

SCIENCE FOR SOCIETY: BUILDING HOPE IN AFRICA

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‘Universities and the Millennium Development Goals’

Plenary Two: ‘Institutional Commitments’

Colleagues, ladies and gentlemen ...

You would have noticed in the Conference programme that it includes campus tours of Stellenbosch University (SU) later today.

I would urge you not to miss it. It will give you an idea of how we have responded to the challenges posed by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and how we are being shaped by them.

As you move around this afternoon, look out for the banners on our faculty buildings. These went up two weeks ago with the internal launch of our advancement campaign. The public launch is scheduled for July, but let me give you a sneak preview.

The banners have a common theme, namely that we “believe” the innovative work our staff and students do “will change the world”.

This is quite a claim. Allow me to explain why we make it, and how we got to this point on our journey of hope.

At the turn of the century, SU adopted a new strategic framework. The aim was to re-evaluate our priorities in light of two major developments:

- The birth of a democratic order in South Africa in 1994; and
- The dawning of the 21st century and its knowledge-based economy.

On the one hand, this called for Stellenbosch to build on the high standards it had achieved as a world-class research university. But it also required of the institution to change.

So, the university acknowledged that it had been a “role player in the injustices of the past” under apartheid in South Africa.

And it expressed a commitment to redress, which would be pursued through:

- Equity – building a corps of students and staff members demographically more representative of society; and
- Service – promoting development in disadvantaged communities and areas.

When I was appointed rector and vice-chancellor three years ago, I dedicated my term of office to the realisation of this commitment. In my installation address, I pointed out that we had a problem with “credibility” and “relevance” (Botman, 2007).

We would have to find a way to move “from success to significance”.

I proposed that we establish a Pedagogy of Hope at the university. This was inspired by the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who had asked what demands democracy placed on the curriculum (Freire, 2004). He argued that the needs of the wretched should take priority, which would ultimately benefit everyone, not just the poor.

This would guide us to become not only “significantly different” from our past, but also “significantly better” in terms of our commitment to the people of our country and continent.

It was also in line with the view expressed at the 2006 Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers in Cape Town that the MDGs would only be achieved in Africa, and elsewhere, if there were flourishing systems of tertiary education.

As the incoming head of the university, I had to decide whether to slowly sell the idea, or to boldly set a course and asking everyone to come on board. I decided on the latter, knowing full well that we would have to build the plane while flying it.

I went to Council and argued that by practicing science for society – by taking on some of the world’s toughest challenges – we could transform hope into action. Council agreed.

Five themes – distilled from the MDGs – were approved to guide the core functions of the university, which are:

- teaching and learning;
- research; and
- community interaction.

Our development themes are:

- Fighting endemic poverty and related conditions;
- Contributing to human dignity and health;
- Consolidating democracy and human rights;
- Promoting peace and security; and
- Balancing a sustainable environment with a competitive industry.

The next step was to galvanise academic and support staff around these themes. They responded with enthusiasm, and flooded us with proposals.

A committee sifted through them and eventually selected 21 strategic projects. A full list can be found in an appendix to this paper, which is available as a handout.

Some of these projects were already underway, while others were still on the drawing board. But characteristic of all of them was a strong emphasis on:

- Cooperation across academic and institutional boundaries;
- Transdisciplinarity; and
- African collaboration.

We went back to Council and asked support to get the ball rolling. We had to show that we believed in ourselves before we could approach others for help.

Council reallocated R320 million from existing university funds for the initial financing of what had by then become known as our Overarching Strategic Plan (OSP).

Let me unpack one of our projects as an example:

The Ukwanda Centre for Rural Health is an initiative of our Faculty of Health derives its name from the Xhosa for “growing and developing within the community”.

It started as an initiative to move health sciences education outside the academic hospitals and into a community setting.

In this way, students get a rural perspective and underserved communities get healthcare.

Ukwanda now has 10 sites in various parts of the Western and Eastern Cape.

Students work under the supervision of trained healthcare professionals, providing desperately needed services at grassroots level.

Ladies and gentlemen, let’s go to the bigger picture for a moment.

This satellite image of Africa and Europe at night caused quite a stir when it was released by NASA a few years ago because it starkly shows the contrast between developed and underdeveloped areas.

The challenges facing Africa can be linked to the brain drain and the decline of scholarship on our continent over the last three decades.

In November 2006, a number of deans of humanities and social science faculties met in Stellenbosch. This resulted in the Partnership for Africa’s Next Generation of Academics (PANGeA).

What started as network among the universities of Botswana, Dar es Salaam, Makerere, Malawi and Stellenbosch will hopefully expand and create continent-wide opportunities for academic collaboration.

A related initiative is the Graduate School in our Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. It coordinates multi-disciplinary research themes to address the challenges of the continent.

And then there is the African Doctoral Academy, which functions as a capacity-building centre for full-time doctoral students. It currently has 31 students, of which 22 come from outside the borders of South Africa.

Ladies and gentlemen, Stellenbosch's Overarching Strategic Plan was designed not to be an "add-on". Every piece of teaching and learning, research and community interaction in each of our 10 faculties helps to provide hope.

Our advancement campaign has certain internal objectives affecting each corner of the university, namely:

- Personnel success
- Student success
- Research success
- Operational success

Here I will highlight just two cross-cutting enablers.

Our Legacy Project is aimed at producing a new crop of academics for when our current researchers retire. Through academic development and skills transfer, we are busy "growing our own timber" and improving the diversity of our staff.

Our First-Year Academy is a campus-wide initiative to improve the academic success rate of our new students and the university's throughput rate. It comprises a range of initiatives, from early assessment to tutoring and mentoring.

In CONCLUSION, I believe our approach answers both the "why" and "how" questions posed in relation to "Universities and the MDGs".

- Improving the lives of the people is the moral imperative of our time; and
- By throwing their weight behind this normative goal, universities can strengthen their core functions.

More information can be found in our 'BELIEVE' folders, which are available as handouts, and on our website, www.sun.ac.za.

I thank you.

REFERENCES

Stellenbosch University. 2000. *A Strategic Framework for the Turn of the Century and Beyond*. Download at www.sun.ac.za/university/StratPlan/index.htm.

Botman, Russel. 2007. *A Multicultural University with a Pedagogy of Hope for Africa*. Download at www.sun.ac.za/university/Management/rektor/speeches.html.

Freire, Paulo. 2004. *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum Impacts.

APPENDIX A

Strategic Projects

1. Africa Centre for Dispute Settlement
2. Africa Centre for HIV/Aids Management
3. Agricultural Development Project
4. Centre for Human Performance Sciences
5. Centre for Invasion Biology
6. Centre for Studies in Complexity
7. Combating poverty, homelessness and socio-economic vulnerability through SA's constitution
8. Communication & Information Systems
9. E-Library Resources
10. Energy and the Environment
11. Food Security Initiative
12. Geographic Information Technology
13. Graduate School (including the African Doctoral Academy)
14. Human Dignity
15. MediaAfrika
16. Security Institute for Governance and Leadership in Africa
17. TsamaHUB
18. Ukwanda Rural Clinical School
19. Unit for Corporate Governance in Africa
20. Virtual Postgraduate Learning Support Project
21. Youth Sport Initiative