

The HOPE Project: A Rector's view of leading a major capital campaign in Africa

Prof H Russel Botman, Rector and Vice-Chancellor, Stellenbosch University

Input at the AAU's COREViP, 2 June 2011

Introduction

Good afternoon, everyone. I want us to use this session to talk about university advancement. And I thought I would tell you about our experience at Stellenbosch University to get the ball rolling.

I am also looking forward to taking your questions later on. Let us use this as an opportunity to strengthen higher education everywhere in Africa.

'Money makes the world go round'

The issues we have been grappling with at this year's COREViP are profoundly important – not in the first instance for our own institutional reasons, but because universities have a central role to play in human and social development. We should never lose sight of the fact that we are in higher education to serve our people.

Precisely for this reason, the topics covered so far were all spot on. These include virtual and distance learning, the role of information and communication technology (ICT), quality assurance, enrolment rates, capacity building for science and innovation, strategic planning, transformation and internationalisation.

These challenges are shared by all higher education institutions. So, how do we as African institutions address them? How do we – in our dealings with the rest of the world – become the experts and the lead partners?

There is one big obstacle we have to overcome before doing anything else, and that is money.

As you know, we operate in a context of dwindling resources for higher education. This is true the world over, and Africa is no exception. It affects all of us, regardless of the level of state funding we receive. Budgetary pressures are mounting everywhere.

Now, it is against this backdrop that partnerships are vital. And key to attracting the right investments is an institution's strategic positioning.

This is my main focus today. I will firstly look back on how Stellenbosch University's HOPE Project – a major capital campaign in Africa – came about. Then I will identify some lessons that we have learnt – the hard way. Finally, I will conclude with a glimpse into the future of sustainable higher education in Africa.

Origins of HOPE

Let me start with some Fast Facts about Stellenbosch University. As you know, we are situated at the southern tip of Africa, in the historic town of Stellenbosch, 50km from Cape Town.

Stellenbosch University is one of 23 public universities in South Africa. The country has a combined head count of 521 000 students in higher education contact tuition.

Stellenbosch has 28 000 students (of which more than $\frac{1}{3}$ are at postgraduate level), 10 faculties, 4 campuses; and 891 academic staff members.

Our history goes back to 1859, but we were officially established in 1918. Today, Stellenbosch is one of Africa's leading research universities.

Now, the transformation of Stellenbosch University is a very interesting story. Once known as the so-called "cradle of apartheid", having produced a number of apartheid prime ministers, we have since become a "national asset" providing equal access to all.

This new direction was captured in an important policy statement in the year 2000, our "Strategic Framework for the Turn of the Century and Beyond". In it, "[t]he University acknowledges its contribution to the injustices of the past ... and commits itself to appropriate redress and development initiatives".

When I was appointed Rector and Vice-Chancellor in December 2006, I dedicated my term of office to the tangible realisation of this commitment. In my installation address (Botman, 2007) I pointed out that we faced the challenge of "relevance". We would have to find a way to move "from success to significance".

I proposed to my University colleagues that we establish a "pedagogy of hope" at the University. This was inspired by, amongst others, the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. He had asked what demands democracy placed on the curriculum. He argued that the needs of the poor should take priority, pointing out that in the long run everyone would benefit.

I felt that by infusing our pedagogical outlook with this kind of hope, we would be able to become not only "significantly different" from our past, but also "significantly better" for the future – in terms of our excellence and commitment to the people of our country and continent.

Now, I had to decide whether to sell the idea to my colleagues slowly-slowly ("*polepole*", as one says in kiSwahili), or whether to boldly set a course and get everyone to come on board. I decided on the latter approach. In my experience, a high takeoff speed is crucial for liftoff. And the fact that you might still need to build your plane as you fly it should not deter you.

So, I went to our University Council and argued that by harnessing our strengths, by following a science-for-society approach, we could demonstrate our relevance as an institution. By taking on some of society's toughest challenges, we could position ourselves as the ideal partner for those wanting to make a difference in the world.

My colleagues and I had looked at local, regional and international development agendas, including the UN's Millennium Development Goals. We had formulated five themes to guide our activities as university: teaching and learning; research; and community interaction.

Our themes are fighting endemic poverty and related conditions; promoting human dignity and health; consolidating democracy and human rights; deepening peace and security; and balancing a sustainable environment with a competitive industry.

I am happy to say that we got the full support of Council.

The next step was to galvanise academic and support staff around these themes. The University responded with enthusiasm, and we were flooded with proposals based on existing expertise and programmes.

A committee sifted through them, and by 2008 we had a solid batch of 21 strategic hope-generating initiatives. The list has grown since then; we now have almost 30 initiatives resorting under the HOPE Project.

You would have received booklets and brochures and newspapers about the HOPE Project in your Conference packs. They contain detailed information about most of our initiatives. But we can also make more information available to anyone on request. And you can also visit our website, www.thehopeproject.co.za.

Back to the story. I knew that before we could ask for resources from outside, the University had to show its own financial commitment. To put it bluntly, we had to put our money where our mouths were.

So, we went to Council and motivated for support to get the ball rolling. Council took existing University funds and reallocated R320 million (approximately US\$46 million) to this strategic positioning project.

We then requested funding support from the Stellenbosch Trust, who provided us with R190million (US\$27 million). The Stellenbosch Trust is the custodian of endowments to the University. The funds we got were earmarked for staffing and resourcing our efforts, and building our capacity.

So, what is the overall financial target that we set ourselves? It was to raise at least R1.75 billion (US\$250 million). We had set our sights high, but this is what was required, so we stuck to our guns.

In between all of this, we benchmarked, we studied, we visited other institutions who had also embarked on major funding campaigns. Then we came back and interpreted it as our own.

The learning curve was steep, but we were as eager and bright-eyed as first-year students, and it seems to have paid off.

The “silent” phase of our campaign started in 2007, followed by the public phase, which started with the launch of the HOPE Project in July last year. So far, we have raised R900 million (US\$129 million).

Remember, our goal is US\$250 million by 2015, so we are over halfway. But international experience shows it gets more difficult towards the end.

So, we still have a long way to go. And despite all we have learnt so far, we have by no means figured it all out. None the less, there are some important lessons that I can share with you at this point.

Vision, Vision, Vision

The **first lesson** is that vision is everything. It is all about deciding where you are heading, and communicating that to your constituency as best you can.

A clear vision, encapsulating an easily identifiable goal, is important for several reasons. It attracts the attention of outsiders, it invigorates academics and professional staff, and it lets you tell a simple story of what it is you want to achieve, why and for whom.

Your vision must be tied to the core functions of the university: teaching and learning, research and community interaction.

In our case, we knew we wanted to build a pedagogy of hope in higher education. The challenge was to turn it into something you can sink your teeth into. It required lots of deliberation, consideration, debate and dialogue, but the advantage of such a process is that you build consensus.

This is important, because you definitely need internal buy-in to make a campaign work. This brings me to the **second lesson**, namely the value of institutional support and commitment.

The value of institutional support and commitment

I will look at a few key structures: Council and Senate, as well as Deans and Management.

Council

Our Council took public co-ownership of the HOPE Project. And they made the first financial commitment. This was key to leveraging external support. It significantly enhanced the credibility of our advancement campaign.

Senate

The support of Senate was vital, because it represents a vital constituency. Leaders of our various HOPE Project initiatives are members of Senate. It was here that they could serve as role models to other academics.

Deans and Management

Stellenbosch, being a comprehensive university, consists of 10 faculties. It was crucial to gain the support of all our Deans. This was also the case with the various support functions, and the top management of the University.

It is very important to motivate and empower leaders at all levels in the University to take co-ownership of the institution's advancement campaign. I am very grateful for the successes that we have achieved with this.

Let me now turn to the **third lesson**, which is about strategic utilisation of resources.

Strategic utilisation of resources

We had to benchmark resources to ensure that we had the necessary human, technological and knowledge capital to achieve the campaign goals.

The principle that guided us was that "structure follows strategy".

University Advancement

We built on existing strengths to create an integrated University Advancement Division. We subsumed three separate, but interrelated departments into University Advancement, namely (in alphabetical order): Alumni Relations; Communication and Liaison; and Development.

It made sense to streamline our communication, liaison and fundraising strategies, and to ensure that we got strong support among our 130 000 alumni worldwide.

All three interdependent functions now have one reporting line, directly to me. So, I am in a good position to give you a bit more detail.

We had an intensive session on human resource planning and strategic deployment, which enabled us to add resources where they were most needed.

To get to our staffing plan, we calculated the large number of prospects to be approached in the life of the campaign, we noted the necessity of good research and proposal-writing skills, we recognised the importance of a good customer relations, and we identified the need for database management. Then we went about recruiting the right people to support our actions.

We also realised how important our alumni are. They live all over the world, in good positions, and are keen to make sure their Stellenbosch qualifications retain – and even grow – in value. We elevated Alumni Relations to a key entity and continue to build it so that our alumni can easily contribute their networks, their contacts, their expertise and their financial support to their alma mater.

On the Communication and Liaison front, we had a very competent team in place. But we realised that we had to extend our reach even higher. So, we engaged a professional service provider to help us conceive of a marketing campaign aimed at grabbing the imagination of the public and the media.

We are very pleased with how this effort has increased the University's exposure in the media in ways and volumes never seen before.

Advisory Committee

Every great project needs ambassadors and spokespeople of substance. We formed a Campaign Advisory Committee, and invited Patrons who would be happy to speak on our behalf to come on board.

Internal realignment

Internally in the University, some changes were necessary in the relationships between different support departments.

For instance, we had to streamline processes between Finance and Advancement to improve response times to donors.

And Advancement's links with our IT division was of crucial importance to ensure that our technologies remain on a par with the best.

The **fourth lesson** that I want to share with you is about celebrating early gains.

Early gains

In our campaign's quiet phase, we worked hard with loyal supporters to generate increased support. This is called "quick wins" or "early gains" in the industry.

To achieve these victories, my management team and I had to set aside time for awareness-raising events, visits to local, national and international constituencies, as well as one-on-one engagements with funding prospects.

Amongst our early supporters were top US foundations, such as the Andrew W Mellon Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the Ford Foundation. We also received support from foreign governments, notably that of the Netherlands and Belgium.

On the home front, we captured the imagination of corporate South Africa. Standard Bank has made a big sponsorship commitment, and various other companies have invested in our research.

Individuals have also come on board with various amounts. Our average donation from individuals increased three-fold.

Let me turn to the **fifth lesson**, namely The role of the Vice-Chancellor and other senior leaders.

The role of the Vice-Chancellor and other senior leaders

This is a key lesson that I have learnt: that for a campaign to be taken seriously it has to be owned at the very top.

But that, of course, takes up a lot of one's time and attention. Fortunately, our Council and my management team have understood this. They have given me the leeway, as CEO, to lead this campaign.

Ladies and gentlemen, I started off by saying how important vision was. To me, this is the legacy I want to leave behind one day – our new destination as university and the journey we took to get there.

I learnt early on that if my vision is to succeed, I have to give voice and passion to the case of my university. *Me*.

Strategic donors want to hear from the horse's mouth; they want to be able to judge for themselves whether your campaign is a core strategy, or if you are merely busy with public relations. They want to see the passion in your eyes.

And trust me, they will decide for themselves – pretty quickly.

So, to be successful, an advancement campaign must rest in the Office of the Rector (or Vice-Chancellor or President, whichever is the highest). As the university's top academic and top executive, you must give the campaign focus, commitment, time, energy and enthusiasm. And more so, it must formally become a key performance area of your job.

In my view, this requires a complete rethink of the role of the VC at a university. Because what it boils down to is that you are responsible for your institution's future sustainability – on all fronts.

Part of this rethinking requires educating our stakeholders, especially Council. They often wonder why a Rector must perform these tasks.

I would even go so far as to suggest that stakeholders must be reassured to understand that a 21st-century Rector may need to devote 40% of his or her time to being the most vocal and passionate advocate of the institution and its work.

The VC has to steer a ship through choppy waters, direct the campaign, provide leadership, and listen to the counsel of top advisors. It requires a deep commitment to a multi-year effort to transform an institution.

This requires vision, conviction, tireless efforts and a thick skin sometimes to handle criticism. And you will have to continuously re-motivate both yourself and your institution many times over during the life of a campaign.

Imagine the possibilities

This has been a most exciting and rewarding journey. For me, what stands out is that we have changed the conversation about Stellenbosch University from being referenced in the past, to being about the future and the kind of world we want to build for generations coming after us.

Our HOPE Project has enhanced respect for what science can contribute to human development, the moral imperative of our time. It has inspired and galvanised our academics and other staff, highlighting their work as essential and worthwhile.

As a university, we have also managed to gain professional expertise in advancement. And, at the same time, through our capital campaign we have raised more philanthropic funds and attracted more research contracts than ever before.

Finally, we have shown that it *is* possible to change perceptions, elevate the relevance of an institution and garner more support. Imagine what this approach can do for higher education in Africa as a whole.

Just imagine ...