

TRANSLATION OF OP-ED, *DIE BURGER*, 19 FEBRUARY 2016 [[Click here for article as published](#)]

Matie rector says: “All our students matter”

SU VALUES MUST BE LIVED

Much has been said recently about the so-called blackface incident at our Heemstede Women’s Residence two weeks ago. I would like to use this opportunity to state my views, writes WIM DE VILLIERS.

First of all, I wish to reiterate the regret that Stellenbosch University (SU) feels over what the two students in the eye of the storm had to endure. That was most unpleasant, and I am sorry about their ordeal.

An urgent internal investigation the week following the incident completely exonerated the pair. They had used purple body paint to resemble extra-terrestrials for a space-themed party at the residence – with no intention to offend. However, a photograph posted on social media was interpreted as ‘blackfacing’, which in the light of the country’s history of racism caused major dismay. Fellow students of the two in question objected and lodged complaints, and the University’s relevant structures got involved.

Meanwhile, allegations were raised that the University dealt with the situation incorrectly. We took note of that and this week decided to launch another investigation by an independent commissioner. We want a comprehensive look at every facet of the incident, including the University’s handling of it. Specific recommendations to the University will flow from that.

The two students have since returned to the residence and can now focus on their studies once more, which I am very pleased about. The University will continue to support them as it has done throughout the incident.

Last week *Rapport* asked: What if one of the two students was my daughter? I thought hard about this, and to a certain extent they are indeed my daughters. As the head of the University, I have many daughters and sons. That may sound extremely patriarchal, I know, but let me explain.

At my inauguration last year, I said that the best interest of the student is the only interest of a university. Those words were adapted from a slogan used by the Mayo Clinic in the United States, namely that the best interest of the patient is the only interest.

My intention was to focus on the importance of our educational task as an institution of higher learning, which a university accomplishes through its three core functions – teaching and learning, research, and community interaction.

We have a major responsibility to young people who come to study at Stellenbosch University – to walk the path of knowledge with them in preparation for their professional lives in future, and their lifelong contribution to society.

This responsibility extends to all our students. I have many daughters and sons, and every single one matters. Their best interests are my concern.

I care for all our students. I want their time at the University to be enriching and fulfilling. I do not want them to have any unpleasant experiences. As might be expected, life is not all moonlight and roses, but as an institution – including the individual staff members and students who are part of it – we should constantly try to do what is right and avoid what is wrong.

In the process, things can go wrong from time to time. Neither institutions nor individuals are perfect. But we need to put right what is wrong, and learn lessons. Rules and procedures need to be followed, codes of conduct must be respected – and that applies to everyone in equal measure.

Sometimes, people feel very strongly about a matter – and that is fine. From the beginning, I have encouraged open discussion at SU. We are committed to honest dialogue on all our campuses. A culture of promoting bold debate and critical discourse about societal challenges lies at the heart of university life.

But how we engage with each other should reflect the values of the University, as contained in our Institutional Intent and Strategy: leadership in service of others, excellence, innovation, shared accountability and empathy.

In living out these values, we create safe spaces for interaction where intimidation, manipulation, threats, hate speech, racism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination and dehumanisation have no place.

Open discussion involves talking *and* listening. I hear black students saying they are being excluded by an institutional culture that is unwelcoming toward them. I hear white students saying they feel abandoned by the University and are suffering a loss of identity as a result.

From time to time, I feel a rise in temperate as discussions heat up and accusations fly back and forth. However, I also hear black *and* white students taking a firm stance against exclusion and discrimination – which is heartening. All across the University I see young people who do get along – despite apparent differences. I see young people treating each other with respect and dignity – regardless of colour, religion, gender or sexual orientation.

We would be foolish to pretend that Stellenbosch University is operating in a bubble. Higher education finds itself in the midst of the turmoil in our country. That goes hand in hand with frustrations over deep-rooted societal inequalities and exclusion. There are also expectations of instant solutions and immense political pressure on the state and such institutions as universities.

Stellenbosch University is not exempt from that – especially in the light of historical realities. There is a perception that white privilege is continuing here. Although unfounded, the perception contributes to the complexity of the situation.

There also seems to be an expectation that SU should provide a barricade against transformation in this country. Some ostensibly expect us to be the last bastion of Afrikaans and Afrikaner traditions, a crime-free campus and town, and a vacuum in which there are no political influences or protest action. That, too, is unrealistic.

We cannot prepare students to be leaders in society by trying to isolate them from the realities of our time. We want to be a place where everyone feels welcome, where knowledge can be unlocked and applied to the benefit of our country and its people. In order to become such a place, we need to navigate through all these expectations and remain on course, steady in the knowledge that not all stakeholders will necessarily agree on everything.

I am not blind to the challenges we are facing. I see prejudices continuing. I see the divides of the past resurfacing, and new ones forming – among other things because of the way people discuss SU on social media in particular.

However, I also see a new generation that accepts the inevitability of change and the necessity to continually adapt to new circumstances. I see thought leadership in action, and that makes me optimistic about the future.

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