

**13th Annual Conference of the South African Association of
Senior Student Affairs Professionals (SAASSAP), 19-21 October 2011**

Theme: "Student-centred and caring universities: Implications for
student affairs professionals at higher education institutions in South Africa"

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

Wallenberg Centre, Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study (STIAS), 19 October 2011

Thank you, [Dr] Llewellyn [MacMaster]. Good morning, everyone.

- Dr Choice Makheta, President of SAASSAP
- Members of the National Executive Committee

... colleagues, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen, from my side, welcome to Stellenbosch. I hope you will have a great time here with us.

Delegates from institutions across South Africa and neighbouring countries are attending this conference. This is excellent, because collaboration is very important. By sharing experiences and learning from each other we can meet our common challenges in higher education.

Higher education plays a key role in society – especially in developing countries. And student affairs professionals are at the rock face where the national resource of human potential is mined.

Chairperson, that is why I find the theme of your conference, "Student-centred and caring universities", quite apt.

Why higher education?

As you know, Africa is faced by serious problems. The continent has a wealth of resources, but this does not benefit the vast majority of people.ⁱ

Yes:

- Trade is growing;
- Turnover and revenues are up; and
- Democracy is spreading.

But:

- Only a small elite gets to profit from Africa's economic growth;
- Of the world's 42 least-developed countries, 35 are Africanⁱⁱ; and
- Very few African countries have made sufficient progress to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015ⁱⁱⁱ.

Primary education has received considerable attention, but higher education is lagging behind. This is problematic, because higher education is a critical pillar of sustainable human development.

Manuel Castells^{iv} defined the role of the university as that of an “engine of development” in the “information society” and its accompanying “knowledge economy”.

Higher education is not only a private good. It is also a public good from which the whole society stands to gain. This has led the World Bank to acknowledge that “higher education is no longer a luxury; it is essential to future national, social and economic development”^v.

Universities and the MDGs

We should ask ourselves, what is it that we as institutions of higher learning are doing to improve the lives of the people of our society?

Ladies and gentlemen, when I listed some of Africa’s woes earlier, you might have gotten the impression that our continent is indeed the basket case that Afro-pessimists make it out to be.

But we cannot allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by despair.

Let me briefly tell you what we are doing about it at Stellenbosch. We have distilled five themes from the international development agenda on which to focus our core functions as a university – learning and teaching, research, and community interaction.

We believe that by (1) eradicating poverty and related conditions; and by promoting (2) human dignity & health; (3) peace & security; (4) democracy & human rights; and (5) a sustainable environment & competitive industry we can make a significant difference.

These are the themes of our institutional advancement campaign, the HOPE Project^{vi}. And student success is a key goal of this initiative.

A holistic approach to student success

The themes of our HOPE Project help to make us a socially engaged institution, which is what we believe universities should be.

We aim to produce graduates who have the necessary knowledge, skills, experience and self-confidence to not only make a good living for themselves and their families, but to also *make life better* for their communities and the rest of society.

We have found that the best way to do that is by:

- maintaining academic excellence; and
- building a value-driven student culture.

In our experience, a holistic, integrated approach to student development is central to the achievement of each of these goals, because it can play a role to:

- aid the academic project; and
- promote a sense of civic responsibility.

Part of a holistic approach to student success is the understanding that student affairs professionals are at the centre of building a new society – student by student and institution by institution.

You, ladies and gentlemen, are creating a new society, a new country, a new world.

And you are doing it by creating a new institutional culture – an inclusive and equitable one.

We know that poverty is a problem in South Africa and elsewhere in our region and on our continent. And we know that higher education is an “engine of development”.

What we need to do is to fine-tune that engine to suit the terrain. We can only feel satisfied that there is fair access to our institutions once the daughter of the farm worker has the same opportunities as the son of the farmer.

And levelling the playing field does not stop at providing fair access to all. It is also about assisting students to cope with the demands of university life, which is quite a step up from school, especially in light of the problems in our secondary education system.

An initiative such as our First-year Academy^{vii} helps a lot with this. When students arrive here, they can count on the support of academic staff, tutors, mentors, managers and support staff to help them deal with making the academic transition, but also with all kinds of other challenges, be they social or financial, etc.

Our First-year Academy has certainly helped us maintain a good throughput rate.

Conclusion

In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, I would like you to think of this conference as a step on a journey of hope. Our vision is an Africa free from poverty, where the human dignity of all people is protected, where our social and ecological systems are healthy, and where peace, security and democracy are safeguarded.

I have argued that higher education is a fundamental component of realising this vision, and that student affairs professionals have a key role to play in creating the kind of universities we need – student-centred and caring.

May your deliberations the next few days be fruitful and invigorating.

ⁱ Africa Progress Panel (APP). 2010. *From Agenda to Action: Turning Resources into Results for People*. Geneva: Africa Progress Panel.

ⁱⁱ *The Real Wealth of Nations: Pathways to Human Development, Human Development Report 2010*, United Nations Development Programme (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)

ⁱⁱⁱ See <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals>

^{iv} See Manuel Castells, *The University System: Engine of development in the new world economy* (Washington DC: The World Bank, 1991); and Manuel Castells, “Universities as dynamic systems of contradictory functions”, In: Muller, J, Cloete N and Badat S, eds. *Challenges of Globalisation: South African debates with Manuel Castells*, (Cape Town, South Africa: Maskew Miller Longman, 2002)

^v Task Force on Higher Education and Society. 2000. *Higher education in developing countries: peril and promise*. Washington, DC, World Bank.

^{vi} See <http://www.thehopeproject.co.za>

^{vii} See <http://stbweb02.stb.sun.ac.za/ctl/fya.html>