

**Translated version of the forum article by Prof Russel Botman on a language model for Stellenbosch University as published in *Die Burger*, Saturday 23 May 2009**

*The language model which provides for parallel medium instruction in the first year of study at Stellenbosch University as from 2010, will be applied in four faculties – Science, Economic and Management Sciences, Agrisciences and Engineering. It is an effort to find a justifiable middle ground that will best serve the study needs of current and future students and that will ensure a place for Afrikaans at the University, writes Prof Russel Botman, Rector and Vice-Chancellor, in the accompanying article.*

In essence, this much debated teaching model is part of a model of growth for the University. It has arisen from fundamental questions on what type of university Stellenbosch would like to be in the next decade. What are the challenges that the University will have to confront to perform in a sustainable manner in the fields of teaching and learning, research and its active involvement in the community and society in which it functions?

It is a fact that the University cannot isolate itself from the socio-political and economic realities of our country. Over many years, SU has proven itself as an institution that moves with the times and that can make the necessary changes to its strategic thinking and direction through a process of critical introspection and self-renewal. (The directional content of the *Strategic Framework for the turn of the century and beyond*, which was accepted by the SU Council in 2000, speaks volumes about this adaptability of SU.) Hence our commitment to the development agenda of our country and the continent.

In step with this endeavour, and in execution of the mandate of the *Strategic Framework*, Management has to consider the demands and challenges confronting the University and deal with them in a responsible manner.

In addition to all the universal challenges with which universities struggle – academic excellence, international competition in the sphere of research, and relevant teaching in a global context – in the face of decreasing government grants and shrinking external funding, there are unique problems that have to be managed effectively. Among these are issues such as accessibility, diversity, student success and the contributions by SU to offer equal opportunities to people who were previously excluded from the University. These are just a few of the facets of a broader self-renewal programme to ensure that, in all respects, SU achieves the objectives that it has set for itself to become a 21st-century university.

In the midst of all these challenges is the issue of language, and more specifically the language of instruction. In contrast to other tertiary institutions, where language is dealt with in a straightforward manner, SU does not want to follow the path of Anglicisation. It is our stated endeavour to promote Afrikaans as a language of teaching and science in a multilingual context.

This poses particular challenges to SU, because of the obvious continuous tension between language exclusivity and the University's endeavour to be accessible to all who wish to study here. In the spheres of diversity and demographic representation, SU is significantly behind the other higher education institutions in the country and this has already been pointed out in the reports of government bodies. The danger is that any form of language exclusivity can easily be converted into more nuanced forms of racial exclusivity. This would be in conflict with the University's commitment to an inclusive culture which is welcoming to everyone.

Even in circles where there is strong support for the inevitability of change, there often is insistence on "transformation in Afrikaans", which in essence means that Stellenbosch should become a place where only white or coloured Afrikaans speakers can study. Black South Africans and Indians are only welcome "as long as they can overcome the hurdle of Afrikaans"; alternatively, they have to be willing to learn Afrikaans or, as it is sometimes phrased: "we should unlock Afrikaans for them".

This is a point of departure that not only denies people access to an excellent University, but that also does not take into account important trends in secondary education and the future student market. Census data indicate that we can experience a levelling in white Afrikaans student numbers over the next decade, largely because of lower population growth. This situation is complicated by the fact that the language choices for learners at school are no longer limited to Afrikaans and English – and this obviously has implications for the learning and teaching situation at an institution such as SU.

A further factor is the small number of successful coloured Afrikaans school leavers. An analysis of the previous census figures showed that the Afrikaans coloured market, particularly in the urban areas, indicated that, for various reasons, it had a preference for English or was multilingual. On the other hand, the participation of coloured Afrikaans speakers from the rural areas in higher education is distressingly low and it is a fact that this picture will not change much over the next few years without significant initiatives. (SU's schools partnership project was created, among others, to intercept this problem and this initiative will enjoy priority over the next few years. Thereby we want to honour our undertaking that SU will be as accessible to the child of the farm labourer as it is to the child of the farm owner.)

Most experts agree that the expectation that Afrikaans-speaking coloured people, particularly those from the rural areas, will help to achieve the diversity objectives of SU is not realistic in the foreseeable future. The University's primary growth over the next ten years will come from urban coloured students who have a good command of Afrikaans, but who prefer to study in English (hence the larger influx of urban coloured students at our neighbouring English universities). But regarding language, SU has to gear itself increasingly to meet the study needs of black and Indian students who do not necessarily have exposure to Afrikaans at home. The challenge therefore is to manage the language of instruction in such a way that previously disadvantaged groups are not again excluded from SU on the basis of language.

With due allowance for all these realities, Management is serious about finding a teaching model within the framework of the 2002 Language Policy and Plan that will serve the learning needs of our students in the best possible way, but that will also enable the University to fulfil its overarching obligations to the greater South African society. The teaching model approved by the SU Council is not a blueprint. It creates space for further discussion in an effort to find a justifiable middle ground that ensures a place for Afrikaans through a teaching model that enables a student to study in Afrikaans or English with exposure to the other academic language.

Our point of departure is a model in which the first year of study is presented by way of parallel medium instruction in the large faculties to help students bridge the divide between school and university and, at the same time, to give the student an opportunity to master the key concepts and core material of his subject in his first language. This will increase the chances for successful study in the first year.

In the senior years of study (and in this respect we are currently holding further discussions with the academic community), Afrikaans and English may be used as languages of instruction in different variations in a way that will ensure effective learning by all students – also by students who initially have little or no communication skills in Afrikaans. The specific model will be co-determined by the unique nature and the needs of the faculty or department. Over the next few days, our academic leadership will be discussing teaching challenges in the senior years of study with members of the SU Council. This discussion will form the foundation for the teaching model for the senior years of study that Management, with the consent of the University Senate, will submit to Council for consideration.

Through this inclusive and pragmatic approach, we wish to create a language model for SU that will be responsible, fair and reasonable towards all our students. We want to use it to eliminate the frustration and confusion about what they can expect in the classroom, ensure a place for Afrikaans in undergraduate study, fulfil our higher obligations as a university and produce a multilingual graduate who can function effectively in a competitive labour market and in a diverse society.