

PROTOCOL FOR COMMUNICATING STAFF/ STUDENT DEATHS

Revision with amendments by ICBC, 26 Feb 2021

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 This protocol provides Stellenbosch University with guidelines to respond appropriately to the death of a staff member or a student by:

- assisting those environments of the University affected by the death of a staff member or a student;
- communicating with the University community with appropriate sensitivity;
- ensuring that the life and contribution of all staff members, irrespective of post level, are treated with respect and appreciation; and
- responding to media enquiries under specific circumstances.

1.2 The objective of the protocol is to have a standard process for such incidents across the institution, but due to each situation being unique, good judgment and sensitivity should always be applied.

1.3 For practical reasons, this protocol is restricted to *current* staff members and students.

1.4 Particular SU environments and the institution itself may wish to also honour/acknowledge *former* staff (e.g. emeritus professors) or students (alumni), or individuals *linked* to the environment or the institution as a whole (e.g. extraordinary professors or past recipients of honorary doctorates). Environments are free to do so, and in this regard please note the distinction made in 1.5 below.

1.5 This protocol describes two main ways for communicating staff and student deaths at SU:

1.5.1 The first is the *dedicated institutional channel* created and managed by CCMD for this purpose – an “In memoriam” mass mailer to staff and students. All deaths should be communicated in this way, subject to the conditions set out in this protocol.

1.5.2 The second is the *general communication channels* that most environments have at their disposal – their own communication platforms, such as a web page on the SU website, or an e-newsletter. In addition to following the above mentioned institutional process, environments may also communicate deaths via their own channels, bearing in mind that such communication would also be subject to the conditions in this protocol.

1.6 Communication, whether internal or external, regarding the death of a staff member or student may only follow after distinct permission by the bereaved family. [SU Legal Services are facilitating a legal opinion on whether deviations may be allowed in some cases.]

1.7 No cause of death may be revealed in any of the official SU communication, irrespective of the cause of death. Health conditions and causes of death are confidential matters. [SU Legal Services are facilitating a legal opinion on whether deviations may be allowed in some cases.]

2. COMMUNICATING THE DEATH OF A STAFF MEMBER

2.1 Irrespective of the point of entry of information regarding the death of a staff member, the line manager of the division/department within which the death occurred should be informed and will be responsible for the operational communication to the relevant internal environments and individuals.

2.2 The line manager should inform:

- The head of the particular environment, and so it should be escalated upwards, e.g. head of (PASS) division/(academic) department > RC head/Dean
- Colleagues in the division/department
- The Human Resources Division (relevant HR practitioner or the Head: Employee Wellness)
- The Corporate Communication and Marketing Division (CCMD) [Director: Corporate Communication]
- The Communication officer/unit of the particular division/faculty (if any)

2.3 Contact with the family: The line manager (or, depending on circumstances, the DVC: SITP or an assigned official) should contact the family to (i) inform them of the death if they do not know yet; (ii) convey the University's condolences; and (iii) request permission to communicate about it with the University community without disclosing cause of death (see 1.6 and 1.7 above). The family's decision in this regard should be conveyed to CCMD.

This does not preclude the head of the environment in question, or the DVC: SITP or the Rector from contacting the family to convey condolences.

2.4 Communication about the death a staff member via the *dedicated institutional channel* takes place in the following way:

2.4.1 Via an "In memoriam" mass mailer (template **to be updated**) to staff in the name of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Social Impact, Transformation and Personnel [**example attached**]. The mailer should contain a short obituary (taking care to use the gender pronoun preferred by the deceased) as well as a photograph, and include information on funeral arrangements or memorial event if available. The mailer should also include a reminder of support being available to staff members and students affected by the death.

Cases can be combined into a single mailer distributed once a week (e.g. on a Thu, to fall between the staff e-newsletters distributed on a Wed and Fri (info@ and news@stellenboschuni)).

Depending on the circumstances, the mailer can go out from the Rector.

2.5 Who provides the information?

2.5.1 The line manager or head of division/department should draft an obituary / bereavement notice (facilitated by communication staff in the particular environment, if any) and provide it to CCMD. Environments can also use this information for their own communication, as explained in 1.5.2 above.

2.5.2 Human Resources (the particular practitioner or the Wellness Officer) should provide information about the staff member's employment history at SU, and also a photograph from the University's records.

2.6 How does CCMD use the information to communicate?

The Manager: Internal Comms or her/his designate converts the information supplied into a suitable mailer, has it edited and translated, and submits it to the DVC: SITP. Once approved, it is supplied to the Digital Channels Co-ordinator: Electronic Communication to send out as a mass mailer.

2.7 This does not preclude a particular environment from also using their own *general communication channels* for an obituary. They could, for instance, load a standalone story on their own SUNACZA web page, or include it in their own newsletter. If they do, they should provide a link to CCMD so that it can be added to the *dedicated institutional* mailer.

2.8 In some cases, a standalone news story (not an “In memoriam” bereavement notice) will be done by CCMD on the institutional pages of SUNACZA, such as SU Main or the Staff and/or Student portals. Or a news bulletin could go out via mass mailer to staff and/or students. CCMD would take such a decision based on such news values¹ as the prominence of the individual concerned, their proximity to the institution, or the impact of their death or the circumstances surrounding it on the University. If such a story is done, a link to it could be added to the dedicated institutional “In memoriam” mailer.

3. COMMUNICATING THE DEATH OF A STUDENT (also refer to process flow diagram for reporting the death of a student [to be amended in line with changes to this protocol])

3.1 Irrespective of the point of entry of information about the death of a student, the death should be reported to the Senior Director: Division of Student Affairs (DSAf) and the Registrar.

3.1.1 The **Senior Director: DSAf** informs the following team members:

- DSAf Communications Coordinator
- Deputy Director of the Centre for Student Communities
- Director: Centre for Student Counselling and Development
- Director: Centre for Student Leadership, Experiential Education and Citizenship, who in turn informs:
 - SRC Chair, who in turn informs Relevant student structures / bodies
- CCMD (Director: Corporate Communication)
- DVC: L&T, who could also contact the family to convey condolences, bearing in mind that another staff member might be chosen to contact the family as explained below.

3.1.2 The Registrar informs Deputy Registrar > all relevant departments within the division > Division of Student Fees and Debtors > Stellenbosch University International (if required).

3.1.3 The Registrar also informs the Dean of the deceased student’s Faculty, who informs faculty staff who worked with the student.

3.2 Contact with the family: The DD: CSC convenes discussion to decide who contacts the family. The most appropriate staff member should contact the family to (i) inform them of the death if they do not know yet; (ii) convey the University’s condolences; and (iii) request permission to communicate about it with the University community without disclosing cause of death, and convey their decision in this regard to CCMD.

¹ News values are "criteria that influence the selection and presentation of events as published news". These factors help explain what makes something "newsworthy".

This does not preclude the Dean or DVC: LT or the Rector from contacting the family to convey condolences.

3.3 Communication about the death a student via the *dedicated institutional channel* takes place in the following way:

3.3.1 Via an “*In memoriam*” mass mailer (template provided [to be updated]) to students in the name of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Learning and Teaching. The mailer should contain a short obituary (taking care to use the gender pronoun preferred by the deceased) as well as a photograph, and include information on funeral arrangements / memorial event if available. The mailer should include reminder of available emotional support to students and staff members affected by the death.

Cases can be combined into a single mailer distributed once a week (e.g. on a Thu, the day before the distribution of the student e-newsletter, [maties@Stellenboschuni](mailto:maties@ Stellenboschuni)).

Depending on the circumstances, the mailer can go out from the Rector.

3.4 Who provides the information?

3.4.1 (i) The DSAf Communication Coordinator should draft a bereavement notice (with information sourced from the particular student community, faculty, registrar’s office and/or the student information system (SIS), as may be required, and provide it to CCMD. Template/example to be provided. Environments can also use this information for their own communication, as explained in 1.5.2 above.

3.4.2 The Registrar’s Division or a DSAf staff member with access to the SIS should provide information about the student’s time at SU, and a photograph as from University records.

3.5 How does CCMD use the information to communicate?

The Manager: Internal Comms or her/his designate converts the information supplied into a suitable mailer, has it edited and translated, and submits it to the DVC: LT. Once approved, it is supplied to the Digital Channels Co-ordinator: Electronic Communication to send out as a mass mailer.

3.6 In some cases, a standalone news story (not an “*In memoriam*” bereavement notice) will be done by CCMD on the institutional pages of SUNACZA, such as SU Main or the Staff and/or Student portals. Or a news bulletin could go out via mass mailer to staff and/or students. CCMD would take such a decision based on such news values² as the prominence of the individual concerned, their proximity to the institution, or the impact of their death or the circumstances surrounding it on the University. If such a story is done, a link to it could be added to the dedicated institutional “*In memoriam*” mailer.

4. EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION

4.1 Stellenbosch University will ordinarily not proactively issue any media statements related to the death of staff or students, but may comment or issue a statement if it receives a media enquiry, especially if the information about a death is already in the public domain.

Also see 1.6 and 1.7 above.

² News values are "criteria that influence the selection and presentation of events as published news". These factors help explain what makes something "newsworthy".

4.2 The text of the “In Memoriam” mailer can form the basis of a media statement.

4.3 Social media will ordinarily not be used for the announcement of staff or student deaths. But if CCMD becomes aware of a social post regarding a staff or student death, it can respond as necessary with approved messaging. And if the University does issue a statement or provide media comment, a social media post by CCMD can be based on it or draw attention to it.

5. FURTHER READING

This protocol should be read in conjunction with the following protocols, including updates and amendments:

- Protocol for institutional Communication from the ICBC during the COVID-19
- Human Resources Management: Bereavement Protocol and Bereavement notice template
- Student Affairs: Guidelines for memorial and funeral report for SU students 2020
- Process flow diagram for reporting the death of a student.

6. REVISION

To deal with changing circumstances, this protocol should be reviewed from time to time – at least once a year.

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Via the CSIER Workstream of the ICBC