

Hatchets should be buried

This Q & A article is an English translation of an electronic interview between Mr George Steyn, Chairperson of the Stellenbosch University Council and Mr Bun Booyens, Editor of the *Die Burger*, an Afrikaans daily newspaper. The conversation was published on the centre spread of *By&Naweek+*, a supplement to *Die Burger*, *Beeld* and *Volksblad*, three Afrikaans newspapers in the Media24 stable on Saturday 9 August 2014. This translation is based on the original electronic interview without editing affected in the printed version (*V&A met Bun*).

Prof Russel Botman's unexpected passing has rocked the university community. Your impression of the emotions at present?

It was a shock and still feels unreal. We are very sad and are trying to process this new reality. At the same time we need to ensure continuity and make arrangements to have someone in the rector's chair again soon.

Prof Botman's most important legacy?

Russel's most important legacy is the path on which he has positioned our university. We are not planning a change in course. Council must ensure that Stellenbosch University (SU) will continue on the course that was mapped in the *Institutional Intent and Strategy* that was compiled under Prof. Botman's guidance and accepted by the Council.

Much has been said about the coverage in "the Afrikaans media" of transformation at Stellenbosch: that it undermines Botman and the Council – the entire process? Comments?

It is a pity that much of the reporting was not accurate. The cover article that appeared in *Die Burger* on the morning of our last Council meeting on an alleged motion of no confidence in the rector gave rise to much speculation and accusations after his sudden death. This alleged motion never served. Since then the Executive Committee of Council has adopted a motion in which we condemn the action of the rumourmongers and distance ourselves from it.

Let us assume for a moment that there was a member or members who did in fact plan to propose a motion of no confidence?

If Council members were involved, as is suggested by the article, it will be viewed as a serious contravention of the code of conduct for Council members.

It does appear that there are in fact Council members who do not agree with the direction in which SU is moving.

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 the council.

It is not always pleasant if some people do not agree with you, but surely you have to respect their right to differ. Unfortunately there are members who enjoy publicity and regularly contact the media to do spadework for their agendas. In this way, for example, they misuse the press to put pressure on the Council and on management.

It surely is their right to differ from the rest of the Council in public?

Council holds long and frank discussions on complex issues and, when decisions are then taken, it usually is with considerable majorities. It is not the role of those few individuals who do not agree to turn to the media. Virtually all the Council members find the 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.

How unified is the Council then?

The 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 transformation should entail. It would be naïve to think that everyone would have the same view.

The language question just won't lie down and the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande, has allowed it to flare up anew with his statement that there no longer is place for Afrikaans universities. Your comments?

Minister Nzimande is in an influential position, but his 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 has for a long time no longer been the “*volksuniversiteit*” that had to help uplift the Afrikaners early in the previous century. That also is something that we cannot and do not want to be today. In the same vein, SU does not have to apologise because we have chosen to serve large numbers of students in more than one language.

However, 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.

So, in as clear language as possible, for how long will Maties still offer Afrikaans as language of instruction?

I recently made the standpoint 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 lecturers 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.

It might be of interest to know that, when I left here as 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.

Therefore no quota system?

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.

Afrikaans speakers generally are more bilingual than English speakers and are also more prepared to study in English than the other way round. This trend is growing. Let's look at the following example. Suppose we have 100 places in a programme and reserve a quota of 50% for Afrikaans speakers. Now 50 Afrikaans speakers and 150 English speakers apply. We will then be forced in terms of the set quota to

accept all 50 Afrikaans speakers and only the best third of the English speakers. The negative impact of this on quality should be obvious.

On what minimum language rights will a student – any student, not necessarily an Afrikaans student – therefore be able to depend? Concerned people regard this as the crux.

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 languages. Council is meeting again in September, and the Language 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.

The question that is being asked increasingly, however – also in the highest courts – is that when percentages like those above come into the equation, you need to use national demographics or regional demographics for the sum. This might be the crux of the matter. Your view?

For me it is logical that universities need to accommodate their applicants, and that profile will then become the university's profile. 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.

Given that, where does a statement that suggests that “white, male, Christian and heterosexual” is almost by default a stumbling block for diversity fit in?

We may not permit it to become a stumbling block. 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.

International rankings for universities have been in the news again recently. SU was placed 311th in the Centre for World University Rankings. How important are such lists?

There are many rankings and the outcomes and criteria of all of them differ. What is important, is to rather watch trends – is our position moving upwards or downwards. SU only started appearing on these lists recently and is improving its position rapidly.

They are of particular importance in a country where the school system has been identified as one of the poorest in the world. That there still are South African universities that appear among the top 1,5% in the world is heartening and a sign of tertiary excellence. The students and parents of our country, and particularly those from the Western Cape, can be grateful that two of Africa's best universities are located here.

There is a lot of pressure on the traditionally white universities to transform more quickly. Does SU do enough to transform?

Let me emphasise again what I said about “attracting the best students”. Within the current SA school landscape, very few students from the previously disadvantaged schools will be admitted to SU if they are

clinically selected purely on the basis of their matric marks. It would be more accurate to say that SU “must attract the students with the most potential”.

It will take very long to eradicate the damage that was done in the past and for schools in the disadvantaged communities to function properly and up to standard.

As privileged, white South Africans, I, my peers and our children largely still have the benefit of being able to afford more expensive schools and in that way almost to ensure university education. There are many learners with a great deal of potential who simply do not have the opportunity to perform on the same level.

If we want to be excellent, we must attract and retain students with the highest potential – and in order to attract them we need to promote transformation.

An important question is how the university will then define excellence: For example, does excellence for a first-rate lecturer entail that he or she should have full command of more than one language? Does excellence for a university entail that it should try to maintain more than one language as academic language? And as you as businessman surely are aware, how does the university measure excellence in this sphere?

We encourage multilingualism in our lecturers. However, academic excellence is measured by an established performance evaluation system. This system reflects the three core functions of universities, namely teaching and learning, research and community interaction. The academic stature of the lecturer is crucial – how well does he/she teach, how good is the content, what is the quality of research and what is his/her impact on society?

We surely will not turn Bill Gates away simply because he can only speak English!

Put otherwise, can any institution in a diverse country with 11 official languages transform itself as diverse if it only has command of one language?

In my opinion, 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?

How does Stellenbosch promote transformation?

SU does a variety of things to promote transformation:

* Selection makes provision for measuring instruments that go further than grade 11 and matric results, for example **national norms tests and language skills tests**.

* We know that **mathematics and science teaching** are severely lacking at most schools – particularly in poor communities, that do not have the benefit of governing body posts and well-equipped laboratories. Hence SU also offers a **SciMathUS bridging programme** to provide educationally disadvantaged learners a second chance to qualify for university admission. Dozens of these students have completed degree programmes at SU, have qualified as doctors and engineers, among others, or have progressed to the postgraduate level.

* Council has decided to make considerable funds available for **recruitment bursaries** to promote student diversity. Diversity management is implemented in **residence placements** to improve the success rate of vulnerable students, such as first-generation students – students whose parents did not study here.

* The university further has special **LLL (Listen, Live and Learn) areas** to help students to feel comfortable with diversity and get to know each other. We are also building **hubs**, which provide day students who

commute to Stellenbosch with living and studying areas on the campus where they can also socialise with residence students.

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 are determined as scientifically as possible, also calculating the associated risks.

The University of Cape Town was also criticised recently about the profile of its professors and certain diversity shortcomings at the institution. Fair criticism?

I cannot speak on their behalf. UCT is a world-class institution that, by the way, beat Stellenbosch in the Varsity Cup rugby this year!

However, I could speculate that they are facing the same challenges as we are. 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.

North-West University, an alleged Nazi salute ... Do these things place additional pressure on Stellenbosch as a traditionally Afrikaans university?

As at North-West, we also find that there sometimes are small groups of students here who do unacceptable things. But to then allege that it also is part of the university's agenda is an unfair and dangerous typification. SU has not worn the Afrikaner blazer for a long time.

What does the financial picture look like?

Here and all over the world, state funding for universities is decreasing in the midst of increasing pressure that socio-economic circumstances may not mean the exclusion of needy students. At the same time, universities have to keep up with the technological century and the costs of innovation. Let there be no misunderstanding – this places considerable pressure on our financial model.

Therefore more dependence on donors?

We have already passed the point where our own income from tuition fees and research contracts is more than the state subsidy. Donors are extremely important and SU needs each one desperately.

SU has to appoint a new rector. The profile of the ideal candidate?

On the eve of SU's 150th anniversary, I believe that this rector's appointment is going to be the most important yet.

Naturally I would like the Council to appoint the best and most suitable person for the post. But this sounds a bit generic: 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 proven and above suspicion. There are high expectations and we will work hard to appoint the right rector.

What would qualify as 'appropriate experience'?

An excellent and proven record of top leadership in a complex environment.

Approximately how long will the process take?

We are planning to appoint the new rector at our Council meeting on 1 December this year. However, when the rector will take up office is another matter – I suspect any time from February to May next year.

Who makes the eventual appointment?

The Stellenbosch University Council.

Your prognosis for the future?

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.

Let us be honest, the relationship between “the university” (or the rector) and Council – was at times strained over the past few years. My perception has been that there was a problem of confidence at some stage. Your experience of this?

SU has a formidable Convocation and precious donors who jointly elect nine Council members. This is a network of people in influential positions both here and overseas. The management and Council will be foolish if they did not consider their sentiments on the way forward. My experience of the current Council meetings has been pleasant – the hatchets have been buried and we are not fighting with each other.

And the road ahead as chairperson of the Council?

SU is complex, challenging and takes up much of my time. I nevertheless serve with pleasure. Maybe I am sufficiently thick-skinned, but I enjoy the support of the majority of fellow Council members. The donors elected me to Council and Council elected me chairperson. I will remain in the chair for about another four years if nothing unforeseen happens. I fortunately am supported by a very competent Council.

It seems to be a rather thankless task to be Council chairperson ...

Let me immediately say that the rector’s task is much more thankless and complex. But it is very pleasant to be busy working alongside this group of very proficient members for the wellbeing of SU.

I firmly believe that we will strengthen SU’s excellence further and produce even more leaders for our country, our continent and for the rest of the world.

- George Steyn (56) matriculated at Paarl Gymnasium and obtained his law degree at Stellenbosch University. He started working at Pep in 1986 and was the executive head 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.