

Stellies committed to achieving greater inclusivity, equality

Professor Wim de Villiers

A YEAR has passed since I first took office, and I must say I now have a much better understanding of the term “hot seat”! It has certainly been an eventful 12 months, but I would not have had it any other way.

Stellenbosch University (SU) is an excellent institution doing great work, and I am honoured to be associated with it. All credit to our staff and students – and other members of the extended Matie family – for our many proud achievements. Allow me to point out a few highlights from the past year, which has been exceptional in many respects:

At SU’s December and March graduation ceremonies, new records were set in terms of qualifications conferred overall, 7 857, as well as the number of PhDs, 266, of which 40 percent went to black, coloured and Indian candidates.

And both our first-year retention and overall student success rate are consistently above 85 percent – among the very best in the country. There is no doubt that SU is making a significant contribution to human development as a national and continental asset.

In a recent annual review, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) again confirmed that SU achieved the highest weighted research output per full-time academic of all universities in South Africa. Maties is also a clear leader in innovation, registering the most patents in the country. This level of performance regularly receives international recognition, as reflected in the fact that we have been placed 11th out of 200 institutions in 48 countries on the Times Higher Education ranking of universities in the Brics countries and other emerging economies for 2016.

And among the many examples

of our social impact, a highlight was our Legal Aid Clinic’s successful High Court application to have garnishee orders obtained by microlenders against farmworkers, cleaners and security guards set aside. This has national implications for low-income earners often facing exploitation due to unscrupulous business practices.

That is not to say all is well and we have no problems. Yes, we are facing challenges – complex and demanding ones. But I think we are making good progress. Our journey of change is incomplete and imperfect, but we remain steadfast in our determination to go forward.

SU’s Language Policy is currently under review to ensure that our commitment to “multilingualism without exclusion” finds the best possible practical expression in the learning and teaching environment. This is being done in pursuance of the twin goals of greater

access and student success.

Efforts to achieve greater inclusivity are continuing unabatedly at SU. Last year, R70 million was allocated from the Rector’s Strategic Personnel Fund to boost the diversification of the institution’s staff core, especially at senior academic level, and several appointments have already been made. We are also participating in the government’s New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP).

Building greater social cohesion on our campuses remains a priority. It has been disappointing to me that we are still struggling with racism, sexism, gender violence and other forms of discrimination and abuse – admittedly nationwide, not just at SU, but that does not absolve us from doing our utmost to solve these problems.

I am glad to say SU no longer seems afraid of the T-word! Transformation has explicitly been elevated to top management level,

and our Transformation Office is up and running.

I have been encouraging an “open conversation” at SU in addressing our challenges. Critical and robust debate is intrinsic to the university as a social institution. And everyone has a right to lawful and peaceful protest under the constitution.

It is important, though, that neither academic nor administrative activities should be disrupted, that everyone’s rights should be respected and that no one should be denied the opportunity to study or work at the university. The DHET and Universities South Africa have made it clear that higher education institutions have a responsibility to protect their people, property and activities.

At the start of the new millennium, SU made a commitment to redress and development. In line with this, I announced at my inauguration last year that the

university would be establishing a bursary fund for descendants of members of the Stellenbosch community who suffered forced removals from the Vlakte in the apartheid era. I am pleased to say that the first five Vlakte bursaries have since been awarded.

Ten more descendants of Vlakte families could also be assisted with bursaries from other sources available to the university, and good contributions were made to bursaries by external funders. In 2015, SU paid out millions in bursaries and loans to undergraduate and postgraduate students – to our knowledge the most of any university in the country.

Education is the ultimate form of empowerment. Let this inspire us as we go forward in creating a community of social justice and equal opportunities for all.

● *De Villiers is Rector and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Stellenbosch*