

## **Prof Arnold van Zyl: Thinking Africa from the Cape Panel**

“We acknowledge our complicity with the injustices of apartheid and reconfirm our commitment to leave a scientific footprint in the community.”

These were the words of Prof Arnold van Zyl, Stellenbosch University’s Vice-Rector for Research, in his introductory comments to the “Thinking Africa from the Cape” panel (Locations and Locutions Lecture Series, Stellenbosch, 7 June 2011).

Prof Van Zyl was talking about the aims of the HOPE project, and its focus on the “proven academic excellence of Stellenbosch University on human and environmental concerns”.

### **The full text of Prof Van Zyl’s speech follows:**

As you know, we were fortunate to host university heads from across our great continent last week for a meeting of the AAU. A recurring theme at the meeting was the “critical need to develop a higher education system that would aid development on the continent”.

A prerequisite for this is the necessary funding and other resources for universities from government, and the intellectual framework to support these goals from the institutions.

This lecture series – and the initiative of which it forms part – does exactly this. We are here tonight to build the intellectual resources to put higher education in Africa on a proper footing. A revitalised higher education sector is crucial to human development in Africa.

As an African University in a developing region, Stellenbosch University’s research, teaching and community engagement are driven by the imperatives of simultaneous excellence and relevance informed by a diversity of people and ideas. Our core activities are guided by five themes that have been distilled from national and international development agendas:

- Eradication of poverty and related conditions;
- Promotion of human dignity and health;
- Advancement of democracy and human rights;
- Maintenance of peace and security; and
- The creation of a sustainable environment and a competitive industry.

Collectively the initiatives undertaken under these themes are known as the Stellenbosch University HOPE Project.

The structure hosting tonight's initiative – the Graduate School and African Doctoral Academy of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences – is one initiative of the Stellenbosch University's HOPE Project.

The HOPE Project aims to focus the proven academic excellence of Stellenbosch University on human and environmental concerns.

In doing so we acknowledge our complicity with the injustices of apartheid and reconfirm our commitment to leave a scientific footprint in the community.

In a policy document adopted by Senate in March this year, Stellenbosch University states that it is "committed to creating hope in and from Africa by means of excellent scholarly practice".

Listen carefully: "Hope in and from Africa", not "for" Africa.

Our project is a progressive effort by an institution from Africa to "ask critical questions about reality, to look at problems in a scientific manner and to use science to make a difference" in Africa.

In this way hope becomes "more than empty optimism" — it becomes what I would call a "radical transforming concept". This means it is "transforming" also for us as a university. Like all higher education institutions in South Africa, transformation is an ongoing process to make us more open, relevant and non-discriminating; to redress past inequalities; and to meet the national and continental need for development.

We would like to measure transformation in education primarily by asking the question – who benefits from what we do?

This requires purposeful action, and I trust the input by panelists and audience members in this lecture series will prove me correct when I say that it will also require courageous conversations.

Finally, ladies and gentlemen, with reference to tonight's topic, "Thinking Africa from the Cape", let me swim against the tide of those who would tend to categorise South Africa and the especially the Cape as somehow "un-African".

If we believe the latest thinking in paleo-ecology, the Cape region can lay claim to having produced the earliest early modern humans around 150,000 years ago, when sea-level change pressed a small group of the only surviving homonids up the folded mountains of the Cape, forcing a diet change to seafood and the geophytes of the fynbos. This was a contributory factor to the success of this group.

Archaeological, linguistic and genetic evidence bear this thesis out. So, perhaps a useful starting point for the discussion, "Thinking Africa from the Cape", is a reflection that, maybe, "the Cape thought Africa".