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[Email to staff]

Dear Colleague

## LET'S TALK

University campuses countrywide are abuzz with developments, and Stellenbosch is no exception.

This is not surprising, because universities excel at shaping the future. Through research we seek solutions to societal challenges, through teaching and learning we change lives, and through engagement and interaction we transform communities.

This is our own challenge. As *The Economist* put it in a special report on higher education in March, “The institutions that have done so much to change the world need to embrace change themselves.”

**Transformation** is obviously a global challenge in our sector.

Change is neither easy nor comfortable. In fact, if it does not make us uncomfortable we are not doing it right. Transformation is essential – in order to serve all our stakeholders properly and for the sake of our sustainability as an institution.

A tool that can be of great value in this regard is the “**open conversation**” I alluded to in my [inaugural address on 29 April](#). It should be the type of dialogue in which we “can talk about everything”, and which “never degenerates into insult, quarrel or anger”.

I am happy to say that this process is already under way. The “circulation of ideas” has started at various levels and places throughout the University. An example is a process initiated by the SRC to produce a Policy on Discrimination. Management is a willing participant in this discussion.

All who contribute to the open conversation play an important role. Therefore, I want to kindly request that we do not shy away from difficult conversations. We should not see it as an attack but rather as an opportunity for growth.

I have accepted an invitation from Open Stellenbosch to receive a memorandum at their *Rooiplein* gathering on Wednesday, 13 May. I have also invited their leadership to formally enter into discussions with Management.

Obviously all conversations must be held in a spirit of **tolerance and mutual respect**. The violation of human rights and victimisation will not be tolerated – regardless of who is involved. That is why a lecturer who allegedly sent a racist SMS to a student has been [temporarily relieved of his duties](#) while the matter is being investigated in accordance with the University's formal disciplinary procedures. A report is expected soon and the appropriate steps will follow.

We must all ensure that our actions and utterances do not have unintended consequences. Nor can we claim rights for certain viewpoints that we deny others. SU has a reputation as an institution that takes good governance seriously – and we are all responsible for it.

Regarding our staff and student bodies – **inclusivity and diversity** are priorities for us. The University is doing its utmost to promote access and to be more representative – with regard to both race and gender, not only for academic, but also for support staff, on all job levels. ([Read more here.](#))



Without pre-empting the report on the career development of women at SU, I can say that the task team's recommendations were received positively at Monday's General Management Meeting and will serve before Council in June.

We are pulling out all the stops to build **human capital** through our postgraduate programmes. SU delivers the second highest number of masters and doctoral degrees in the country, of which 492 (38%) and 95 (40,6%) respectively were awarded to black, coloured and Indian students in 2014. This is not only to our benefit, but also to the benefit of other institutions in South Africa as well as the rest of our continent.

This is a contribution to development, an investment in the future – which is also why we have established a [bursary fund for descendants of residents who were removed from \*Die Vlakte\*](#) in the 1960's en 70's.

These forced removals brought about separation because the University did not protest against it at the time, built on expropriated land, and benefited from being given the Lückhoff school building. Hopefully the bursary fund will bring healing and reconciliation, and will help to mend the ties between the University and the community. Most importantly, however, it will offer more students the opportunity to study at SU.

Obstacles in the path of unity and progress on campus should be removed – like the [HF Verwoerd plaque](#) in our Accounting and Statistics Building. The ceremony will take place at 27 May at 17:00. Though specific guests are being invited, the event will be open to all who want to attend, and it will be streamed live over the internet ([www.sun.ac.za/streaming](http://www.sun.ac.za/streaming)).

The plaque will provisionally be kept in the University Archives. This gives us the opportunity to talk about symbols on campus, as an institution of learning and critical debate rightly should. A committee of staff members and students are working on identifying other controversial names and symbols, and are also discussing how to handle these matters.

Another thing that we should talk about, is **language of instruction**. There is an argument that we are not sufficiently meeting the needs of our students who do not speak Afrikaans. There are also arguments to the contrary.

Let's take as our starting point [SU's new Language Policy](#), which was adopted by Council in November last year – a policy which favours multilingualism. SU is committed to Afrikaans as an academic language, but we also use English to give all South Africans access to the University, and promote isiXhosa where feasible.

Stellenbosch is not an Afrikaans or English or Xhosa University; Stellenbosch is a world-class multilingual South African university – one of the few in this category, which is sorely needed in a country with 11 official languages. This is how we are trying to ensure that language is not a barrier to access, but a tool for success – especially in diverse educational settings.

**Let the conversation continue** – no matter how difficult. For if we cannot speak our mind and do not really listen to each other, we will get nowhere.

**Prof Wim de Villiers**  
**Rector and Vice-Chancellor**

- [Click here for a video message to students.](#)