

South African universities and the 2010 World Cup

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Football fever has swept across South Africa. While stadiums play host to jubilant fans and football superstars, through a variety of initiatives universities are bringing their expertise and resources to bear on the 2010 FIFA World Cup. Research projects, accommodation for teams and fans, access to sports facilities, exhibitions and soccer events have brought the monumental contest to campuses.

Hosting a high-ranking international team is a coup for a university. The state-of-the-art sports facilities at the University of Pretoria, North-West University and the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) helped them secure bids to host top teams.

Pretoria and North-West are housing world number seven Argentina and number two Spain respectively. Wits is the only institution to host two teams - the Netherlands, ranked fifth, and the low-ranking but hands-down local favorite South African team Bafana Bafana.

The Spanish team is staying at the NWU-Puk sports village at North-West's Potchefstroom campus. A hotel with 80 double rooms, a restaurant and a heated swimming pool are some of the facilities available.

But most appealing for the team tipped to win the tournament is the world-class FNB High Performance Institute for Sport (HPIS). The institute boasts superior sports facilities including an ice bath the size of a small swimming pool, used by athletes to minimize swelling after hard training. Medical and sports services are also on offer, and the team will have access to sports specialists, physiotherapists, psychologists and nutritionists.

"We've called it a 'one-stop shop'," said Jean Verster, manager of the institute. The high 1,400 metre altitude is also a draw and that, coupled with the top-notch facilities, attracts some 1,000 overseas athletes a year.

With the newly built sports village, the hope is that even more international sports teams and athletes will make use of the amenities well beyond the World Cup. Verster said for the moment, their goal is to make the Spanish team as comfortable as possible.

"The main thing we've tried to do is create a home away from home," said Verster. "We want to help them do their best." He and colleagues recently visited a soccer city outside Madrid and, coincidentally, the structure and atmosphere were remarkably similar to the South African university's facilities.

"We really click, we have the same goals," Verster said. "We're almost a bit of a family now."

Universities that failed in their bids to host teams are offering accommodation to tourists and fans. The University of KwaZulu-Natal can accommodate 5,000 visitors and its sports fields are installed with big screens to broadcast all the games.

Stellenbosch University has made 3,000 beds available in 17 of its residences. Spokesperson Martin Viljoen said he couldn't currently divulge how much the university will be making, but the revenue will be reinvested into university facilities.

As of 10 June, the University of Cape Town had 1,480 confirmed bookings (a 'bed night') and 1,880 provisional bookings at its student residences.

"We are confident of more bookings, as we are aware of fans making last-minute travel plans, as well as other fans who have come to Cape Town without making previous reservations anywhere and are showing up looking for accommodation," said Pat Lucas, media liaison officer. Cape Town too is keeping quite about profit expectations.

Universities are also conducting research related to the World Cup. Cape Town's Department for Exercise Science and Sports Medicine (ESSM) is coordinating a study of all medical and injury conditions that afflict players during the competition. The department has also made a list of experts available to local media to help enhance coverage of the game, in collaboration with the Sports Science Institute of South Africa.

Researchers at the university's Centre for Criminology have conducted research on new laws that were passed in South Africa to satisfy FIFA requirements, and the effect they might have on human rights in the country.

At the University of KwaZulu-Natal, academics and postgraduate students are involved in a range of research projects related to the game, including gathering residents' views and weighing environmental considerations, and the university will host a major post-World Cup conference.

Arts faculties are highlighting the cultural significance of the tournament.

'Soccer Kultcha', an exhibition of street photography at the University of Cape Town's Michaelis Galleries, looks at the diverse world of football outside the imposing stadiums and David Beckham celebrity. The exhibition, which opened on kick-off day, includes photographs snapped by school kids from the sprawling Cape Flats, depicting the vibrant soccer culture in the slums of Lavender Hill and Nyanga.

At the Wits School of Arts, a street theatre using 32 four-meter high multi-ethnic puppets, as well as

musicians and storytellers, on Friday started a month-long tour at Soccer City in Soweto.

The giant puppets, some donning the South African yellow and green Bafana Bafana soccer jersey, welcomed soccer fans to the opening game. The puppets will parade and perform the show throughout the tournament at public viewing areas, festivals and fan parks around Johannesburg.

The university is also lending its expertise to 'Halakasha', an exhibition framed around local and African soccer supporters. The exhibition, curated by Fiona Rankin-Smith from the Wits Arts Museum and housed at the Standard Bank Gallery in Johannesburg, includes artwork from local as well as international collections. Makarapas (crafted soccer helmets), vuvuzelas and soccer merchandise, fine art and street art, and video installations will be on display.

"This exhibition marks a momentous time in our history, and a time that has some of the excitement felt by the historic elections of 1994," said Rankin-Smith in a statement.

Universities have also rearranged their entrenched schedules so staff and students do not lose out on any soccer action.

Rhodes University in Grahamstown has adapted working hours so staff doesn't miss any of the 64 World Cup matches. The University of KwaZulu-Natal took a step further and structured its 2010 academic calendar so the mid-year vacation period coincided with the dates for the tournament.

Wits too is on holiday, but the university 16 of its journalism students to work to produce material for the school's international multi-media newsroom, covering less-reported stories around the game. Dave Mayers, a lecturer in multi-media journalism at Wits, said students' lack of accreditation and their insider knowledge of Johannesburg gives them an advantage.

"They're covering all the ancillary stories, stories where you have to be plugged into Joburg," said Mayers. "They'll be able to do that, and they'll be able to do it better than [the mainstream media]."

World Cup-related events have been staged on campuses countrywide.

On 11 June, Rhodes University hosted its own opening ceremony and match, where staff and students wore the yellow and green Bafana Bafana jersey while dancing the 'diski' and watching a soccer match.

As part of Stellenbosch University's Support 2010 campaign, students staged a 'diski' dance-off for the chance to win R10,000 for their residences. In March the university hosted the biggest known soccer game ever to be played in South Africa, consisting of 500 players, 250 per side.

So while most of the focus this month will be centred around the action taking place in the country's stadiums, South Africa's universities are making their own special mark on this once-in-a-lifetime event.