

Stellenbosch University information session for prospective students and their parents
Coetzenburg, 18:45, 8 August 2015
SU Rector & Vice-Chancellor Prof Wim de Villiers
"A top university for top students"

Good evening, everyone! It is wonderful to be here with all of you.

These are exciting times. The world is changing fast, so it is important to get a good education. By going to university and becoming a doctor or engineer or entrepreneur – and we even have careers we don't know the names of yet – you will be making a vital contribution to society. But you will also be investing in your own future. Research shows that someone with a master's or doctoral degree will earn up to four and a half times more during their lifetime than someone who only has matric.

This makes it worth it to study – and to continue studying. You have proved that you can be successful. I want to encourage you to make the decision today that the degree you will obtain in three or four years' time will only be your first degree! I know it can be quite tough to decide where to study. So, I want to tell you a bit more about Stellenbosch University (SU).

I would also like to talk to the parents here. I know your child's future is important to you. I am also a parent of three children, and one always wonders, will my child fit in and adapt? Will my child obtain the right qualification here? We hope to answer all your questions tonight. You are also welcome to talk to our faculties and other divisions afterwards.

My theme is simple: **"A top university for top students."** Stellenbosch is an excellent choice, for mainly two reasons: Here you will get a top education for a successful future career, and you will also get a rounded student experience as you embark on this very exciting stage of your life's journey.

I was a student here myself. And I was in the fortunate position that the foundation I received here took me all the way to Oxford for my PhD, and to America, where I worked for 18 years as a physician/scientist. Now I'm back, and I must tell you, I've been blown away to see that Stellenbosch is really up there with the best in the world.

Maties appears on various ranking lists of the top universities in the world (Times Higher Education 276/401; QS 390/800; Shanghai 401–500/500; CWTS Leiden 481/750). There are more than 17 000 universities worldwide, and we are among the top 2%. Employers know they can rely on our qualifications. By coming to Stellenbosch, you will be getting a qualification that is globally recognised and respected.

Now, there's a worrying statistic in South Africa. Nationally, an average of only 50% of new students make it to their second year, but our first-year retention rate at Stellenbosch is consistently 86% and above. How do we manage this? Two things: by focussing on excellence, and by offering good support.

Let's talk about excellence first. We recruit the best students – that's why you are here tonight. And we offer the best teaching by the best lecturers – you will get the opportunity to meet some of them tonight.

I mentioned world rankings earlier. Each year, the Department of Higher Education and Training ranks South African universities in terms of their weighted per capita research output and knowledge generation. Since 2008, Stellenbosch has been number 1 in the country. Why should you care about research output? Because your lecturers – the ones who will be teaching you – will be experts in their fields, up to date with the latest developments.

That's why you should come to Stellenbosch – because it is a top university, not only for top students but also for top lecturers.

But let's look at what it means to be a 'top student'. You all do well at school, right? However, that doesn't mean university will be easy. You will have to work very hard, and differently. Here we don't merely test your knowledge. We also stimulate you to think – to think for yourself, to think critically, to think inquisitively, and to think of creative solutions.

Because we need these solutions for the complex problems of society, the so-called wicked problems of intricate, convoluted issues with various causes – such as poverty, unemployment and inequality. Developing the ability to address such complex problems is what will help you be successful in life – not only to know the periodic table, but also to help prevent a nuclear war; not only to know plant biology and soil composition, but also to help prevent famine; not only to know the law, but also to let justice prevail.

These are huge goals, these are huge issues, but each one of you has great potential, and it is our mission to help you realise your full potential. You will find that we offer extensive support to our students. That's the second reason for our good results. Besides recruiting excellent students and staff, we also offer excellent support.

Early in the year you will write your first tests, to enable us to determine any problems as soon as possible and offer support. You will be given this support throughout our systems – by the senior student who may be your mentor (whether you live in residence or private); by the tutors who offer classroom support in smaller groups; by the lecturers who present classes and the deans who manage faculties; by our Division of Student Affairs, where you can go for help any time; and by our many administrative and support divisions. There is support at various levels.

So, you will not be left to your own resources, but – importantly – in the end you are responsible for your own progress. This is how life works, and also in this regard the university will help you gain valuable experience.

Every year, before classes start, we have a Welcoming Programme for first years – to orientate you to campus. And this programme, plus all the support services that I have mentioned, are all aimed at creating a more inclusive university. This is important to us as we attract a greater diversity of students – from all population groups and walks of life, from all across the country and the world.

Our changing nature as an institution is also reflected in our languages of tuition. There was a time when Stellenbosch was an Afrikaans university. This is no longer the case. But neither are we an English university. Stellenbosch is a world-class, multilingual South African university. This provides our graduates with a significant competitive advantage in today's diverse and integrated society.

There has been a policy decision to put English and Afrikaans on an equal footing as languages of tuition at Stellenbosch. Now we are in the process of implementing this policy. Many of our courses

are already offered fully in either English or Afrikaans. Other classes might be bilingual. Or there may be a simultaneous interpreting service, similar to the one here tonight. And as has been the case for many years, most textbooks are in English, and you can write all your assignments, tests and exams in English.

This does not mean Afrikaans is not important to us – not at all! We find innovative ways to provide in the language needs of our English- and Afrikaans-speaking students. We follow this approach because we know language is an instrument of empowerment. We put in great effort to make everyone feel welcome.

Ladies and gentlemen, you might have seen reports in the media about talks on campus about the language issue and transformation. I want to reassure you that this is OK. This university is not an ivory tower, and neither are we an island. We are part of a society in transition, a society undergoing transformation. That's fine, that's good.

We welcome an open conversation on campus, we encourage critical discussion and dialogue. And we are committed to **transformation through education and research**.

We have, however, also made it clear that we cannot allow disruption of either academic or administrative activities. And nobody has the right to infringe on the rights of others. So, we remain committed to dialogue, as we become more inclusive, as we build excellence and as we focus on the future.

Speaking of the future, we are constantly innovating to stay at the cutting edge of technological developments. Across the world, there is a revolution underway in this Information Age of the 21st century. Knowledge is flowing faster and easier than ever before thanks to the internet and mobile technology.

Young people today – the millennials and post-millennials – are learning in different ways. That means we have to teach differently. Stellenbosch is one of the best internet-connected universities in South Africa. You will have access to computers for online research in the library, in residences, in study centres, etc. And we have a campus-wide wireless network for students, called "Maties WiFi". So, you can B.Y.O.D. (bring your own device) for easy access whenever you want.

Students here can access important university services online – you simply go to my.SUN and click through to the info you need, e.g. about accommodation or the library or the exam timetable or your academic progress. And we also have an e-learning platform called SUNLearn. That's your online connection to all your academic course work and to your lecturers.

So, ladies and gentlemen, I am extremely excited to be here and to see you here tonight. And I would certainly like to welcome you here in 2016 at the start of the academic year. See you then!

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