

'Thank you' event for sponsors of SU's new LaunchLab Incubator
STIAS Manor House, Stellenbosch, Thu. 7 Aug. 2014, 18:00
Keynote Address by Prof Leopoldt van Huyssteen,
Stellenbosch University Rector and Vice-Chancellor (Acting)

The LaunchLab is an exciting new venture for us, and it's good to know that we can count on our partners. I want to state this right at the outset – and thank you for your support.

Now, you have heard what the LaunchLab is, and what it does. I want to take one step back and ask, "Why?" Why is it important to have this kind of initiative ... in this country, and at this university?

To start with, we have a very high unemployment rate in South Africa – roughly 25% -- and that's counting only active job seekers. Then, if one looks at youth between 15 and 24 years old, unemployment jumps to 50%. That's the third highest in the world. Only Greece and Spain have higher youth unemployment rates.

Clearly something must be done, and stimulating entrepreneurship and innovation must be part of the solution, especially in a developing economy such as ours.

Now, the traditional starting point has always been education. But what kind of education? Universities worldwide have for long been offering Entrepreneurship as part of their degree programmes in the Economic and Management Sciences.

That's all good and well, but two problems remain: How do you bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical know-how? In other words, when is knowledge just information, and when does it become doable? And, secondly, how do you ensure that entrepreneurship is not just confined to Commerce or Electronic Engineering Science students?

This point was made by our late Rector, Professor Russel Botman, when he opened the LaunchLab a year ago. He said, "In today's dynamic and fast-changing world entrepreneurship has become crucial in all fields, whether Economics or the Arts, Engineering or Medicine, Science or Philosophy, Agriculture or Education, Law or Psychology ... even Theology." By the time students graduate, their entrepreneurial instincts must have been sharpened to such an extent that they can start their own businesses and make a success of it – creating employment for themselves and others in the process.

That is why the best place for a business incubator or business accelerator is not an industrial or technology park, but a university campus – because its presence helps to create an entrepreneurial mind-set that ripples through the whole student body. An incubator creates a community of entrepreneurs. It's a space where different disciplines get together and where learning from each other is a strength.

The other reason for having an incubator on campus is of course that a university is in the business of generating new knowledge, and to convey that knowledge widely.

Stellenbosch excels at both these aspects. Our undergraduate student success rate is the best in the country. And we have the highest research output of all universities in South Africa (output per researcher) – and therefore also on our continent.

But success is meaningless if it is not converted to significance – that much Professor Botman also taught us. A university cannot only pursue academic excellence. We also have to be relevant to society. So, a few years ago we started asking ourselves, how do we make a difference? What's the best way to make an impact?

By that stage we had already set up InnovUS – our technology transfer and innovation company, or Centre for Innovation – with considerable success. In the period 2011-2013, Stellenbosch produced more PCT patents [Patent Cooperation Treaty] than any other university in the country – even more than the CSIR [Centre for Scientific and Industrial Research]. Over the last few years, more than 36

PCT patents from Stellenbosch University have been published by the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO).

One might think 36 PCT patents is not much, but let me put this in perspective by quoting from a letter that we got on 10 July from the [Center for World University Rankings \(CWUR\)](#). They said, “Stellenbosch University (SU) ranked 311th among the world’s top institutions in this year’s (2014) World University Rankings. This puts SU in the top 1.5% of more than 22 000 degree-granting institutions of higher education worldwide.” [[Click here to see 2014 SU ranking on CWUR website.](#)] In South Africa, they ranked us No. 3, so there is some work to be done.

Now, this is a ranking that really measures concrete things, not perceptions – it measures quality of education, quality of research, quality of faculty, and so forth, but also international patent filings. It is interesting to note that our patents ranking is 259th in the world, which is better than our overall ranking. So, kudos to InnovUS for boosting our score.

Now, patents are mostly high-end stuff ... cutting-edge knowledge and technology that still have to get to market. So, how do you make that transition, and how do you ensure you take the “next generation” along with you?

Worldwide, top universities have been meeting this challenge by setting up business incubators, just as we have done at SU. Other examples include Cambridge in the UK and Leuven in Belgium, where whole industrial hives of high-tech start-ups sprung up around the universities. And the engines driving this growth are business incubator --- because they are places where ideas can be nurtured and developed, backed up by top experts and industry partners.

I remember it well ... we were in the Netherlands in May 2013, Anita Nel of Innovus and myself, looking at some of these developments, when we thought we should call our initiative the “LaunchLab”. Why “LaunchLab”? Because this is where new ideas are developed, and then given flight to the next level.

Now here we are tonight, a year after the LaunchLab opened its doors for the first time – and already we have several success stories under our belt, and we on our way to bigger and better premises. From the University’s side I want to thank our sponsors for their support – particularly the DTI and Nedbank and Entersekt.

The dilemma we have as universities in today’s world, is that we have to prepare our students for careers that don’t exist yet. In such uncertain times, a venture such as the LaunchLab is the best investment in the future – a place where young entrepreneurs can break new ground and define new careers.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me conclude with something that the motorcar entrepreneur Henry Ford said: “If you think you can do a thing or think you can’t do a thing, you’re right.”

We choose “can do” ... and with your help, more and more young people will too.

I thank you.