

WELCOMING ADDRESS: BUILDING THE SCIENTIFIC MIND COLLOQUIUM

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Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, it is a real privilege for me to welcome you here at this thought-provoking colloquium. I'm sure you will agree that the Boland has pulled out all the stops with lovely hot weather and beautiful scenery to make you feel at home and provide you with the setting for a stimulating and fruitful professional engagement with one another, and enjoyable collegial interaction in a more informal manner as well.

When I received the invitation to do the welcoming address today, I was intrigued by the concept of a colloquium that will contribute to Building the Scientific Mind. As an educationist, I also found the theme of this year's colloquium appealing: reflecting on Learning for Sustainable Futures, and exploring what conditions must be present in the environment for learning behaviour to emerge that allows humans, individually and collectively, to interact with their environment in ways that lead to sustainable futures certainly are most relevant and important. I trust that you will find this year's colloquium as pioneering as past colloquia have been.

I would like to say a few words about the work that Stellenbosch University is doing in what we believe will be building a sustainable future. The role of the university in this regard is certainly a complex one.

In a recent essay by Michael Burawoy (2011), Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley and President of the International Sociological Association writes about the university in crisis. I quote: "In the broadest terms, the university's positions as simultaneously inside and outside society, simultaneously participant in and observer

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of society, - always precarious – is being eroded. With the exception of a few antiquated hold outs the idea of the ivory tower has gone. We no longer can hold on to a position of splendid isolation. We may think of the era gone by as the Golden Age of the University, but in reality it was a Fool’s Paradise that simply couldn’t last. Today, the academy has no option but to engage with the wider society, **the question is how”**.

Stellenbosch University has been engaging with this and similar questions over the past decade, and over the past three years in a more focused and critical manner. The questions that we asked of ourselves are: **What is the university, and what should its place and role in society be?**

Stellenbosch University is one of the oldest universities in South Africa; its origins date back to 1866, and it received full university status in 1918. It is a comprehensive university in sense that our academic offerings span the full breadth of scientific endeavour, organised in about 100 academic departments in 10 faculties and ranging from health sciences to law. We are the only university in South Africa offering viticulture and military sciences. We have about 26 000 students on three campuses, with main campus in Stellenbosch home for about 18 000 undergraduate students. We are also the most research intensive university in South Africa, with our academics producing an average of 2.13 research outputs per capita annually and 12% of SA’s research in natural and human sciences. In addition we are one of top three universities in South Africa in terms of undergraduate student success, with a first year retention rate of 87% and an undergraduate success rate of 82 %.

Yet this institution has a troubled history. In 2000 (in *A Strategic Framework for the turn of the century and beyond*), the University acknowledged that it had been a “role player in the injustices of the past” and expressed a commitment to “redress”, which it undertook to pursue through:

- “Equity” – building a body of students and staff members demographically more representative of society; and

- “Service” – promoting development in disadvantaged communities and areas.

Adopting Hope as a leitmotif for the University is an endeavour to ensure that these commitments were realised in practice. However, they need to be realised by us playing our role **as a university**, in other words a place of knowledge and science, a place where knowledge is created, shared and applied in a scientific manner. We can never become anything else than this.

In working towards a sustainable future, we need to take into account the local conditions of the university community as well as the fact that we simultaneously form part of the global community, described by Castells (2000) as a network of local societies, cooperating and competing at the same time in a global system of networks of wealth and information”.

The global challenges are therefore also the challenges of our continent and our country. And our local problems, also those in rural areas, are part of the challenges of Africa and the global challenges of our time. These include poverty, human dignity and health, democracy and human rights, peace and security, a sustainable environment and a competitive industry.

How does the University respond to these local, continental and global contexts?

SU responds by adopting hope as the guiding motive for the University’s activities, which means that scientific knowledge is created, shared and used to the advantage of and through interaction with the world within which the University finds itself.

By using hope as the guiding concept, the University is led to ask critical questions about reality, to look at problems in a scientific manner and to use science to make a difference. In this way hope becomes a radical transforming concept. If hope is used with the assumption that a better future can be created actively through a joint search for knowledge, in service of the community, it becomes more than empty optimism and changes into a shared social resource.

Hope is created when the possible is prioritised rather than that which is on hand at the moment (with reference to Eberhard Jüngel's formulation: *Die Welt als Möglichkeit und Wirklichkeit*). This means that the SU community (researchers, lecturers, support staff, students and other stakeholders) does not simply accept the current reality as the beginning and end of everything, but takes as point of departure the assumption that another and better reality can and must be created and cultivated by creating, applying and sharing new knowledge.

Hope as Leitmotif does not only ask what SU wants to do, but also what SU is and how the University positions itself. From this perspective, creating hope is the reason why this University exists.

Through being significantly different the University wants to be significantly better. This implies liberation from the constraints of ignorance and outdated traditions and a continuous search for innovative alternatives. The University endeavours to create the conditions that will ignite the imagination of scientists to solve problems in creative ways through basic and applied research and through multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary academic activities. The three core academic functions of the university, namely scientific research, learning and teaching and expertise-based community interaction are integrated and used in the service of the private and the public good. The University builds on its tradition of excellence scientific work, but now with a sharper focus on the world within which the University finds itself.

This sharper focus has led us to identify five themes derived from Millennium Development Goals and the SA government Medium Term Strategic Framework:

- Promoting democracy and human rights
- Promoting peace and security
- Promoting human dignity and health
- Eradicating poverty and related conditions
- Promoting a sustainable environment and competitive industry

More than 20 initiatives contribute to these themes. Let me give you some examples: in promoting human dignity and health we have the Ukwanda Centre for Rural Health and the Rural Clinical School in Worcester. Locating services within rural communities facilitates greater access to health care for residents who otherwise have to travel great distances at considerable expense. At the same time, undergraduate students are provided with a diverse range of conditions in which to learn and develop, making their skills sets more applicable to the disease profiles presenting in Southern Africa and Africa. In future we hope to develop this satellite campus to include training and services by other faculties.

Another example under the theme of Eradicating poverty and related conditions is the excellent work being done in our Law Faculty to combat socio-economic vulnerability through the South African Constitution and uses specific fields of expertise to seek solutions for social and economic problems that continue to exist and that are exacerbated by poverty, unemployment and housing shortages.

A number of world-class initiatives are clustered under the theme of Promoting a sustainable environment and a competitive industry. One of these is the Centre for Invasion Biology, another is the TSAMA Hub which houses the Sustainability Institute. The Centre for Renewable Energy focuses on research into energy generation and distribution with the aim of increasing energy supply for developing regions, providing renewable energy, limiting environmental impact and finding new techniques in energy usage management.

We believe that our post-graduate students who are involved in these relevant, and in many cases multi- and trans-disciplinary projects are working towards and learning for sustainable futures. Not only are they learning that our challenges are not to be tackled from a narrow disciplinary perspective but they are also learning that we all share in the responsibility for the future. They are learning that they can make a difference.

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I would like to conclude with some profound words of Martha Nussbaum (1997: 14): "Our campuses educate our citizens. Becoming an educated citizen means learning a lot of facts and mastering techniques of reasoning. But it means something more. It means learning how to be a human being capable of love and imagination. We may continue to produce narrow citizens who have difficulty understanding people different from themselves, whose imaginations rarely venture beyond their local setting. It is all too easy for the moral imagination to become narrow in this way ... But we have the opportunity to do better, and now we are beginning to seize that opportunity. That is not 'political correctness'; that is the cultivation of humanity".

List of sources:

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