

**Welcoming remarks by Prof H Russel Botman,
Rector and Vice-Chancellor of Stellenbosch University,
at a lecture by Dr Thabo Mbeki, former president of South Africa,
on 'The potential of African students in light of the Arab Spring',
at the Endler Hall, Conservatoire, Stellenbosch University, 26 August 2011**

Thank you, chairperson. Good afternoon, everyone. *Molweni. Wamkelile. Goeiemiddag, dames en here.* Wow! What a great turnout. Clearly our guest of honour has serious pulling power. Congratulations to Sasco Stellenbosch for bringing him to campus.

- Dr Thabo Mbeki, former president of South Africa, and – let me add – the recipient, in 2004, of an honorary doctorate from Stellenbosch University
- Colleagues
- Our student leaders who have arranged this event
- Ladies and gentlemen

On behalf of the University, welcome to Stellenbosch. Dr Mbeki, we are honoured to host you, and look forward to hearing your thoughts on “The potential of African students in light of the Arab Spring”.

Students today face many challenges, including that of dealing with socio-economic inequalities and constraints. This is where higher education comes in. As a private good, it allows individuals to improve their own lives; but it is also a public good, empowering people to help change the world.

Here at Stellenbosch University, the question of what the graduate attributes of our students should be is one of the important issues that we have been grappling with.

A strong view that has emerged is that all our students should be agents of change. Our aim is to produce graduates who can take the lead in society as responsible and critical citizens in a democratic social order – not only in South Africa, but on the rest of our continent and other parts of the world as well.

Why have we gone this way? Does a university’s responsibility not end with producing highly qualified professionals for various careers? We don’t think so. At Stellenbosch, we are convinced that universities should be relevant to society. And that means they have a critical role to play in addressing the needs of the people.

The Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1921-1997) came up with the concepts of a critical pedagogy and a pedagogy of hope to capture the notion that the role of education is not to maintain the status quo, but to change the world for the better.

We engaged with these ideas and came up with a comprehensive programme called the HOPE Project. We have adopted hope as the guiding principle of the University. This allows

us to use our key strengths – academic excellence and cutting-edge research – to the benefit of all our people.

The HOPE Project has five themes, derived from the Millennium Development Goals and the government's Medium-term Strategic Framework, amongst others. We are convinced that if we work to (1) eradicate poverty and related conditions, and promote (2) human dignity and health, (3) democracy and human rights, (4) peace and security; as well as (5) a sustainable environment and a competitive industry, then we would have made a meaningful difference. And we want every student to find their niche in these themes.

Dr Mbeki, by addressing us today, you will be making an input in the unfolding public debate at our institution about how we, as an African university, and our students can best contribute to society.

Ladies and gentlemen, Dr Mbeki is well placed to do so. He was a key player in the success of South Africa's negotiated transition from apartheid to a non-racial democracy. And one of the highlights of his presidency was the strong role that he played on the international stage and in the African Union.

His vision of the African Renaissance and his call for a re-awakening of the continent instilled a sense of pride and responsibility in citizens and counties alike. And his on-going role in the African Union reiterates his stature as a statesman.

All of this puts him in a good position to speak to us about the winds of change that have been sweeping across North Africa and the Middle East this year.

He is also well placed to talk about the role of African students in shaping the future of our continent, having had a longstanding interest in youth and student affairs. One of the goals of the Thabo Mbeki Foundation is to train and develop a new cadre of high calibre leaders to promote peace, stability, democracy and economic development on the African continent.

I am sure he can tell us more about this. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Dr Thabo Mbeki ...