

Discussion with new Stellenbosch University (SU) student leaders
Venue: Academia Residence, 18:30, 26 August 2015
Speaker: SU Rector and Vice-Chancellor Prof Wim de Villiers

It's wonderful being here tonight. *Baie dankie vir die uitnodiging. Dis die seisoen van studenteverkiesings, en dis nou alles verby, hoor ek. Ek wil vir julle baie gelukwens en alles van die beste toewens vir wat die volgende jaar voorlê.*

Ek is baie bly vir hierdie geleentheid om met julle te kan praat – veral nou, in hierdie tyd van kritiese gesprekke. That's my 1st point. **We should not be surprised about the turbulence on campuses now.** South Africa is still a society in transition. The legacy of the past lingers, it is still with us – the inequality and poverty and unemployment.

The other reason why we should not be surprised is that we are 20 years into our democracy now. The “born frees” are coming of age – that's you guys. You are now old enough to think for yourselves, to see the problems around you. But at the same time you are young enough to want to do something about it, you have the energy to do it.

So we should not be surprised, but **neither should we be alarmed.** *Ons moenie beangs te wees oor hierdie onstuimigheid nie, want verandering is altyd moeilik. Ons kan eintlik sê, as dit nie ongemaklik is nie, dan doen ons dit nie reg nie. Daarom is universiteite so belangrik – dit is daardie kritiese denke wat eie aan universiteite is.*

Van die begin af het ek van die “oop gesprek” gepraat. Dit kom van die frase van Johan Degenaar. Johan Degenaar was a philosopher who recently died. He was known as the “Socrates of Stellenbosch.” The phrase of Socrates that is most important to remember is, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” It is not the answers that are important, it is the questions. We should always question.

Wat die oop gesprek behels, is dat 'n mens luister en dat jy oop is vir oortuiging. Ja, julle het reg gehoor... “luister”. So, kom ons praat oor die Luistervideo, want leiers staan nie kop-in-die-sand nie. Ons pak die bul by die horings.

The first thing I want to say about the *Luister* video is to acknowledge that it raises very important issues. I watched it with my wife and we both found it extremely uncomfortable. Because these are some valid lived experiences. I don't enjoy knowing that some of my students on campus here have negative experiences.

The video has shortcomings – which I will get to in a moment – but it is very important to engage with it. Leaders don't skirt issues, they tackle them head on.

So, what is my response to this video and the debate unfolding on Stellenbosch campus?

I'm not going to defend the indefensible. What is the indefensible? Racism, discrimination, human rights violations, exclusion, marginalisation. This is wrong. End of story. Except, whatever's wrong must be fixed. And we are attempting to do that. We are committed to doing that.

This is a process that's been on-going for quite some time now – since 1990. Stellenbosch University has been in a process of transformation for a long time, but we have not done enough yet. Since my

tenure started, two examples of what we have done are that the service contract of a lecturer who sent a racist SMS was terminated, and the HF Verwoerd plaque was removed.

So, I am not going to defend the indefensible. **But I also am not going to tolerate the unacceptable.** The unacceptable is disruption [of classes and other activities on campus], hate speech, violence, destruction of property ... by whomever. Because these things are also wrong and we will act against it. There are rules of conduct on how we engage with each other and with issues in this open discussion. So we won't hesitate to take disciplinary action if needed.

But we are not victimising anyone, and I am certainly not silencing protest. Because students should be critical – that is the nature of what Degenaar said, the open discussion. Students should raise issues, and your role as a leader is to facilitate that and give guidance.

Now, let me briefly point out some of the flaws of the video. The basic tenets of journalism are to be accurate, balanced and fair. Now, the video in part is not accurate because Elsenburg [Agricultural College] is not part of Stellenbosch University. It is not balance but patently one-sided and not true to the dictum “hear the other side”. It is not fair because off-campus incidents in pubs or clubs are not the University's doing, they are not under our control – though, I hasten to say, what is wrong is wrong and we must do everything we can to stop racism everywhere.

It is also not fair to insinuate that Stellenbosch University does not heed transformation calls, that we are not busy with the process of transformation. In this spirit, let's take another issue head-on – the language of tuition.

Out point of departure is that language should not be barrier to access, but a tool of empowerment. I said it very clearly at my inauguration [on 29 April 2015, [click here for video highlights](#) and [here for full speech](#)]: Stellenbosch is certainly no longer in the past just serving one specific part of the population. It is not an Afrikaans university, it is not an English university, it is not an isiXhosa university. It's a world-class, multilingual institution, a national and international asset “advancing knowledge in service of all”, as is [stated in our vision](#).

The research clearly shows that multilingualism – or plurilingualism – gives one a competitive advantage in today's diverse and integrated society.

Last year in November, after quite a struggle, Council made a policy decision to put English and Afrikaans on equal footing as languages of tuition. Now it is being implemented. Many courses are already offered fully either in English or Afrikaans. Other classes might be bilingual. Or there is simultaneous interpreting. And as has been the case for a long time, most text books are in English, and one can write assignments, tests and exams in English.

There are problems with implementation – we acknowledge that. We have task teams that are investigating, and have issued an open invitation to all to raise these issues with us. We have received and are investigating proposals from the SRC, Open Stellenbosch and many other stakeholders. And we will report back to campus and Council about what we find, and how we can make things better.

But I want to debunk the fallacy – I think Degenaar would have called it a '*denkfout*' – which equates the mere presence of Afrikaans with racism. Parallels are being drawn between Stellenbosch University today and Soweto in 1976. There is a huge difference. In 1976 Afrikaans was imposed on

school learners as part of a system of state discrimination, as part of the apartheid system. In 2015, we have a democratic Constitution in place, with a Bill of Rights, enshrining the values of human dignity, equality and freedom.

Let me quote from it: “Everyone has the right to receive education in an official language of their choice in public educational institutions.” But there are two qualifications – “where reasonably practicable”, which is what we are trying to do, and (2) that “access” may not be restricted, hence we are also using English.

Look, the language issue is not easy to handle – to the contrary, it is extremely complex. And as American journalist HL Mencken said, “For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear and simple ... and wrong”.

That makes it doubly important to avoid what in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy is termed “cognitive distortions” when we speak to each other: emotional reasoning, labelling, overgeneralising, blaming.

In the end, we’re at a university. This is a great place to be, an exciting space. True to the Socratic method, we should not be teaching you what to think, but how to think. Critical thinking means that you have to question unexamined beliefs, question received wisdom, question rhetoric – even though it might be uncomfortable, or painful.

Our role is to facilitate critical thinking, but we must also practice it ourselves. We must go beyond borders, leave our comfort zones, expose ourselves to other perspectives, put ourselves in the shoes of others. That may not be easy to do, in fact, it’s pretty hard – but it’s the right thing to do. Besides, the benefits far outweigh the costs.

What are the examples at Stellenbosch that signifies this? One is our new Resident Placement Policy. The emphasis is on greater integration so that people from different backgrounds can get to know each other. It’s the only way for us to move beyond superficial stereotypes.

Another example is our LLL Initiative ... “Listen, Live and Learn” – which is not restricted to the LLL village; the principles are applied throughout the student community. It is actually a bit ironic that the title of the video is “*Luister*” because not only do we “Listen”, we “Live” and “Learn” as well. But that journey starts with listening for a very good reason. It is based on sound academic research about the benefits of “Active Listening”. What is encouraged, is the pursuit of ideological pluralism, a safe space for *all* perspectives, reasoned disagreement, principled dissent, multiple interpretations ... in the end – in the spirit of Ubuntu – “I am because you are”.

Stellenbosch is becoming much more diverse. It is interesting to note that when Madiba was released in 1990, there were less than 1 000 black, coloured and Indian students on campus. Now we have more than 11 000 – nearly 38% of the student body, up from 31% in 2008 as we head for 50% by 2020.

Diversity is an absolute requirement for excellence, because it exposes us to a variety of people and ideas, which broadens the mind and enriches us. That is our [VISION](#) – to become more inclusive. We want to be more welcoming.

If we want to do that, it puts our institutional culture in the spotlight. It must change for the better, and the challenge we face as leaders is to help each other do exactly that.

Now, there is interesting literature in this regard, around the concept of “Critical Mass”. A gender study by the UN found that “only a ‘critical mass’ of women allows female politicians to bring different values to public life.” The study identified 30-35% of any particular population as the point at which a minority are able to influence the dominant culture. This can be applied generally to society – also here at Maties. We have passed that point. That’s another reason why we should not be surprised at calls for our institutional culture to change – and there’s nothing wrong with that.

Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *Blink*, pointed out that our actions are influenced by our attitudes. We have conscious attitudes – those we choose. But we also have unconscious attitudes – those are the product of what we are exposed to. In order to change our unconscious attitudes, he argued, it is not enough to show a mere commitment to equality. We have to expose ourselves to “the other” on a regular basis.

So, we need to open Stellenbosch University even more, let us have open discussion, let us be open to change – let us all take 100% for the change we want to see because it is a collective duty we have. We are all 100% responsible for this.

I am Matie alumnus – *ek is ’n oud-Matie* – but I know full well the Stellenbosch University of the past is not the Stellenbosch University of the future, and nor should it be. We are on a journey of transformation, one that will never end, because transformation is integral to higher education. Madiba said the best way to change the world is through education, and this is what you are receiving here – a quality education. As a higher education institution, we change world through learning and teaching (empowering students and lecturers), we change the world through research (the impact of new knowledge), and we change the word through engagement with communities.

For example, this past Saturday I was in Kayamandi at the launch of an Oral History Research Project ([click here to read more](#)), where our History Department is intimately engaged with the community through teaching fieldworkers to capture oral histories from inhabitants of Kayamandi. Founded in 1941 but with roots that go back two decades earlier, it is one of the oldest townships in the Cape, the second oldest after Langa. Another aspect of the Project is that high school learners will be roped in to write biographies of prominent people in the community.

That is engagement with the community through teaching and learning, and through research. Through doing these things, we undergo fundamental change ourselves.

I have spoken to a few of you here tonight. You have told me you’re in your third year, but you’re a different person from when you started here in your first year.

So, universities transform, and are transformed. This is equally true for institutions and individuals. But therein is the challenge. As Gandhi put it, you have to “Be the change you want to see”. That is something we all have to take responsibility for – because we are in this together, 100%.

Thank you.