

**SU Leads (Stellenbosch University Leaders' Conference), 2015/09/06-08**  
**Opening session, Kruiskerk, Stellenbosch, 16:30 for 17:00, 2015/09/06**  
**SU Rector and Vice-Chancellor Prof Wim de Villiers**

On behalf of Stellenbosch University (SU), welcome to all – student leaders in various ways and structures, both positional and non-positional leaders

- SRC, Tygerberg Student Council, Military Academy
- HKs, Prims, Res and PSO Mentors, Cluster Conveners
- Academic Affairs Council (ABR), Societies Committee
- Initiatives such as our Listen, Live and Learn Community, HeForShe, Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert Institute for Student Leadership Development

Welcome, too, to FVZS partners from other HEIs and initiatives in the sector

- UWC, UCT, CPUT
- Boland College, TSiBA (Tertiary School in Business Administration)
- Year Beyond (W Cape govt), ACTIVATE! (Network of young leaders)

Also structures and staff supporting students and student leadership

- Division of Student Affairs
- Centre for Student Communities
- Centre for Student Counselling and Development
- Transformation Office

And a particular word of thanks to the organisers, FVZS Institute – well done!

We find ourselves in a very interesting time in higher education. This year, we have seen a wave of activities on campuses: Rhodes Must Fall at UCT and Wits, and Open Stellenbosch (OS) right here on our own campus. But also internationally, University of California Berkeley and the University of South Carolina, where there were protests after the Charleston shooting.

In fact, throughout history, students have been at the forefront of change:

- In America in the 1960s students demanded civil and women's rights, and protested the Vietnam War;
- In Paris in 1968, students protested against capitalism and traditional value.
- The oldest example I could find, was at the University of Paris, in 1229 – nearly 800 years ago! Students went on strike for autonomy from church and state. It lasted two years, and ended in a Papal Bull honouring the University as the "Mother of Sciences". So, victory for the students, but at a very high cost because a number of them had died in clashes.

That is definitely something to be avoided – death, injury, violence, destruction. There is no problem with student activism. Critical thinking is engendered at universities – but it should not lead to violence and destruction. I have a responsibility to protect all the University's people and property, and disciplinary codes are in place applicable to all, but ideally we should not get to that point.

Why do we have student protests in South Africa now? At this point, 21 years into our democracy, the legacy of the past lingers – poverty, inequality, unemployment, etc. The "born frees" have arrived on campuses, they see the problems in society and they things to be better.

Let's look specifically at Stellenbosch. Since before my inauguration, there were complaints over race and language issues. A few weeks ago, the *Luister* video was released on social media. As I have said many times, including in Parliament this past week – I found it extremely painful to watch. I do not want any of my students to suffer. I am not going to defend the indefensible: racism, discrimination, marginalisation – whether consciously or unconsciously – these things are wrong, and they must be fixed. Whether on campus or in town, I am sorry it happened, and we have to put things right.

The University has acted against perpetrators of racism in the past, but what is being raised here actually go beyond individual acts. I believe it speaks to structural issues, our institutional culture, whether everyone feel they belong here.

I can say without doubt that SU is not the “racist institution” that it is made out to be by some. That is not our policy. We are not trying to “maintain white privilege”, as some say. We are working very hard to become more inclusive and welcoming in practice.

But, as much as it saddens me to say this, some have had a different experience – as we have heard from those who have spoken out. So, there seems to be a gap between our sincere intentions and the reality experienced by some. That is now our challenge – how to in reality make Stellenbosch the truly “inclusive, innovative and future focused” University we want it to be.

We have reached an important moment in the history of Stellenbosch, and we all need to contribute to solutions. And who better to help guide this process, than our campus leaders – you folks. I want to ask your help with the conversation we need to have on campus.

I have been promoting an open discussion since the start of my tenure five months ago (1 April 2015). Meaningful dialogue requires mutual respect and a willingness to change. I remain committed to this, because we must avoid the danger of polarisation. As each side increasingly demonizes the other, compromise more difficult. We must reach out to each other in the search for common ground instead of retreating into “us” and “them” camps.

I think there is plenty of common ground to be found. The starting point is the SA Constitution and Bill of Rights: democracy, human dignity, equality, freedom. It is the job of leaders to guide us to what we have in common, not what sets us apart.

It's sometimes very hard, very demanding to be a student leader. I know, I've been there. I was Tygerberg Student Council Chair in my day – thus also a member of the SRC here on central campus. It is tough to balance your own academic responsibilities with also representing your constituency and its interests. There's so much to do – house functions, welcoming programme, MAD<sup>2</sup>, etc. But there is also a much bigger picture – the search for common ground.

**What we need on campus to find common ground is an open conversation, *’n oop gesprek, ’n gesprek sonder grense*, a conversation beyond borders.**

You folks need to understand the debates, and have the conversation yourself – and I don't mean just on Facebook and Twitter, where the nuances so easily get lost. I know it's hard, maybe the hardest thing you've ever done in your life, especially if you go deep, beyond superficial – but it will stand you in good stead one day.

This country of ours has been through some tough times. But against expectations, a political settlement was reached in the early 1990s. Negotiations were on the brink of collapse a number of times, but leaders pulled us back from the precipice. Nelson Mandela and FW de Klerk both had to

overcome opposition in their own ranks. But they reached compromise because they could see the bigger picture, they looked at the future, they had vision, and they took their followers along with them.

How did they manage that? It was because of you guys. Yes, most of you weren't even born yet, but Mandela and De Klerk and other leaders of that time wanted to create a better future – one that you could inherit. Now that future is here, and we are looking at you folks to help us lay the foundation for future generations of Maties. Because it is like my predecessor, the late Prof Russel Botman, always said, "We work not for ourselves, but for future generations."

So, I am very glad that we have events such as SU Leads, and the many other ways in which leaders are supported here at SU. You folks need to guide that process in the many well-established structures that we have at this University – in res, in classrooms, in student societies, in elected bodies, such as the SRC. I am very pleased that the SRC elections had a very high rate of participation this year. It means the SRC is certainly a representative body for all students. And there are also many other structures that can accommodate all interests

I want you as student leaders to reflect on what I said in Parliament on Tuesday: that our journey of transformation is imperfect and incomplete, but it must go on. That is the only way of creating a community of "social justice and equal opportunities for all" – as our mission statement says.

Yes, we are at the moment facing challenges in the life of this University, but many exciting opportunities are there as well, and we must go FORWARD. I have no doubt we will do so, by fixing what is wrong and celebrating what is right ... together. It is important for us to all assume 100% responsibility for creating the SU we want – a truly inclusive, innovative and future focused institution that we can ALL be proud of.

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