

**6th Annual Stellenbosch University (SU) SoTL conference
(Scholarship of Learning and Teaching),
Lord Charles Hotel, Somerset West, 22-23 May 2012**

Welcoming address by Prof H Russel Botman, Rector and Vice-Chancellor, SU

Dankie, Ludolph. More almal! Molweni! Good morning!

Having been unable to attend this conference the last two years, you cannot imagine how much pleasure it gives me not only to be here today but also to welcome all of you here.

This conference is close to my heart

Launched when I was Vice-Rector: Teaching. It was started with the strategy of lifting teaching and learning to the same stature of research. It was always my belief that a classroom is the most important living laboratory. There we do our research, students engage with us and we grow together.

This conference started in a small venue at Stellenbosch Lodge *en kyk hoe lyk ons nou!* Just look how we have grown! It shows that the SoTL Conference, which is now in its 6th year, enjoys broad support within the University.

Welcome, also, to our overseas guests:

- Prof Ron Barnett of the University of London's Institute of Education; and
- Prof Joan Tronto of the University of Minnesota, where she teaches Political Science.

Colleagues, as you know, the focus of this conference is academics and the academic life of the University. Now, one of the four priorities highlighted in our *Institutional Plan 2012-2016* is to strengthen the knowledge base of the University's staff: "It is a fact that the main element of the University's lasting competitive advantage is based on the expertise of its staff – as producers, conveyers and appliers of knowledge."

The "knowledge base" referred to here, is both the knowledge of discipline, and knowledge of pedagogy. At the heart of a flourishing university, should be a teaching cohort which is learning and developing their expertise, feeling engaged, fulfilled and affirmed.

We have been talking about this since 2002, but have we reached our goal yet? It remains a process.

We measure great teaching not only in terms of numerical outputs, but also how we relate to each other, how we relate to our students, how we learn and teach

We are busy looking at our graduate attributes. But we cannot only look at attributes of students without looking at the attributes of lecturers. If we want a student with an inquiring mind, we need lecturers with a critical pedagogy. If we want an engaged citizen, we need lecturers with a progressive pedagogy. If we want students who become dynamic professions, we need lecturers with an innovative pedagogy. And if we want students who are well-rounded individuals, we need lecturers with a self-renewing pedagogy.

So, we need to explore every opportunity for renewal, e.g. *teaching development grants*. Yes, there have been glitches in the process this year, but teaching development grants offer the opportunity for academic renewal and for collaboration across faculties.

There is evidence that they produce dynamic & engaged thinking around teaching; as well as a fresh commitment to teaching. So, we will provide more grants next year in order to open new opportunities for teaching and learning

When it comes to research on teaching, I am glad to say that FINLO (our Fund for Innovation on Learning and Teaching) is going from strength to strength. The conference programme includes a number of presentations emanating from the grant scheme.

The writing retreats are generating insightful publications on teaching and learning. SU is now also leading a national project on teaching and learning, funded by the NRF. This is focusing on the professional learning of academics at eight universities in SA.

It is concerned with what an institution should look like that encourages academics to teach and develop. You might have noticed an email in your inbox requesting you to complete a survey – please fill it in. It will help to ensure that the support that we provide to academics is based on solid research.

Ladies and gentlemen, in conclusion, let me share some thoughts with you on a vision that is starting to take shape in broad consultations at the University, which I want all of you to join in.

The future of learning and teaching at Stellenbosch University cannot be separated from where we are heading as a leading 21st-century Higher Education Institution in Africa.

As the Information Age unfolds, we find ourselves in a new digital environment ... a networked world that is rapidly changing. How will it provide the basis for more students to interact with their lecturers? Learning and teaching cannot remain homogeneous.

The HOPE Project has put us ahead as an institution that blends excellence with relevance to address the needs of society. Now we need to keep up the momentum in order to stay in touch with what the best universities in the world are doing.

You would have seen that Stanford and MIT and Harvard are now offering online courses. They are embracing new learning technologies as the demand for increased open access to

knowledge grows. The engagement is changing. We need to understand where things are heading.

Back in 1998 already Stellenbosch started offering a telematic service for the transmission of classes countrywide via satellite. This service has since become interactive by incorporating cellphone, smart card and internet technology. And it's all run from a modern studio & control room on campus, so we already have very useful infrastructure in place.

Our question is now is whether we are ready for the new challenges. Have we done enough to prepare for the age of the virtual university? Do we want to be part of a virtual learning environment?

Our job is to broaden the base of the learning experience, and of learning opportunities.

On another front, in 2010, Stellenbosch became the first African university to sign the Berlin Declaration on Open Access). It is crucial to maintain our momentum. If we have agreed that all our research should be available on an open access basis, how do we also provide broader access to the classroom as a laboratory?

Africans must play a very important role in the development not only of the continent but of the world. How do Africa step forward and leave its footprint internationally within every person's reach?

There are no easy answers. There are challenges, and we must handle them.

Virtual learning and teaching is something we will look at. We are looking in Council at the question of growth. Physically, the University cannot grow much more – only about 2 000 more students. But then the growth must happen elsewhere, because the country needs strong universities to take in significantly more students.

If you look at what is happening in virtual learning and teaching worldwide, there will be strong European and American universities that will be online soon. Does Africa play in that space? What we can bring is the true multicultural reality of our intellect and our classrooms. Multiculturalism is the asset of Africa and the asset of this University.

The development in town of free Wi-Fi being made available in Stellenbosch is part of being prepared for the challenges that are coming.

Thank you.