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Centenary Commemoration of Stellenbosch University

Paul Roos Gymnasium, Stellenbosch, Friday evening, 23 March 2018

CENTENARY ADDRESS BY RECTOR AND VICE-CHANCELLOR PROFESSOR WIM DE VILLIERS

[Ook by www.sun.ac.za/rektor: (1) Afrikaanse vertaling; en (2) tweetalige weergawe soos gelewer]

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen ...where do we come from? Where do we stand now? And where are we headed? These questions spring to mind as we are gathered here tonight to commemorate the Centenary of Stellenbosch University (SU) [formally created by an Act of Parliament on 2 April 1918]. In our search for answers, we can take both a short and a long-term view.

WHERE DO WE COME FROM?

Looking at the present and at the recent past, SU clearly excels in many fields. In the most recent academic year, we again conferred record numbers of qualifications, as illustrated at this week's graduation ceremonies. We continue to produce high research outputs, and we have a substantial social impact. We are also holding our own in the international rankings. And we enjoy relative stability, despite the turbulence in higher education over the past year. Also in terms of our sustainability as an institution, it is encouraging that our budget balances and that our facilities keep up with demand.

For these achievements, the entire university community deserves credit – staff members, students, alumni, donors and friends of the University. Thanks to everyone's hard work and sacrifice, we can proudly say we are a university to be reckoned with.

This has been the case for the past century since SU was officially created out of Victoria College in 1918. We thank everyone who has helped shape this University and cemented its reputation as a world-class academic institution.

Yet we are not blind to our mistakes. Against the backdrop of our country's divided past, SU acknowledges its role in the injustices of the past, which we deeply regret. Make no mistake – this is a reference to South Africa's apartheid past. We sincerely and unreservedly apologise to those who were hurt and excluded from the historical privileges we enjoyed at this University, in this town and in this country. And we acknowledge the critical voices in our own ranks who took a principled stance, no matter how difficult.

There is a very good reason why our Centenary march through town three weeks ago started at the Old Lückhoff School. Half a century ago, residents of Die Vlakte were forcibly removed from the area for having the "wrong" skin colour – in terms of the deplorable Group Areas Act of the time. The University did not object and later also benefited when some of the expropriated land was transferred to us.

saam vorentoe • masiye phambili • forward together

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In our Centenary year, we honour the critical Matie voices of the past who would not be silenced despite being ostracised. Because the narrative of Stellenbosch University as the so-called “cradle of apartheid” is an oversimplification.

Reference is often made to justifications for apartheid offered by Stellenbosch academics at the time, fundamental contributions to policies of the apartheid government, and the fact that many of those political leaders had studied here.

Well, it certainly forms part of the picture, but fortunately, there were also progressive voices against apartheid. Yes, HF Verwoerd and BJ Vorster and others were Maties, but so were Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert and Beyers Naudé and Johan Degenaar and many others who challenged injustice and helped build bridges across all kinds of divides in the search for common ground in our beloved country.

Today, in responsibility towards the present and future generations, Stellenbosch University commits itself unconditionally to the ideal of an inclusive, world-class university in and for Africa.

That is our dream, because we share the conviction held by former President Nelson Mandela that “Education is the most powerful weapon ... you can use to change the world.” We are honoured to be commemorating our Centenary in the same year as Madiba, who was also born in 1918. He, of course, played a leading role in South Africa’s transition to democracy in 1994, and two years later, received an honorary doctorate from Stellenbosch University.

According to the commendation on his degree certificate, SU honoured Mr Mandela 22 years ago as a “symbol of empowerment through education”, an “icon of peace and reconciliation through negotiations” and “the personification of justice and compassion”. This is a legacy we are happy to identify with as we enter SU’s second century of existence.

WHERE DO WE STAND NOW?

Stellenbosch University has become a leading higher-education institution that is making a crucial contribution to human development in our country, on our continent and in the rest of the world. Our graduates are well qualified and they are internationally in demand, our research is innovative and relevant and our impact on society is extensive.

All this we do by reaching out inclusively, not by looking inward. Maties started out as a “volksuniversiteit” (peoples’ university). That was the “idea” that Stellenbosch stood for at the time – upliftment through higher education, but only for some, not everyone. Clearly, this idea was too narrow-minded. It represented an exclusive inward focus instead of an inclusive reaching out.

In saying that the idea of a “volksuniversiteit” was too narrow-minded, we are not taking a stand against Afrikaans. There is this mistaken notion that SU is causing the demise of Afrikaans. To the contrary – Afrikaans is one of our languages of instruction, but for sound pedagogical reasons, and not driven by ideology or ethnic identity.

Some fear that our use of Afrikaans may exclude those who prefer to study in English; others fear that our use of English may prejudice Afrikaans. Let me assure you that the University remains committed to multilingualism without exclusion. No student should ever experience language as a barrier. By also using English as language of instruction, we ensure that we are accessible to more people, which opens doors – both locally and internationally. Yet many still have a need and demand for instruction in Afrikaans, which is why we continue to offer it.

We continue to strive for greater diversity in terms of the composition of both our staff and our student corps. We are working hard to ensure our institutional culture becomes increasingly more welcoming. And we are constantly renewing our academic offering to be relevant to our context.

WHERE ARE WE HEADING?

SU's current guiding framework –our Institutional Intent and Strategy –expires this year, and we have been hard at work for over a year to craft the building blocks of a new framework.

Our Vision 2030 has been to become more inclusive, innovative and future focused. I think we have made good progress in this regard. What will our Vision 2040 be? And which strategies are we going to follow to get there? The final proposals will serve before Council soon, but I can share some of the consensus that has emerged from University-wide consultations thus far:

- Stellenbosch wants to be a world-class university in and for Africa, an institution with an impeccable reputation that serves the whole of society with innovative knowledge that is interdisciplinary and collaborative in nature.
- We want to excel academically, contribute to the search for solutions to societal problems, and promote entrepreneurship.
- We want to build strong partnerships with other higher-education institutions, with civil society, with the business sector and with the state at various levels –at the same time also guarding our academic freedom.
- We want to be a preferred place of work and study that people do not want to leave – because we look after and help develop our people.
- We want to tread lightly on this earth and we want to protect the environment
- And because we want to do all these things for a long time to come, we want to look after our sustainability without compromising our impartiality and independence.

Our Centenary year is the ideal opportunity to look back on our journey thus far and to look forward at what lies ahead. It is an opportunity to continue to build on our achievements of the past, to correct our mistakes and to start anew.

Friends, it has been said that a child's education starts at least a hundred years before they are born [Samuel Wishard]. If this is true, we have made a good start! It also means that we have a big responsibility, because what we do now will matter to future Maties a hundred years from now.

SU's motto, therefore, remains relevant: "Pectora roborant cultus recti" – "A sound education strengthens the spirit", "n Goeie opvoeding versterk die gees".

Indeed a historic moment – that is what 2018 means to us. Let's embrace it and go forward together, saam vorentoe, masiye phambili! Thank you.