A black member in a sea of white

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The only black member of the newly elected executive committee on Stellenbosch University’s convocation says the university cannot continue to operate exclusively in Afrikaans.

Although Dr Michael le Cordeur was elected to the position of “additional member” on the six-member executive, he disclosed to make it count.

Stellenbosch University’s convocation election sitting was scheduled for November, but was postponed as a result of the FeesMustFall protests.

Le Cordeur, the head of the university’s department of curriculum studies — who was elected along with a white- and male-dominated convocation that includes president Jan Hennings, vice-president Jacques du Preez, secretary Nadia Marais and additional member Sonja Loots — said he was excited about his appointment, although it was “still early days”.

“It is something new for me — I still have a lot to learn. But something I have been encouraging among fellow lecturers is that we cannot just complain about the issue of transformation at Stellenbosch. We need to be prepared to serve,” he said.

“The position of additional member is not a powerful one, but we can work on that.

At the forefront of the quest for transformation at the university is its language policy, but Le Cordeur said this week that too much time was spent on debating language, while other equally pertinent issues were put on the back burner.

“There are other issues apart from the language one. The institutional character of the university is problematic. Black students do not feel welcome.

Accommodation is a problem. There are students who travel by taxi every day from places like Atlantis and Mitchells Plain,” he said.

“I was speaking to a student who travels every day from Atlantis by taxi and it costs a lot of money. She has to be up by 5am to get to class on time. Both of her parents are unemployed. These are the kinds of things that we need to speak about. I will be pushing for a shuttle service for these students because this is not just a place for hostel students.

“The institutional character cannot continue to be allowed to make students feel unwelcome.”

Le Cordeur said he did not expect to be elected, and stood for the position because he believed those who were pushing for transformation at the institution needed to be proactive and not just “criticise from the outside”.

“I think the university missed a wonderful opportunity to show the world that we are serious about transformation by not electing someone like [Nigerian-born political sciences master’s graduate] Lovelyn Nwadeyi. Convocation can play an important role in changing mind-sets, and voting for Lovelyn would have contributed greatly to that conversation,” he said, in a reference to Nwadeyi’s speech on the evening of the elections that since went viral.

Le Cordeur said he believed that an additional 10 student or lecturer votes would have made the difference and would have seen Nwadeyi elected to the convocation body.

She missed out on the position of deputy president to Du Preez by 15 votes.

“We cannot be absent from debates on campus as alumni — we need to engage,” he said.

Le Cordeur, who is fluent in English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa, said he constantly encouraged his students to be multilingual.

“Language is important because it does translate to access, but my motto going into this term will be that we need to forget about thinking of Afrikaans as the only language of education,” he said.

“We need to work to construct a balance between English and Afrikaans at the university. We cannot continue to operate as exclusively Afrikaans. Those days are gone and they should never return. English can add value because the playing field is uneven and English can level it out.”

In an article headlined No rainbow nation for Stellenbosch, published on January 30, City Press reported that the convocation committee elected at the university consisted exclusively of white members. This was incorrect, as Le Cordeur is black. City Press apologises for the error.