

## Transformation and excellence at SU

*PROF WIM DE VILLIERS*

Universities are complex institutions with various stakeholder groups, each with its own expectations. So, there is nothing strange about having divergent perceptions of Maties. But there is a distinct difference between perception and reality.

For example, Stellenbosch University (SU) is on the one hand being accused of “political subservience” and “undermining the Afrikaans language and culture”; on the other, it is still being denounced as an “apartheid institution” that should be teaching in “English only”.

As is often the case, the truth lies somewhere in the middle. SU is a leading higher education institution with outstanding student success, research achievements and social impact. As an asset to society, Maties serves the entire community, not only one group or the other. We are guided by the principles and vision to which we as a university community agree, and prefer to stay the course instead of being dragged hither and thither.

Another example is the new Maties admissions policy, which takes effect in March to coincide with the commencement of student applications for 2018. When Council in 2013 adopted a new vision for the University, a review of our admissions policy was initiated. It stands to reason that an institution cannot aim to become more “inclusive, innovative and future focused” without putting its words into action. And the composition of a university’s student body is largely determined by its admissions policy.

The revised policy expands SU’s admissions criteria also to include socio-economic status, in addition to applicants’ academic performance and racial classification. The principal aim is to maintain the University’s culture of academic excellence by attracting the best applicants, whilst at the same time ensuring that our student body becomes more representative of society.

The University is also mindful of the multifaceted nature of disadvantage in the South African context. For this reason, SU acknowledges the need to reserve places for socio-economically disadvantaged students, regardless of racial classification, who meet the minimum requirements for a study programme of their choice, but would not otherwise gain admission to that particular course.

The policy was properly researched and widely consulted on with various stakeholders, including all ten SU faculties and every relevant support services division, SU’s Senate (the forum of senior academics) as well as our Institutional Forum (who also represents students and the community at large). Council too convened a special meeting dedicated entirely to an in-depth discussion of the policy.

Yet we again find ourselves barraged with criticism from both sides of the spectrum – those who believe SU “is overstepping the mark”, and others who reckon it is still “too little, too late”. There clearly are discrepancies between not only the expectations of different stakeholder groups, but also between how SU sees its own identity and future, and how stakeholder groups perceive it.

Nevertheless, we remain unperturbed, knowing that the University’s reputation as a place of excellence depends on its ability to recruit and retain a diverse student body, as this enriches the learning environment. We also know that the long-term objective of the policy is to help create a non-racial and more equal society that will no longer require redress on the grounds of race and class – that would be transformation at its very best.

SU is not the only institution seeing fundamental change. Universities worldwide continue to transform in terms of teaching models, information and communications technology, student communities, curriculum and programme development, as well as environmental sustainability.

At SU, we take a systemic approach to the challenge of transformation. In other words, it affects every dimension of the University itself, and at the same time enhances our impact on the outside world. Whilst no aspect of university life remains untouched by our transformation, the University, in turn, helps renew and improve society. This is transformation *of* the University, and transformation *through* the University.

We regard transformation as a combination of purposeful change to our institutional culture in order to be a more accessible, inclusive, engaging and representative institution, building our academic excellence, while remaining relevant and responsive.

Inclusivity goes hand in hand with broadening access for all students who wish to study at SU. Since 2013, our black (African), coloured and Indian (BCI) student intake has increased from 30% to 35%. We hope that our new policies on admission and language will further advance this process, as a diversity of people and ideas broadens the mind and enhances our output as a place where knowledge is discovered, transferred and applied.

Upon welcoming our newcomer students earlier this year, I told them they had come to the right place, for the following reasons:

- The success rate of SU students consistently remains around 84%, some 10% above the average of other institutions.
- SU's retention rate is even better – 17% above the national average. Of the newcomers who were first-time entrants in 2016, 87% have already advanced to their second year of study.

The decisions taken on SU's language of instruction should also be seen against the backdrop of promoting student success and broadening access. Council's adoption of our new language policy in June 2016 – with the concurrence of Senate – was an important development.

Various factors contribute to the exclusion of students – such as academic performance, financial challenges as well as language of instruction. Not all our students are proficient enough in Afrikaans to receive tuition in that language. Similarly, some students lack English skills. We wish to cater for both these groups by providing them with full access to SU's valuable knowledge base. This is achieved by using both Afrikaans and English as languages of instruction.

In large class groups, you'll often find separate lectures in Afrikaans and English. Where class groups are smaller, all content is conveyed in at least English during lectures, whilst Afrikaans is extensively used to emphasise or summarise key points. Also keep in mind that lectures are but one part of learning and teaching. There are also other forms of learning facilitation, such as tutorials and consultations, where Afrikaans and English can be used.

The language policy, therefore, promotes inclusive multilingualism and the broadening of access. These were already identified as priorities prior to 2013 when, following a period of introspection, SU decided on a new vision. The new language policy represents a further step on our journey of systemic transformation – not because of subservience or as a reflex in response to student protest, but because it is the right thing to do.

SU continues to excel in its core functions:

- In December 2016, we conferred 5 395 qualifications, including a new record number of 138 doctorates compared to 127 in 2015. Our March graduation in 2017 is again expected to shatter previous records.
- SU academics with a National Research Foundation rating have increased from 306 in 2012 to 427 in 2016.
- In the period 2009 to 2016, SU registered a total of 98 patents, the highest number of all universities nationwide, and even exceeding Sasol and the CSIR.

- Philanthropic donations to SU in 2016 amounted to R338 million, which represented a 53% increase on the previous year. This included a significant growth in donations by individuals, mostly alumni.

This degree of excellence – despite 2016 having been called the most volatile and demanding time in higher education since 1994 by Universities South Africa (USAf) – enhances the value of our alumni's qualifications. And that should be our stakeholder groups' foremost consideration.

*\* Prof Wim de Villiers is Rector and Vice-Chancellor of Stellenbosch University.*