

**“The doors of learning and culture shall be opened.”
Perspectives on changing institutional culture.**

**Speech by Prof H Russel Botman,
Rector and Vice-Chancellor, Stellenbosch University
on occasion of the conference on
changing institutional culture held on
30 May 2008 at Stellenbosch University.**

Respected guests, good morning and welcome to this conference where we will be focusing on the important subject of institutional culture – more specifically on the very pertinent and pressing need for change in institutional culture in our institutions of higher learning. An although our attention will largely be focused on our universities, I find it striking, if not significant, that we will be grappling and deliberating about this issue amid the sad and shocking occurrence of xenophobic attacks that continues to plague our country.

It is not my intention to make a political statement about these incidents, safe perhaps to say that it has shamed our struggle for freedom in a manner I never thought possible, particularly when we take into account that all of us embraced and believed that this type of violence and atrocities against fellow human beings and the assault on peoples’ dignity, will never happen again. And while

all sorts of fancy and scientific answers are being offered for this occurrence, a salient feature that runs like a golden thread through all these despicable incidents, is the fact that these people are “different”, sometimes expressed in the words “foreigners, aliens or makwere-kwere”. It is even more disturbing when one considers that xenophobia and racism do not start when we see the physical manifestations of it as portrayed in our newspapers and other media. It has a long period of germination and it shows in our behaviour and language.

And it has to do with being different. This concept of “difference” has also come to challenge the character of our institutions of higher learning. I do not have to bore you with the changes that have taken place in the higher education landscape since 1994.

Suffice to say that the universities of today are vastly different from the ones that we have known fifteen years ago. Different in the manner that they pursue their core functions; different in the composition of their students and staff; they are now different places where people with divergent backgrounds, cultures and world views come together to study and work together, and to generate knowledge for the common good. In a nutshell, difference is the common feature of our institutions of higher learning today.

Question is: How do we cope with these differences on an institutional level? Can we honestly refer to our universities as “homes for all”? And this question can be extended to our colleges and schools and all other public organizations.

The answer of course, is no – especially when we refer to previously **advantaged** institutions who have enrolled larger numbers of people of colour since 1994 in their quest to transform and reflect the vision and spirit of the new South Africa.

Over the last few years we have increasingly heard voices of disillusionment from these new enrollments about the alienation that they experience on a daily basis in these institutions. Lately I have heard the term “universities of alienation” in discussions on this topic when people refer to the institutional culture of most centres of higher learning in our country.

Needless to say, it is an indication of the extent to which people find themselves not fitting in, not being familiar with the customs and practices of the institution, where their backgrounds, heritage and culture are relegated to the fringes of day to day activities and existence and where they are expected to be assimilated into the existing modes and practices – according to the old notion of “when in Rome, do as the Romans” even if you come from Troy.

I have now referred to the experience of people from previously disadvantaged communities which points to race and ethnicity as important considerations when dealing with institutional culture. Am I thus saying that once you have addressed these that it will be problem solved? It would be very naïve to take such a narrow view on a complicated matter such as institutional culture. There

is a school of thought, however, that argues that at the heart of institutional transformation is the matter of dealing with the “overwhelming whiteness of academic institutions” and transforming the notion that the “white norm fits all”.

I think we all agree that dealing with race and ethnicity within the context of creating a home for all is an important matter, a non-negotiable so to speak, and I’m sure that we will hear this as a recurring theme throughout today’s discussions. As difficult as it may be, this hurdle is not one that we dare sidestep. It goes hand and hand with issues such as diversity, equity and affirmative action as ways to establish and affirm acceptable levels of social justice in our institutions as set out in our Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Added to race and ethnicity are other critical issues such as religion and peoples belief systems; gender issues and sexual orientation; making our institutions not only accessible but welcoming for people with disabilities; dealing with the issue of HIV and Aids in the workplace; and obviously the issue of language of instruction. And then there is the burning issue of the promotion of women in an otherwise male enclave, such as Stellenbosch University. Put together, all of these give one a fair idea of the daunting challenge that differences pose for all of us in creating and maintaining organizations and institutions that portray an institutional culture that can truly be described as facilitating a home for all.

The issues that are very high on the transformation agenda of our institutions, and that overshadows all the other very important issues at this juncture of our country's development are race and racism – whether overtly or covertly in its varied subliminal manifestations. At times, one get the impression that we are all aware of the sensitivities regarding the management of these issues on a daily basis, but mostly our efforts are lacking in honesty and commitment.

It is only when an outpouring of the worst in us -- that sends shockwaves through civil society and government -- that we sit up and take note. It takes an incident like the student video at the Reitz-hostel to spur government into action by appointing a Ministerial Committee on progress towards transformation and social cohesion and the elimination of discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions. Only then do we wake from our slumber and frantically pay attention to the critical importance of changing institutional culture at our universities. Fact is, that this should be an ongoing process of evaluation and adjustment – not because the Minister wants us to do it, but out of our own conviction and critical self-analysis as the right thing to do.

It is an exciting challenge, one that we sometimes characterize as problematic, but exciting nonetheless. What makes it even more challenging is the fact that we can attempt to address all these issues to transform the character of our institutions, but if we cannot inculcate the values of mutual trust and respect, tolerance and a sacred regard for the dignity of other's we are doomed to failure.

[No lasting change is value free (i.e without values) and without value (i.e worthless).]

This is not only the challenge of institutions of higher education, it is the challenge for all our people and our country as a whole. It is the foundation of the social cohesion and nation building that hitherto have been eluding us as a country. We cannot hope to change the character of our institutions when we thrive on prejudice, stereotypes and intolerance with little or no regard for the human-ness and dignity of others. Nor can we change our country if we build on the foundations of suspicion, racial and ethnic hatred and xenophobia. In the words of Dr Betty Siegel, a friend and colleague from Kennesaw State University in the United States: We should be about difference until difference makes no difference at all -- and that applies equally to our formal institutions as well as our country at large.

I now want to turn to a few critical challenges for Stellenbosch University that also goes to the heart of transforming our institutional culture.

The racial profile of the University is an issue that management are committed to change in line with the approach to “redress” as stipulated in our Strategic Framework

Redress involves all aspects of the University. Stellenbosch sees its commitment to achieving equity and a readiness to serve as major instruments in its efforts to redress its contribution to past injustices.

- In commitment to equity, the University acknowledges that the academic backlogs - due to historical disadvantages - not only at the University itself, but also in the schooling system, require the extension of existing academic support programmes at the University;
 - And that the need for demographic broadening of the University calls for a sustained critical appraisal of its accessibility. Redress requires a proactive approach in regard to both the student body and the staff body.
 - In commitment to a readiness to serve, the University acknowledges the need for development and service in communities and areas previously and currently disadvantaged in the provision of services and infrastructure.

With these strategic decisions and commitment as backdrop we remain cognizant of the huge challenges it represent to create a welcoming institutional culture and a home for all. To this end I need to mention the overwhelming enthusiasm of our students and staff to deal with all these challenges under the banner of courageous conversations which aims to create safe spaces for people to discuss openly and honestly the burning issues of our institution, interrogating our ways of being, customs and practices and reshaping the entire social ambience of this University. The only prerequisites for participation in these conversations are respect for the other person and his/her point of view, honesty and openness to other ways of thinking, but most of all, a sacred regard for the dignity of all the participants. It is in this spirit that we are rolling out our

program of courageous conversations to not only realize the vision of the “the doors of learning and culture shall be opened”, but to give meaning and content to it. For it is one thing to walk through an open door, it is a different matter altogether once you’re in to discover an alien world that threatens the very reason for your presence – and that is to study successfully.

I’m looking forward to today’s very insightful and stimulating courageous conversation on changing institutional culture. Thank you for your participation here today and thank you for listening to me.