

“The role of universities in cultivating leadership”

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More, almal! Good morning, everyone. Thanks for coming out so early in the morning ... *nogal* in the middle of the Cape winter! That’s dedication.

Now, we are here to discuss a very interesting topic – “The role of universities in cultivating leadership”. The way I want to tackle this is to tell you two stories. They will practically illustrate what we are talking about.

For the first one, let’s go back to 1976 – in fact, quite appropriately so close to Youth Day, back to June 16 that year. I was a student at the time – at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), and a member of the SRC.

We were politically aware, but the events of that winter’s morning in Soweto still caught us by surprise. The shock waves of children taking on the might of the apartheid state – and paying for it with their lives – quickly spread throughout the country ... and the world. *Mens besef daar is groot fout as die owerhede bereid is om kinders dood te skiet; en dit ter wille van ’n idee – apartheid.*

We struggled with responding to what had happened. We had long and difficult debates. Our Rector, Prof Jakes Gerwel, suggested to us we take a whole week and spend it in a symposium. And we did so. We had people speaking to us every day, and into the night.

The issue was, what was it that impacted us and to which we should respond? We had all kinds of responses, from we must do something out of solidarity with the people of Soweto, to no, it is not about that, we must stand up for our own rights.

Twee jaar later het dinge verder uitgekristalliseer toe een van ons Teologie-dosente, prof Jaap Durand, ons uitgedaag het om die moeilike vraag te vra – almal sê daar’s iets verkeerd met apartheid, maar wat behoort ’n teoloog te dink is verkeerd daarmee?

Ja, apartheid het tot onreg gelei, gesinne opgebreek en mense verarm ... maar wat was die teologiese vraagstuk? Hy’t ons laat praat en dik boeke lees, en so het die insig ontstaan dat iemand wat in apartheid glo, moet glo dat mense onversoenbaar is met mekaar. Dan kan daai persoon mos nie ’n Christen wees nie, want in die Christendom is versoening die hart van die evangelie.

So, we started thinking what would it mean if we translated this theological insight into political action, leadership and engagement with society. It led to interesting debates. If we actually think apartheid takes its point of departure in the irreconcilability of people, what would it mean if you believed the opposite – i.e. that people are reconcilable?

Out of that developed leadership, and a commitment to people living in poverty, to standing up, to seeking transformation at our university – all from our debates.

The result was that UWC would never be the same again. Out of an apartheid “bush college” emerged a university with leading students and staff that would have a lasting impact not only in the Western Cape but on the rest of the world. Everybody – into Geneva

[headquarters of the World Council of Churches] – knows that the argument to undermine the theological justification of apartheid was developed at UWC, specifically by students with one professor and a lot of books.

Now, instead of being closed, universities should become sites of struggle for thought leaders. You have to fight against wrong thinking, thoughts that push us back to irreconcilability and injustice.

It is the idea of building free communities that are open, characterised by freedom of conscience, freedom of speech, freedom of association ... and universities are the places where these debates should take place, where a diversity of people and ideas should help us go forward.

So, to enable students to have the crucial experiences that will prepare them for a leadership role in society, that is the most important thing we can do. Yes, teach them a few things, and expose them to the best thinkers of their time.

Now to my second story. The year is 1989, and we are still here in the Western Cape, but at a different university – Stellenbosch.

The country is still in turmoil, and youth are engaging with issues around them. The apartheid government still has an iron grip on the country, and the liberation movements are still banned, but progressive students decide they want to find out for themselves what is going on.

So 18 student leaders from Stellenbosch decide to travel to Lusaka to meet with the ANC at its headquarters in exile. And all hell breaks loose. The students are threatened with expulsion, they are harassed by the Security Police, and they are made out to be traitors – all for wanting to pursue free thinking, a clear understanding and peaceful dialogue.

Why this controversy? Aren't student leaders supposed to take an active interest in society? And had there not been many other "safaris" before that to Lusaka and Dakar and Harare for talks with the ANC? So, why the fuss around this particular visit? I think there were two reasons: These were young people; and they were specifically from Stellenbosch.

They represented a University that had been pivotal to the idea of Afrikaner Nationalism for the beginning. So, if young critical voices at Stellenbosch were growing louder, it would become harder to keep everyone else "on song".

This past weekend, we had a reunion in Stellenbosch of the Maties who went to Lusaka 25 years ago. And I told them we owed them a debt of gratitude – not because they spoke to the ANC per se, but because they were prepared to do their bit to help fix what was so obviously wrong with South Africa at the time. They took the lead in doing the right thing, despite the cost to themselves. They were young, but they showed Maties the way towards the future. Five years later a political settlement had been reached in South Africa, and the country held its first democratic elections.

And the impact of their actions at their alma mater was definitely significant. If 1976 was a turning point for UWC and the country as a whole, 1989 was a turning point for Maties. Stellenbosch would never be the same after the students' trip to Lusaka.

Today, Stellenbosch is no longer a university only serving a section of the population. We are now a national asset. *Stellenbosch is nie meer "volksbesit" nie. Ons behoort nou aan die land ... en al sy mense. En dis studente wat die Universiteit daardie kopskuif help maak het.*

Dis hoekom ons nou daarna streef om 'n plek te wees waar denkleiers vir die toekoms opgevoed word. In Stellenbosch University's new Vision 2030, we've set ourselves the goal of becoming a place where thought leaders are educated for the future. And we are doing this by becoming more inclusive, more innovative and more future focused.

We want our students to examine life critically, and to be active and engaged citizens. The country certainly needs thought leaders for the future. Twenty years into our democracy, a lot has been achieved, but many challenges remain ... both old and new. And the way to make a difference, is to cultivate thought leadership.

An important vehicle that we are using for this purpose is our Institute for Student Leadership Development. It is named after Dr Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert, a former student, lecturer and eventually Chancellor of Stellenbosch University. He had devoted his life to building democracy and non-racialism in South Africa.

It is no longer is enough for universities to just provide graduates with good academic qualifications. We are working to develop well-rounded thought leaders who are committed to ploughing back into society; who will build this country and make it the kind of place it should be.

By acting responsibly as a leader – in the interest of society – young people can give real substance to the idea that what Africa has to offer the world is Ubuntu, the notion that “a person is a person through other persons”.

Now, in conclusion I want to tell you one last story. It is about the girl child. In the Millennium Development Goals there is an emphasis on empowering the girl child, especially in the developing world and especially on our continent.

There has been a big drive the past few years on getting the girl child educated – first primary school, then high school. Now the girl child is at university. Are universities ready to be challenged by the girl child? Their way of thinking, challenging reality, looking at the future, challenging other people.

It is clear to me that the girl child will be THE leader of the future. They will be the change makers of the moral system we've inherited from the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. They will no longer be there just to bring children into the world.

They will be the transformers of the economy. They will have an impact – not only on politics. They will change the economy; it will look at human beings in a different way.

If you don't believe me ... Boko Haram has seen this future. They have seen the real leaders. They have looked at women. And they, like traditionalists everywhere from all religions, are scared, because they know what it will do. It will destroy patriarchy and its values. It will build a new sense of human dignity. And it will lead us into a new world, where a new diversity of engagement will take place that we have not really seen as yet.

Traditionalists will attack education because they see that as the vehicle of the leadership of the girl child. We will have to learn to keep those spaces open. And we must remember that the girl child will go through a more difficult time the next few years especially in poor communities as conservative forces try to retard their progress.

Thank you.