

**OPENING OF THE STELLENBOSCH  
UNIVERSITY RESEARCH COMMONS**  
Welcoming address by Prof H Russel  
Botman, Rector and Vice-Chancellor,  
Stellenbosch University (SU)  
JS Gericke Library Auditorium,  
9 May 2011

**OPENING VAN DIE UNIVERSITEIT  
STELLENBOSCH NAVORSINGSENTRUM**  
Verwelkomingsrede deur Prof H Russel  
Botman, rektor en visekanselier,  
Universiteit Stellenbosch (US)  
Ouditorium, JS Gericke-biblioteek,  
9 Mei 2011

*Dankie, Mohamed [Shaikh, Senior Direkteur: Kommunikasie &Skakeling, en seremoniemeester by die geleentheid].*

*Goeiemiddag, almal. Molweni.* Good afternoon, and welcome to the official opening of our new Research Commons. Allow me to single out some of our distinguished guests:

- Mr Pravin Gordhan, the Minister of Finance;
- *Dr Paul Cluver, voorsitter van die US-Raad*
- Prof Fikile Mazibuko, Rector and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Zululand;
- Ms Nasima Badsha, CEO of the Cape Higher Education Consortium
- Prof Krish Bharuth-Ram, Head of the National Advisory Council on Innovation
- Mr JC Heyneke, a director with Elsevier publishers
- *Prof Arnold van Zyl, ons viserektor: navorsing*
- *Me Ellen Tise, Senior Direkteur van die US se Biblioteek- en Inligtingsdiens*
- *Dekane en ander senior kollegas hier teenwoordig;*
- Colleagues from various other universities, including Rhodes, Pretoria and CPUT
- *Lede van die studenteraad; en*
- *Lede van die argiteksfirma en boukontrakteurs wat by hierdie projek betrokke was.*

*Dames en here, ladies and gentlemen,* we are here to mark the achievement of another milestone at Stellenbosch University – the opening of a dedicated Research Commons here in the Library.

Why do I rate it so highly? Let me explain by briefly analysing the two words that make up the concept, “Research Commons”.

**“Research”** stems from an Old and Middle French term meaning literally “to search again”. To do research is to go beyond the obvious, to delve deeper in search of answers.

In the world of science, researchers take the real-world problems of everyday life and convert them into research problems. And then they look for solutions – again and again (Mouton, 2011). This is why research is important – it helps us find solutions to tangible problems we face every day in our society.

There’s a famous quote by the British biologist and Nobel laureate Peter Medawar (1967), who said, “If politics is the art of the possible, research is surely the art of the soluble”.

For a problem to be “soluble”, it must be “capable of being solved”. What Medawar meant was that there is to be a time when certain problems seem especially ripe for answering. The “art” of research is to know when to focus on which questions, and how to frame the problem that you are investigating.

At Stellenbosch University we have positioned ourselves to use our key strengths as a top research university to address seemingly intractable problems in society – problems for which we think answers can be found. We are convinced that if we work to (1) eradicate poverty and related conditions, and promote (2) human dignity and health, (3) democracy and human rights, (4) peace and security, as well as (5) a sustainable environment and a competitive industry, we can make a meaningful contribution and leave a lasting footprint in society.

This is Stellenbosch University’s HOPE Project. Its five goals were derived from local and international development agendas, including our government’s Medium-term Strategic Framework and the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations.

And across our faculties and management structures, our leaders, researchers, academics and students have developed a growing list of more than 20 academic initiatives to give expression to our development themes.

I am proud to say that Library’s Research Commons is one of these HOPE Project initiatives. It serves to promote student success and research excellence, which count among our strategic goals.

Earlier, I quoted Medawar on “research”. Here’s another quote. It’s by Wilson Mizner, an American playwright known for such witty remarks as, “If you copy from one author, it’s plagiarism. If you copy from many, it’s research” (McIver, 1994).

*Dis baie snaaks, maar nie heeltemal korrek nie. Om die waarheid te sê, plagiaat is een van die grootste oortredings in die akademie en wetenskap. Maar Mizner was tog op die regte spoor.*

Mizner was mistaken in suggesting that research is stealing from others, but he was correct in hinting at its collective nature. Science doesn't take place in a vacuum. Researchers work in a community. This brings us the second word in phrase, "Research Commons".

A "**commons**" is typically a piece of open land at the heart of a community, belonging to all its members – 'n gedeelde ruimte, soos 'n dorpsmeent. Die Biblioteek se Navorsingsentrum is so 'n meent vir ons gemeenskap van navorsers.

Now, our Research Commons is not restricted to this building, but extends worldwide. I'll mention just two examples.

There's our agreement with Elsevier, the world's leading publisher of scientific information, in terms of which our staff and students have full access to an unrivalled collection of journals and e-books.

And there's the 'Virtual Bridge' between Stellenbosch and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, the oldest technological research university in the USA. This high-capacity fibre-optic network raises the bar for research collaboration at a distance.

Now, this speaks to the leitmotif of Stellenbosch University. It is our view that a university should be a relevant institution, closely engaged with society, very much aware of what society hopes for. If there is serious hope and you can connect it to a research problem, you can make a tangible difference.

There is broad consensus that Stellenbosch is a national asset that inclusively serves the needs of the entire South African society. We are striving to be a knowledge pioneer and partner, tackling the key challenges facing our people.

Are the problems in South Africa and the rest of the continent "soluble"? Can they be solved? Are they amenable to the "art of research"?

- For instance, will poverty always be with us, or is it a problem that falls within the Medawar Zone – i.e. can we do something about it?
- Can sustained economic growth be achieved in South Africa and the rest of the continent? Can we create enough jobs to lift all our people out of poverty?

Mr Minister, ladies and gentlemen, it is our view that the time is indeed ripe to find solutions to these problems – and our new Research Commons is a key component of our quest for answers.

By using hope as the guiding concept, the University is led to ask critical questions about reality and to use science to make a difference. In this way hope becomes a radical, transforming concept for a developing country.

The present moment is exactly the right time for hope, and it is a great moment for us to share the Research Commons with all who have in common the search for the soluble question.

My congratulations to Prof Van Zyl and Ms Tise and their team, including Dr Reggie Raju and everyone else involved in developing the Research Commons – and the Learning Commons launched in February.

A big thanks too to our supporters, financial benefactors and partners, including the Carnegie Corporation of New York – who are major proponents of the research commons concept – and, of course, the South African government – through the National Treasury and relevant ministries.

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## REFERENCES

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