

Wim De Villiers*

As we celebrate Africa Day on 25 May, we reflect on the strides the higher education sector has made and the journey that lies ahead in shaping the future of our continent. This year, the African Union has aptly chosen the theme: "Educate an African fit for the 21st Century: Building resilient education systems for increased access to inclusive, lifelong, quality, and relevant learning in Africa." The theme for 2024 is in line with Goal 2 of the AU's [Agenda 63](#): Well Educated Citizens and Skills revolution underpinned by Science, Technology and Innovation.

This theme also resonates deeply with the vision and mission of Stellenbosch University (SU) as we strive to empower our students, some of whom also come from other African countries with the knowledge, skills, and values needed to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

In the 21st century, education extends beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge. It encompasses fostering critical thinking, nurturing innovation, and cultivating adaptability. By 2030, roughly 230 million jobs in Africa will demand digital skills. As we stand at the intersection of rapid technological advancements and evolving societal needs, our higher education systems in Africa must evolve to meet these demands. At SU, we are committed to this mission by embracing a holistic approach to education that prioritises resilience, inclusivity, and relevance. Elements of this approach include curriculum development, innovative teaching methods, inclusive education strategies and lifelong learning opportunities, among others.

Curriculum Development

A foundational element of our strategy is the development of a robust curriculum designed to equip students with the necessary skills for the future. We design and implement interdisciplinary programs that encourage students to draw connections between different fields of study, fostering a comprehensive understanding of complex issues. Integrating critical thinking and problem-solving modules across all disciplines enhances students' analytical abilities. Additionally, innovation labs and incubators provide hands-on experience, enabling students to develop creative solutions to real-world problems.

In a [recent article](#), Prof. Michael le Cordeur, Vice-Dean for Learning and Teaching in our Faculty of Education, highlighted the need for a curriculum that can bridge past inequalities and prepare students for future challenges. This approach is reflected in the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) adopted in 2012, which aims to promote social transformation, human rights, inclusivity, and environmental consciousness.

Despite the noble goals of CAPS, persistent educational inequalities and resource shortages have hindered its full realisation. At SU, we address these challenges by focusing on innovative and inclusive education strategies. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we leveraged technology to provide online education, ensuring continued learning despite widespread disruptions. This adaptation demonstrates our commitment to a resilient and modern educational environment, preparing students to thrive in a rapidly changing world and to help address some of most pressing challenges our country and the continent face.

Effective Teaching and Inclusive Education

Effective teaching methods are crucial to fostering an engaging and dynamic learning environment. We employ active learning techniques, such as flipped classrooms, group projects, and case studies, to deepen student engagement and facilitate deeper understanding. Advanced technologies like artificial intelligence (AI), virtual reality (VR), and digital platforms are utilised to create interactive and immersive learning experiences. Continuous assessment methods offer ongoing feedback, helping students to refine their skills and knowledge progressively.

Ensuring that education is inclusive and accessible to all is a core commitment at SU. We offer scholarships, financial aid, and flexible payment options to make education affordable. Our robust support services, including academic advising, mental health resources, and career counselling, address the diverse needs of our student body. Creating diverse learning environments that respect and celebrate cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic diversity is also a priority, fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion. By investing in effective teaching and inclusive education, we can attract students from across the continent.

Lifelong Learning and resilience building from a global perspective

In an era where continuous learning is essential, we emphasise lifelong learning opportunities by offering continuing education programmes, professional certifications, and executive education to support ongoing professional development. Comprehensive online learning platforms provide flexible and accessible educational opportunities, catering to the needs of working professionals and lifelong learners. Additionally, partnerships with local communities and industries facilitate practical learning experiences, bridging the gap between academia and the real world.

Building resilience in students is essential for navigating the uncertainties of the modern world. Adaptive learning technologies personalise education, accommodating individual learning styles and needs. Resilience training and stress management techniques are incorporated into the curriculum, helping students to cope with challenges effectively. Promoting sustainability in education by integrating environmental and social responsibility into university operations further instils a sense of resilience and ethical responsibility.

In today's interconnected world, global perspectives are vital. We forge partnerships with other higher education institutions in Africa and other parts of the world to provide students with global learning experiences and exchange programmes. Our Centre for Collaboration in Africa (CCA) fosters relationships with other African institutions through agreements, mobility programs, and research networks to enhance SU's research reach, scholar development, and African network integration. Embedding cultural competency and global awareness into the curriculum prepares students for a diverse and interconnected world, equipping them with the skills to work collaboratively across different geographies and cultures.

Conclusion

By embracing this holistic approach, we aim to create a dynamic educational environment that equips students from South Africa and the rest of the continent with the skills and knowledge necessary to thrive in the 21st century. Our commitment to resilience, inclusivity, and relevance ensures that we are not just preparing students for the challenges of today but also empowering them to shape the future and to help build a prosperous Africa. Through these concerted efforts, we strive to build a brighter future

for every African student, fostering a generation of critical thinkers, innovators, and adaptable leaders.

Prof Wim De Villiers is Rector and Vice-Chancellor of Stellenbosch University, South Africa.