Stellenbosch academics feel the strain of dual language decision

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STELLENBOSCH University says its push to give English and Afrikaans equal status has added pressure on its academic staff, as extra teaching will be required to maintain the Afrikaans offering.

Yesterday, university management also said preliminary figures showed a decline in the number of black students who had registered at the institution this year.

Late last year, the Stellenbosch University council, which has oversight responsibilities of academic and operational issues, decided to give English and Afrikaans equal status, despite support from the rector’s management team for the adoption of English as the primary language of communication and administration from this year.

This year, the registration rate for first-year black students dropped 7% compared to last year, the Coloured group declined 3%, while the registration rate for Indian newcomers increased 1%, according to Christelle Feyt, the senior director of prospective students.

She cited campus unrest, the Luister documentary, which captured some students’ and a staff members’ accounts of racism at the institution, and negative media coverage as some of the possible reasons fewer black students had enrolled this year.

This emerged yesterday, when members of Parliament’s higher education and training portfolio committee visited the university to be briefed on governance, transformation, enrolment for this year and the institution’s language plan.

PW van der Walt, the deputy chairman of Stellenbosch University council, told MPs the previous language policy had shortcomings in accommodating students who did not have a working knowledge of Afrikaans.

“Our academics have worked hard to remedy these in the interim, while the language policy is being revised. While enthusiastically pursuing the goal of greater language inclusivity, they unfortunately moved outside the confines of the current policy,” he said.

This had resulted in a court challenge by AfriForum Youth.

“We now have to realign our offerings with the current year book, but we can’t move back to a less accommodating position. It will require additional teaching to maintain the Afrikaans offering. This will place a heavy additional load on our academics.”

Meanwhile, Ms Feyt told MPs the university was aiming to increase the number of black, Coloured and Indian students in the next five years to more than 15,000. According to the 2016 preliminary figures, out of 30,000 students, 62% are white, 18% coloured, 17% black and 3% Indian.

Committee chairwoman Yvonne Phosa expressed satisfaction with the university’s transformation plans. “The challenge now is the actual implementation of the plan,” she said.

Stellenbosch University is just one of a number of traditionally Afrikaans universities grappling with transformation. Following weeks of student unrest, the council of the University of the Free State said last week English would be the primary medium of instruction at undergraduate and postgraduate level on its campuses in Bloemfontein and Qwaqwa.

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