

**Address by Prof Russel Botman, Rector and Vice-Chancellor,
Stellenbosch University, at the Stellenbosch Symposium on Evidence-to-
Action in Disability (SSEAD).**

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Good morning colleagues and respected delegates to this symposium. Let me start by congratulating Stellenbosch University's Centre for Rehabilitation Studies for hosting a symposium of this nature – the first of its kind on the African continent, and I believe an initiative that will lead to follow-up discussions and development reviews biennially. This initiative could not have come at a more appropriate time. Frankly, I think there must be people sitting in this audience today, who might feel that such an initiative is long overdue. Fact is that it is not only a matter of concern for a few or for dedicated organizations serving the disabled. It is a matter of critical importance for society at large, with specific importance for us as institutions of higher learning.

As a country, we have come a long way in the attainment and development of a culture of freedom and human rights in our developing democracy. Our constitution with its Bill of Human Rights was hailed more than a decade ago already as one of the best and most liberal to date, when viewed from a world perspective, but more particularly when weighed up against constitutions elsewhere on our continent.

Sadly, though, no comprehensive attention or reference has been given in our Bill of Rights to the rights of disabled people. I will venture to say that that has been the case internationally. It was only since 1997 when the White Paper on an Integrated National Disability Strategy was published in this country that a complete reorientation on traditional views regarding persons with disabilities became more evident locally.

In the past disability was perceived as a health and welfare issue. As a consequence, persons with disabilities have been marginalized and excluded from the mainstream of society. This in turn has led to serious curtailment of their human rights and to discrimination in

terms of equal access to education, employment, transport, housing and state and civilian buildings.

Fortunately today we realize that the discrimination they face are socially created phenomena, sometimes referred to as cultural barriers. It has more to do with a weakness in societies' view of human rights and dignity. This calls for an urgent paradigm shift.

A number of examples given in the South African White Paper on an Integrated National Disability Strategy illustrate the significance of the shift in perspective, and I quote:

- It is the stairs leading into a building that disable the wheelchair user rather than the wheelchair.
- It is defects in the design of everyday equipment that cause difficulties, not the abilities of people using it.
- It is society's lack of skill in using and accepting alternative ways to communicate that excludes people with communication disabilities.
- It is the inability of the ordinary schools to deal with diversity in the classroom that forces children with disabilities into special schools.

But given this new grasp on the socially created impediments on the ability and potential of disabled persons to lead a full and meaningful life, one is still highly perplexed and disturbed by the slow pace with which governments and organizations throughout the world have been in taking up the challenge to address this matter in a constructive and meaningful way. The natural response by governments is to give plenty of attention to the writing and promulgation of policies, and there is certainly nothing wrong with that. It is an essential requirement in fostering a new culture and mindset with regard to the role and human rights of persons with disabilities. But when it comes to action and putting significant structures in place, the required drive and energy is sadly lacking. As it was so aptly put in a report by a United Nations representative who described this phenomenon as "plenty of letter, but a disturbing lack of action".

Essentially what is required at all levels of society is a total reconstruction of our thinking about persons with disabilities. The question now is how do we ensure equality and full participation in the widest context of our everyday lives to persons with disabilities? This question is very pertinent to institutions of Higher Learning, to our centers for further education and training, as well as our schools, and to society at large.

But apart from the paradigm shifts that are so desperately needed, institutions of higher learning can contribute in various ways to facilitate the required transformation at different levels.

In this regard, it is prudent that we as institutions of higher learning consider some of the root causes of disabilities and consider ways of minimizing the occurrence of avoidable disability in our society. I realize that this is a complicated matter, but for the moment I would just like to limit myself to matters such as poverty, violence (including wars and their aftermath), degradation and environmental pollution.

At Stellenbosch University we have committed ourselves to a Pedagogy of Hope for all the people of our country and this continent. We realize that the way to provide new horizons and a future of hope for generations to come, is to be part of the international development agenda by way of delivering on the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations. From the list of themes that the UN has identified as parameters for human development worldwide, we have selected a few that permeates all the core academic and research activities of the University namely; the alleviation of poverty, the promotion of peace and security (including human security), the promotion of democracy and the development and promotion of sustainable resources in the environment.

We are convinced that by delivering on these parameters in order to improve the quality of life on our continent, Stellenbosch University will simultaneously address key issues pertaining to the root causes of disability on our society. But having said that, we realize that persons with disabilities are part and parcel of our society and so they will always be. Therefore Stellenbosch University's Vision 2012 includes people with disabilities in its quest for diversity. We will continue to provide and develop the technologies to assist such

students and staff. We will deepen our self-examination to shift paradigms and to assure better access to higher education. But not only access, also success.

Hence, the commitment of our Institution to provide equality of opportunities and full participation of persons with disabilities in all activities and at all levels of the University. Not as a special provision or as an exception to the rule, but in the spirit of ensuring that our students and staff with disabilities be regarded and treated as equals in every respect of our teaching, research and community interaction activities.

To this end we have a Policy on Persons with Disabilities in place that acknowledges the rights of the disabled; an office with dedicated staff focusing on our students with disabilities; and our Centre for Rehabilitation Studies that involve themselves in the cutting edge debates on the reconstruction of society in a way that will embrace the contribution that persons with disabilities can make to the development of our country in every respect. It is my dream that SU would be seen to put science behind the range of issues related to disability. I am therefore pleased to open this conference on evidence based science that can lead to sustainable action.

It is within this broader context that this symposium under the auspices of the University's Centre for Rehabilitation Studies seeks to contribute to efforts to bridge the gaps between evidence, policy and practice regarding the disabled in our society. An increasing body of evidence is being generated by researchers on disability, highlighting factors that may facilitate the participation and inclusion of disabled people in mainstream society and many of those will be highlighted at this symposium over the next two days.

It is my heartfelt wish that all the research evidence and the discourse at this symposium will lay the groundwork for pioneering thinking and debate in a way that will on the one hand enhance the place of the disabled person in our society and on the other reaffirm Stellenbosch University as a truly Afro-centric university where a diversity of people, cultures and thinking are embraced.

Thank you for your attention.