

## **‘STUDENT HOUSING AFRICAN SUMMIT’, 30 MAY TO 3 JUNE 2010**

Association of College and University Housing Officers International,  
Southern African Chapter (ACUHO-I SAC)

Summit theme: ‘Re-Creating Futures’

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

Delivered at the Wallenberg Centre of the Stellenbosch Institute for  
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Thank you, chairperson.

- Mr Mike Schultz, President of ACUHO-International
- Ms Sally Traxler, Executive Director of ACUHO-I
- Prof Roelf Visser, President of the Association’s Southern African Chapter
- Prof Derrick Swartz, Vice-Chancellor and CEO of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University
- Prof Brian O’Connell, Rector of the University of the Western Cape

... distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, good evening. It is good to be with you this evening. And I am glad to see all of you here.

Welcome to each of you who have joined us. *Goeie naand en hartlik welkom. Wamkelekile. Karibu. Bienvenue. Bem-vindo.*

This is the “Student Housing AFRICAN Summit”, so collaboration across the continent is very important. By learning from each other – and from our partners elsewhere in the world – we can meet our challenges.

Student Housing is a critical issue – even more so for us here in Africa, where there is a great need for improving people’s lives.

**I would like to argue that higher education is crucial for development, and that better Student Housing is crucial for better higher education.**

If we want “graduates that meet the challenges of the continent” (as stated in the Summit Programme), then we need to re-conceptualise Student Housing in Africa.

If we are serious about “Re-creating Futures” (Summit Theme), we need to re-think Student Housing.

## **WHY HIGHER EDUCATION?**

As you know, Africa is faced by serious problems. The continent has a wealth of natural resources, but this does not benefit the vast majority of people (Africa Progress Panel, 2010).

Yes:

- Trade is growing;
- Turnover and revenues are up; and
- In 12 days’ time, Africa will even be hosting the soccer World Cup for the first time.

But:

- Only a small elite gets to profit from Africa’s sound economic growth;
- Of the world’s 24 least developed countries, 22 are African (UNDP Human Development Index, 2009); and
- Very few countries in Africa have made sufficient progress to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015 (APP, 2010).

Education is one of the areas lagging behind. This is problematic, because – in the words of Nelson Mandela – “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”

For us working in this sector, it is important to note that higher education is a critical pillar of sustainable human development. Higher education imparts knowledge and produces leaders and wealth generators in society.

If one looks at the rate of participation in higher education in Africa, the alarm bells go off. In 2005, the number of students entering higher education stood at just 5% of the eligible age group (World Conference on Higher Education, 2009).

Comparable figures were 72% in the United States, 60-64% in Eastern European countries, such as Slovenia and Russia, and 10% in India (Teferra and Altbach, 2003).

One of the goals of this Summit is to:

*... lobby the Association of African Universities [AAU] and other regional educational associations as well as political bodies such as the African Union [AU] and its member states and governments to invest in Student Housing projects to harness educational opportunities to the benefit of learners and students across the African continent.*

We support this goal, and it is a message that I will convey to the executive committee of the AAU.

In the past, little empirical evidence showing the link between investment in higher education and economic growth and poverty reduction existed. But more recently, evidence has emerged showing that tertiary study is both a determinant and the result of income.

Higher education is not only empowering on an individual level, it is also a public matter from which the whole society stands to gain.

This has led the World Bank, Unesco and donors to acknowledge that “higher education is no longer a luxury; it is essential to future national, social and economic development” (Task Force on Higher Education and Society, 2000).

This is the message that the AU and its member states must get. And what we want from them is – as Elvis Presley used to sing – “A little less conversation, a little more action please”.

The problem is not a lack of resources. Between Africa’s own wealth and that of its partners in the international community, there’s enough money to go around. What *is* in short supply is sufficient political will.

## **UNIVERSITIES AND THE MDGs**

Let us now turn the gaze inwards. What is it that we as institutions of higher learning are doing to improve the lives of the people of Africa?

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 the Afro-pessimists make it out to be. But at Stellenbosch University, we refuse to be overwhelmed by despair.

We have distilled five themes from the international development agenda on which to focus our core activities as a university, which is 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 will change the world.

## **STUDENT HOUSING – AN HOLISTIC APPROACH**

These development themes help to make us a socially engaged institution, which is what we believe universities should be.

At Stellenbosch University 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, Student Housing 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.

We try to accommodate as many “vulnerable” students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds as possible in res because it promotes academic success.

Our approach is to try and achieve greater integration between students’ classroom and out-of-class experiences. And our mechanism for this is a Residential Education Cluster system. This is aimed at creating living-and-learning communities as an extension of the classroom.

It works as follows:

- A number of residences (male, female and co-ed) and private student wards are grouped together in a cluster
- They all get to share such facilities as meeting halls and study rooms
- Lecturers and other speakers are invited to address Clusters at mealtime, followed by discussions
- Senior students act as mentors to juniors
- Students provide peer support in study groups

## **DEALING WITH DIVERSITY**

Diversity in the student body creates challenges and opportunities for universities the world over. In Africa, ethnic divisions in society have on occasion spilled over onto campuses. Here in South Africa, racial discrimination has been a major problem.

The report of the Committee on Transformation in Higher Education under Prof Crain Soudien of the University of Cape Town last year bemoaned the fact that racism, sexual harassment and xenophobia are still prevalent on various campuses.

All of this impacts on Student Housing. The challenge is twofold:

- On the policy level, institutions should promote integration in such aspects as room placement
- On the practical level, there should be programmes to help students to get to know each other so that they can live together harmoniously

## **CONCLUSION**

This Summit is 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 progressive Student Housing is an essential part of improving higher education.

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

Welcome, again, to Stellenbosch. Enjoy your stay here, and feel free to make use of our facilities. If you need anything, just ask any South African. We need the practice at being good hosts for the World Cup!

Thank you.

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