

An interview with Edu-Lead's Ellen Daniëls from Belgium



1. Where are you from and what is the purpose of your visit to South Africa at the NWU?

I come from Belgium from the University of Leuven. I am visiting NWU as a visiting researcher, I am a PhD student.

2. What is the focus of your PhD?

I am researching leadership development and primary school leaders' reflective learning (also known as school principals in South African contexts) using an experimental research design.

3. What was some of the research activities during your visit?

3.1 EMASA Conference

I attended the EMASA Conference where I presented a side-study of my PhD research. I was very excited to attend the conference because the conference is predominantly attended by locals. It was very nice to see what the focus is on in South Africa. It gave me some real insights on researching school leadership in this area and it widened my horizons a lot. There are a lot of challenges in researching school leaders in terms of performance and outcomes of pupils in South Africa. At home (Belgium, Flanders) the main issue is the drop-out rate of school leaders and high stress levels of teachers. Attending the conference really highlighted the difference between the issues and the contexts of South Africa and Belgium (Flanders).

3.2 Visiting the Vaal and Mafikeng campuses

It was very interesting to visit the other campuses. To get an overview of the research unit, it was a necessary to visit the other campuses. They all have some unique characteristics that contribute towards a shared identity. I enjoyed seeing how motivated and determined everyone was. At Mafikeng, it was so nice to see how interested they all were in my research. At Vaal, they were very interested in teaching. It was very interesting for me to present a PhD trajectory from a Belgium perspective. We could really have some good discussions on it and learn from each other. It was interesting to see the differences. I felt I could learn a lot but also enlighten some colleagues. It also motivated me to think deeper and different about my own research.

4. What are some differences between a PhD at your home university and a PhD at the NWU?

- At our university you are paid as a staff member to do a PhD, where in South Africa most PhD students are self-sustaining
- The requirements are also different, we need to publish in an international journal, present at a conference and defend our thesis in public (in front of a whole audience) in order to obtain a PhD. We also do not wear a gown nor a graduation hat at our graduation ceremonies.



5. How was the social experience for you?

I didn't know what to expect at all coming to South Africa. I had met Prof Jan Heystek at a conference two years ago, waiting in line to get lunch. I do not know if he remembers this. We had a nice chat and I estimated him as an expert in the field. There was a little voice telling me that he would be a good and professional mentor. We emailed for quite a while, before we finally managed to organise the research visit. I was so surprised and overwhelmed by how friendly and welcoming everyone was. Everyone has put a lot of effort in welcoming me at the workplace. Prof Jan Heystek was a good mentor during my time here. He is an expert in the field and added a lot of value to my research and my professional development as researcher.

My stay here would not have been the same here without colleagues who became friends. It really made me feel at ease and at home here. I previously did internships in Finland, Russia and Zambia, so I knew what it could have been. So, I was prepared for a quite lonely time. However, my visit here was a very nice surprise. I never could have imagined it turned out so well. South Africans in general are very welcoming.

6. What was the most memorable experience of your visit?

There are so many things, it's hard to pick one! Getting such good feedback is memorable. Going to EMASA and seeing how they approached the conference was also memorable. My time here really provided some opportunities for introspection, I realised again that I really want to and can be an academic in the correct atmosphere and the right context.

7. What skills/knowledge did you gain from your visit in terms of research?

As a PhD student, I really gained a lot of insight in how to write articles and prepare them for submission to journals. Jan gave me an overview of what good journals are in the field and how to approach publishing. Moreover, I gained a deeper insight in my own research through being included in another research unit and culture, which helped me to create a structure for my dissertation, in South Africa the final written product of a PhD is called a thesis. I felt that I met my aims and targets. I am very satisfied with what I gained and achieved during my time here.

8. What are some of the words/habits that you thought were funny/interesting?

The way you use "shame" is very different from the way it is use in British English. Saying "Issit" is also something I heard a lot. Some cute Afrikaans words that I will remember were "asseblief", "kuier" and "oulik".

