

#SULEADS 2016 (Stellenbosch University's Annual Student Leadership Conference)

Theme: "DECOLONISE, RE-IMAGINE, CO-CREATE"

Opening session, Kruiskerk, Stellenbosch, 08:15 for 08:30, 4 September 2016

Remarks by SU Rector and Vice-Chancellor Prof Wim de Villiers

Good morning, everyone. Great to see all of you here – so early on a Sunday morning! Research indicates that young people generally are night owls, not early birds. So, your presence here – not only early in the morning but also at the start of recess – shows you take your role as student leader very seriously.

Congratulations to the organisers – our Frederik van Zyl Slabbert Institute for Student Leadership Development – for putting together what looks to be a fascinating programme ...with input from other structures and staff of the University supporting students and student leadership, of course.

On behalf of Stellenbosch University, welcome to all of you – in particular our new Dean of Students, Tonia Overmeyer. We look forward to working with you.

I was at SU Leads for the first time last year, and I must say – looking back at my first year-and-a-half in office – I have been impressed by our students. You folks are getting to grips with important issues. And that's how it should be – students are often at the forefront of confronting with the big issues we face ... as society in general and as a specific community, as a University.

There was a time when one could speak of the “Stellenbosch bubble”. But that time has passed. The “Stellenbosch bubble” has burst. We are part of the open conversation ... in South Africa, on the rest of our continent, in fact, worldwide. And you have to hold your own in that conversation.

That's why #SULEADS is so important. Just look at the conference theme: “DECOLONISE” – it speaks to the very place and role of the university today; asking us to rethink, reframe, “RE-IMAGINE” knowledge; inviting us to be part of something bigger, to “CO-CREATE” the future together. This is our collective transformation journey ... as Maties, as South Africans, as Africans, as global citizens.

One of the prominent voices in the decolonisation debate is Prof Achille Mbembe of Wits University. He says “the decolonising project is back on the agenda worldwide”. That was part of an input he made to research in our Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Stellenbosch University.

What does “decolonise” mean in our context? That's what you are here to flesh out. But looking at the literature, an important element is putting Africa at the centre, not at the periphery – as has been done for centuries.

And that is a challenge that we face together, all of us. Mbembe says, “Since the advent of democracy, there are no longer settlers and natives, there are only citizens.”

The decolonising project is our joint project as citizens, and that at best entails being an active citizen – a person who shows initiative and takes responsibility for dealing with crucial matters.

The first part of decolonising is straight forward – it is about “seeing ourselves clearly” as Africans. That's how influential Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o puts it. He wrote the seminal work, *Decolonising the Mind*.

Seeing ourselves clearly means to reject the notion of Africa as a mere extension of the West, to reject the notion that the Western intellectual tradition is the only valid way paradigm, that African thinkers cannot be thought leaders, that we have to mimic Europe or America. We do not want to do that.

That is why I have been saying Stellenbosch University should not aspire to being an Oxford or a Harvard of the South. We have to be our own university, in Africa.

This does not mean closing the door on the Western model of knowledge. But it does mean placing Africa at the centre for once. Celebrating the perspective of our environment, our continent, the African perspective. Using it to enrich our insights and outputs. It is not either/or, one or the other, but and/and, using all perspectives.

But that brings us to the more difficult bit, the second part of decolonising: giving substance to the alternative. What is it that we do want to be as Africans? What does the new African university look like? That question is firmly on the agenda; and I am glad to see it reflected in the programme of this conference. Let us discuss what it means to be rooted in Africa, how we can honour the contribution of African intellectuals and institutions to world knowledge.

Now, to think of Stellenbosch University as an African university means we also have to acknowledge our Western roots because that's where we started. And that also means we also have to acknowledge our role in the divisive history of racial exclusion in our country. We have been doing that, since at least 2000, when this University formally said it "acknowledges its contribution to the injustices of the past, and therefore commits itself to appropriate redress and development initiatives".

Since then, our desire to transcend the divisions of the past has crystallized in our institutional intent to become more inclusive, innovative and future focused. More inclusive by broadening access to this public university serving the public good; more innovative by pursuing excellence as a national asset, contributing to human development through quality education and cutting-edge research; more future focused by having an impact on society, here in our local community, in the rest of the country and much further afield across Africa.

To be rooted in Africa means to be firmly connected to our continent and bearing fruit for the benefit of its people. Prof Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni of Unisa says "the African university must be distinguishable by its innovative fields of study and research agendas that are directly informed by the desire to solve pressing African problems and challenges."

Now, there is a perception that Stellenbosch is a little piece of Europe in Africa, but did you know we have an African Doctoral Academy and Graduate Schools in different faculties taking in candidates from all over Africa and producing record numbers of PhDs graduates for our continent? This is how Stellenbosch University is contributing to stemming the African brain drain.

Did you know Stellenbosch University has active bilateral agreements in the rest of Africa with 14 higher education institutions? This entails joint research and also exchange programmes. That's maybe something you would want to explore. Fourteen percent of our students are international, with 56% of them coming from other African countries. This is how Stellenbosch University is helping to develop the next generation of professionals in a variety of fields required to take our continent to the next level.

I am always so impressed when I look at the research being produced at Stellenbosch University, to see its relevance to Africa. Did you know we produce research about the "role of the media in the democratisation of Malawi", the "needs of adult learners in Ghana", the "human right to development in Nigeria", "social protection for vulnerable children in Zambia"? This is how Stellenbosch University is not only based in Africa, but how we are relevant to the needs of the people of our continent.

We recently launched our first MOOC – a Massive Open Online Course on the [African Philosophy of Education](#). Did you know that? And you can enrol – it's free and open to anyone across the world online.

What am I saying with these examples of our African activities? I am not saying Stellenbosch University has arrived, we are already the new African university we want to be. But I am saying part of “seeing ourselves clearly” means recognising we have made a start.

Of course, lots remain to be done. Decolonising the curriculum means opening up, taking the trouble to not only include thinkers from the Western canon but also African thinkers, of which there are many. I can tell you we have embarked on programme renewal at Stellenbosch University, and we need your input. We all need to be part of the conversation.

Another issue is that of our institutional culture. Are we truly cosmopolitan in outlook, welcoming to all? Mbembe says we need to create “conditions that will allow black staff and students to say of the university: ‘This is my home. I am not an outsider here. I do not have to beg or to apologise to be here. I belong here.’.” I cannot agree more. Stellenbosch University certainly needs to create those conditions ... and that means we have to ask some difficult questions, confront hard realities.

And this is a responsibility we should not run away from. We should have the open conversation, we should raise the difficult issues. But here’s the crux – we should always do it constructively. We should “be the change we want to see”, as Ghandi put it. If we want to create a community of social justice and human dignity, then that is how we should also conduct ourselves in the conversation about these issues.

A big talking point in our sector currently is the funding of higher education. We are also having that conversation here at Stellenbosch University. Go have a look at [www.bonfire.com](#) where I am posing the question, “[How should university studies be financed?](#)”. I would love for you to contribute.

On Tuesday we will be making a first submission to the Fees Commission, and in the coming months we should talk more about making a university education financially accessible.

This conference is a chance for you to take the lead. It can be a life-changing experience, potentially world-changing ... but that’s up to you. You can help us DECOLONISE, you can RE-IMAGINE, you can CO-CREATE. What an opportunity! A two-day crash course in changing the world for the better. Make the most of it!

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REFERENCES:

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