

Insights from SU Council's meeting of 15 April 2024

The Stellenbosch University (SU) Council met on Monday, 15 April for the first of its four scheduled Council meetings for 2024. Council met in February for its annual strategy session – this year focussed on the impact of, and opportunity presented by technology to the University's activities and focus.

This first Council meeting reflected on a start to the year with significant points of pain but also of achievements and events in which SU could showcase its commitment to academic excellence and thought leadership. Considerable time was also spent on discussions around the initiation of the search for the new Rector and Vice-Chancellor to assume office in April 2025 after Prof Wim de Villiers comes to the end of his second five-year term. These are among the issues dealt with below.

Reflection on the Restitution Statement

As is customary, the meeting commenced with a reflection on SU's restitution statement:

Stellenbosch University (SU) acknowledges its inextricable connection with generations past, present and future. In the 2018 Centenary Year, SU celebrates its many successes and achievements. SU simultaneously acknowledges its contribution towards the injustices of the past. For this, we have deep regret. We apologise unreservedly to the communities and individuals who were excluded from the historical privileges that SU enjoyed, and we honour the critical Matie voices of that time who would not be silenced. In responsibility towards the present and future generations, SU commits itself unconditionally to the ideal of an inclusive world-class university in and for Africa.

This statement is an important reminder that as SU becomes increasingly attractive as a university of choice for the best students and staff, it has a unique opportunity to model the ideal of an inclusive world-class university in and for Africa. SU still has a way to go before it is experienced by all stakeholders as a multicultural, multilingual, inclusive and welcoming space and the University is devoting significant time and energy to this. But it will come as no surprise that the tough local socio-economic conditions add to the pressure felt by the University's stakeholders and in turn add to their expectation that the University respond. I would expect this context to reflect increasingly in Council's conversations in the coming months and years.

The first quarter

The academic year was off to a challenging start when staff members came across two rooms in Wilgenhof residence containing items and depictions that are deeply distressing. The contents of the rooms seemingly point to practices at the residence that run counter to the University's values. Given the imminent arrival of seniors at the residence to prepare for the official welcoming of our newcomer students, the rooms were cleared, and the contents secured to launch a thorough investigation. The Panel subsequently appointed by the Rectorate to investigate the discoveries is due to report shortly and this will inform the next steps.

Efforts to increase the diversity of our student demographic profile in recent years have seen a steady increase in students from outside Stellenbosch, some of whom arrive on campus without confirmed accommodation for the year. Council expressed great concern about the impact on these students at the start of this year and noted with thanks the extraordinary assistance given to affected students by members of the Stellenbosch community.

In discussing the many moving parts and pressure around the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) funding, Council recognised that as the University increased in attractiveness and as NSFAS continued to struggle, the University would have to find new ways of responding to these developments without making unsustainable commitments.

Adding to the first quarter pressure was the problematic go-live of SUNStudent. Council noted the frank feedback provided by the Registrar and the critical importance of stabilising the SUNStudent system, ensuring business continuity, and improving the staff and student experience as users of the system. The challenges around the SUNStudent implementation and the next steps were also discussed in detail at the Council's Audit and Risk Committee meeting a few days after the Council meeting.

Amidst all this, the University hosted a very successful welcoming event with more than 6 700 new students while the March graduations were typically festive and took the 2023 graduates to over 9 000.

Fresh from leading a senior delegation to the University of Groningen, the Rector and Vice-Chancellor shared the exciting opportunities flowing from a partnership agreement signed between the two universities in 2022 which committed to addressing some of the most pressing societal challenges of our time. The visit served as a platform to explore and unlock new opportunities in energy transitions, digital transformation and biomedical solutions facilitated by interdisciplinary research and more focused industry collaboration. Of immediate importance are the new possibilities it holds for joint PhD programmes, joint postdoctoral fellowships, undergraduate student mobility, enhancing opportunities for external funding, and academic matching across interdisciplinary research projects.

In addition, events such as the Nobel in Africa Symposium and the Chancellor's Lecture featuring Nobel Laureates Esther Duflo and Abhijit Banerjee highlighted the University as a global partner in scholarship. Initiatives such as SUNRISE (which stands for Stellenbosch University Research & Innovation Strategic Excellence and is focused on creating a sustainable pipeline of leading scholars), as well as the Biomedical Research Institute (with its cross-

disciplinary cutting-edge research) are further solidifying SU's position as a leader and partner in research and innovation. The Stellenbosch International Academic Networks (SIAN) 2024 meeting was hosted by Stellenbosch University International from 13 to 15 March. SIAN is an annual gathering of SU's international partner universities. This year, more than 100 delegates from 70 university partners across 27 countries attended to discuss the intricacies of internationalisation in higher education with a focus on reinforcing SU's presence in shaping the future of knowledge, particularly within Africa.

We were joined by Dr Leslie van Rooi who briefed Council on the progress of the Committee for the Institutional Response to the Commission's Recommendations (CIRCoRe). Council appreciated the movement on deliverables and the energy shown by the new leadership of CIRCoRe. The importance of advancing SU's transformation initiatives in a manner that results in a tangible difference to the lived experience of all SU's stakeholders continues to be a key focus for Council and indeed featured strongly in the stakeholder input concerning the Rector and Vice-Chancellor appointment process.

Process for the appointment of new Rector and Vice-Chancellor

The appointment of a rector and vice-chancellor is one of the most important decisions a university council needs to take since the person in this role has overall responsibility for the execution of the university's vision.

The Council held an extensive first discussion on possible requirements to be considered for its new Rector and Vice-Chancellor and set in motion the process for the recruitment that, for the first time, sought input from key stakeholders on possible requirements.

Close to 100 staff and Convocation members have responded to Council's invitation to provide input and we have also met with representatives of the Senate, the Student Representative Council, the Institutional Forum, and the General Managers' Meeting for their input. I am most grateful to everyone who has taken the time to share their insights with us. We will be taking this input into the process of finalising the requirements and the advertisement for the role which will be released during May once it has been finalised by the Senior Appointments Committee.

I encourage you to follow updates on the appointment of the new Rector and Vice-Chancellor [here](#).

Annual report on Research, Innovation and Postgraduate Studies

In her annual report to Council, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, Innovation and Postgraduate Studies, Prof Sibusiso Moyo, presented an inspiring report, showcasing the University's advancements in climate studies and research transformation, emphasising SU's focus on fostering a culture of innovation and collaboration while addressing pressing societal challenges and driving positive change. It was pleasing to see that the Bibliometric report reflected significant gains by SU in research outputs and citations (particularly through global

collaboration, reflecting SU's increasing renown as a reliable research partner). Congratulations are due to our academic leaders in this regard.

Prof Moyo noted that what kept her awake at night was: making sure that we had a sufficiently deep pipeline of good young academics; attracting and retaining good academic talent; ensuring we had the right technology, processes and policies in place to facilitate research; sourcing and successfully taking up new funding and grant opportunities; making sure that the institutional culture was enabling, inclusive and welcoming of new scholars.

There are several actions in place to address these concerns – some of which, like an inclusive and welcoming culture, apply across the University. Council will be keeping an eye on these.

Finances

While the University's core mission is the academic project, it is only possible to advance that mission if the University is financially sustainable. Council reviewed the financial results for the 2023 Main Budget, presented by our Chief Operating Officer, Prof Stan du Plessis. These reflect careful management, a discipline that will stand us in good stead given the pressures on the national fiscus, the NSFAS challenges mentioned already, and the generally stressed socio-economic environment that all the University stakeholders are navigating.

Council noted that, as usual, the 2024 budget will provide gap funding to NSFAS students to ensure that they are not left short due to the University's 2024 fee adjustments which were higher than those proposed by the Minister.

Keeping track of performance

Prof Hester Klopper, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Strategy, Global and Corporate Affairs, presented the executive scorecard offering a comprehensive overview of the University's performance against the key strategic objectives that Council is tracking for 2024. In general, the sense is that the University is making progress on the right issues although perhaps some of the targets could be more stretched – something that we will take up in the 2025 scorecard.

Conclusion

Council meetings almost invariably have 100% attendance, a commitment to Stellenbosch University that is exceptional, especially as no Council member is remunerated for attendance. The meetings are robust and frank, even on difficult topics, and we are stronger for this. I am most grateful to my fellow Council members and Prof de Villiers and his team for creating a space where we can shape the future of our institution and the communities we serve.

In ending, I want to congratulate Nadine Moodie who was elected as the Deputy Chair of Council. Nadine has been on Council since 2019 and holds a BA (International Studies) and a BPhil (Journalism) from SU.

There is much to do this year and I would like to thank you all for the part you are playing in positioning SU as a world-class research-intensive university in service of society in and for Africa.

Warm regards

Nicky Newton-King

Chair of Council