

SU Leads 2017

Address by SU Rector and Vice-Chancellor Prof Wim de Villiers

Kruiskerk, Monday 4 September 2017, 13:30–13:40

Thank you, Gareth [Cornelissen] – for the introduction, and also to everyone in Student Affairs for organising this event. Afternoon folks. Goeie middag. Molweni. Wow! What a gathering. It's my third time in a row that I address SU Leads, [the annual student leaders' conference of Stellenbosch University (SU)] and it's always impressive to see our student leaders get together like this, empowering yourselves for the journey you have embarked upon.

Leadership is a profound journey, on different levels: your own journey as a person; the journey of those you serve and whose interests you represent; and the journey of your organisation – in this case, SU and the particular structure or environment that you form part of. From my side, I welcome you as fellow travellers on this journey, and I look forward to walking with you on the path of leadership here at this University.

In terms of my own journey, I've come full circle in many ways. Having studied here and having been a student leader here, it is exciting for me to now lead the University at a crucial time in its history. And I am glad to have you as fellow travellers on that journey.

I'm also glad to see that the theme this morning was "Inclusivity", and that this afternoon's theme is "Building a community for all". Because that is the journey we are on as a University. And like all journeys, it started somewhere, it had a beginning; we have our current location, where we are at the moment; and we are headed somewhere, a destination we want to get to.

Past, present, future – let me briefly touch on those three aspects, starting at the beginning.

Next year, it will be 100 years since SU was formally born out of Victoria College in terms of an act of parliament. Like the 100th sprouting of a leaf on a tree, SU's Centenary signifies a new beginning, while commemorating the growth and hard work over the past century – and also the many important lessons learnt.

Having been founded in a certain context at a particular time, this University has come a long way. And ours has certainly not been an uneventful journey. There have been many twists and turns, ups and downs ... major milestones, but also potholes and dead ends.

We will celebrate our achievements, but there have also been serious challenges and mistakes. It is important that we acknowledge these – as we have done, and will continue doing – so that we can get on with our journey, here and now.

That is the second aspect I want to touch on – the present, where we find ourselves currently. There are many more students here at SU Leads – this gathering of student leaders – than the whole University started with in 1918, which was 213. Today we have more than 31 000 students, on five campuses – of whom 65% are undergraduate and 35% postgraduate. This is a research-intensive university with a significant focus on postgraduate studies.

Our students are here to get an excellent qualification, but the University also offers much more, and you folks have seized that opportunity. And that is the chance we have as leaders to learn more

about what is going on in the world around us, but also to influence things, to shape society, to make it a better place for all- in a society that is so challenged by the many wicked problems we face.

In our context, that includes such issues as broadening access to higher education, in the process looking at financial issues. It also includes our institutional culture as a University, ensuring that it is inclusive and welcoming to all. It includes the languages we use as mediums of instruction. And it includes the curriculum we follow, what subject matter is on offer here, paying attention to what knowledge we teach, making sure our context here in Africa is acknowledged.

We should have these debates, engage in an open conversation, but always do so in a value-driven way. And our two touchstones in that regard are, firstly, our values as an institution – which currently include shared accountability, empathy and leadership in the service of others. And secondly, the Constitution of South Africa, which says our values as a country include (1) human dignity, the achievement of equality and the advancement of human rights and freedoms; as well as (2) non-racialism and non-sexism

What I have always found very compelling in the Constitution is the Preamble, which says “South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity”. And that’s how I see our institution. Stellenbosch University belongs to all who work and study here, united in our diversity.

We need to go **forward together**, which brings me to my third and final point – the future. We have started a process of developing a new vision and strategy for the University – Vision 2040, and an institutional strategy for the six-year period 2019 to 2024. This is an exciting journey, and we want to take all our stakeholders along – including our students.

We intend launching our new vision and strategy towards the end of next year, but we need your input. Students are key stakeholders, and your role as a student leader is vital ... to give students a voice in this process

We are consulting in various ways: Through formal structures, e.g. SRC, Prim Committee, Academic Affairs Council, etc. But there will also be opportunities for broad input from the student body, for instance in discussion forums, and through mechanisms such as questionnaires or surveys.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am proud of you. For nearly 100 years, we have been learning, growing and moving forward together. May we as leaders at this University proceed in that spirit. Thank you.