

Stellenbosch sets course for the future

Wim de Villiers says varsity 'decolonising' its curriculum

By PREGA GOVENDER

Stellenbosch University is conducting a major revamp of its curriculum to "decolonise" it.

At least 10 programmes, including law, medicine, conservation ecology, earth sciences and some aspects of engineering will be extensively renewed over the next two years.

In an interview with the Sunday Times, the university's rector and vice-chancellor, Professor Wim de Villiers, said an advisory committee had tabled 23 new programme submissions last year for approval, accreditation and registration.

"Curriculum renewal is to look both at assessing courses and determining whether they are still relevant or need to change. We want to incorporate this notion of decolonising the curriculum."

He cited the MBA as an example, saying it was not relevant to use case studies only from North America or Europe.

"We should develop local case studies that speak to our local experience and context and that also address universal principles of scholarship."

De Villiers, 58, a gastroenterologist and respected researcher, also spoke about in-

corporating data science into a range of courses.

"It's an interfaculty initiative which would encompass economic management sciences, engineering, health sciences and maths – not only for postgraduates but also at the undergraduate level.

"How do we enable our undergraduates to engage with data and also analyse and utilise it?"

The curriculum renewal project is being led by vice-rector Professor Arnold Schoonwinkel.

Issues under the microscope include the elimination of unnecessary duplication of content, assessment practices and the financial viability of programmes and modules.

De Villiers, who took over as vice-chancellor three years ago, said his role, and those of his counterparts at South Africa's other 25 universities, had increasingly become that of fundraiser.

"That's something that VCs didn't have to do in the past. Government's support has declined from 70% of our total budget to 35%. That's massive so we have to find alternative sources of income."

English-speakers welcome

The father of three, a keen long-distance runner who has taken part in the Boston, New York, London, Chicago and Berlin marathons, spoke proudly of the changes in student and academic staff demographics at Stellenbosch University.

The proportion of black students increased from 16.6% in 1996 to 41.4% this year. In 2015, the university for the first time had



Stellenbosch vice-chancellor Wim de Villiers. Picture: Siphwe Nkwali

Delayed ratification

Former president Jacob Zuma this week questioned why South Africa had taken so long to introduce free higher education for poor and working-class students. Delivering a lecture in Umlazi, KwaZulu-Natal, on Thursday, he said: "When I took this decision in 2017, it was already three years late."



Stellenbosch University acknowledges its role in the injustices of the past, which we deeply regret. We sincerely and unreservedly apologise to those who were hurt and excluded from the historical privileges we enjoyed at this university.

Wim de Villiers

Vice-chancellor

more English-speaking (44%) than Afrikaans-speaking (42%) students.

As is the case at most of South Africa's historically white universities, Stellenbosch University still has skewed race ratios among academic staff.

This year, 71.7% of the academic staff are white.

De Villiers said a special fund, the rector's strategic personnel fund, was being used to increase the number of black academics.

A total of 44 black academic staff had been appointed through the fund, which was allocated a budget of R76.3-million.

"That's been very successful. I'm continually topping that up [the budget] in a very concerted fashion," he said.

De Villiers said he was proud of the thought leaders the university had hired.

These include former public protector Thuli Madonsela; the former vice-chancellor of the University of the Free State, Professor Jonathan Jansen; award-winning author and scholar Professor Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, who served on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission; and Vuyiseka Dubula-Majola, who heads the university's Africa Centre for HIV/Aids Management.

"We need to address complex problems and issues that we face in a multidisciplinary way and we need thought leaders to do that," De Villiers said.

"We need people who can act as role models for our students and that's the way to go."

Stellenbosch has 14 A-rated researchers, the fourth highest among South African universities.

It is the most productive university in the country, as judged by the number of research publications and the number of master's and doctoral degrees it has awarded.

De Villiers said he was optimistic that the government's fee-free higher education policy for families earning up to R350 000 would result in stability in the university sector.

One of his priorities in 2018 is commemorating the institution's centenary year.

"It's a time to reflect but also to fashion a new strategy and vision. We are a research-intensive university. We are way beyond that history where we served only a particular part of the population."

Brickies to welders, appies will be back

By PREGA GOVENDER

● South Africa's 50 technical vocational education and training colleges could soon specialise in teaching certain trades if Naledi Pandor has her way.

Pandor, who replaced Hlengiwe Mkhize as higher education minister in February, is committed to college specialisation.

"This is where colleges develop particular skill domains we would invest in. We should support diversification of the colleges. We shouldn't expect all institutions to be doing the same thing," she said.

In an interview with the Sunday Times, Pandor said her department was piloting the colleges-of-specialisation model next year at 26 institutions.

"We have already put aside funding to identify particular colleges. They would have particular occupations that they focus on, so we will build or expand workshops. We will modernise them. We are making sure the appropriate infrastructure is in place."

Tooling sector

Pandor said she was astounded to discover there were "very few" good bricklayers in the country, adding that one of the colleges involved in the pilot programme would be designated to offer training in bricklaying.

"You know that we have a problem of welders in South Africa, so one of the occupations will be welding. Another is in the tooling sector, draughtspersons, where there's also a particular gap."

A total of 790 students will be selected as the pilot group to be trained in one of 13 priority trades, which will include electrical, plumbing, welding, carpentry, bricklaying and boiler-making.

"The TVET colleges are going to be a particular focus for me because I really believe they hold great promise for the future of the youth in our country."

"I don't want to just train young people for the sake of a certificate. I'd like them to be absorbed in the workplace, in industry or in creating their own businesses."

She said her department had spoken to several organisations, including those responsible for the interests of welders and plumbers, to help establish links with employers.

One of the minister's concerns was train-



Naledi Pandor is to get colleges to teach trades. Picture: Alon Skuy



The TVET colleges are going to be a particular focus for me because I really believe they hold great promise for the future of the youth in our country

ing young people with technical and occupational skills and then finding them doing public administration and secretarial courses.

"Secretaries are very important and we wouldn't survive without them, but we need to build more houses. We need competent bricklayers, we need plumbers because young people must be able to start their own enterprises."

Pandor said the private sector and business associations had committed to offering apprenticeships to students participating in the pilot project.

She also unveiled plans to build 10 TVET campuses. "We have already identified the sites and I will announce the plans in my budget speech."

10

The number of TVET college campuses that are going to be built

R1.1bn

The expected cost of the construction of the 10 campuses

737 880

The number of students enrolled at TVET colleges in 2015

TVET colleges have come under fire for students' high failure rates in the national certificate vocational courses.

But Pandor gave assurances that there was going to be "proper support for the TVET sector so that the colleges come into their own in the skills development of young people in our country".

She said that the content of the curriculum was "open for discussion".

She also vowed to offer institutions greater support for their foundation and academic development programmes to assist students to complete their degrees.

"We have had disappointing levels of dropouts in some universities. We will ensure that the funds we make available, which are ring-fenced for student support, are utilised to improve success in our universities."

Aviation courses

Another issue that Pandor has to tackle is re-sourcing research-intensive universities and those that don't have a strong research record.

"The fear, particularly from historically disadvantaged institutions, is that differentiation means they will never receive research funds. I don't see it that way."

A senior lecturer in the electrical electronics field at the Ekurhuleni West TVET College in Gauteng, who spoke on condition of anonymity, welcomed Pandor's move to get colleges to specialise in certain trades.

The academic, who was a former systems engineer in avionics, said the Kempton Park campus should, for example, offer aviation courses, because it was close to SAA, Comair and Denel.

"In the old days, almost our entire enrolment comprised SAA apprentices and apprentices from Denel, which was the old Atlas aircraft. We offered subjects such as avionics, aircraft metal, aircraft filter and aircraft instruments."

He said they had to cancel their specialised aviation subjects after the government scrapped the apprenticeship system about 20 years ago.

"If government wants to rescue the country's economy, they need technical people. Unfortunately when we enrol students, they want to become managers, not artisans or technical workers."



Dainfern College's Grade 4s have a choice of desks and chairs, including wobbly ones.

Seat of learning perks up

By PREGA GOVENDER

The conventional seating arrangement in the classroom, where pupils sit behind rows of desks facing the teacher, has been turned upside down at a school in Johannesburg.

Unlike their peers at other schools who sit on the same chair in class for the whole day, Grade 4 pupils at Dainfern College are free to change seats during lessons.

The Grade 4 classroom is equipped with, among other things, soft and colourful "wobbly" or "buddy" chairs that have either a square or circular base.

Sandi Tyson, the Grade 4 teacher who introduced the flexible seating arrangement at Dainfern, said it had resulted in a tremendous improvement in classroom engagement and "buy-in" to the tasks that pupils are given.

"We have tried to get as many different varieties of seating options so that each and every child could find a spot or seat in the class that works for them."

Pupils choose a seat to suit the task they are busy with.

"They may sit in various seats throughout the day. The idea is that a child does not have to sit anywhere for a long period of time. They match the seat to the task or how they are feeling."

The new seating "assists the children to be more engaged in the activity", she said.

"The wobbly chairs in particular help the child who feels the need to fidget to be more settled and attentive in the classroom environment."

"The fact that they can also move from one space to another during the day also helps them, as they are not stuck in one place for the whole day."

"This has really assisted in maintaining the children's attention and keeping them engaged."

She said that Grade 5 and Grade 7 pupils were awaiting their furniture.

"Teaching in a classroom with 25 of the same desks in rows or groups often does not inspire creative thinking and unique thoughts. The quality of work I am getting is better as the children are taking more accountability for their learning."