

NATIONAL IMPERATIVES AND THE MICROPOLITICS OF HIGHER EDUCATION CHANGE: INSTITUTIONAL VOICES

Case Study of Stellenbosch University

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Madam Chair, fellow panellists, ladies and gentleman

Thank you very much for the opportunity to address such an informed audience on matters of institutional change, particularly in the domain of higher education. Your expertise in these matters is reassuring and allows me to share more frankly my ideas about the need for change and transformation at Stellenbosch University. The issues that I will share, admittedly, are my own observations and experiences, which I have reflected upon whilst seeking to act as a catalyst for change within an environment with a strong culture and tradition of doing business in their particular way – attempts which are not often in step with the national imperatives for change in the higher education sector. Against this background, allow me before I continue to make three specific comments in order to contextualise my observations of our institution.

1. Prof Chris Brink, the current Vice-Chancellor, is clearly committed to transform the institution into a national asset for the country. He recognises that the university must reach out to both external and internal stakeholders for support in its quest to implement organisational change. The Vice-Chancellor sees the danger that a lack of transformation at the university could endanger its status as one of the leading universities in South Africa. The result of this would be unacceptable, as the institution also wants to be successful globally.
2. There are small numbers of staff members and students at Stellenbosch who are committed to change. The drivers of transformation in the university find this support encouraging and continue to try and grow a critical mass of change agents.
3. I am the first to acknowledge that in certain domains the university lags significantly behind other tertiary institutions. The legacy of the university's close alliance with the government of the past makes this understandable. The general public and other stakeholders argue that transformation is not happening at a faster pace. To undo an institutional culture that has become so endemic in structures and people's minds, require time. It will take a holistic, committed and consistent buy-in of all stakeholders within the university to expedite change. Senior management and all the university's trustees should strategically drive this.

DIFFICULTIES

I would now like to share some of the difficulties the university, its administrators, staff and students continue to experience – the result of which place tremendous pressure and frustration on institutional progress towards change and inclusivity of ideas, attitudes and practices. Since 1994 Stellenbosch University came under increased pressure from both government and the public to transform. Given its legacy of racial exclusivity and worldviews held, this external pressure has not

been welcomed by a large section of the university community. Certain forms of resistance have been subtle; others continue to fly in the face of democratic practice, inclusivity and diversity. The acknowledgement and celebration of difference, be it race, gender, ethnicity, language, worldviews, religion or other forms of social identity, is emphatically underscored by the national imperatives to effect institutional change in higher education. The rather slower than expected pace of cultural change at the university was recently highlighted by the controversial case of the university's decision to award an honorary doctorate to the late Bram Fischer, an Afrikaner and well-known communist. The contrasting voices within the university have been a timely catalyst to engender a much needed, critical debate. This debate along with others such as diversity and the language issue demonstrates that the media, in particular the Afrikaans media, impacts on highlighting transformation or the lack thereof at Stellenbosch University. I will come back to the role of the media vis-à-vis the shaping of the change discourses at the university.

The question posed is whether the university is out of step with the national imperatives prescribed by government especially how such imperatives can expedite cultural transformation in the institution as well as influence the minds of those associated with it. With regard to race and gender the picture looks still rather skewed. Closer examination of the demographic profile of staff members at Stellenbosch University reveals an institution still predominantly controlled by White men. At this stage all ten deans of academic faculties are still white men although the Theology Faculty recently appointed its first female dean. Earlier this year the university appointed its first female Dean of Students. There is only one woman out of seven members serving on the senior management team. The senate and council reflect the same patterns of limited numbers of women.

Clearly the equity profile of staff remains much to be desired and the critical question remains how can these low equity targets be strategically and expeditiously improved. While, in my opinion, it could be argued that many people especially at the selection level lack the political will to nominate suitable candidates from the designated groups, there remains a larger structural problem of often creating an environment that is conducive and invitational to change. Even when the university succeeds in appointing Blacks the retention rate remains poor. This is especially true for academic appointments. The pro-transformation groups see budget cuts and the closure of the Diversity Office as a setback for transformation. The employment opportunities for people from the designated groups are furthermore retarded by the persistent low staff-turnover. While this may be a matter for the attention of senior management, the critical question raised is whether national government has a role to play in pressing for internal changes at the level of achieving cultural diversity or whether the institution sets itself strategic targets and timeframes to get all their internal stakeholders on board.

In respect of the diversity of students (n = 21, 972 for 2004) we find that up to 70% of them are still white. Many faculties/departments still show a serious shortage of Black students. A few departments, wittingly or unwittingly still exclude large numbers of students of colour – in which case the university needs to revise the level of autonomy and, paradoxically, lack of diversity and change consciousness these departments display. The serious question is why certain departments are not in line with the university vision of transformation and why

the monitoring procedures are not seen as effective and working. The gender profile of students for 2004 showed a decrease in female students, compared to 2003 when female students were in the majority, (43.3% females vs. 52.3% males). Our diversity profile for 2004 is increased by the 1941 (9.2%) international students, some from other African States. In terms of the university's global vision of attracting the best from elsewhere, much more could be done not only to boost these numbers but also to remain responsive to change.

Over and above race and gender, language remains a major exclusionary factor and hampers access of potentially excellent students. Even though the university's demographic profile is improving, we are still experiencing great difficulty with limited access for Black South Africans. The university may fast be in danger of becoming unaffordable to many potential students, except the best and brightest who have access to bursaries and grants – and of course the wealthy will continue to pay their way. Black South Africans continue to operate on the assumption that lectures will be conducted in Afrikaans – and in many of the undergraduate courses this is still the case because Afrikaans has been declared the academic language in a multilingual context. The unevenness of change across the various faculties and departments in terms of bilingual and/or English medium lectures remains highly problematic against the background of the university's official language policy to deploy and develop Afrikaans as medium of instruction. Only three out of ten faculties offer instruction in English. The question of language (i.e. exclusive Afrikaans and the prevalence of an Afrikaans culture) in student accommodation/residences – coupled with very expensive residence fees, makes this still largely a non-reality for Black students.

Furthermore, the misperception still exists among sectors in the university that the academic quality of certain Black students is questionable. Here too there can only be a lack of coherent strategies for recruitment and development of students. Policies ought to be put in place to correct the gross educational (read: racial) imbalances of the past that continue to haunt us and other universities.

SUCSESSES

Lets highlight some of the successes that we have experienced. In the midst of the politics at micro-level the question raised is whether the university has been able to respond to national imperatives, especially as they relate to issues of access, equity, gender and race. The encouraging answer is that in 2002 the University Council appointed Prof Chris Brink, and outsider, as Vice-Chancellor and Rector for the first time. Since his appointment he accomplished significant transformation successes. He increased the number of Blacks on the senior management committee, addressed the discriminatory practices against women, especially their working contracts and salaries, and succeeded in changing some of the institutional practices, policies and structures. He also scored some symbolic victories like the hosting of the ANC conference in 2002. In so doing he was able to show both sides that Stellenbosch can work within the new South Africa.

At student level the institution experienced a significant increase in Black and female students in the Health Faculty. Some of these successes lead to new problems, for instance, the physical plant at the medical faculty was designed mostly to accommodate males! We are seeing marginalised student groups getting established and institutionally supported. The Black Students Association,

South African Students' Congress (SASCO), ANC Youth League and Lesbi-Gay are examples. Our Student Representative Council is being challenged to amend its constitution to increase the representivity of marginalised groups. In 2002 the first African male was elected onto the SRC and the pattern of inclusivity continued since then. While a Coloured female was elected as SRC president in 1998 – 1999, the first African female was only elected in 2004. There is also institutional encouragement for our students to integrate into regional and national student activities.

The successful integration of Black students into the residences however remains limited. The university appointed a coordinator in 2004 to work exclusively with students living in residence and to bring about a renewal of student culture. Although we must still debate whose culture we are talking of, we are currently promoting a value-driven rather than a rule-driven approach to shift the minds of students. We have launched programmes to develop student role models to destroy the myth that diversity equals a lowering of standards or quality. We also launched a transformation programme through our highly successful student leaders USA Tour Programme. These students are trained to become change agents for transformation.

THE WAY FORWARD

Having examined some the difficulties as well as successes Stellenbosch University has experienced, I would like to highlight the following issues to point towards a new transformed future for the institution:

1. Debating the need for change and developing a culture that is conducive to transformation and inclusivity: It is no secret that the university is still stuck in an entrenched Afrikaner culture that is not always invitational to Blacks and those who do not speak Afrikaans, or those who are made “other”. There is still reluctance by the dominant culture to critically evaluate and change some of the traditions and practices that would lead to a more inclusive environment for others. This could in part be due to a culture of fear among members of the older generation. One gets the sense that the students are far more ready to embrace and deal with change. Perhaps it is due to the students having open opportunities, in contrast to their professors who are entrenched in institutional patterns of fear of breaking with tradition, fear of loss of rewards such as promotion, or simply “falling out” of favour with the dominant culture.

The debate of what it means to be an intellectual, and of interrogating the issues of transformation in a constructive way, must be honed in the civic and academic arena. With regard to the latter it must be pointed out that the university is committed to excellence and has a well-respected teaching and research track record. During 2003 it had an enrolment figure of 36% postgraduate students and graduated 889 students at the Masters and 112 at the Doctoral levels. That is a significant contribution by South African standards to the labour needs of the country. Our research is well supported by industry and is recognised internationally. However, the institution has not sufficiently explored the relevance of the current content of the curricula or the research it undertook post 1994. Are we preparing graduates that could serve the needs of South Africa and the continent well? Are we doing research that can help solve the serious social problems affecting South Africa and the continent? Are our graduates ready to be successful globally? These are

hard questions, but academics will have to become true intellectuals in that they must consistently hone their critical voice regarding institutional cultural change against all odds that may inhibit the pursuits of the richness of diversity.

2. Policy alignment: Externally, Stellenbosch University can still do much to move in tandem with national policy imperatives for higher education transformation. The university has not been affected by the recent mergers of institutions and is therefore strategically better placed to proceed to fast-track change and expand its identity – in line with our diverse national cultures, irrespective of race, gender, culture, ability, religion and language. Internally, the university needs to synchronise its policies of recruitment (staff and students), medium of instruction, academic programmes, departmental governance, community service and research - in line with the national plan for higher education. In order to build an environment for change and inclusion of all, the university must of necessity build capacity through ongoing, progressive training of staff and student leadership.

The difficult question Stellenbosch University needs to ask itself is whether they will only act when national government intervenes – which might be necessary if all else fails – or whether it wants to move the locus of control into their own institution. Attempts to bring about change at the University are seriously hampered by the processes and structures in place at the institution. Attempts to move the transformation agenda forward by bringing about changes to the structures of policies are still largely unsuccessful. The university needs to embrace a new political literacy of change, inclusion and power sharing in order to keep a pace with other national processes of transformation. To this end the university must become visionary and align their goals with their human and financial budgeting processes.

3. The role of the media and the university. We all realise that the media does not only mirror events but in fact actively shapes, albeit selectively, opinions and perceptions. We have witnessed this in the case of the decision to award Bram Fischer posthumously with an honorary doctorate. An interesting question one may ask is why the tough questions about transformation at Stellenbosch are left largely to the Afrikaans media as this perpetuates the notion amongst some of those opposed to change that this is indeed the only real Afrikaner institution. Transformation processes at the university is clearly made difficult by the exclusive role of the Afrikaans media in the daily operations of the institution. Unless government officials and the general public reads Die Burger, a prominent Afrikaans newspaper, and Die Rapport, they will not appreciate the pressure brought on the university to protect Stellenbosch as an institution for the Afrikaners. The Afrikaans media has a significant impact on the management of the institution and the support from its powerful alumni.

The university has the ability, albeit it is a tough battle, to break the stereotypical portrayals of the university as representing exclusively the old guard, or an institution that is out of touch with national transformation practices. Where better to begin by opening the way with a more amicable press of all languages than through its strategic activities with students and the broader community as “good press” can enhance the university’s image.

Forging partnerships, both local and international, as have recently been demonstrated can only put Stellenbosch on the path to develop into a quality African university.

CONCLUSION

There is indeed great symbolism in what happens at Stellenbosch University precisely because of its legacy of apartheid. The institution has the potential to be seen as either going back into the laager or contributing to an open democracy and nation building. Currently there is an intensified fight for ownership of the institution. If the traditionalists succeed, the university will not be able to support the national imperatives set by government. The Vice-Chancellor and the University Council however are committed to advancing the national goals of the Higher Education Sector. They want to reposition the university as a national asset in service of a democratic South Africa and the African continent. Although progress is still slow there are clear signs of hope that Stellenbosch University will break the barriers and become a success story that has the potential to be viewed as a best-practice model, not only in teaching and research but also in reflecting a vibrant and diverse student and staff community. The vision statement of the University clearly states that it wants to become a role player. The drivers of transformation are determined to position the university as an active participant and not to remain a spectator. For this process to be expedited government and other stakeholders must continue to exert pressure and rewards that can help move the institution to the point where transformation is viewed internally as a national imperative that is non-negotiable. Government can support this, among others, with prestigious research grants or other contract research in diverse social and scientific areas to strengthen our young democracy.