

Opening of Research Commons

STIAS: 9 May 19:45

Dinner Speech – Prof Arnold van Zyl, Vice-Rector (Research)

The celebration this evening is more than the opening of the Research Commons: it is a celebration of the University's commitment to

- nurture the culture of research
- accelerate postgraduate throughput
- increase in research output

In a broader sense it also reflects the commitment of the University to

- Expand the body of knowledge - and to
- Provide the highly skilled individuals

needed to move South Africa from a resource based to a knowledge based economy.

I would like to highlight the contribution that the Library makes – in collaboration with the Faculties and the other support divisions – towards the operative Foci of the Institution:

What are these operative foci?

We need to -

- Diversify and rejuvenate the research cohort at the university
- Increase the postgraduate student success

- Broaden the knowledge base
- While, ensuring the sustainability of the Institution.

We have seen the attractive facility - the Research Commons. However, what is not apparent is the underpinning philosophy - the research commons will be the space where the various capacity building and generic support for postgraduate students and staff will come together.

It will also act as a social space where pg student and staff can engage across the disciplinary boundaries in a informal setting – in my experience creating the context for such discussions are key to creating innovation.

We believe that the support services and novel space will contribute to Diversifying **and rejuvenating the research cohort at the university – here diversity is used in the broader sense – people and ideas.** Generic support for postgraduate students – beyond the narrow disciplinary support from their supervisors – **is key to postgraduate student success** - Our modest aim is to reduce the throughput times by 15 % and to halt the dropout rate of postgraduate students.

In terms of broadening **the knowledge base**, The Library contributes substantially to this focus and in many instances has become a leader in the country and continent. There has been exponential growth of our institutional repository – in fact, I am led to believe that we are the only institution on the continent that only accepts an electronic version of a thesis or dissertation. The significant issue here is that all of our current theses and dissertations are available to anyone that has access to the internet. And, given that a large component of our research output addresses African issues, it makes good sense to have his research output

accessible from anywhere in Africa. We are delivering on leaving a scientific footprint in Africa.

Our commitment to sharing our research output with the world and leaving a scientific footprint in Africa is exponentially enhanced by the rapidly growing institutional repository – SUNScholar. We are adding published research articles to this institutional repository. In October of last year, Stellenbosch University became the first African university to sign the Berlin Declaration on Open Access. Concomitant with this signing is the fact that we will be the first African institution to host the Berlin Conference on Open Access. I would like to take this opportunity to extend an invitation to attend the conference to fellow Deputy Vice Chancellors of Research or representatives from their institutions.

In keeping with the principle of increasing the visibility of Stellenbosch University research output and sharing that with the rest of the world, the University has become the first institution in the country to offer its academic staff the opportunity to publish their research output using open source publishing platform. The use of the Online Journal Systems to publish Stellenbosch University journals is best summarized by one of our leading researchers. He pointed out that local journals that convey critical and relevant research material for the African context will now have exceptional visibility. In fact, the research output in these journals (local journals published via OJS) will potentially have greater visibility than any of the leading academic journals.

The last focus is that of sustainability. We all acknowledge that institutions of higher education function within tight financial constraints. Today less than half of our budget comes from treasury and we seek mutually beneficial partnerships to ensure sustainability. One of the significant partnerships that impacts on the research productivity of the University is that with Elsevier – the largest publishing house of scientific research. They have

contributed to increasing access to research material and have engaged in other research support activities such as author workshops.

I have tried to be as brief as possible to demonstrate that Stellenbosch University is committed to increasing research output. By the same token, everything (within constraints) is being done to share this output with the rest of the country and Africa. The Minister has indicated that South Africa needs to be a catalyst for the development of Africa. Stellenbosch University, as a significant national higher education resource, is and will continue to act as a such a catalyst.

In conclusion, the research commons is one link in a strong Stellenbosch University chain to deliver quality graduates and research to address national and continental imperatives. Facilities such as the research commons enhance this delivery.