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Inaugural Address by Prof Wim de Villiers as Rector and Vice-Chancellor of Stellenbosch University, Old Main Building, 29 April 2015

[English translation of speech originally delivered in English and Afrikaans. Visit www.sun.ac.za/rector for more.]

Baie dankie. Molweni. Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, you have all been welcomed by the Chairman of Council, and from my side, I would also like to extend a warm welcome to everyone. I am honoured to have you all present for this very special occasion, and it is a great privilege for me to stand here today.

Education is the bedrock of society, and higher education is the keystone locking everything in place. This institution, in particular, is a jewel in the crown of higher education in South Africa. I want to thank our Council for entrusting me with this responsibility. I will not let you down – and by that I mean the entire University community, inclusively defined.

I also want to thank everyone for welcoming me and my family with open arms. My wife and children have always been pillars of strength to me – thank you, Catherine, Katusha, Braam, Kelly and Gera for your enduring support ... not to forget our darling grand-daughters, Eloise and Beatrice.

Ladies and gentlemen – I feel like a lost son who has come home after wandering far and wide. I was born and raised in Stellenbosch. My father, AB de Villiers, was Dean of Law, and as a young boy I would often visit him here in this beautiful building. Just nearby, in House de Villiers, I made a nuisance of myself hanging out with the “big kids” – the students of that time.

I later matriculated from Paul Roos Gymnasium, and then qualified as a medical doctor at this University, later specialising in Internal Medicine, before leaving for England in 1992 for further studies, and proceeding to America, where I worked for many years.

So, I come from afar, but am also from here. My foundations were laid here, in Stellenbosch, for which I am very grateful. This is one of the main reasons why I am here – to give back to my alma mater.

I am a proud alumnus of Stellenbosch University. But I know all too well that the Stellenbosch of today is not the Stellenbosch of yesterday, and nor will it – or should it be – the Stellenbosch of tomorrow. Life is dynamic; nothing stays the same, which means that we have the exciting opportunity of constantly changing, constantly transforming ourselves. That’s what we need to focus on – moving forward.

A lot of the heavy lifting to get us to this point was done by my predecessor, the late Prof Russel Botman. I want to pay homage to him. I never had the privilege of meeting him, but I respect his achievements. He led Stellenbosch along a path of change, a journey of hope. And today we are all the better for it.

Building the Stellenbosch University of tomorrow is a work-in-progress. Let me assure you, my sleeves are rolled up – even though it might not look like it in this academic gown and silly hat! I’m ready to work with you to take this venerable University to the next level and into the second century of its existence.



So, where are we headed? I don't have all the answers. That's not what leadership is about. Every stakeholder has a piece of the puzzle. We all need to build it together.

As I have been saying from the start, I am talking to as many people as possible to understand what our situation is, and what it requires of us. This is in line with my training as a doctor. You first take a complete medical history. Then you examine the patient. And only then do you make a diagnosis and implement a treatment plan.

So, with this in mind, I have essentially been asking two questions: What makes you proud to be a Matie? And what can we do to make Stellenbosch University better? Here's some of what I've heard thus far.

On the first question, a student said, "It's wonderful to share my life with so many different people from around the country and world. The quality of instruction is outstanding." And a staff member said, "The academic atmosphere here is on par with the very best universities in the world."

Ladies and gentlemen, this is in line with what we already know. Stellenbosch is one of the best universities in the country. On the authoritative Times Higher Education rankings we count among the top 300 universities in the world, and among the top 20 in BRICS countries.

Actually, I have some breaking news. A few minutes ago, the global embargo on the latest edition of the *QS World University Rankings by Subject* was lifted, and I am proud to announce that Stellenbosch – and I quote – "now features among the world's elite institutions in 10 subjects", including Biological Sciences, Chemistry and Mathematics. Particularly in Agriculture and Forestry we are No. 1 in the country. All credit to our staff and students for this achievement!

This success is the result of sustained performance in terms of our first-year retention rate and our overall student success rate, both of which have consistently been above 85%. It is also the result of sustained performance in research. Our research outputs are among the highest in the country, and our research income has also increased significantly. Another factor that plays a role is our engagement with the community to help find solutions for developmental challenges and societal problems.

For all of these reasons you might have heard me say that in my professional opinion Stellenbosch University is "fit and healthy". However, that does not mean there's no room for improvement.

That much is clear from some of the constructive feedback on my second question, "What should be done to make Stellenbosch University a better place?" A good number of the responses focused on the scarcity of parking on campus; surprisingly few on salaries, I'm glad to say.

More seriously, though, there have been concerns raised around transformation, inclusivity and diversity, as well as our institutional culture and symbols on campus. There have also been comments around our language policy, which may be experienced as exclusionary by some.

Are these just the normal aches and pains of a mature university in its late nineties? Or do they signify a serious underlying condition threatening our wellbeing as an institution? Let's investigate further.

The need for transformation has been part of the South African landscape for some time now – also in higher education. It seems to me that transformation can be thought of in two ways. On the one hand, it relates to the need for change in response to South Africa's history of racial discrimination and exclusion. On the other hand, transformation in education and research is an imperative to build the future we want – for ourselves, for our University, for our country and for our continent.

Let me now deal first with putting right what was wrong in the past. In this regard, Stellenbosch University took an important step in the year 2000 when it formally acknowledged – and I quote – "its contribution to the injustices of the past". This was captured in a policy document called *A Strategic Framework for the Turn of the Century and Beyond*, which took shape in Prof Andreas Van Wyk's time as Rector. Broad and deep discussion led the University to take responsibility for its role. Make no mistake – this was an apology for apartheid, which I would like to reiterate.

But the University did not stop there. It also committed itself to “redress and development” – specifically in terms of broadening access to the University for those who had previously been excluded solely on the colour of their skin. Today, inclusivity is one of the cornerstones of our new policy framework, our *Institutional Intent and Strategy*, adopted by Council in 2013, under Prof Russel Botman. In 1990, the year Nelson Mandela was released, Stellenbosch had 762 black, coloured and Indian students in total. Today, we have more than 11 200, or nearly 38% of our student body. And we will advance this further the next few years. I believe we can do it.

Looking at our staff diversity, 43% of our personnel are black, coloured or Indian – although that figure drops to 20% in terms of academic staff. So, yes, there is much room for improvement. This is also true for the representation of women, especially at senior academic and management levels. But on both fronts – race and gender – we are working towards greater equality, and I believe we can do it.

We need to ensure that this University is a place where everyone feels welcome. Particularly as we become more diverse, it is important that every Matie feels, “This place is also my place”, an issue that was firmly put on the agenda by former Rector Prof Chris Brink back in 2004 already. We can do it – this I do not doubt for a moment.

Now, there is an argument that we don’t sufficiently meet the needs of those students who don’t speak Afrikaans. And there are viewpoints to the contrary.

What we need to do, is firstly to recognise that language of instruction is a complex issue, requiring careful deliberation. And let’s take as our starting point Stellenbosch University’s new Language Policy, adopted by Council in November last year – which advocates multilingualism. The Policy says the University is committed to Afrikaans as academic language, but also to English in the interest of accessibility, as well as the advancement of Xhosa, where feasible.

Stellenbosch is not an Afrikaans university; Stellenbosch is not an English University; Stellenbosch is not a Xhosa university; Stellenbosch is a world-class multilingual South African university – one of the few in this category, which is sorely needed in a country with 11 official languages. This is how we are trying to ensure that language is not a barrier to access, but a tool for success – especially in diverse educational settings.

Ladies and gentlemen, the issues of the institutional culture of South African universities and the pace of transformation is currently receiving a great deal of attention, and Stellenbosch is necessarily part of this debate. Now is the time to practise the thought leadership we profess. We can turn the current debate into a positive opportunity for growth. How? By looking incisively at our progress – both in our young democracy, which celebrated coming of age two days ago, and here at Stellenbosch, where we will be celebrating our centenary in three years’ time.

We need to talk about where we stand and where we are going. And for this we need a constructive attitude. It has to be a “conversation without boundaries”, as Johan Degenaar called it. Or an “open conversation”, which was defined by NP van Wyk Louw as “conversations in which you can talk about everything, in which no standpoint is too dangerous ... and that never deteriorates into insult, quarrel or anger.”

On the one hand, this “open conversation” is “the free expression of own opinion” and, on the other hand, it is “the attentive listening to the opinions of others, so that an interaction can arise.” Once there is this kind of interaction between speaking your mind and listening to the opinion of others, you achieve a strong “circulation of ideas”. And this, says Van Wyk Louw, is “as essential as the circulation of blood for the body”.

Now, as doctor I can confirm that the circulatory system is absolutely essential! Similarly, if we cannot freely express what we have on our minds, and if we do not really listen to one another, the prognosis is not good. Once there is a strong “circulation of ideas”, though, the blood pressure returns to normal and colour returns to the complexion, because there is “mutual understanding” and “communal conviction”.

Ladies and gentlemen, that is what is needed in the transformation debate – “discussion without borders”, an “open debate” in which ideas can circulate freely, leading to “mutual understanding”. I know we can do it.

This brings me to the second way to think of transformation – as an imperative for creating the future we want. And this is especially true for universities – where we learn and teach, conduct research, and engage with society.

In the foyer of our Education Building, there’s an often used but enduring quote by Madiba: “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” Interestingly, the same quote appears in the hallway of the inner-city high school in Los Angeles where our son, Braam, is Principal. This speaks to its universal truth and inspirational appeal.

Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan once described education as “a human right with immense power to transform.” Let’s unpack that for a moment. Transformation through education. That means there can be no transformation without education – because “on its foundation rest the cornerstones of freedom, democracy and sustainable human development.”

To learn – and to teach – is truly transformative. It changes lives. I have experienced the power of education myself. And I have seen time and again how a passion for knowledge and excellence sweeps us along.

The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead said the “task of a university is the creation of the future”. Now there’s a potent thought: “The task of a university is the creation of the future.” How is that achieved? It works, he says, because “the gift the university has to offer is the one of imagination ... the lighted torch which passes from hand to hand.” That’s transformation in action – passing the torch from person to person.

Let me share with you a story that illustrates this well. It’s about one of our students, Claudia Ntsapi. She is currently enrolled for a PhD in Physiology, after obtaining her MSc degree here in March this year. She grew up in Eldorado Park, Johannesburg, and after matriculating from Kliptown Secondary School, she wanted to study Chemical Engineering, but needed to improve her marks. Many learners in our country experience this problem. They might have the talent and motivation, but face obstacles due to educational backlogs in the system.

Then Claudia heard about a bridging programme called SciMathUS, which stands for Science and Mathematics at the University of Stellenbosch. So, she enrolled, did extremely well, and soon realised that she actually wanted to study BSc, not Engineering.

She says, “SciMathUS opened doors for me, gave me a second chance, and time to discover my true passion.”

Since 2002, more than 1 100 students have completed our bridging programme, with many of them going on to obtain university degrees in medicine, engineering, science and business. That’s 1 100 young South Africans who experienced the transformative power of education, with ripples extending outwards from them throughout society.

Claudia, congratulations with your inspirational journey thus far! And best of luck with your further studies. You are showing the world what can be done. In higher education we can achieve transformation by recognising and developing potential, and constantly emphasising excellence.

This brings me to a very important point I never tire of making. In the foyer of the Mayo Clinic, in Rochester, Minnesota, is a quote from a speech that its founder, Dr Will Mayo, gave to a graduating class of doctors in 1910. He said, “The best interest of the patient is the only interest.”

We at Stellenbosch could just as well adapt this to, “The best interest – and success – of the student is the only interest.” For me, this is a priority. I want the University to offer students an experience that is pleasant, welcoming, safe and hospitable – in an inclusive environment. We can do it.

Our undergraduate and postgraduate students must receive an excellent education that will give them a competitive advantage in a rapidly changing world. And the latest technology should be used for this, because virtual learning is becoming ever more important.

Students today have access to knowledge all the time, from any place. They carry around entire libraries on their smartphones, get lectures on the internet, and communicate at lightning speed via social media.

Stellenbosch is also testing these new waters. Council has provided considerable resources for the use of 21st-century technology in learning and teaching. Our emphasis is on the blended model, in which technology does not replace contact sessions, but is used to enrich learning and teaching.

Now, universities are places of learning and teaching, but also places of research. And it, too, is a transformative activity; it has the power to change how the world works and how people think. Society is increasingly looking at universities for solutions to both local problems and global crises in such areas as the environment, conflict management, health, water, food security, sustainable energy and social cohesion.

American journalist and cultural critic HL Mencken said, "For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear and simple ... and wrong"! That's because the world is faced with what John Kao calls "wicked problems" – highly complex challenges comprised of interwoven issues whose potential solutions require creative, interdisciplinary thinking.

This is how Stellenbosch University as a research-intensive institution can help. The challenge for us is to be locally relevant, yet globally competitive. We should focus on unique areas in which we have developed expertise over time and build collaborative networks in South Africa, the rest of the continent and further afield. I have no doubt we can do it.

Ladies and gentlemen, in his book *Good to Great* Jim Collins coined the phrase "Big Hairy Audacious Goals". He was referring to those visionary ambitions that spur us on to greater heights – NASA's goal of getting to the moon, the World Health Organisation's goal of eradicating polio, Google's goal of organising the whole world's information and making it universally accessible and useful.

I believe the aims of this University qualify as "Big Hairy Audacious Goals". Our Vision 2030 shares with South Africa's National Development Plan (NDP) the desire to create a country that works for all of its people. We want to create a University that works for all of us – a national asset, in fact a continental and global asset, to help make the world a better place by seeking solutions to such "wicked problems" as poverty, inequality and unemployment in our society.

And it is exactly because of this, that the recent manifestation of xenophobia in our country is so reprehensible. South Africa is known internationally for its progressive Constitution, but this is of little value if we as citizens have no regard for the human dignity and rights of others. Stellenbosch University is proud of the fact that we have more than 4 100 international students, making up 14% of our student body. They come from 117 countries around the world, and 56% of them are from other African countries. They enrich us, and that is why we say "No!" to xenophobia!

It is very important for us to have an impact on society. I have spoken with Stellenbosch Mayor Conrad Sidego, and together we will ensure that the Rector-Mayor Forum continues to pay attention to matters of communal interest.

From the start, Stellenbosch has embraced a willingness to serve. Initially, "community" was defined very narrowly, but there has been an evolution ... from SU as "volksuniversiteit" serving only a particular group of people, to SU as a "national asset", serving the entire population.

We made mistakes in the past, and it is important that we apologise and try to repair ties. This we did in 2000, with our acknowledgement of the University's "contribution to the injustices of the past."

More recently, in 2012, Dagbreek men's residence apologised for the Battle of Andringa Street in 1940, when students clashed with black and coloured residents of *Die Vlakte* – a part of Stellenbosch just down the road from where we are now.

Prof Botman ensured that a comprehensive permanent exhibition was installed in the University Archives in the Wilcocks Building to remind us of the forced removals from *Die Vlakte* in the 1960s. These removals brought separation because the University as institution did not protest against them at the time, and also because the Arts and Social Sciences Building was later erected on expropriated land.

In the interest of what Dean of Theology Prof Nico Koopman calls “healing reconciliation”, I now announce with humility that the University is establishing a bursary fund for the children of *Die Vlakte*, the descendants of those who were uprooted.

Last year, Stellenbosch University awarded R588 million in bursaries and loans to the 37% of our students in need of financial assistance. Of this amount, 55% went to black, coloured and Indian students based on merit and financial need. And because greater diversity is a priority for us, we want to award even more recruitment bursaries. It is a golden opportunity for empowerment.

Let me reach out to members of our community everywhere. Let us all move forward together. That will be the main thrust of my time as Rector and Vice-Chancellor: Forward, *vorentoe, siyaya Stellenbosch!*

If there are obstacles in our way, let’s remove them. Like the HF Verwoerd plaque in our Accounting and Statistics Building. This will be removed and placed in the University Museum, there to be properly contextualised. We will do so in consultation with all stakeholders, including students, staff, alumni and the broader community. This is an ideal opportunity to engage in open discussion about visual elements and symbols on campus, as a place of learning and critical thinking should. It will help us move forward.

Ladies and gentlemen, Stellenbosch University has deep roots in this country, and there are two aspects that have run like a golden thread through our history: excellence and a willingness to serve. If we focus on this – in an inclusive manner – we will flourish. We are moving forward into our next century, striving for perfect health, deeply committed to our community and our country, and the values of our Constitution.

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. *Ek dank u. Enkosi kakhulu.*

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