



When shall we celebrate?

Stellenbosch University (SU) is ninety years old this year. Dr Matilda Burden, senior lecturer in die Department of History and active at the University Museum, gave a presentation on the University's ninety years of existence earlier this year at the Woordfees (Wordfest). Here she explains why the University seems to be so much younger than a few other universities in South Africa.

In the life of a human being, reaching the age of ninety is a much celebrated event, as few are destined to reach the magical one hundred. In the life of an organisation people usually do not take much notice of the ninety year milestone - everyone is already planning for the celebration of the centenary.

Although not with great fanfare, the University did indeed celebrate its ninety years - at more than one occasion.

At the Woordfees in March a lecture on this topic was presented, incorporating anecdotes, mostly of a humorous nature, of the people and happenings of the past nine decades. This lecture has already been repeated on request at a number of occasions. Early in the month of May an exhibition by the University Museum on the chancellors, vice-chancellors and rectors who have served the University during the ninety years was opened. The contributions of the twelve chancellors, four vice-chancellors and eleven

rectors have been captured by means of paintings, photographs and texts (the exhibition opened before the election of the thirteenth chancellor, Dr Frederik van Zyl Slabbert).

Is Stellenbosch not much older?

Most organisations wish to commemorate their inception, but it is not always easy to determine when that should be done. Universities, schools, departments and organisations often existed formerly with another name and status. It could therefore in all fairness be asked how old SU really is - particularly since education had commenced long before 1918 at Stellenbosch.

SU developed from the Victoria College, which had developed from the Stellenbosch College, which, on its turn, had developed from the Stellenbosch Gymnasium. The institution was officially declared a university by law on 2 April 1918 - interestingly enough, together with two universities: the University of Cape Town (UCT) and the University of South Africa (Unisa).

Being declared a university was, however, not a mere formality. It was preceded by years of negotiations, which started in 1901 already, with the promulgation of the Stellenbosch University Act (Act 13 of 1916) preceding it. This law stipulated that Stellenbosch would be the first Afrikaans university in South Africa. Great celebrations commemorating the birth of SU mark 2 and 3 April 1918, ranging from a festive church service and inaugural speeches to several receptions.

Several festival dates

From the above it is clear that the University could

already have celebrated a centenary in 1966, because the Stellenbosch Gymnasium was established in 1866. In fact, such a festival was celebrated, during which the University was even congratulated on its hundredth birthday (in, among others, Matieland), but that was of course not the whole truth - it was higher education in Stellenbosch that was hundred years old.

Then a centenary could have been celebrated in 1981, as the Stellenbosch College developed in 1881 from the gymnasium, while the gymnasium continued existing as a high school. In 1887, the jubilee year of Queen Victoria, the name of the College was changed to the Victoria College. It is however a fact that the University only received university status in 1918 and therefore its centenary can only be celebrated in 2018.

Other universities, however, regard the dates of their predecessors as their dates of birth and therefore the University of the Free State (UFS) already celebrated its centenary in 2004, and the University of Pretoria (UP) celebrated theirs in 2008, although they only received university status in 1950 and 1930, respectively. Judged by the definition of official university status, SU is therefore just as old as UCT and even older than the UFS and UP.

The exhibition in the University Museum may still be visited for quite some time and the lecture on the anecdotes could be presented on request. [m](#)



Do you have a different opinion on the age of SU? Let us know!