

Stellenbosch University, 2019/05/21

Opening statement of Symposium and ‘Re-structuring Science and Research at SU’, Organised by three Senate members of the SU Council – Usuf Chikte, Amanda Gouws and Aslam Fataar – with the support of concerned members of Senate

The symposium is a sequel to the article on race and cognition published by five SU-based academics, titled, ‘Age- and education – related effects on cognitive functioning in Colored South African women.’

As Senate members of Stellenbosch University Council and a group of concerned Senate members, we released a statement on 24 April in which we strongly objected to the use of stigmatising race-based categories in science and research as evidenced in this article.

In particular, we decried 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.

We pointed out that the racial essentialism expounded 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.

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 feel that as a group of concerned academics we should aim to develop a focused and concerted long term institutional response. In this light, we acknowledge the responsive manner in which the University’s Senior Management has interacted with us over the last few weeks and the assistance it provided with organising this symposium.

It is important that we cultivate and protect a fully inclusive, mutually engaging intersubjective institutional approach to dealing with this matter.

Much transformation work is already underway in various processes and committees across the university. An article such as this has the potential of working against the advances that the university is making. We must 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 offer this symposium from our perspective as engaged academics of SU, and members of our Senate and Council. Our intention is to offer a space for in-depth and critical deliberation about the core dimensions that the so-called ‘race’ and cognition article elicited.

We are hoping to generate suggestions (not quite resolutions) from the audience that would inform the positions we want help develop at SU in response to matter. Our struggle with the term ‘RE-STRUCTURING SCIENCE AND RESEARCH AT SU’, is meant to indicate both the depth and urgency with which we ought to approach our work.

We are approaching this issue from the perspective of interrogating the structuring role of the Enlightenment, Colonialism and Apartheid in positioning Science and Research in the academy generally, and how these were given acute expression at Stellenbosch University during its history, especially during the pre-apartheid and apartheid years, with on-going impact in the current period.

The concept of race and racism is of course the central focus of the symposium. We are interested in developing alternative approaches to the gratuitous use and misuse of race in Science and Research. We specifically wish to debunk it as an instrument used to discriminate against, and undermine, the dignity of people. This is where we believe the heart of the debate in the first session will reside.

The second session is aimed at illuminating various aspects related to Research, Science and Ethics at SU, from which we can begin to re-imagine how we proceed to re-orientate and re-structure our work at the university.

Some Faculties, departments, as well as various other university structures have already begun to consider how to adapt their research practices in light of the type of challenges that the article has highlighted. Discussion has already occurred in seminar and symposium spaces, and further academic discussions are being planned.

As SU academics, we believe these type of activities has to be extended across the university, involving the research, teaching and learning, and social engagement sectors of the institution as well as the various related support service departments.

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 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.

Debate at the symposium is meant to help frame the terms of on-going engagement with our prevailing Science and Research orientations, platforms and practices.

A key objective of this symposium is the praxis of Re-structuring Research and Science at SU.. We will consider how the university's policies, regulations and practices can be more adequately adjusted in pursuit of justice, inclusion and ethical integrity.

An opportunity will be provided for discussion after the second session to solicit ideas and suggestions from the audience that would help us take this matter productively forward across the university.