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**“Symposium on re-structuring science and research at Stellenbosch University
on the basis of justice, inclusion and ethical integrity”
Stellenbosch University Library Auditorium, Rooiplein, Tuesday, 21 May 2019, 9:00 to 13:10
Voice note input by SU Rector and Vice-Chancellor Prof Wim de Villiers**

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Good morning, colleagues. Sorry I cannot be here with you, but I am overseas on University business. I therefore welcome the opportunity to have my voice heard at this very important symposium. I want to thank Professors Aslam Fataar, Amanda Gouws and Usuf Chikte for taking the initiative to organise this event, as Senate members who serve on Council. This is an opportunity to reflect once again on who we are at this institution, and who we want to be.

Now, this symposium was precipitated by the publication of what has become known in my household simply as “The Article” (“[Age- and education-related effects on cognitive functioning in Colored South African women](#)”, in the international scientific journal [Aging, Neuropsychology, and Cognition](#)).

I initially learnt about it and its claims with a sense of disbelief. Reading it in detail, I was appalled and saddened: How could this work – given its insensitivity and the unnecessary pain it caused to so many people – possibly have emanated from our University?

As a clinical researcher, I know fully well our research subjects are our most valuable and vulnerable resource and we have to protect their interests fiercely and adhere rigidly to the primary principle of “do no harm”. The wonderful privilege of doing human research carries with it a tremendous responsibility. I had to reflect long and hard about what it is that our University is doing when it comes to research practices. We need to use this opportunity to think anew about how we approach these issues.

Let me say this frankly: What happened here, was wrong, and I will not defend the indefensible. This single piece of research in no way reflects the ethics, quality and values of Stellenbosch University’s stellar research programme. But, it does serve as a reality check for our institution. We have come a long way in our transformation journey, but we are still not where we want to be. We continue to be haunted by the ghosts of our past ... we have to exorcise these once and for all!

So what is to be done?

1. The unconditional [apology](#) issued by the University on 30 April was a good starting point. Let me use this opportunity to once again repeat that apology ... to the 60 women who were interviewed in the study, to so-called coloured women in general, and to the public at large. I deeply regret the hurt this article has caused fellow South Africans.

saam vorentoe • masiye phambili • forward together

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2. We will need to work very hard at rebuild trust and collegiality with our different partners and stakeholders, internally and externally. And this will have to be a long-term project.
3. And we must make sure this never happens again at our University. Our investigations will reveal possible shortcomings in our processes. I would ideally want an eventual outcome to be a protocol detailing how we should deal with the issue of “race” in research in an ethically sound way. This would ideally be an important contribution that Stellenbosch University can make to the South African higher education sector.

In a recent article in *Mail & Guardian* (10 May 2019), Christa Kuljian argues that the problem goes beyond a single study. It is a deeper problem – the systemic perpetuation of racist stereotypes in academia based on an outdated paradigm of the so-called “scientific” classification of human beings into different “racial categories”.

She quotes a statement earlier this year by the American Association of Physical Anthropologists. They said, “Racial categories do not provide an accurate picture of human biological variation.” And they added that “the Western concept of race must be understood as a classification system that emerged from, and in support of, European colonialism, oppression, and discrimination”, and that “no group of people is, or ever has been, biologically homogeneous.”

And then Kuljian makes the point that precisely because there is this underlying problem, “[t]he lesson is not only for Stellenbosch, but for every academic and research institution in South Africa and around the world to promote sound science. Each university and journal must reflect on its in assumptions in biology, medicine, natural sciences, anthropology and the social sciences.”

Colleagues, let us not despair in the face of adversity, but rather use this opportunity to reinvent Stellenbosch University and contribute to the national discourse. And for doing so, let us use the five institutional values that we have agreed upon: excellence, compassion, accountability, respect and equity. Let us make these our action guides.

I conclude with the words of the President of Purdue University, Mitch Daniels, when he addressed the issue of academic freedom on campuses: “The advance of knowledge requires the collision of ideas. Where you get complete homogeneity it just leads to dreary conformity.”

Colleagues, my wish is that you will have good, robust and illuminating deliberations at this symposium, and I look forward to engaging further with you upon my return to South Africa next week.

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