

“Stellenbosch University: Forward!”
Communication to the Convocation by the Rector and Vice-Chancellor, Prof Wim de Villiers
Coetzenburg, 26 January 2016

(This is an English translation of an address delivered in English and Afrikaans

VIDEO: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DfoPWT2pHZs>

Transcript: <http://bit.ly/1SYPUv5>

Afrikaanse vertaling: <http://bit.ly/WdVtoesprake>)

Thank you, Prof [Christo] Viljoen. Good evening, everyone. It’s good to be here with all of you. My fellow speakers, Lovelyn [Nwadeyi] and Breyten [Breytenbach], have raised important issues, some of which I will also be touching on. In reporting to Convocation, I wish to do three things, namely highlight our major successes, address our main challenges, and most importantly, outline the way forward. Although not necessarily in this order, these broadly are the areas I wish to cover.

Now, there are indeed important issues to address at our institution, but I am confident that we have solid foundations in place: (1) We are doing well in the pursuit of excellence, (2) we are making good progress towards becoming more inclusive, and (3) we are addressing societal challenges.

Let me briefly expand on these three areas:

(1) In terms of excellence, it was announced in December 2016 that Stellenbosch had again improved its position on the Times Higher Education ranking of universities in the BRICS countries and other emerging economies.¹ For 2016, we are ranked 11th out of 200 universities in 48 countries. Granted, rankings are not the be-all and end-all, but it is encouraging to receive authoritative international recognition.

You might also have seen a survey² late in 2015 showing that Stellenbosch University graduates earn the highest average entry-level salaries of all South African university graduates. This confirms that employers hold our qualifications in high esteem.

Still on the issue of qualifications, we awarded over 5 000 degrees and diplomas in December 2015. Of these, 128 were doctorates, and along with those to be awarded in March 2016, we are expected to come very close to 250 doctorates for 2015, which will be a new record. This is something in which alumni can take pride.

(2) The second example of our solid foundations is the progress we are making towards becoming more inclusive by broadening access to our institution. From 2008 to 2015, our intake of black, coloured and Indian students increased from 31% to 38%. Our target for 2020 is for 50% of first-years to be from these groups. Already nearly 50% of our more than 10 000 postgraduate students are black, coloured or Indian.

We regard diversity as a prerequisite for excellence, as exposure to a larger variety of people and ideas broaden the mind and enhance our outputs. This was confirmed by Stellenbosch alumnus Dr Japie van Zyl of NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory, who received an honorary doctorate from Stellenbosch University in December 2015. He shared his incredible experience working with a team of scientists and technicians who hail from 67 countries. As he put it: “Diversity is a major catalyst that brings out the best in everyone.”

In pursuit of greater inclusivity, we allocated an additional R70 million in 2015 to diversify our staff body, especially at senior academic level. Stellenbosch University is on a journey of becoming ever more non-racial and multilingual – a national asset proudly serving the South African and global society as a whole.

¹ <http://www.sun.ac.za/afrikaans/Lists/news/DispForm.aspx?ID=3173>

² <http://mybroadband.co.za/news/business/137322-graduates-from-these-south-african-universities-earn-the-highest-starting-salaries.html>

(3) In the third instance, we are contributing to a better future for all by making a positive impact on society. A striking example is the successful application by our Legal Aid Clinic in 2015 to have garnishee orders obtained by micro-lenders against farmworkers, cleaners and security guards set aside. This has national implications for low-income earners.

Ladies and gentlemen, this institution – your university – aims to grow these strengths (excellence, inclusivity and social impact) as we tackle head-on the challenges facing our sector. Higher education is undergoing rapid change, and all universities now need to innovate and adapt to new circumstances, or else we will stagnate.

John F Kennedy said: “Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or the present are certain to miss the future.”

Student finances, and thus the financial sustainability of the University, is set to still be an issue this year. The central idea emerging from the protests of 2015 is affordable higher education for all. We support this national call – and free, subsidised studies for academically deserving students who struggle financially – but for the moment, all universities still rely on student fees. We welcome the allocation of significant additional funds by the state as well as the appointment of a presidential commission of inquiry, and look forward to satisfactory outcomes.

Our language policy receives a lot of attention. Some fear that our use of Afrikaans may exclude those who prefer to study in English; others fear that our use of English is putting Afrikaans at a disadvantage. I want to assure you that the University remains committed to multilingualism without any exclusion. Language should never be an obstacle to any student. That is why we are expanding parallel-medium tuition (separate Afrikaans and English classes for the same module).

By using English as medium of instruction, we ensure that we are accessible to more people. However, there still is a substantial need and demand for Afrikaans, which is why our Afrikaans offering will continue.

It is important to note the linguistic-demographic trends. We currently have more than 30 000 students. Last year, for the first time ever, Stellenbosch had more English-speaking than Afrikaans-speaking students in total. This is a trend that is set to continue.

Now, in terms of our challenges, various interest groups have different positions on a variety of issues – that’s a given. The important thing is that we should keep on talking and listening to one another in the search for common ground. That is the principle behind the idea of an open discussion, which the late Prof Johan Degenaar was a proponent of. Universities are places where ideas are generated, and a search for answers should always be accompanied by contestation.

Everyone has a right to lawful and peaceful protest under the Constitution. But there should not be any disruption, and everyone’s rights should be respected. We condemn all acts of violence and intimidation. We have a responsibility to protect our institution and all its people, property and activities.

Stellenbosch University is a national asset providing a crucial service to the country as a whole. That is why we strive to be an inclusive, welcoming home to all. Everyone is entitled to be treated with respect and dignity – regardless of colour, belief, gender or sexual orientation.

This, however, has not always been the experience of all our students and staff members. As much as it saddens me, I must admit that some members of our University community have had unpleasant experiences. With the *Luister* video last year, I said that I would not defend the indefensible: Discrimination and marginalisation – whether intentional or unintentional – remain wrong.

The University does act decisively against transgressions, but the issues raised go far beyond individual cases. They are about structural concerns, our institutional culture; about whether everyone feels at home here and that this place belongs to them too.

This can all be traced back to the fact that Maties was once regarded as a “volksuniversiteit” (i.e. an ethnic university for a certain section of the population only). Clearly, this notion was too narrow. It represented an exclusionary inward focus instead of an inclusive outreach to others.

We need to understand that times have changed. We need to think and act inclusively. Stellenbosch cannot and will not be an island. In fact, the successes that we have achieved can be directly traced back to us opening up, becoming part of the broader context – nationally and internationally.

Our inclusion in global rankings of the world’s top universities is no accident. It is the result of years of sustained investment in research excellence and building international networks.

From my own experience I can confirm that Stellenbosch today is a far better university than in 1983, when I completed my MB,ChB. And the reasons are clear: greater diversity, improved research, more internationalisation.

Stellenbosch University now has almost 150 partner institutions in 44 countries across six continents, with agreements signed at departmental, faculty and institutional level. Just over 15% of our total student population are international students – from 117 countries.

We should continue along this path – to be locally relevant and globally competitive. Now is not the time for squabbling and navel gazing.

What we need to avoid at all costs is the danger of polarisation. As different sides demonise one another, it becomes increasingly difficult to find common ground and compromise. We need to reach out to one another in the search for communalities, rather than retreating into “us” and “them” camps.

We realise our journey is incomplete and imperfect, but we remain steadfast in our determination to go forward. Because that is the only way to create a community of “social justice and equal opportunities” for all – as our University mission states very clearly.

Yes, we do face some challenges at the moment, but there are also many exciting opportunities. We need to fix what is wrong and celebrate what is right. I was in the United States recently when Martin Luther King Jr Day was commemorated there, and I was again struck by this quote of his: “The time is always right to do what is right.”

What is the idea that Stellenbosch University stand for today? To be inclusive, innovative and future focused. This is what we strive for. Let us go forward together.

Thank you.