OPINION EDITORIAL

By George Steyn, Chairperson of the Stellenbosch University Council

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**Council Chair reflects on discord, Afrikaans and transformation at Stellenbosch University**

*The search is on for the next Rector and Vice-Chancellor for Stellenbosch University after the unexpected passing of Prof Hayman Russel Botman on 28 June 2014. Prof Botman passed away in the same week that a Stellenbosch University Council meeting was preceded on the same day by a cover story in an Afrikaans morning newspaper, alleging that a vote of no confidence would be tabled against Prof Botman at the Council meeting. This subsequently gave rise to much speculation and accusations in various media. Now, after the funeral and various memorial services, the focus has shifted to ensure continuity, Prof Botman’s legacy and the search for the person to follow in the footsteps of Stellenbosch University’s first black Rector and Vice-Chancellor.* **Mr George Steyn***, Chairperson of the Stellenbosch University Council, reflects on the alleged discord within the SU Council, Afrikaans as teaching language and transformation at Stellenbosch University.*

Stellenbosch University finds itself in the interesting position that in the eyes of some its academic offering in Afrikaans is insufficient and that this threatens the future of Afrikaans as an academic language. Others regard Afrikaans as a teaching language at Stellenbosch as a method of exclusion; a barrier to diversity and resistance to transformation.

The language issue in higher education flared up after comments by Dr Blade Nzimande, Minister of Higher Education and Training, that there no longer is a place for Afrikaans universities. This statement simply is not aligned with our Constitution and the Constitutional Court eventually is the highest authority. If he possibly means that there is no place for Afrikaner universities, that obviously is something else entirely and I would agree with him on that. Stellenbosch no longer is the “volksuniversiteit” that had to help uplift Afrikaners early in the previous century – and it has not been that for many years. But, we also do not apologise because we have chosen to serve large numbers of students in more than one language. If it is Minister Nzimande’s wish that South African universities should start looking like clones of each other, then I cannot agree. Our country is rich in diversity and will be poorly served by a bunch of cloned and mediocre universities. It naturally concerns us that quite a number of South African universities are dysfunctional and in a desperate financial position.

I am known for the view that SU’s first priority and most important focus may never be anything but academic excellence. We will only be able to achieve and sustain this if SU attracts and retains the best lecturers and the best students. It would be absurd to think that we would be able to achieve that with only Afrikaans-speaking staff and students. It is equally true that you would not manage that in South Africa with only English speakers. It is for this reason that I support the intention of the university management to extend the Afrikaans and English offering. When I left here as a student in 1985, SU had approximately 9 000 students who were primarily Afrikaans. Now we have about 28 000 students, of whom about 14 000 are Afrikaans speaking. This disproves both notions – that the SU language offering is detrimental to Afrikaans and, that Afrikaans is being used as tool to promote exclusion.

Although we encourage our lecturers to be multilingual, academic excellence is measured by an established performance evaluation system. This system reflects the three core functions of universities: teaching and learning; research and innovation and community interaction. The academic stature of the lecturer is crucial – how well does he/she teach; how good is the subject content; what is the quality of research and what is his/her impact on society?

I strongly believe that a quota system for Afrikaans will fail. Increasing numbers of Afrikaans-speaking parents are encouraging their children to Anglicise, and increasing numbers of Afrikaans-speaking students want to be taught in English of their own free will. SU cannot ignore the available sources of potential students, and wants to be an equally friendly home for both Afrikaans speakers and English speakers. We already have a number of degree programmes that are offered in their entirety in both Afrikaans and English with the aid of parallel medium instruction and educational interpreting.

In 2014 the proposed lecture offering in Afrikaans was more than 60% and in English it was close on 60%. However, students may write or submit all tests and examinations and assignments in either of the two languages, irrespective of the teaching language of the module. Council is meeting again in September, and the Language Policy and Plan will be discussed. Council would like to see that the offering in both Afrikaans and English is extended considerably. But we naturally will have to consider the impact on costs.

On the ongoing debate in higher education on whether universities should reflect the regional or national demographics, I have a simple and practical view. It is logical that universities should accommodate their applicants. The profile of our applicants will become the profile of our university and this should apply to all forms of diversity.

For example, SU does not have control over the trend towards Anglicisation at schools and also should not don that jacket. We are continuously investigating affordable and practical ways in which to offer both languages properly in order make SU more inclusive and diverse; a place where different people feel at home. We also promote the development of isiXhosa as an academic language and as a language of social engagement.

The fact that we use both Afrikaans and English as languages of teaching is a tremendous asset for the university and distinguishes us from most of the other South African universities. This enables us to attract the best from both language groups by welcoming them all and then making them feel at home. Multilingualism is a great benefit in South Africa. You can communicate better with more fellow citizens. This is true in our general dealings and equally true in the business world. I still resent the National Party for not forcing the country to learn the ethnic language of each region as a compulsory subject at school – just as they forced black learners to learn Afrikaans. Just think what wonderful benefits this would have had.

In terms of staff diversity we do well in our support services, but we face the same challenges on senior academic levels than other prominent universities in the country. We compete with the corporate world for qualified candidates. But I can add that our staff turnover is also low. Nevertheless, SU undertakes special recruitment to promote staff diversity. There also is the requirement that final shortlists have to include a candidate from the disadvantaged groups. There are in fact very good candidates who are available and we definitely can and must do more in this regard.

Contrary to rumours in the media, the Stellenbosch University Council is unanimous about the need for SU to change or transform continuously to adjust to a rapidly changing environment. Naturally there are different views on what exactly that transformation should entail. It would be naïve to expect that everyone would have the same view. The day that any council with close on 30 members all hold more or less the same opinions and views will probably be the time to disband that council.

It can become unpleasant if some people do not agree with you, but surely you have to respect their right to differ. This principle is entrenched in our Constitution. Unfortunately there are members who enjoy publicity and regularly contact the media to do spadework for their own agendas. They misuse the media to put pressure on Council and on management. Council holds long and frank discussions on complex issues and, when decisions are then taken, it usually is with considerable majorities.

The alleged motion of no confidence in the Rector never served at the Council meeting. It is a pity that the cover story and those that followed were not accurate, leading to damaging rumours and allegations. If Council members were involved, as is suggested in the original article, it will be viewed as a serious contravention of the code of conduct for Council members. It is not the role of a few individuals who do not agree with majority decisions to turn to the media. Virtually all Council members find this process frustrating. Over time, these people will marginalise themselves within Council and, as a result of their actions they are prejudicing their potential impact in Council.

The Executive Committee of Council has since adopted a motion in which we have condemned the actions of the rumourmongers and we have distanced ourselves from these rumours.

Since Prof Botman’s death concerns have been raised from within and from outside the Stellenbosch University community about Russel’s legacy: whether his work would continue or whether the opportunity would be seized to steer SU back to pre-2007.

Russel’s most important legacy is the path on which he has positioned our university. We are not planning a change in direction. Council will ensure that SU continues along the course that has been mapped in the *Institutional Intent and Strategy* that was compiled under his guidance, and accepted by Council.

However, there have been concerns raised in Council in response to comments in the social media that suggest that at Stellenbosch “white, male, Christian and heterosexual” almost by default is a stumbling block for diversity. Of course, we may not permit it to become a stumbling block, but being white, male, Christian and heterosexual, is equally part of our inclusivity as any other list of physical and ideological attributes. As with so many other issues, it depends on how we live up to all the different value systems that have to be respected and that have to enjoy equal acknowledgement. Our *Institutional Intent and Strategy* clearly indicates the course that we are going to follow. It is our objective to learn from past errors; not to perpetuate them in another form. Our Institutional Plan will be finalised before the end of 2014. This plan will include transformation targets that will contribute to the university’s excellence. We insist that these targets be determined as scientifically as possible.

For us transformation relates to much more than staff and student statistics. It includes the ways in which we teach; how we incorporate technology; how we create innovative and integrated listening, living and learning environments for our students and how we foster a welcoming campus culture for different people. Like other universities, especially traditional Afrikaans universities, we are also exposed to regrettable incidents from time to time. I am referring to the Nazi salute and students dressing up as black housekeepers on other campuses which caused uproar in the media. On all campuses small groups of students do unacceptable things, sometimes intentionally, but often also due to insensitivity or even ignorance. But to then ascribe it to the university’s formal agenda and an unwillingness to transform is an unfair and dangerous typification. SU has not worn the Afrikaner blazer for a very long time.

I do not know of a single Council member or staff member who does not have the best interests of our university at heart. Stellenbosch also has the most loyal Convocation (of which all former Maties are members) in South Africa, and they have strong feelings for their *Alma Mater*. I hope and pray that we will respect our different opinions and points of departure on challenging issues and look for solutions, rather than criticising and attacking, especially so during the coming months while the University will be in the process of appointing a new Rector and Vice-Chancellor.

On the eve of SU’s 150th anniversary (the founding of the Stellenbosch Gymnasium in 1866), I believe that this Rector’s appointment is going to be the most important yet. We are looking for an energetic, knowledgeable and qualified person who is equal to the task and will remain so in the midst of all the different pressure groups and undercurrents. We probably are looking for a calm individual with a balanced outlook on life and appropriate experience, whose leadership qualities are above suspicion and have been proven in an equally complex environment. There are high expectations and large shoes to fill. We will work hard to appoint the right Rector for Stellenbosch University. We plan to do so at our Council meeting on 1 December this year.

* George Steyn (55) matriculated at Paarl Gymnasium and obtained his BA (Law) and LLB degrees at Stellenbosch University. He started working at Pep in 1986 and was a director for 22 years and the managing director from 2005. Mr Steyn retired in 2011. He was elected to the Stellenbosch University Council by the University’s donors and Council elected him as chairperson. He currently is serving for a second term.