



PROTEST MOVEMENT: Open Stellenbosch demonstrators and allies march through the campus. The university's vice-chancellor says there is no problem with student activism, as long as it does not degenerate into violence and destruction. PICTURE: DAVID RITCHE

Maties is serious about fostering transformation

University's council ready to engage students in creating an inclusive institution

THERE has been lots of talk about transformation, or the lack thereof, at Stellenbosch University lately. I want to provide the assurance that Maties is not the "racist institution" that we have been made out to be by some. That is not our policy, and we have also been working very hard to become more inclusive and welcoming to all in practice.

But, as much as it saddens me to say this, some of our students and staff members have had a different experience. This is clear from a number of incidents and also the *Luister* (or "Listen") video on social media. I found it painful viewing, because I do not want any of my students to suffer.

I am not going to defend the indefensible: discrimination, marginalisation, these things are wrong, whether consciously or subconsciously. I am sorry it happened, whether on campus or in town, and we have to fix things.

We have taken action against racism, but what is being raised by Open Stellenbosch and others goes beyond individual acts.

It speaks to structural issues, our institutional culture, whether everyone feels they belong here, that it is also their place.

We certainly want Maties to be a welcoming home to all. There was a time in the past when this university, along with others in our country, served a particular section of the population only. But that is long gone. We have moved from being a "whites only", Afrikaans university to being a non-racial, multilingual national asset – proudly serving the whole of society. Already in the year 2000, the university formally acknowledged "its contribution to the injustices of the past". Make no mistake – that was an apology for apartheid, often repeated by me and my predecessors. At the same time, the university also committed itself to "redress and development".

In 1990, a mere 5 percent of our student body was black, coloured and Indian. Today, it is 38 percent, and we are aiming for a minimum of 50 percent by 2020. So, we have made progress, even though much remains to be done.

We consider diversity an absolute requirement for excellence because it exposes us to a variety of people and ideas, which broadens the mind and enriches us.

In November last year, the university's council placed English on an equal footing with Afrikaans as a medium of instruction for the first time. This was done so that neither language functions as a barrier to access; and so that both languages are used as instruments for success. The Minister of Higher Education and Training recently

Wim de Villiers

confirmed the validity of this framework, and we consider multilingualism an asset in today's global knowledge society.

We are now in the process of implementing our new language policy. And we acknowledge that there are practical problems – especially with bilingual classes and the use of simultaneous interpretation. Task teams are investigating, and we will report back to the university council and those who have submitted complaints and proposals. Neither of our two languages of instruction is being forced on anyone. Although, again, I am not invalidating the experience of those who feel differently.

We have reached a crucial moment in the history of the university. There seems to be a gap between our sincere intentions and the reality experienced by some. This calls for deep introspection, earnest dialogue and a concerted effort to make Stellenbosch a truly "inclusive, innovative and future focused" university.

I have been promoting an open discussion since the start of my tenure in April. Meaningful dialogue requires mutual respect and a willingness to change. I remain committed to this, and we have issued an invitation to Open Stellenbosch afresh to engage in talks with management.

Last week saw two significant developments. We had fruitful discussion with Parliament's Portfolio Committee on Higher Education and Training. And a peaceful though spirited demonstration took place on our campus by protesting students and staff members.

We welcome robust discussion because universities are places of critical thinking and freedom of expression. However, that does not mean anything goes.

Earlier this year, a lecture and a career fair were disrupted, and an administration building briefly occupied. This was unacceptable, and an investigation in terms of codes of conduct applicable to all is under way. But no one is being victimised, and I am certainly not silencing protest.

What we must avoid is the danger of polarisation. As each side increasingly demonises the other, compromise becomes more difficult. We must reach out to each other in the search for common ground instead of retreating into "us" and "them" camps.

We should not be surprised by the restlessness in higher-education nationwide this year. South Africa is still in transition, and the first born-frees have arrived on campuses – old enough to think

for themselves and see the problems around them, and young enough to want to do something about it. But neither should we be alarmed. There is no problem with activism – as long as it does not degenerate into violence and destruction.

What I do find tremendously reassuring and inspiring is the conversations that are happening despite the current tensions – or maybe it is because of the troubles that Maties are stepping forward and doing their bit. Both Council and Senate have publicly declared their commitment to transformation. The annual elections in representative student leadership structures have now been concluded, and a lot of work is going into preparing them to help guide the honest discussion we need at this university.

There is a wealth of work that has been done for several years already to make the process of Stellenbosch becoming more diverse and integrated a positive one. Our "Listen, Live and Learn" initiative in student housing is a good example, an approach that is not restricted to a few units but permeates the whole of the system.

Significant steps are being taken to reinvigorate the process of change at Stellenbosch University. Transformation has been included in the restructured portfolio of Professor Nico Koopman, one of our vice-rectors. And a transformation office is being established, as well as a broader transformation committee.

Also, to ensure that our journey of transformation is based on sound research, we will be establishing two chairs for transformation, reconciliation and justice.

And we have also allocated R70 million to diversify our staff body, especially at senior academic level. This is a big challenge, though we are not the only university in this position.

There is a serious shortage of senior black academics nationwide, which we are helping to alleviate in the long run with our large output of master's and doctoral graduates from the designated groups.

Our journey of transformation is incomplete and imperfect, but we remain steadfast in our determination to go forward. That is the only way of creating a community of "social justice and equal opportunities for all" – as our mission states.

Yes, we are at the moment facing challenges, but there are also many exciting opportunities. We must go forward, as I have no doubt we will, by fixing what is wrong and celebrating what is right – together.

• Professor Wim de Villiers is rector and vice-chancellor of Stellenbosch University.