

22 May 2019

Ronel Retief

Registrar, Stellenbosch University

Motion for discussion at Senate

Stellenbosch University has recently been rocked by responses to an article on race and cognition that was published by five of its academics, titled, ‘Age- and education – related effects on cognitive functioning in Colored South African women.’

We strongly object to the use of stigmatising race-based categories in science and research as evidenced in this article. In particular, we decry the continuation of colonial and apartheid research thinking that makes essentialist connections between race/ethnicity and particular attributes or aptitudes of a group of people. Such use, we believe, goes against the grain of the stated institutional culture, policies and strategies of Stellenbosch University.

Racial essentialism expressed in the article is not only an assault on the dignity of research subjects, it also insults black people and communities classified as Coloured generally, and women in particular. Furthermore, it sets back the transformation agenda of SU at a very turbulent time in the history of higher education in South Africa.

An article such as the one that created the furore has the potential of working against the advances that the university is making. We believe that Stellenbosch University should therefore avoid situations that would tie us to a past that we have explicitly disavowed during our centenary celebrations in 2018.

The current debacle also shows how far we still have to travel across all levels of the university to engage our institutional past. It points the way to how we have to deepen our transformation efforts.

We acknowledge that the university has strongly supported the retraction of the article by the journal, and has launched a comprehensive investigation into all facets of the study.

We believe that we should aim to develop a focused and concerted long term institutional response. It is important that we cultivate and protect a fully inclusive, mutually engaging intersubjective institutional approach to dealing with this matter.

We have to begin to re-imagine how we proceed to re-orientate and re-structure our work at the university. We believe the university should become a key site for developing a critique of race in science and research, and establishing related institutional practices and processes.

Consideration should be given to instituting a campus-wide mechanism dedicated to transforming research and science, which would develop the scholarship and scholarly infrastructure to promote, coordinate and deepen processes related to a transformed understanding of science and research.

We propose that consideration be given to offering a module on anti-racism, democracy and critical citizenship to all first year students. We also propose that a suite of short courses be offered by the Research Office for all staff members on the following types of topics: 'The use of human categories in research and science', 'Human categories and research ethical integrity' and 'Human categories, reflexivity and research'. Given the excellent transformation work done elsewhere by departments of Gender and Critical Race Studies, we call for the institutionalization of such departments at Stellenbosch University.

Supported by;

Usuf Chikte

Amanda Gouws

Aslam Fataar

Sandy Liebenberg

Steven Robins

Leslie Swartz

Bradley Slade

Ronelle Carolissen

Ashraf Kagee

Nadine Bowers- Du Toit

Doria Daniels

Faadiel Essop

Leslie van Rooi