

Africa Day Seminar, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Stellenbosch University (SU).

JN de Villiers Boardroom, Tygerberg Campus, 13:15, 25 May 2015.

Theme: "Increasing our African Footprint in Post Graduate Education and Research".

Remarks by Prof Wim de Villiers, SU Rector and Vice-Chancellor.

Good afternoon, everyone. Let me immediately say congratulations. Africa Week is a splendid initiative, and that goes for this Africa Day Seminar as well. Kudos to our Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences ... and I am not just saying that because I am an alumnus!

It makes me proud to be able address a gathering of our University where we are so clearly – as an institution – saying “We are Africa”. Across our continent, these words are ringing out on this anniversary of the formation of the forerunner of the African Union – the Organisation of African Unity – in 1963.

But what exactly does it mean to say “We are Africa”? More particularly, what does it mean to us, as a University and a Faculty? It would be easy to get lost endless discussions – so, allow me to adapt a famous phrase of Abraham Lincoln and say it simply means we are a University “of the people, by the people, for the people” of Africa.

Also relevant is a phrase by another American president, John F Kennedy, who in his inaugural address said, “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” It helps us to focus on what we can do for our continent, Africa.

There is more than geography to us saying “We are Africa”, because 14% of our student body is made up of people from 117 countries across the world, and 56% of them are from African countries other than SA. So we have a large African contingent studying at Stellenbosch University, which is great because they enrich us.

Our claim that “We are Africa” also goes beyond demographics. There is a more substantial reason, which is that we collaborate closely with fellow institutions and individuals all over our continent in teaching and research that is locally relevant yet globally competitive.

The challenges we face are what John Kao calls “wicked problems” – highly complex challenges comprised of interwoven issues whose potential solutions require creative, interdisciplinary thinking. This is what we need to tackle.

For this we require what Jim Collins calls “Big Hairy Audacious Goals”. This is what we need to spend our energy on.

We need “African solutions to African problems”, a goal captured in the African Union’s Agenda 2063, which is seeking to mobilise efforts towards “The Africa We Want” in 50 years’ time. The Agenda says all people on our continent should enjoy “sound health and wellbeing”.

This is a very important, because on all health indicators, Africa lags behind the rest of the world (KPMG, 2013, *State of Healthcare in Africa*)¹:

- Life expectancy (54 vs 68 for the world on average)
- Physicians per 1 000 people (2,3 vs 14 for the world)
- Under-5 mortality (107 vs 51 for the world); and
- Maternal mortality (620 vs 260 for the world)

The reasons are varied and complex, but there is consensus on four main contributing factors:

- Epidemics that affect Africa worst, such as HIV and Aids, as well as TB;
- Policy and governance failures in the political sphere;
- The ravages of war and armed conflict in general; and
- Widespread poverty and inequality across our continent.

These are the Four Horsemen of our Apocalypse: poverty, inequality, unemployment and corruption.

There is some progress – coinciding with the spread of democracy and economic growth across Africa – but huge challenges remain. That's where we can make a contribution. As a leading research-intensive university in Africa, our role is to help produce the necessary knowledge base and human resources and community engagement to improve the situation.

I must tell you, I have been doing the rounds at the University, and I have been very impressed by what I've seen. I have been blown away by our human capital.

Looking at the map of Africa, the footprint of Stellenbosch is everywhere – either through:

- bilateral partnerships with other universities; or
- multilateral partnerships in thematic networks; or
- collaborations between individual researchers and their peers elsewhere on the continent outside of South Africa.

Our Postgraduate and International Office might have more up-to-date figures, but according to our 2014 Annual Report, we have 350 active projects, with 760 African partners in 43 African countries. This makes Stellenbosch University an important role player in research collaboration in Africa.

In March, I was in Dakar for the launch of the African Research Universities Alliance, or ARUA. Fifteen leading institutions with strong research and postgraduate training joined ARUA – and I am proud to say Stellenbosch is a founder member. Our focus as a group will be to build African research excellence as a vital precondition for the continent to develop and control our own destiny.

I welcome the drive for us to do even more to increase our African footprint in postgraduate education and research. This will help us achieve our institutional intent of becoming more focused

¹ <http://www.kpmg.com/Africa/en/IssuesAndInsights/Articles-Publications/Documents/The-State-of-Healthcare-in-Africa.pdf>

on the future that we want for the people of our country and the rest of our continent by increasing our impact on society.

There is something else that I want to draw your attention to, ladies and gentlemen – we are not dealing with a one-way process here. The change we are seeking to effect in society is also affecting us. The day Stellenbosch University started moving away from serving only a part of the population towards serving society as a whole was the day we started transforming ... and that process is still underway; it will never stop.

As we become more inclusive, opening up access to the University, so we become more diverse in terms of the flow of people and ideas – not only from within South Africa but also from further afield.

With internationalisation, we are transforming our institution into a national and continental and global asset. That means we have to be adaptable and flexible at all times, which is why promoting a welcoming culture is such an important goal for us.

I want to thank all who are making positive contributions in this regard.

Transformation is not a uniquely South African phenomenon. It is a universal process affecting higher education globally. Change is neither easy nor comfortable. In fact, if it does not make us uncomfortable, we are not doing it right.

A tool that can be of great value in this regard is the “open discussion” that I alluded to in my inaugural address. 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.

Let’s not see challenges to the status quo as an attack, but rather as a healthy opportunity for growing together. Obviously all conversations must be held in a spirit of tolerance and mutual respect. But let the conversation continue – no matter how difficult. Let us talk. We must find a way forward.

Now I have said enough for the time being, though.

Let me conclude by repeating my support for the drive to increase SU’s African footprint – especially in postgraduate education and research.

And I am happy to announce that we will be taking up President Zuma on his call for all institutions in South Africa to fly the AU flag. We will fly the flag of Africa because “We are Africa”. Thank you.