

**Submission by the Steering Committee of CIRCoRe**  
**(Committee for the Institutional Response to the Commission's Recommendations)**  
**to the Council's request for further submissions**

**regarding the Rectorate's Decision on the Closure of Wilgenhof**

**This submission is supported by the Institutional Transformation Committee**

**31 July 2024**

**1. Introduction**

As the Steering Committee of CIRCoRE, we would like to firstly express deep gratitude and appreciation to the Wilgenhof Panel of Enquiry (Panel) for a report which has eloquently laid complex issues on the table regarding SU's Wilgenhof Residence and how its culture continues to be deeply engrained within its fabric.

**2. What issues would the closure or non-closure of the Wilgenhof Residence raise and that would need to be considered?**

*Arguments for closure*

As a committee, we commend the Rectorate's decision to support the main recommendation of the Panel, related to the closure of Wilgenhof. This intention for decisive action sends a clear and unequivocal message about the University's commitment to a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students (and staff). It reflects the commitment of the Rectorate to the institutional values of SU and radiates the spirit of our Restitution Statement. The positive impact of this step by the Rectorate on staff morale in general cannot be overstated. In this submission, we mainly wish to highlight the issues that the closure or non-closure of Wilgenhof would raise and that would need to be considered, at various levels.

We have noted calls for a more "nuanced" response about the rectorate's decision. We wish to state that such a response could undermine the progress made on changing SU's residence culture as a whole and perpetuate the problematic culture associated with Wilgenhof. [The report of the Panel deals in detail with the latter, and specifically with the manifold institutional efforts to realign the practices and traditions of the residence that run counter to a human rights culture.] Whatever the intention of those who call for a nuanced response, such calls may be seen as a justification for unacceptable practices, aligning with efforts to maintain the residence with minimal changes. These efforts are in direct contrast to the purposeful efforts of becoming a more transformative institution, both in the eyes of the public, as well as within the lived experiences of our staff and students.

It is essential to recognise that the challenges at Wilgenhof are deeply ingrained within its residence's culture. It is telling that despite undertakings by the residence leadership over the last few years of material and substantive change to foster an all-embracing culture, unacceptable practices have evidently continued unabated and have lately been taken off-campus. Furthermore, it is very disappointing that a sense of secrecy, a 'coded' language and other actions have remained part of Wilgenhof despite notions of change within its ranks. This indicates that the issue extends beyond individual students and is systemic in nature reflecting a deliberate resistance to change, or at the very least "change on our terms". It seeks to

safeguard traditions that are contrary to changing societal values and norms and which are at variance with SU's values and strategic direction.

#### *Issues related to non-closure*

We must consider the potential consequences of allowing Wilgenhof to remain open. Such a decision will seriously impede the university's transformation imperative and send a troubling message to students and staff as well as the broader society. We are particularly worried about the possible impact on the broader residence community and the possible undermining effect of actions undertaken by the Division for Student Affairs. To this end, we wish to highlight a few matters. This list is not exhaustive, but captures the pertinent issues related to our core business as a university:

##### 1. Learning Environment

The learning environment within residences is intrinsically linked to academic success. Residences are extensions of the classroom and as such should be conducive to a transformative learning experience. Learning is seriously thwarted where the dignity and self-worth of individual inhabitants are purposefully eroded and where they are subjected to fear-induced submission to an unacceptable residence culture. Learning becomes almost impossible where a residence culture marked by secrecy, subversion and unhealthy traditions are at the order of the day. All residences should be accessible to all students, regardless of race, colour or creed. A residence environment characterised by exclusion and disrespect undermines the University's efforts to foster a culture of inclusivity, critical thinking, and responsible citizenship. Wilgenhof has repeatedly demonstrated its unwillingness to be a warm and welcoming home for all. Closing the residence is a step towards achieving this goal and we see no other way to bring about a break in the mentioned negative and destructive residence culture.

##### 2. Erosion of Institutional Trust

The University's transformation endeavours will be seriously compromised if it fails to address a persistent and well-documented issue that goes to the heart of deep relational change as pointed out by the Khampepe Commission. This could lead to a loss of trust and credibility among students, staff, alumni, and the broader community.

##### 3. Recruitment and Retention Challenges

A reputation for tolerating harmful behaviour can deter prospective students and staff, impacting the university's ability to attract and retain top talent. Here not only the context of Wilgenhof should be taken into account but also the recruitment ecosystem as a whole e.g. students might not want to apply to Wilgenhof given its (recent) negative impact on the reputation of SU.

##### 4. Inconsistent Messaging

Continuing to operate Wilgenhof sends a contradictory message about the University's values and its commitment to creating a supportive learning environment for all students.

##### 5. Damage to the University's Reputation

A failure to address the issue of Wilgenhof could negatively impact the University's reputation as a leader in higher education and social justice.

## 6. Nature and Spirit of closure

It is important to emphasise that closing Wilgenhof does not equate to condemning past or present residents. Instead, it signifies the University's commitment to creating a positive and inclusive learning environment across all its residences, particularly as it charts a new identity that is inclusive of many different lived realities, while maintaining its excellent academic track record.

### **3. What would the implications be of the acceptance of the Rector's recommendation regarding the redesign of Wilgenhof as a different and/or upgraded residence?**

We recommend the immediate closure of Wilgenhof and request that Council consider and prioritise:

- a new residence that fosters an open, democratic learning culture that welcomes all students and that is aligned to the values of SU
- a new name for the residence and the establishment of clear criteria for resident selection for the new residence
- appropriate accommodation be arranged for current Wilgenhof residents with a deliberate approach to placement that will curb the transfer of a "Wilgenhof culture" to other university residences.

### **4. Are there alternatives to the closure of Wilgenhof that are reasonably likely to address the concerns set out in the Panel's report?**

Yes

No X

### **5. If you have answered yes to question 4, what are these alternatives?**

N/A

### **6. What should the SU Council set as indicators for the success of these alternative measures?**

Indicators should be aligned with the University's values as articulated in the Transformation Plan 2017 and the Draft Transformation Policy – excellence, compassion, accountability, respect and equity.

The indicators should focus on the ways in which the new residence supports a transformative learning experience (i.e. inclusive and conducive to a cross-cultural learning environment that enriches learning and translates to higher levels of academic success for all students).

Finally, the indicators should test the extent to which the residence promotes deep relational change (e.g. through its initiatives and programmes of leadership development, social responsibility and thought leadership that leads to impactful social innovation, civic engagement and responsible citizenship).

### **7. Do you have any further remarks or suggestions?**

By taking decisive action, the University will demonstrate its commitment to creating a welcoming and inclusive campus community. We look forward to the possibilities of a new residence, with an enabling environment, to emerge as a result of this process. New beginnings

carry the necessary energy for other transformative habits and behaviours among staff, and can propel us into a new collective future as an institution.

In conclusion, it is important to recognise that while the closure of Wilgenhof (and possible re-establishment of new residence) would be of symbolic importance, particularly for those who have been wounded by past events, the University will also need to give further consideration to the policies related to the residences, including student placement procedures and the training of residence staff in the transformation of institutional culture. In other words, an immediate response needs to be coupled with a longer-term response.