

**Conference of Rectors, Vice-Chancellors and Presidents
of African Universities (Corevip)**

Theme: 'Strengthening the space of higher education in Africa'

**Welcoming address by Prof H Russel Botman,
Rector and Vice-Chancellor of Stellenbosch University
and a Vice-President of the Association of African Universities**

Spier Conference Centre, Stellenbosch, Mon. 30 May 2011

Thank you, chairperson. *Goeiemore, dames en here. Molweni; wamkelekile. Salaam alaikum. Bienvenue. Bem-vindo. Habari; karibu.* Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Allow me to single out a few distinguished guests:

- Prof Hlengiwe Mkhize, South Africa's Deputy Minister of Higher Education and Training
- Mr Conrad Sidego, the Mayor Elect of Stellenbosch
- Prof George Magotha, Acting President of the Association of African Universities
- Prof Bruno Bekolo-Ebe, my fellow AAU Vice-President
- Prof Olugbemiro Jegede, AAU Secretary-General
- All heads of higher education institutions present here today and
- My colleagues from Stellenbosch University

Ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of Stellenbosch University and the Association of African Universities, welcome to this VIC – Very Important Conference.

Why do I attach such significance to it? This is how I see it: Africa has many challenges, but is also bursting with potential; Education holds the key to our future; Higher education is the capstone of society; and here we have the continent's higher education chiefs all in one room. Clearly, this is the place to be!

Now, the Conference of Rectors, Vice-Chancellors and Presidents of African Universities takes place every two years so that we can examine common concerns and priorities for higher education in Africa. The organisers have come up with a stimulating programme that will allow us to do that in detail over the next five days.

Allow me to set the scene by referring to Africa Day, which was celebrated last week with the theme of "Accelerating Youth Empowerment". Dr Ibrahim Assane Mayaki, CEO of the AU's Nepad Agency, explained as follows: "The recent uprisings by our youth in some parts of the continent should ... remind us that we need to ... critically look at our past in order to make a better tomorrow for all our people."

This is the challenge ... "to make a better tomorrow for all our people." So, how do we as the universities of Africa respond?

From the beginning, the university has been a place where knowledge is pursued through research, communicated through teaching, and applied through community

engagement. We should be asking ourselves what we do with all the knowledge that we generate and disseminate. What is our knowledge good for?

I think that we can only claim to be of real significance if we use our knowledge to address the societal challenges we face as a continent. This is the niche that we need to carve out for higher education in Africa: to be relevant to the needs of our people.

So, what does Africa need? The usual response is that we need solutions to our many problems: hunger, disease, homelessness, exploitation, corruption, violence, pollution, unemployment, etc.

But Africa is not just a place of pain; it is also a place of hope. With economies in Africa consistently registering a growth rate of 5% or 6%, the rest of the world is waking up to our continent's future potential.

Unesco reported last month that countries in sub-Saharan Africa have been increasing their expenditure on education by 6% every year over the past decade. The bulk of this funding has, however, gone to primary and secondary education, not to institutions at tertiary level.

Tertiary enrolment has risen faster in Africa than anywhere else – by some 66% since 1999 – but the number of students entering higher education is still only 6% of the eligible age group. This is much lower than in other parts of the world.

However, our challenge goes beyond the numbers. Quality matters too. Africa produces only 0.7% of the world's scientific research, so clearly we are not doing enough to come up with home-grown solutions to our own problems in Africa.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me leave you with this thought: It is only by putting ourselves at the service of society collaboratively that we as universities will be able to improve the prospects of future generations. This, more than anything, will strengthen the space for higher education in Africa. Collaboratively we must carve out the space for higher education in Africa by demonstrating our relevance to society.

Thank you for this opportunity, and please enjoy the Conference. It is an honour for Stellenbosch University to act as host. If you need anything, just ask the organisers. We are here to make your stay a pleasant and productive one.