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Teaching and Learning 2020 Celebration

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OPENING address by SU Rector and Vice-Chancellor Prof Wim de Villiers

INTRO

Hello, everyone! I appreciate this opportunity.

The fact that we are meeting online and not in-person is of course a sign of the times ... COVID times. But it's actually not a bad thing at all – to the contrary! You folks have really shown us all the way in cyberspace this year, so it is quite appropriate that we gather virtually for this celebration of Teaching and Learning at Stellenbosch University the past year, and going into the future.

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all on behalf of the University.

What I want to do is to briefly provide the INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT by focusing on just two aspects:

- The role of teaching and learning at Stellenbosch University – especially in the “new normal” in which we find ourselves
- And within that, the role of “teaching champions” – of whom many are with us in this event today

TEACHING AND LEARNING AT SU

So, firstly, teaching and learning at Stellenbosch University.

To put it bluntly – without you, we wouldn't be here at all. There would not be a university without “teachers” and “learners” / lecturers and students. Yes, we are a “research-intensive” university. But, as Prof Arnold always rightly points out, the foundation for solid research is good teaching and learning. The two go together. We need both research and teaching excellence to “advance knowledge in service of society” – which is, as you know, our vision at this University.

I am proud to say that SU is known for its academic excellence – as reflected not only in our research & innovation successes, but also in our teaching & learning achievements. Let's look at the evidence:

- On the one hand, we have one of the highest research outputs per fulltime academic in South Africa, with a host of research chairs and centres of excellence.
- And on the other hand, we are also tops in terms of student success, with the best throughput of all universities in South Africa, and a module pass above 87%. That's very high, and our students could not maintain that level without your input, guidance and hard work – so, thank you very much!

Our students are what it is all about. And you are key in providing them with the “transformative experience” that we aim for – all geared towards delivering graduates who are dynamic professionals; with enquiring minds; engaged citizens; and also well-rounded individuals. Yes, we want our graduates to be sought after in the workplace. But we also want them to use the knowledge and skills they gain at SU to serve society.

And that whole enterprise starts with you, so thank you ...

2020, THE YEAR OF COVID

... in particular, for your sterling work in this most challenging year – for displaying resilience and adaptability, innovation and flexibility, helping us to overcome the many challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis.

When the coronavirus pandemic struck early on in 2020, all our plans became focused on just two priorities – completing the academic year and ensuring SU’s sustainability. I think the University has done well in both respects, and it was heart-warming and inspiring to see how the whole of the University community rallied in response to the crisis.

But I especially want to thank you for your contribution in teaching and learning, which has been key to our success. Our ability to rapidly switch to emergency remote teaching, learning and assessment (ERTLA) when contact tuition was suspended in March was absolutely essential to both our priorities of completing the academic year, and ensuring our sustainability as an institution.

It was very clearly a tremendous team effort by everyone – from lecturers who had to repackage their courses and students who suddenly had to get used to exclusively online class attendance and assessments, to experts who had to upgrade overloaded systems in record time and managers who had to find a way to keep things going, come what may.

On the whole, I think the University has been successful with the transition to an online mode of teaching and learning. Yet we are not resting on our laurels but are continuing to work to improve processes and systems further, even as we gradually return to face-to-face classes.

A major lesson that we have taken from the past few months is that hybrid and blended learning – combinations of online and contact tuition – hold great promise for extending the reach and richness of our educational offering.

2021 AND BEYOND

So, what lies ahead for us? Depending on COVID-19 developments, we are planning to resume most on-campus activities to the fullest extent possible in the new year, as early as possible. Our goal is to resume face-to-face tuition, augmented with some online learning in observance of COVID-19 regulations affecting class sizes and physical distancing.

We must build on the learnings and successes of ERTLA to not go back to business as usual, but to come back better – using the momentum of the past few months to really let hybrid and online learning take off in a big way. Because that is the future.

As always, however, we have to get the basics right, which is complicated by the fact that we are working with new mediums and modalities. This is why collaboration is key. We can achieve more if we work together and learn from one another.

Which brings me to my second point ...

THE ROLE OF “TEACHING CHAMPIONS” AT SU

Let me start by stating what is quite obvious by now ... the world is changing fast, and we have to keep up as universities – we have to make major changes in order to adapt to new circumstances.

But the problem is, institutional transformation is not easy. It creates uncertainties and places high demands on all involved. This makes it difficult to achieve the desired results.

The coronavirus pandemic has wreaked havoc globally, but at the same time, it has given us the chance to rethink how we do things, to replan, redesign and ultimately rebuild society ... better than before.

In his 2015 book, “Change Leadership in Higher Education: A Practical Guide to Academic Transformation”, Jeffrey Buller says the “most important task for ... leaders in higher education is not to announce a specific goal but rather to spend [our] time creating a culture of innovation and continuous learning”.

How do we do that? Buller says meaningful change is all about the culture of an institution, and the culture is all about the people. We need to trust the people we work with, empower them, and recognise their efforts to be creative. If we do that, the change that can result from it is likely to be more spectacular than can be possible with even the best strategic plan.

Now, I think we can all agree that if there is one person at Stellenbosch University who embodies this approach, it is Prof Arnold Schoonwinkel. He has led your responsibility centre with great distinction the past eight years, really getting SU to take a quantum leap into the future. There’s no doubt about it, the man who helped build SUNSAT, Africa’s first satellite, would really become an academic superstar when he became Vice-Rector: Learning and Teaching in 2012.

Arnold, we will miss you. We wish you a peaceful and fulfilling retirement, and thank you for the legacy that you leave us – not the least of which is a people centredness.

You did what Buller said should be done long before he published his book – you empowered the people you worked with, recognising their efforts to be creative, and that is why teaching and learning is blooming at Stellenbosch University.

At this function today, many champions of teaching and learning will receive prizes and awards and fellowships – well done to you all!

And I also want to single out Dr Antoinette van der Merwe, who has done most of the heavy lifting to move us into the e-learning paradigm – supported by her very able team at the Centre for Teaching and Learning Enhancement.

Well done to you all, and thank you again.

CONCLUSION

I know that 2020 has been an incredibly difficult time that has challenged us in different ways, and that burnout and exhaustion are setting in for many people.

But we can counter rising feelings of fatigue and hopelessness with a goal that energises us – the enduring vision of teaching and learning excellence, in service of society, now taken to new heights with the sound application of information and communications technology always putting people first.

All the best with the last duties of the year. We are looking forward to graduation, which is around the corner (14 to 16 December)

Enjoy the upcoming break and return safely for 2021. But first, let us celebrate teaching and learning at Stellenbosch University!