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# FITTING A SQUARE PEG IN A ROUND HOLE: LESSONS LEARNED FROM MANAGING A GRANT WHOLLY DESIGNED FOR THE GLOBAL NORTH

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## INTRODUCTION

International collaboration in research plays a crucial role in enhancing the relevance, generalizability, and impact of scientific findings. [1] Many funders from the global north have recognised the importance of including researchers from the global south in such research teams, and they are increasingly opening funding calls where participation by one or more researchers from a low or middle-income country is either a requirement or strongly encouraged. Concurrently, limited investment in research by governments in the global south [2] is forcing researchers from low and middle-income countries to depend on this source of funding for their research.

How equipped are institutions from the global south to manage these grants and meet all funder requirements and how suited are these funding instruments to the needs and specific contexts of researchers in the global south?

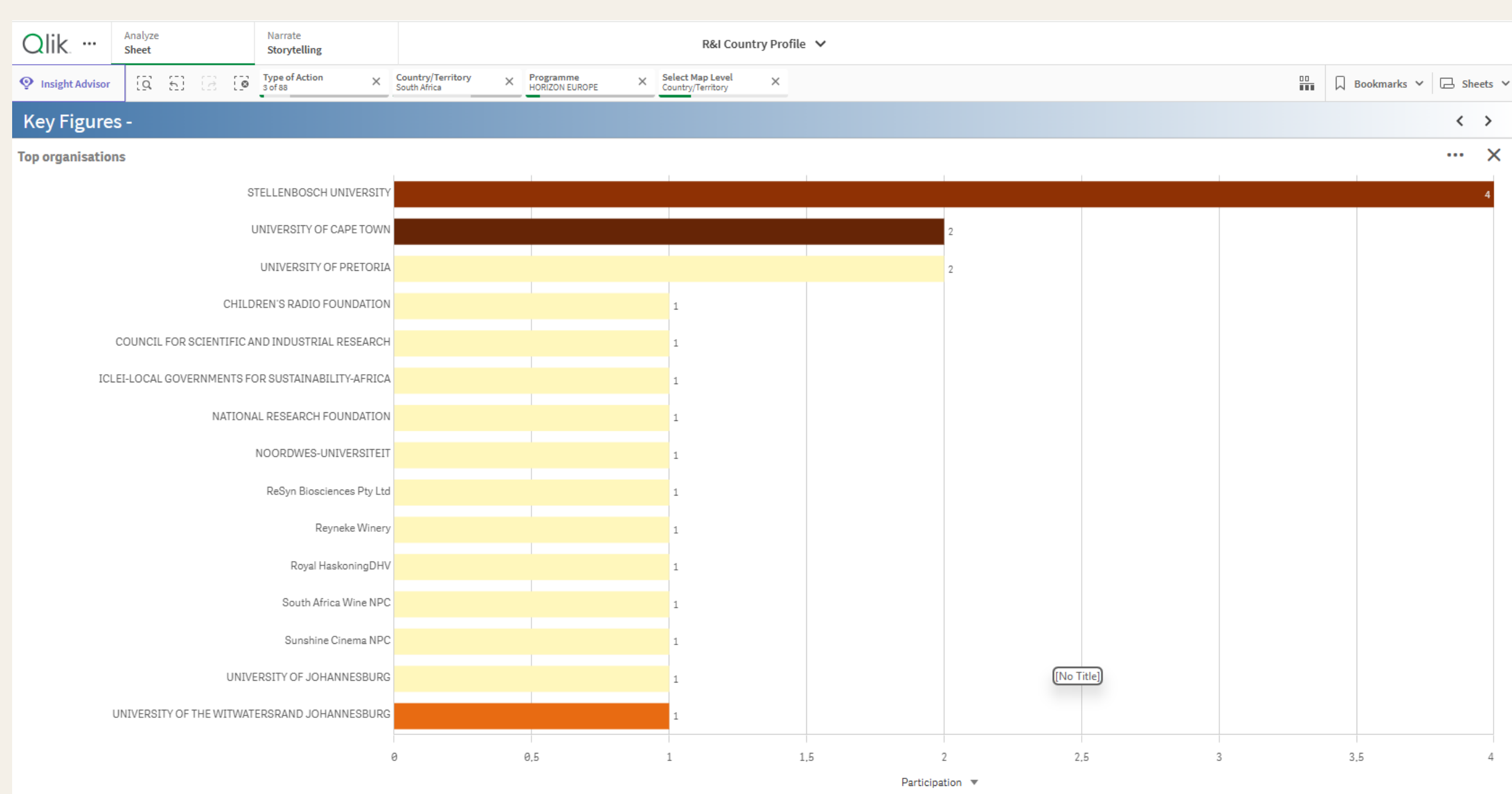
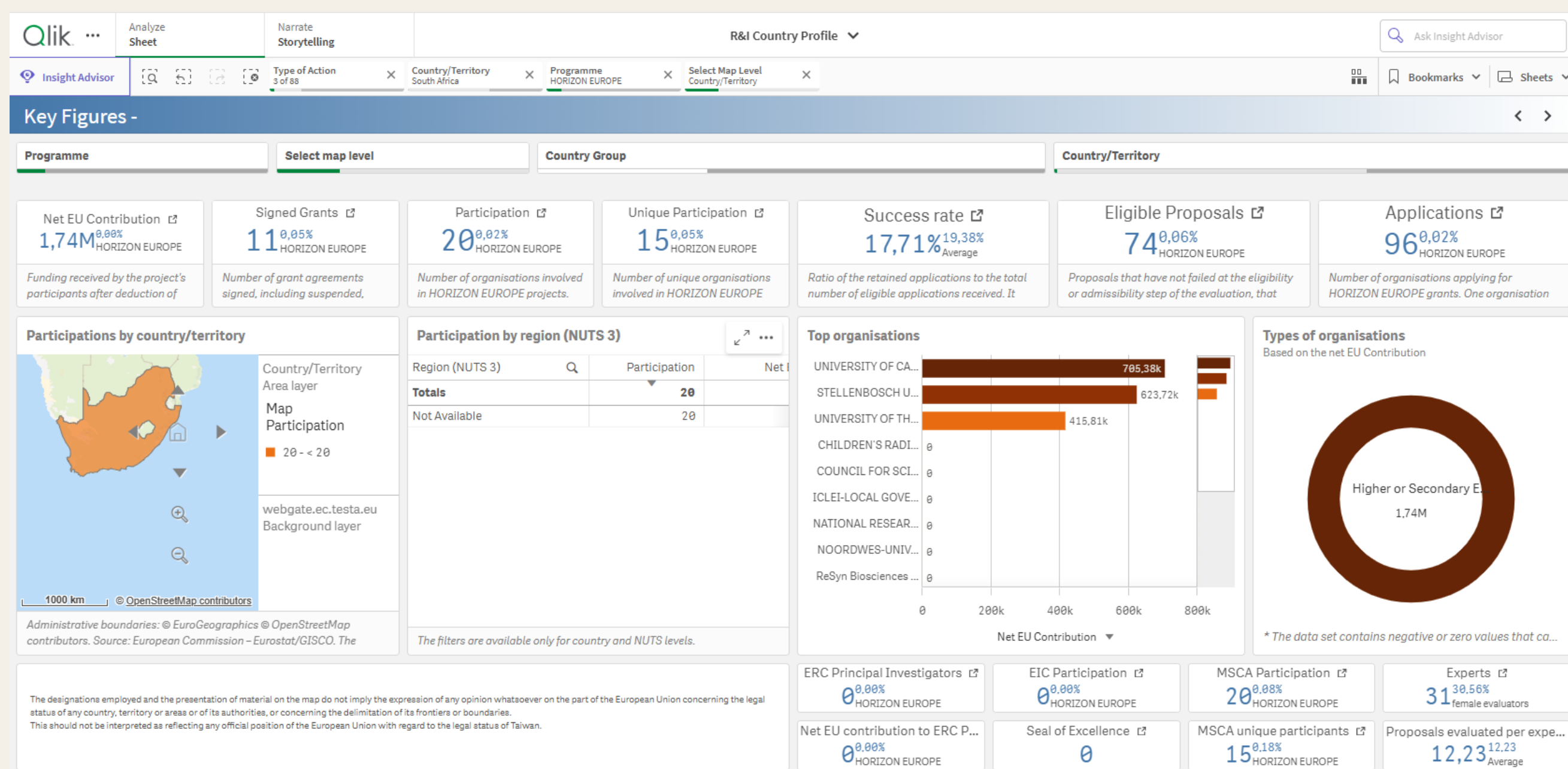
## MSCA DOCTORAL NETWORKS

In 1997 the *Agreement on scientific and technological cooperation between the European Community and the Republic of South Africa* was signed. Since then, South Africa has been the EU's biggest partner in research and innovation in Africa, and it is the first among African countries to participate in the framework programmes. [3]

The South African National Department of Science, Technology and Innovation is actively promoting participation in the different EU funding opportunities. On 25 November 2024 they held a roundtable meeting in collaboration with MSCAdvocacy and Stellenbosch University (SU) to showcase SU's approach to fostering South African participation in the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA). By sharing insights from Stellenbosch University's experiences, the event aimed to equip other South African institutions and individual researchers with practical knowledge and tools for successful participation in MSCA.

The MSCA Doctoral Networks aims to train entrepreneurial, innovative and resilient doctoral candidates, able to face current and future challenges and to convert knowledge and ideas into products and services for economic and social benefit. [4]

Several South African institutions are participating in twenty of these grants, with Stellenbosch University as the top participant.



## THE STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE

### Benefits

Participation in a MSCA Doctoral Network can be a life-changing experience for both the students and their supervisors. It provides a unique opportunity to engage in transdisciplinary research with a wide network of experts and industry partners. The students are fully funded and gain transferable skills and competences relevant for innovation and long-term employability.

### Challenges

These grants placed a higher operational burden on Stellenbosch University than anticipated. Apart from the usual challenges like limited grants management capacity compared to the partners from the global north, and dealing with currency fluctuations, this funding instrument presented a unique set of challenges:

#### Academic calendar

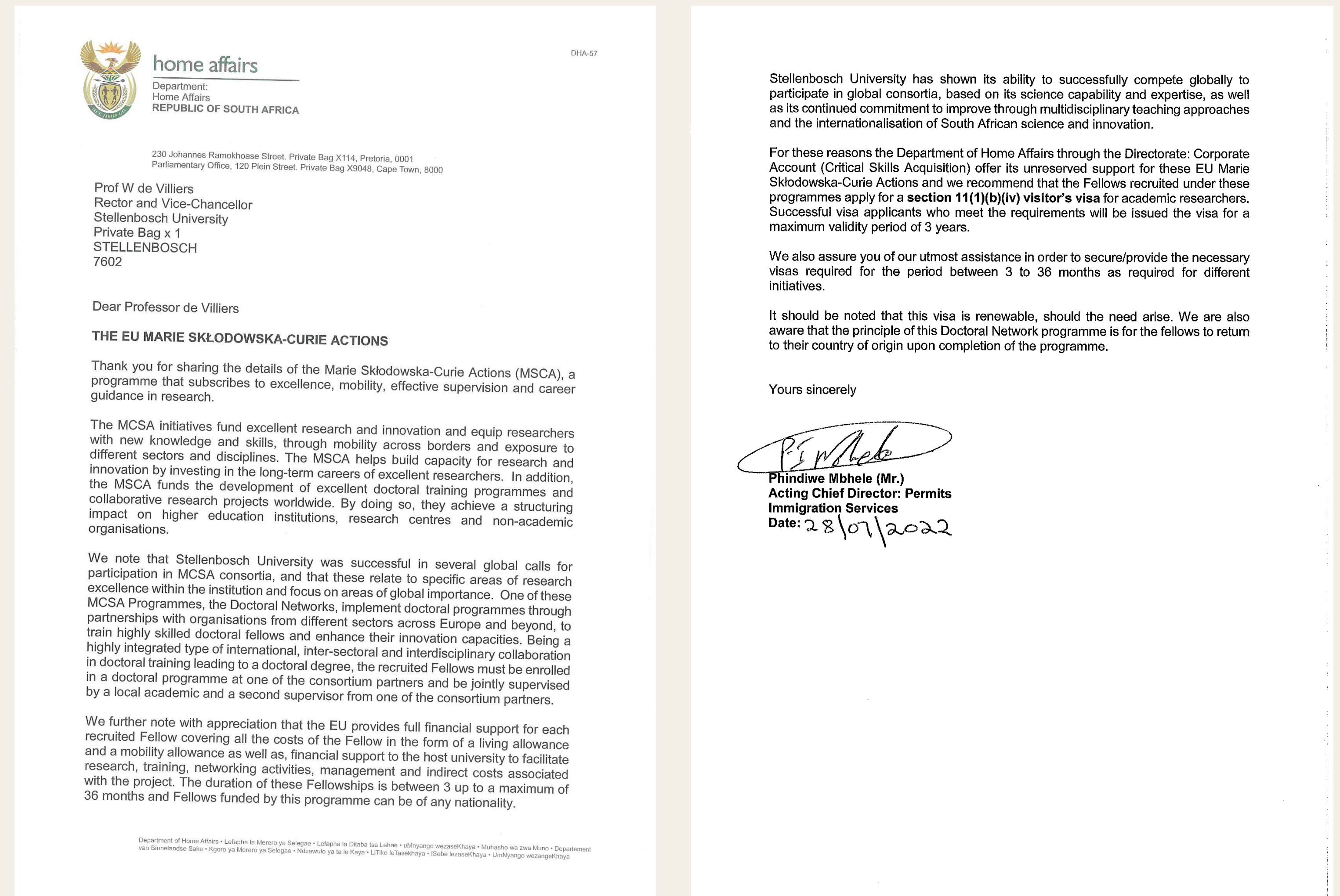
The academic year of institutions from the south usually runs from February to November vs those of Europe that usually runs from September to June. Although PhD students can register at Stellenbosch University in either the first or second semester, the different scheduling of approval processes can lead to delays.

#### Appointment of doctoral students

The MSCA Doctoral Networks grants require all PhD students to be appointed as staff members with full benefits. In South Africa, PhD students are not normally appointed. They are registered as full-time students and can then obtain a tax-free bursary to cover their expenses. Stellenbosch had to create a totally new type of contract appointment to accommodate these students.

#### Visa requirements

International students are required to have a valid study visa to enrol at Stellenbosch University. Obtaining such a visa takes a minimum of eight weeks but, because the MSCA Doctoral Network students must be appointed as staff members, they were initially advised to apply for Critical Skills Work visas. This caused much longer delays. Through intervention by the South African Department of Science, Technology and Innovation, the South African Department of Home Affairs issued the letter below and recommended that they rather apply for section 11(1)(b)(iv) visitor's visa for academic researchers. As some of the embassies and agencies dealing with visa applications in European countries and the UK are not aware of this, new students are still experiencing delays.



### Cost of living in South Africa and Stellenbosch specifically

A country correction coefficient applies to living allowances in all the MSCA programmes. At face value, living costs in South Africa are well below that of Europe. As staff members, these PhD students must however be appointed with full benefits, reducing their take-home pay. Housing and transport in Stellenbosch are also very expensive, if compared to the rest of the country and even with Europe. Add to this that these students are also required to travel to partner countries on two to three month secondments and afford this from their reduced allowances. This makes being hosted by Stellenbosch University less attractive and contributed to the delays in recruiting suitable students.

## CONCLUSION

Stellenbosch University, like most South African universities, is generally well-equipped to manage international grant funding. Ensuring that funder regulations, designed for institutions from the global north, are met however places an extraordinarily high operational burden on universities from the global south as illustrated by the measures Stellenbosch University had to put in place to manage the MSCA Doctoral Network grants. Such structural inequity should be avoided if funders from the global north are sincere in their intentions to support equitable partnerships and build research capacity in the global south. There are many codes and guidelines available in support of equitable research partnerships. [5] Unfortunately very few of these provide guidance to funding organisations. This is a gap that can be addressed by ensuring that there is a feedback loop between funding bodies based in the global north and their funding recipients in the global south.

## REFERENCES

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