

Opening and welcoming by Prof H Russel Botman, Rector and Vice-Chancellor of Stellenbosch University, at the Stellenbosch Library Symposium and the Presidential Meeting of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), 18-19 February 2010, Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Studies

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Madam Minister, Madam President, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, good morning, *goeie more, molweni. Welkom hier by ons.*

It gives me great pleasure to open this event. Now in its 11th year, the annual Stellenbosch Library Symposium is important to our institution. This time, it coincides with the second annual Presidential Meeting of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). Ms Ellen Tise, the university's Senior Director of Library and Information Services, was last year elected IFLA President. We are proud of her and grateful for the links she has been able to make so that the insights reach here can also inform our endeavours.

Knowledge is at the heart of this university. It drives a specific strategy around the transformation of this institution. We want to become a significantly better university, one that is also significantly different from how we were in the past. This is an interesting challenge, one in which knowledge – and our library as our main store of knowledge – is central.

The library is in the first instance a place where information is shared, where people get access to knowledge. It is also a place where students meet and discuss and debate important issues. This shapes them and helps them form opinions for the future.

How do we understand the place of knowledge in the university? I like your theme – “Knowing is not enough”. It is great to know things, but the important part is what you do with that information.

Stellenbosch University has long been recognised as a place of academic excellence, but in looking at ourselves, we had to ask what it is that we have been doing with all the knowledge we have been accumulating through the years. We have great undergraduate courses, and our post-graduate programmes are up there with the best. But at some point we asked ourselves: What is all this knowledge that we generate and disseminate good for?

We started to look at the needs of our community, this town. We saw that if we considered this place to be our first laboratory, we could use the knowledge generated in our social sciences departments to help us break out of the mould of apartheid town planning; we could use the work done in business economics to empower the poor people around us; and so on. We realised we had to reinvent the town and make a real difference to the lives of its people.

In this, we have to work together with the municipality. We need the municipality to be solid, honest and hardworking. Our challenges are difficult sometimes, but we are getting there. When sitting around the table, we come from different perspectives, but the common question becomes, “What do we want Stellenbosch to be?”

The important thing for us as a university is to put our knowledge behind the goals of society. The government is committed to a development agenda. So are we. Our goals include combating poverty, promoting human dignity and security (including food security), promoting human rights and democracy, and promoting a sustainable environment and competitive industry. We call Stellenbosch University's strategic positioning our pedagogy of hope. By being relevant, by taking the work we ordinarily do and making it of use to society, we aim to become a centre of hope for South Africa and the rest of our continent.

As a university, we want the transformation that we are busy with to also reach into our academic enterprises. It should have an impact on the methodologies we follow in our studies, and ultimately produce also the necessary curriculum changes. Our academic planning structures are looking at this and will report to our senate, which will ultimately provide direction about how to change the ways in which we teach and learn so that we can play a different role in society.

How does all of this relate to libraries and the knowledge economy? In the Information Age, the most important commodity is knowledge. With it, social progress is possible. Without it, large stumbling blocks loom. People need access to information and knowledge to improve their lives – especially in the developing world, where human development needs are greatest. Individuals excluded from the knowledge economy are likely to find it difficult to get a good job, and societies on the fringes of the knowledge economy are unlikely to experience sustained growth.

The digital revolution means that more information than ever before can now be transmitted freely via the internet and cellphones – not to forget older technology, such as radio and television, the telephone and the fax machine. But technology is expensive and therefore scarce. And even if people do get access to information, will it necessarily be of the right kind? Will it be knowledge that people can trust? Will it be relevant?

This is where libraries come in, to my mind. Librarians and others associated with libraries are experts in processing, organising and conveying information. Yes, the latest technology should be utilised, but well-trained and committed people – more so than some search engine – are best placed to mediate access to the kind of information required for human development.

Coming up with strategies for how libraries can drive access to information in the knowledge economy is the task that you have set yourselves. I think you would have done well if you can promote improved sharing of information and open access to research and other forms of knowledge.

In the words of John Naisbitt, US writer in the field of future studies, in “Megatrends” published in 1982: “The new source of power is not money in the hands of a few, but information in the hands of the many.”

I hope that you can draw inspiration from our experience as an institution and from the ambiance of this place. Welcome, again, to Stellenbosch University. Please make good use of our facilities, and if you need anything, I am sure the organisers will be happy to be of assistance.

*Welkom, weereens, en alle sukses met die gesprekke die volgende twee dae.*

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