

'New Voices in Science'
Stellenbosch University (SU) PhD Colloquium
Stias, 2 December 2011

Welcoming remarks by Prof H Russel Botman
SU Rector and Vice-Chancellor

Goeie more, almal, en welkom hier. Molweni; wamkelikile. Good morning, and welcome to this colloquium, an exciting new venture for us.

It is the brainchild of Prof Arnold van Zyl, our Vice Rector for Research. He challenged our Postgraduate and International Office to put together an event that would give our new PhD graduates an opportunity to share their research with a wider audience.

This is very important because in today's world, the ever increasing pace of development in the sciences can easily widen the gap between the scientist and the general public.

If we don't "mind the gap", it can impair the ability of people to make informed decisions, and leave them suspicious and even hostile to science.

So, it is a good thing to emphasise to our researchers that they have an obligation to share their research with a lay audience, and to empower them to do so. This is exactly what this colloquium aims to achieve.

Ladies and gentlemen, you are in for a treat. Today, 25 PhD candidates will be presenting their research findings to us – 19 verbally, and 6 by means of poster presentations in the foyer.

The challenge put to them was to extract from their PhD dissertations something interesting, something relevant – and to make it understandable to the general public.

Now, it is often hard to see the forest for the trees, especially when you have slaved over every page of your thesis for so long, and agonised over every word. Letting go of the intricate details is easier said than done.

But, our new scientists were helped to find their voice by our Postgraduate and International Office, who arranged science communication workshops and worked closely with them in other ways.

Just judging by the titles of the presentations on today's programme, they certainly succeeded in grabbing the attention and stimulating our curiosity.

What has this process meant to our PhD candidates? You will have to ask them yourselves – maybe you can use the question time at the end of each presentation – but I think they will confirm that it was a worthwhile exercise to reflect on the relevance their work, so that its true significance could be revealed.

This is in line with how we see the role of science and higher education at Stellenbosch. We think universities have a responsibility to be relevant to people's needs. This conviction of ours is captured in our HOPE Project, which – in a nutshell – entails a science-for-society approach.

Well done to the organisers of this event, and good luck to the participants. They will each get only 10 minutes to share some aspect of their research with the audience, and another 5 minutes for questions.

Their brief was to do it in an accessible, entertaining and informative way – and I'm sure they are going to live up to our expectations.

Mind you, it is not a competition. But selected members of the audience will provide written feedback to the candidates after the event.

Ladies and gentlemen, let us celebrate the achievements of our latest crop of PhD candidates, and may their efforts inspire the next generation of African scientists.

Thank you, and enjoy the colloquium.