



THE DIMINISHING FUTURE OF AFRIKAANS AT STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY

By Dave Steward, Chairman of the FW de Klerk Foundation

Reports that students have been prohibited from speaking Afrikaans - even in private conversations - at the University of Stellenbosch - are deeply disturbing. They are the latest development in the sorry decline of the language at South Africa's oldest (and once-upon-a-time) Afrikaans university.

According to an article in Rapport on 14 March

- female students allege that they have been threatened with punishment if they speak with one another in Afrikaans in their residences;
- 17 out of 18 students surveyed at the University's Tygerberg Campus reported that they had been "spoken to" because they had used Afrikaans in their residence;
- students at the Minerva residence said they had been warned that they would be excluded from the residence's welcoming programme if they used Afrikaans in informal spaces;
- some students had been threatened when they had asked for Afrikaans to be used in dual language classes; and
- students said that they had reported these problems to the university authorities without much reaction.

In a statement on 10 March the University appeared to dismiss these charges as "misconceptions and untruths". However, it did not deny that they had occurred. It simply said that they were "still being investigated" - but that if they had occurred "it would be due to an incorrect application of the (University's English-dominant) 2016 Language policy - *and would not be "condoned"* by the University (emphasis added).

The University went on to insist that it would "continue ensuring that a welcoming atmosphere is created for all students to thrive as they make Stellenbosch their academic home." Well, if there is any truth in the allegations in the Rapport article, the students involved have definitely not experienced "a welcoming atmosphere".

If the University wishes to be true to the spirit of inclusivity it must investigate the latest allegations with all the rigor with which it has, in recent years, investigated - and responded to - complaints of exclusion from other sections of the student body.

- In 2015 it reacted quickly, comprehensively and sympathetically to the systemic complaints lodged by the Open Stellenbosch movement;
- In September 2015, the Executive Committee of the University Council, castigated one of the Council's Members, Piet le Roux, for an "anti-transformational statement" that he had posted on Twitter - and called for "possible sanctions" against him. Le Roux's tweet, posted in his personal capacity and directed at the existential problems facing Afrikaans as a university language throughout the country, stated that "Blade Nzimande and 'transformania' won't win. Support the Afrikaanse Alumni Association". Le Roux was, no doubt responding to a statement that Higher Education Minister, Blade Nzimande, had made on 13 May, that "there remains an urgent need to radically change the demographics of our professoriate; transform the curriculums and research agendas; cultivate greater awareness of Africa; eliminate racism, sexism and all other forms of unjust discrimination; improve academic success rates and expand student support."
- In February 2016, the University took rapid and draconian action against two female students who had been accused of "black-facing" (it later transpired that the young women, who were traumatized by their treatment, had actually dressed up as aliens - with purple faces - for a fancy-dress party).



During the past 20 years the university's language policy has moved from Afrikaans as the unquestioned primary medium of tuition; to a situation where it was the default position; to parity with English; and, since 2016, to the primacy of English - and now, to allegations that even the private use of Afrikaans is being informally discouraged. How has this happened - in a province where Afrikaans is the primary language and where there are already three other universities that provide tuition in English?

These developments have been driven, overwhelmingly, by the University's own predominantly Afrikaans-speaking leadership. Most of those involved are decent, intelligent and honourable people. However:

- some see themselves, in the first place, as academics committed to promoting world-class standards. They reject the idea that universities have any special role in promoting this or that language. They sincerely believe that academic excellence can be better achieved by adopting the world language, English, as the sole language of tuition;
- others have bought into the ANC's argument that Afrikaans is a language of exclusion - and that it is indelibly tainted by its association with the past. They are ashamed of the role of Afrikaans universities under apartheid and are determined to jettison any associations with their pre-1994 Afrikaans identity as fast as they can;
- others believe that they will inevitably have to bow to the demands of the ANC Government and protesting students to transform in the direction of demographic representivity. They imagine that the more they co-operate, the better they will be able to ring-fence core academic interests;
- many Afrikaans commentators, students and parents have - for purely practical reasons - little problem in accepting the switch to English. They think that emersion in English will assist them in a country where it has become virtually the sole language of business and government. It will also be better for their children to study in English should they decide one day to emigrate.

The University will be reviewing its language policy this year. This will be an excellent opportunity for it to investigate in depth, the degree to which its 2016 policy is achieving its stated objectives. It should conduct a rigorous assessment of the actual language situation at the university based on independent monitoring and confidential opinion surveys, to establish:

- to what extent it is actually giving effect to section 29(2) of the Constitution that states that "everyone (and in particular, Afrikaans-speaking students in the Western Cape - most of whom are Coloured) has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions..."
- how, exactly, does the progressive erosion of Afrikaans at the university "advance multilingualism"?; and
- is there any basis to the concerns expressed by Afrikaans-speaking and other sections of the student body that they feel linguistically and culturally excluded? Is the principle of inclusivity being applied equitably to all sections of the university community and student body?

South Africa's future as a multicultural and multilingual society might be at stake.