of Stellenbosch University for funding this project and Professor Sibusiso Moyo for funding my conference travel and attendance.