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ABSTRACT

It is the responsibility of educational institutions to instil in their students an understanding of and respect for human diversity and the interdependence of all people. Showing an institutional-level commitment to social responsibility lays the foundation for this to happen.

South Africa's transition from apartheid to non-racialism serves as a case study, as does the experience of Stellenbosch University (SU) in transforming itself from an ethnic university into a national asset.

Re. South Africa, the traditional African philosophy of Ubuntu is identified as a central value that focused attention on the common humanity of all people. Re. SU, the University's acknowledgment that it had contributed to injustices in the past was a turning point, as was its commitment to seek redress through social development.

SU's HOPE Project serves as an example of a transformative institutional programme. The lesson is that in order to produce graduates who can help create a better future for humanity, universities need to themselves become the kind of institution where social responsibility is nurtured.

KEYWORDS

Africa, Centre for Chinese Studies, China, Confucius Institute, diversity, education, HOPE Project, Mandarin, Nelson Mandela, social responsibility, South Africa, Stellenbosch University, transformation, Ubuntu, Xiamen University

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1. INTRODUCTION

Stellenbosch University is located in the Cape Winelands, 50km from Cape Town, South Africa. We have 10 Faculties, roughly 28 000 students, and a total staff contingent of approximately 2 800.

Our roots go back 152 years, but officially Stellenbosch University was established in 1918. Today, we are recognised as one of the leading research-intensive universities in South Africa, and as one of the top two universities on the African continent. We have a high student success rate, and are considered a leader in community interaction.

Looking at the theme, “Maintaining the Cultural Diversity of the World and the Social Responsibility of Universities”, one could argue that it is the duty of educational institutions to instil in their students respect for diversity and the interdependence of all people. The question is how to do that. It has been our experience at Stellenbosch University that if you show an institution-level commitment to social responsibility, you lay the foundation for your students to themselves become agents for social good.

2. VALUES

Let us take one step back, and look at the broader South African experience – particularly our transition from apartheid to a non-racial democracy in 1994. A central value of our new order is the idea of “Ubuntu”, a traditional African philosophy that holds that “a person is a person through other persons”.

Ubuntu goes beyond individuals’ relations with each other. It has implications for educational institutions too. Ubuntu takes universities out of the ivory tower and plants their feet firmly on the ground. It asks of them to be of service to society.

Now, this is where the parallels between Ubuntu and the traditional Chinese attitude toward study and research become apparent. To pursue reliable knowledge and apply it to the benefit of the community in recognition of our shared humanity is similar to the approach of “Seeking truth from facts”, the historically established Chinese expression.

3. SCIENCE FOR SOCIETY

The demand of relevance in higher education translates into the idea of science for society. Clearly this has universal applicability, but in developing societies educational institutions face an additional moral obligation.

Early on in its history, Stellenbosch University had been seen as a “volksuniversiteit”, an ethnic university exclusively serving the needs of just a section of the population – mainly Afrikaans-speaking whites (Thom, 1969). But in time, reform-minded intellectuals on our campus would participate in a critical debate that would eventually undermine the very foundations of apartheid.

This would eventually lead to an acknowledgment by the University that it had contributed to “the injustices of the past”, accompanied by a commitment to “redress”, which the University undertook to pursue through “equity” and “service” (Stellenbosch University, 2000). Broad consensus now exists that the University is a “national asset” serving the whole of society’s needs without any exclusion (Botman, 2010a).

4. CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Our vision of moving away from exclusivity and embrace inclusivity also broadened our horizons beyond our national borders. We have built strong relations with institutions the world over, including Xiamen University, our partner in China.

Stellenbosch University is privileged to host a Confucius Institute, which serves as a bridge for liaison between South African society and that of China. We are also one of only a few Southern African universities offering Mandarin. And our Centre for Chinese Studies is considered to be a leading institution for analysis of the multifaceted relations between China and Africa.

Interaction between China and Africa famously dates back to the 15th century, with the celebrated visits of Admiral Zheng He to the east coast of Africa. Modern Chinese-African relations date back to the foundation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. The last two decades have seen a strengthening of our economic, political and cultural bonds, with many mutual benefits.

China is Africa's second largest and South Africa's largest trade partner. It is one of the top five investors in Africa, and an important donor to the continent. On the other hand, Africa's natural resources help to keep China's phenomenal growth engine going. And, at the same time, Africa needs to develop its own economy. The challenge is to ensure that the relationship remains mutually respectful and beneficial into the future.

5. SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Looking at developmental needs, Stellenbosch University has distilled five themes from international agendas to guide our core activities (Botman, 2010b). Our five themes are the eradication of poverty and related conditions, and the promotion of human dignity and health, democracy and human rights, peace and security, as well as a sustainable environment and a competitive industry.

Our faculties have come up with such initiatives (Stellenbosch University, 2010) such as an interdisciplinary water institute, a centre for agribusiness leadership development and a new rural clinical school to train more doctors for marginalised areas. We also have a collaborative network with five other African universities called the Partnership for Africa's Next Generation of Academics (PANGeA, 2010).

All of this is known as Stellenbosch University's HOPE Project. By using hope as its guiding concept, the University is led to ask critical questions about reality, and to use science to make a difference. In this way hope becomes a transforming concept, not mere wishful thinking. Hope is created when future possibilities are prioritised over what is on hand at any particular point in time (Jüngel, 1969).

6. GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES

The notion that universities should produce graduates for the public good is well established (Walker, 2010). Graduate attributes include qualities that prepare students to be agents for social good (Bowden et al, 2000). In order to produce graduates who can meaningfully transform society, you need to become the sort of institution where graduates of this nature can be nurtured (Van Schalkwyk et al, 2010).

At Stellenbosch we strive to produce graduates “who can play a leadership role in society as responsible and critical citizens in a democratic social order” (Stellenbosch University, 2000) and who can embrace diversity and thrive in an increasingly multicultural, multilingual world.

7. CONCLUSION

Our experience has shown that if you want to instil in your students respect for cultural diversity and interdependence, you have to start with showing an institutional-level commitment to social responsibility. In order to produce graduates who can meaningful transform society, you need to become the sort of institution where graduates of this nature can be nurtured (Van Schalkwyk et al, 2010).

Another way of saying this is to quote former South Africa president Nelson Mandela, who famously said: “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”.

Universities the world over should pursue close collaboration to increase their impact. Only by exposing our students to other ways of doing things can we properly prepare them to truly be global citizens.

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