

'We are all 100% responsible to be the change we want to see'

Wim de Villiers

THE Luister video posted on YouTube recently raises very important issues regarding transformation at Stellenbosch University (SU). I found it extremely uncomfortable to watch. It contains valid lived experiences of some of my students, and I do not enjoy knowing that they suffer.

So, I am not going to defend the indefensible. Racism, discrimination, human rights violations, exclusion, marginalisation – these things are all wrong, end of story. Except, whatever is wrong must be fixed. We are attempting to do exactly that, and SU has been in a process of change for a long time, but that is not to say we have done enough.

Transformation remains a priority – because it is the right thing to do, not because of the pressure on universities this year.

The current turbulence on campuses should not surprise us, for two reasons. South Africa is still a society in transition. The legacy of the past lingers on – the inequality and poverty and unemployment. And 21 years into our democracy, our born frees are coming of age. They are old enough to think for themselves, to see the problems around them, and young enough to want to do something about it.

However, neither should we be alarmed at calls for transformation. Change is always difficult, but if it does not make us uncomfortable, we are not doing it right. That is why universities are important – because they stimulate critical thinking.

Since the start of my tenure in April, I have been promoting an "open discussion" at SU. The phrase comes from Johan Degenaar, one of South Africa's greatest philosophers, who died recently. He was known as the "Socrates of Stellenbosch" because he lived by the principle that "the unexamined life is not worth living".

If we listen and engage in a "discussion without borders", there is no way we can defend the indefensible. We have to put things right. Two recent examples are the termination of the services of a lecturer who sent a student a racist SMS, and the removal of the HF Verwoerd plaque from one of our buildings.



'TRANSFORMATION A PRIORITY': Stellenbosch University Rector and Vice-Chancellor Professor Wim de Villiers. Picture: ERHARDT THIEL

But neither am I going to tolerate the unacceptable – the disruption of classes, hate speech, violence, destruction of property, by whomever. Because these things are also wrong. However, we are not victimising anyone, and I am certainly not silencing protest. Students should be critical – that is the nature of the open discussion.

Now, let me briefly point out some of the flaws of the video. It is not accurate because Elsenburg Agricultural Training Institute is not part of Stellenbosch University, despite the fact that we accredit one of its qualifications. It is not balanced because it is not true to the dictum "hear the other side". And it is not fair because off-campus incidents in pubs or clubs are not under the university's control – though we must do everything we can to stop racism everywhere.

It is also not correct that SU does not heed transformation calls. Take the language issue. I said very clearly at my inauguration that Stellenbosch is no longer just serving one part of the population. Stellenbosch is not an Afrikaans or English or isiXhosa university. It is a world-class, multi-lingual institution, a national and international asset advancing knowledge in the service of all.

The research shows that multi-

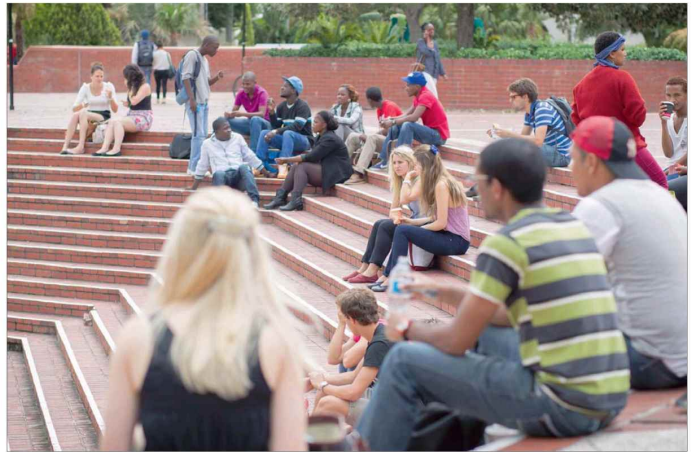
lingualism provides a competitive advantage in today's diverse and integrated society. Last November, our council decided to put English and Afrikaans on an equal footing as languages of tuition.

Now we are in the process of implementing this policy. Many courses are already offered fully in parallel English and Afrikaans streams. Other classes are bilingual. Or there is simultaneous interpreting. And as has been the case for a long time, most textbooks are in English, and one can write assignments, tests and exams in English.

Yes, there are problems with implementation – we acknowledge that. Task teams are investigating, and there is an open invitation to anyone to raise concerns. We are examining proposals from the SRC, Open Stellenbosch and others, and we will report back to campus and council.

But I want to debunk the fallacy which equates the mere presence of Afrikaans with racism. Parallels are being drawn between Stellenbosch University today and Soweto in 1976.

There is a huge difference. Then Afrikaans was imposed on school pupils as part of a system of state discrimination, apartheid. Now we thankfully have a democratic constitution, with a bill of rights, enshrining



DIVERSITY: Stellenbosch University students on the "Roopplein" square on campus.

the values of human dignity, equality and freedom, which we wholeheartedly support.

Let me quote from it: "Everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions". One qualification is that it should be "reasonably practicable", which is what we are trying to get right. Another is the need for "access", "equity" and "redress". This is partly why we also use English as a medium of tuition in line with our commitment to multilingualism and in order to equip our students for full participation in the global knowledge society.

Language is not easy to handle – to the contrary. And as American journalist HL Mencken said: "For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear and simple... and wrong".

That makes it doubly important to avoid such cognitive distortions as emotional reasoning, labelling,

overgeneralising and blaming. We are an institution of higher learning, and true to the Socratic method, universities should not be teaching students what to think but how to think. Critical thinking means you have to question unexamined beliefs, received wisdom and rhetoric.

We must go beyond borders, leave our comfort zones, put ourselves in the shoes of others. One example is our new resident placement policy. The emphasis is on greater integration so that people from different backgrounds can get to know each other. Another example is our LLL Initiative, "Listen, Live and Learn" – which is not restricted to the LLL Village of student housing units; the principles are applied throughout campus. It is based on sound academic research about the benefits of "active listening" and encourages

the pursuit of ideological pluralism, a safe space for all perspectives, reasoned disagreement, principled dis-

sent and multiple interpretations. Stellenbosch is becoming ever more diverse. We now have more than 11 000 black, coloured and Indian students – nearly 38 percent of the student body, up from 31 percent in 2008 as we head for 50 percent by 2020. Diversity is an absolute requirement for excellence, because it exposes us to a variety of people and ideas, which broadens the mind and enriches us.

So, we need to open SU even more. We are open to change, which is a collective duty of all our stakeholders. We are all 100 percent responsible to be the change we want to see, as Gandhi put it. We are committed to an open discussion, and welcome the opportunity to engage with our students and all other partners and stakeholders.

● Professor De Villiers is Rector and Vice-Chancellor of SU. This article is based on his address to new student leaders on August 26 at a scheduled event at Academia Residence