

Stellenbosch University (SU) appoints new distinguished professors.

Die Universiteit Stellenbosch (US) stel nuwe uitgelese professore aan.

Remarks by SU Rector and Vice-Chancellor Prof Wim de Villiers

Opmerkings deur prof Wim de Villiers, Rector en Visekanselier

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Good evening, colleagues. *Goeienaand, kollegas. Ek is bly om hier saam met u te wees.* It is good to celebrate something at the heart of our core mission as institutions of higher learning, namely academic excellence.

This is only the second time that Stellenbosch University is appointing distinguished professors – having started this process in 2014 – so this is a very special occasion. The title of “Distinguished Professor” was created to recognise our very best academics who have reached the pinnacle of achievement in their university careers.

Congratulations! This is recognition for you, and confirmation of the University’s commitment to academic excellence, as reflected in the good standing that our institution currently maintains internationally. For 2016, we again improved our position on the Times Higher Education ranking of universities in the BRICS countries and other emerging economies to 11th out of 200 universities in 48 countries. And Stellenbosch has for a number of years now been rated the most productive university in the country in terms of weighted research outputs per full-time academic staff member – as measured in publication outputs and postgraduate students successfully supervised.

Of course, this is no accident. This kind of achievement does not just fall out of the sky – similarly to individual academics who have to put in sustained effort over time to reach the top level of achievement.

It is fascinating to look at the history of our University to see how we got to where we are now. In her 2014 thesis for a joint Stellenbosch/Leipzig PhD, Stefanie Baumert refers to one of the first comparative studies in South Africa on research in the natural sciences – by UNISA physicist E Reynhardt in 1982.

He found that local academics did far less research than their counterparts in industrialised countries, and also that English-medium universities in South Africa “comprehensively outperformed” their Afrikaans-medium counterparts in terms of research – with Stellenbosch at nearly the bottom of the list.

Baumert writes “This must have come have come as a big shock” to Stellenbosch, because it conflicted with “the historical self-image that Stellenbosch University had always been a place of excellence”.

One problem identified is that “Stellenbosch had been constructed ... around the notion of the *volksuniversiteit* (ethnic university) binding itself solely to one cultural community and, therefore, limiting itself for quite some time to identity politics more so than focusing on academia.”

Baumert argues that this “‘identity-driven’ insular character additionally resulted in a ‘measuring by own standards’ rather than in comparing oneself to other institutions in terms of the quality and quantity of academic achievements.”

So, after all of this was processed in the 1980s, there subsequently was a noticeable shift at this University to focus on (1) improving our research function, and (2) also purposefully internationalising the University.

There were deliberate steps in this regard under my predecessors Professors Andreas van Wyk, Chris Brink and Russel Botman – as reflected in all of our major policy documents, right up to our latest guiding framework, our “Institutional Intent and Strategy” of 2013. And I support this direction of ours, because it helps us to become ever more locally relevant and globally competitive.

Now, this initiative of appointing distinguished professors is a very important step in pursuing the excellence that we strive for.

Candidates have to meet stringent criteria to be appointed:

- They must have international stature in their particular field
- They must have shown exceptional achievement and leadership in higher education, specifically in terms of:
 - Research and publications
 - Postgraduate supervision
 - Learning and teaching; and
 - Community interaction, or social impact.
- And they must have demonstrated alignment with the vision of the University, which is to be inclusive, innovative and future focused.

Secondly, a thorough process is followed to make these appointments:

- Deans follow an internal process within faculties to identify suitable candidates
- Applications have to be supported by at least two external referee reports
- The Appointments Committee of Senate considers the applications
- And then it goes to a top-level Oversight Committee for a final decision.

So, we can have confidence in this round of appointments, bringing the total number of distinguished professors at Stellenbosch University to 45.

What does this mean in this age of the “democratisation of knowledge”? Do professors really still matter when anyone with a smartphone and an internet connection can access the sum total of human knowledge through the ages? Haven’t universities lost their position of pre-eminence in the knowledge chain? Haven’t we fallen victim to the negative effect of “disruptive innovation” caused by technology?

In their book, *The Innovative University: Changing the DNA of Higher Education from the Inside Out*, Clayton Christensen and Henry Eyring strongly argue against this.

They say higher-education institutions have an opportunity to lay claim to an indispensable role – but only if university scholars help students “gain their footing in the flood of information that might otherwise overwhelm them”.

Digital natives often “lack an understanding of what to search for and what to make of it when they find it”. Universities are uniquely qualified to help students do what they might otherwise struggle to do on their own. That is because “scholarly communities have the collective insight and experience to answer a student’s most vital questions:

- How can I achieve proper breadth and depth in my formal education?
- What books should I read?
- What sources of information can I trust?
- What new information matters?
- What principles don't change?
- What works and what doesn't?"

Who better to answer these questions than "Distinguished" professors? So, that is my challenge to you, ladies and gentlemen. Having reached the pinnacle, do your bit to make professors and universities – this University – indispensable:

- Indispensable to a new generation of students precisely at this point of the 21st century, here at the southern tip of Africa, as we go into the future.
- Indispensable to your fellow academics and other colleagues
- And indispensable to society at large – here at home, further afield on our continent, and globally, across the world.

Use your experience, your knowledge, and above all, the wisdom that comes with years of dedication in the search for truth – realising full well that Socrates was right, after all, in saying "All I know is that I know nothing".

On that note, I know I have now said enough. *Baie geluk, weereens, en geniet die res van die aand.*

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