

# bulletin



@StellenboschUni

06 - 09 - 2019

## Gender-based violence: Enough is indeed enough

Dear Student

Although I am currently travelling on university business, I have been following the current events in the higher education sector and the country very closely. Last night I had to field many related questions about the situation back home, and at Stellenbosch University (SU) at an alumni event that I hosted.

We live in a broken society. The violent attacks on university students over the last few days have highlighted this fact. Together with my fellow members of management and the rest of the SU community, I join many others in expressing my deepest condolences with our neighbouring universities, the University of the Western Cape and the University of Cape Town, who have been dealing with the loss of Jesse Hess and Uyinene Mrwetyana respectively.

SU understands something of this loss after having dealt with the horrific deaths of our own students Robyn Pearce and Hannah Cornelius in 2018. Our condolences too to the grieving families of students who had dreams for the future and could have made a significant difference in our society.

Let me be clear about this: Gender-based violence is a form of civil war. We are a society at war with ourselves and we are killing off and injuring our own. This must stop. I concur with our Senior Director: Student Affairs, Dr Choice Makhetha: Enough is indeed enough. She wrote to our students on Wednesday ([link](#)) and amongst others challenged men in our communities to stand up and be counted. This is a fight that has for far too long been spearheaded by primarily the women in our society.

Unfortunately the solution not only lies in better security and contingency arrangements, improved policing, a more effective judicial system or high-profile campaigns or petitions – although these are definitely part of the solution. It probably foremost lies in a change in the hearts and minds of us as ordinary citizens.

This sentiment has been echoed by Professor Ahmed Bawa, CEO of Universities South Africa, in a [statement](#) earlier this week saying that Ms Mrwetyana's murder is a symptom of the deeply sick and cruel society that ours has become. 'This murder reminds us of the importance of men in our nation taking a stand and actively contributing to the cultivation of a more caring society,' he said.

I challenge all men – but especially our SU staff and students: we should critically scrutinise our thinking and behaviour. We may not all be guilty of gender-based criminal offenses, but the change starts on a micro level, with you and me. If you verbally abuse, if you laugh at inappropriate jokes or make degrading comments, if you catcall and if your online behaviour – even what you pass on via Whatsapp – is questionable, you are part of this unacceptable culture.

Prof Bawa is correct in stating that universities need to lead South Africa towards that change. "It is not enough for our institutions of higher learning to simply recognise the prevalence of gender-based violence. They have to act to change the culture that generates such violence."

### **Xenophobic attacks**

The societal ill of sexual violence is sharply in focus at the moment, but I need to acknowledge the heartfelt plea of international students at our institution to forefront recent xenophobic attacks. At SU we have more than 4 000 international students with more than 50% of them from other African countries. To quote one of our students: "I believe no person regardless the circumstances, need to live in the current fear prevailing within our society, and so we collectively need to make a bold and open stand for what we feel is RIGHT and wrong". We need to say no to xenophobia. I want to reassure our international students that we take their safety and well-being to heart. You contribute to the rich diversity of our campus community.

### **SU challenges**

Like all academic institutions, and the broader society, Stellenbosch University grapples with many challenges. We can always do more and do better, but sweeping statements that SU has done nothing for those affected by gender-based violence or for the safety of our students are simply not true.

Academic institutions across the country are continuously upgrading safety and security measures at considerable costs, especially so at SU. Some postgraduate students may recall that until a few years ago, we had three exam sessions per day. For safety reasons assessment schedules were changed to no longer schedule exams in the evening, thereby decreasing the number of assessment sessions from three to two per day. During the term tests are being scheduled at 17:30, the earliest possible time after lectures end around 17:00 to give students time to reach the test venues and to ensure that students can leave by 20:00|20:30.

Based on student needs the Equality Unit was established in 2016. The Unit promotes collective action towards social justice, discourse regarding social asymmetries, and implements a comprehensive HIV response. The Unit coordinates, educates and raises awareness around sexualities, gender non-violence, HIV/Aids and anti-discrimination. The Unit also formulates and oversees the implementation of SU's Unfair Discrimination and Harassment Policy, #EndRapeCulture 2017 Report findings and the SU HIV/Aids Policy. The Unit also serves as a centralised service for students and staff managing accounts of unfair discrimination and various forms of harassment at Huis Simon Nkoli House (at 39 Victoria Street).

I am aware of the allegations of sexual misconduct against a SU staff member that surfaced only earlier this week. We take such allegations very seriously and the Equality Unit has launched a preliminary investigation to determine the facts. Staff members and students who are found guilty after due process has been followed, will face serious consequences. However, we cannot endorse trial by public opinion or social media. Let the institutional processes run their course.

I would like to direct a very serious appeal to our staff and our students: if you have been exposed to sexual violence, harassment, discrimination or assault, please discuss your experiences with our Equality Unit. If you have been a witness to any such incidents, or if friends have confided in you, please encourage them to contact the Equality Unit. Trained staff will assist with information about the various options. We need information or evidence to pursue allegations.

Students who require emotional support and counselling after incidents should contact the Centre for Student Counselling and Development. Staff members can seek assistance via the Wellness Office in the Human Resources Division.

Much work on gender violence and xenophobia is also being done in academic fields, the most recent example being related discussions at the inaugural Social Justice Summit and International Conference, organised by the Law Trust Chair in Social Justice in SU's Faculty of Law, Prof Thuli Madonsela. [More information.](#)

### **Institutional values**

In closing I would like to remind our campus community of our institutional values: excellence; compassion; equity, accountability and respect, with a focus on the last two as it relates to the current topics. We define accountability as 'accepting the highest level of responsibility for our actions'. I would like to link this to my earlier challenge to all SU men. Respect is generally well understood, but we have taken it further to include 'civility in our mutual and public discourse, with due regard for the freedom, equality and dignity of all'. We are obligated to apply this principle to all our engagements, even when we disagree or have opposing views: in one-on-one discussions; institutional meetings; email correspondence and even social media.

We are aware that the SU management decision to not shut down the academic project for today (Friday 6 September) has not been popular among some students. Our approach has been to facilitate participation in gatherings in solidarity with national initiatives where possible, without disrupting the scheduled academic calendar. Cancelling an academic day has major practical implications and a ripple effect for students and staff alike. This should not be misinterpreted as callousness or ignoring the high prevalence of gender-based violence. Staff and students who were able to attend the gathering in Cape Town yesterday, were encouraged and even assisted to do so by providing transport. To show solidarity with national initiatives the Rectorate invited deans and other senior management members and staff to join them at a gathering on the Rooiplein over lunch time today without impacting our services to students.

We should not give up or become despondent. We owe it to current and future generations to persevere for the sake of the common good, but while the situation is not ideal in our country or in our town as yet, I urge our students and staff: please be vigilant and look out for yourselves and others, and make use of the services available on our campuses.

Warm regards

Prof Wim de Villiers  
Rector and Vice-Chancellor

SAAM VORENTOE | MASIYE PHAMBILI | FORWARD TOGETHER