

**Higher Education Aids 2012 Conference Dinner,
Cape Town, 29 November 2012**

**Remarks by Prof H Russel Botman,
Rector and Vice-Chancellor of Stellenbosch University, and a
Vice-President of the Association of African Universities**

Distinguished guests, conference delegates, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, it is a great pleasure to be with you.

I want to share some thoughts with you about where we are in terms of higher education and HIV/Aids, as well as the challenges that remain. Essentially, my assessment is that we have much to celebrate, but that does not mean we should let down our guard. In fact, we seem to have entered a new era of HIV/Aids – one that is posing new demands, and therefore requires new responses from us.

So, where are we in terms of HIV and AIDS? The news coming out of the field is encouraging. In terms of prevention, our communication campaigns seem to be working. The message seems to be getting through, with the result that HIV prevalence has stabilised.

We have also made good progress in terms of treatment. Now that the country has an extensive antiretroviral programme – the largest in the world – millions of people are getting the treatment they need.

But with the good news come new challenges. Let's take antiretroviral therapy (ART). The success of our national antiretroviral programme has increased the workload of clinics and hospitals many times. Staff members feel overwhelmed because clinics are overstretched. Those needs must be addressed. And we also need a shift in our thinking – from crisis management to long-term planning for patients who now have a future in the long run.

Let's also look at the success of the communication campaigns. Yes, most people are getting the message – but is a single message appropriate for everyone? The HIV and Aids situation is becoming more complex. Shouldn't our messages change to suit the circumstances?

Are our communication campaigns nuanced enough for our complex realities? Highly differentiated messages are needed – especially on our campuses. We don't have homogenous student bodies – to the contrary. You can't give them all the same message.

I also think we should get away from a fear-based strategy, especially on our campuses. Higher Education Institutions are supposed to be places where you teach young people the value of knowledge. If they understand a problem, they can do something about it, instead of living in fear. Our campuses are nurseries where tomorrow's leaders get a chance to grow and develop.

We need to empower our students with critical-thinking skills. That's the way to produce a new generation of leaders who think critically. We should be providing our students with opportunities to engage with the world around them. In that way we will produce engaged citizens, and leaders willing to place the public good before self-interest.

Another dimension of the successes that have been achieved so far in combating HIV/Aids, is that those working in this field may feel threatened by the very progress that has been made. Professionally, they may worry about their employment security. The challenge is to realise that we have built up a whole lot of expertise that can be applied in related fields. And there is need for this kind of expertise not only in our own country but on the rest of our continent and elsewhere as well. So, are we ready to change our perspective and reinvent and reapply ourselves?

I said earlier that we are making good progress, but there are still huge challenges left. Those who find themselves on the margins of society, still face a great risk of falling victim to HIV and AIDS. I want to mention a programme at my University run by our Africa Centre for HIV and AIDS Management. They use educational theatre to spread the prevention message to farmworkers in the Winelands. And they involve students in these productions, so that the learning becomes a two-way process. The students learn as much about the harsh realities of life as the farmworkers learn about HIV/AIDS prevention & treatment.

This is absolutely necessary, because those harsh realities still exist despite changes in our country since 1994. The prevalence of HIV and Aids is linked to the social conditions of the population. There is still massive poverty and inequality in our society; still far too many people with health problems; and too many who are not treated with the human dignity they deserve. Human rights are being violated, and democracy without restorative justice rings hollow. Violent conflict and insecurity threatens peace; and our very existence into the future is being threatened by practices that are environmentally unsustainable.

These are the kind of challenges that the Millennium Development Goals are seeking to address, but our progress since their inception 13 years ago have been too slow. And until we conquer them, we won't defeat HIV and Aids. We therefore need a more holistic approach.

That's the only way to counter the growing despair out there; the despair of people who have little to lose. We need to provide them with hope – not empty optimism, but the prospect of a better future based on a realistic assessment of the challenges, and an unwavering commitment to finding appropriate solutions.

Seen this way, the role of higher education becomes crucial. In our teaching it is our task to open our students' eyes. In our research it is our responsibility to be relevant to the needs of our people. And in our community interaction it is our duty to serve.

This science-for-society approach lies at the heart of the HOPE Project of Stellenbosch University. Hope is important because it energises us to do what must be done.

I said earlier that I think we have entered a new era of HIV and Aids in South Africa. There was a time when activism was required to get a national antiretroviral programme. Now that we have one, and now that the prevalence of HIV seems to have stabilised, and the prevention message is getting through, all that energy seems to have dissipated.

So, what we need now is courage to face up to the challenges that remain. Courage ... and a new kind of leadership – leadership for human dignity; leadership inspired by a new humanism.

Ladies and gentlemen, let us take up this challenge in higher education; let us equip and deliver the new generation of leaders that we need now. Thank you.