

## Stellenbosch University Council's

### Reasons for its Decision on 16 September 2024

#### **To Close Wilgenhof Residence in its Current Format and Replace it with a Reimagined and Rejuvenated Male Residence**

#### **The Decision**

1. On 16 September 2024, Council took the following decision in terms of clause 10(3)(g) of the University's Institutional Statute:
  - 1.1. To close the Wilgenhof residence in its current format and replace it with a reimagined and rejuvenated male residence. A renewed residence would acknowledge the constructive aspects of Wilgenhof while making a decisive break with the unacceptable and secretive practices of the past.
  - 1.2. To give effect to this decision:
    - 1.2.1. The residence will be closed during 2025.
    - 1.2.2. The residence will reopen during 2026 as a male residence.
    - 1.2.3. While it is closed in 2025, the residence will be upgraded to comply with DHET's Policy on the Minimum Norms and Standards for Student Housing at Public Universities (**the DHET standards**).
    - 1.2.4. All current Wilgenhof residents who fulfil the academic requirements for re-placement in a residence and wish to stay in SU residences will be placed in other university residences for 2025. During 2025, current Wilgenhof residents will be given the opportunity to apply for placement in 2026 as per the SU residence placement policy.
    - 1.2.5. A facilitated and student-driven process will be launched, including SU management, a number of elected and other Wilgenhof residents, as well as other male and female student leaders and residence heads, to shape the new reimagined and rejuvenated residence. This will encompass its

values, constitution, disciplinary code, acceptable practices, and a definitive and deliberate end to unacceptable practices such as the Vleisfees, Nagligte, and other such customs.

- 1.2.6. Internal and external facilitators will capacitate the Division of Student Affairs to guide this process with the intent that outcomes (including the strengthening of management processes and practices) are applied systemically across all SU residences.
- 1.2.7. All current staff supporting and working in Wilgenhof will be deployed to appropriate positions within SU while the outlined process and upgrades are completed.
- 1.2.8. The University will provide the necessary psychosocial support to all affected students and staff throughout this transition.
- 1.2.9. The University will engage with relevant stakeholders regarding the archive and artifacts as well as any visual redress initiatives that might be appropriate.
- 1.2.10. The name of the residence will be considered, and proposals will be invited in this regard for consideration by SU's institutional Naming Committee and recommendation to the Council. The Naming Committee will be asked to include consideration of all the names proposed in the submissions that were made to the Council in the run-up to its decision.
- 1.2.11. The role played by the Wilgenhof Alumni Association going forward needs to be aligned with that played by other SU Alumni Associations.
- 1.2.12. The Rector will report to the Council on progress on all of these items.

2. Below, I set out Council's reasons for that decision. These reasons have been compiled based on:

- 2.1. The discussions held by Council at its meetings on 24 June 2024 and 16 September 2024;
  - 2.2. The documents that were provided to Council prior to each meeting; and
  - 2.3. Further documents that were available to all Council members.
3. The reasons are a distillation of the considerations that, on a conspectus of the relevant documents and robust discussion in Council, motivated the Council to take the decision. Council is a multi-member body and not all members would have acted for the same set of reasons. The failure to include any fact or submission in these reasons does not mean it was not considered by Council.
  4. Council was not conducting an assessment of the Panel Report which the Rectorate had commissioned. Members of Council pointed to what they regarded as flaws in that Report which were considered by Council. Council’s task was to consider, based on all the information – including the Panel’s Report and the criticisms of it, as well as all the other underlying information and submissions it received – what decision it should take.
  5. Council took a composite decision. It did not decide to “close” Wilgenhof and then take separate decisions about what to do thereafter. Its decision to close Wilgenhof in its current format was inextricably linked to its decision to conduct a facilitated process – including current Wilgenhof residents – to design a renewed and reimagined residence and to re-open a new residence in a refurbished building in 2026.

### **The Reasons for Council’s decision**

6. It was important to **make a decisive break** with the unacceptable and secretive practices of the past.
  - 6.1. Those practices were detailed in the Panel’s Report and have no place in the University. They include practices that, even if participants believed they were acting voluntarily, were inconsistent with human dignity and inconsistent with SU’s values. The practices are referenced in troubling imagery and iconography

that had no place in SU today. There was, rightly, little attempt in the submissions to defend these practices as consistent with SU's values.

- 6.2. The disclosure of the content of the two rooms at Wilgenhof in January this year had a significant impact on members of the SU community.
- 6.3. Previous attempts at renewal and breaking with past unacceptable and secretive practices had not yielded lasting outcomes:
  - 6.3.1. Serious attempts were made during the 2000s to eradicate the practices.
  - 6.3.2. The practices had continued, as evidenced by incidences of concern since 2019 and even recently at the 2023 off-campus Nagligte loop.
  - 6.3.3. In 2024, too, there had been incidents involving current residents (such as breaking down shower cubicle doors) which suggested that there was not sufficient commitment amongst current residents to breaking with unacceptable and secretive practices of the past.
- 6.4. There is a strong sense amongst many Wilgenhof residents and alumni that they are independent of the University; Wilgenhoffers first, not Maties. They also did not see themselves as subject to the University's authority in the same way as other residences.
- 6.5. In those circumstances, Council did not believe that the unacceptable and secretive practices of the past would be finally eradicated through normal interventions. Closure in its current format and reimagining was the only intervention that would ensure that those practices did not persist.
- 6.6. The University required residence beds and closing the residence completely and repurposing it as something other than a residence was not appropriate.
- 6.7. Council recognised that the current Wilgenhof residents should not be blamed for all the unacceptable and secretive practices of the past and accepted that the University had not succeeded in preventing them from continuing:

- 6.7.1. In their submission, the Wilgenhof residents recognised the need for, and their commitment to, a process of reforming the residence including both Wilgenhof residents and University stakeholders.
- 6.7.2. Council does not believe the current residents should be demonised for past practices that were part of the culture into which they were placed. It resolved that current residents should be an integral part of the renewal and rejuvenation of the residence.
- 6.7.3. At the same time, Council recognised that management had not been able to stop unacceptable and secretive practices in the past. There had been a failure of reporting of incidents to those who bore ultimate responsibility. The Rector acknowledged that this meant that the University management over time had not been successful in preventing the practices from continuing. This too had to be taken into consideration in deciding on a way forward.
- 6.8. Council acknowledged that there were admirable and wholesome facets of the Wilgenhof residence culture, including the values of critical thinking and independence. Many of these had been raised by the Wilgenhof residents and the Wilgenhof alumni in their submissions. But, retaining those could not come at the cost of not addressing the unacceptable and secretive practices and culture.
- 6.9. Council was of the view that this should be seen as an opportunity not only for Wilgenhof, its residents and alumni, but for the whole University community, and for all residences, particularly male residences. It could be a pivotal moment of meaningful and systemic change and give effect to the University's desire to foster an environment where all students can thrive in a community that upholds the values of inclusivity, respect and excellence. Wilgenhof has an opportunity to be at the forefront of that vital project. At the same time, Wilgenhof was not responsible for other failures to transform in the University and should not be a scapegoat for other failures by the University to transform.

7. Breaking with the past would require a **two-pronged approach**:
  - 7.1. A facilitated and student-driven process which would include the University's management, elected leaders from the Wilgenhof residence, other Wilgenhof residents, as well as other student leaders and residence heads to shape the new, reimagined, rejuvenated residence and through that, systemically, the residence culture across the University.
  - 7.2. Upgrading the residence to comply with the DHET Standards. On the least intrusive assumption, this would require the residence to be closed for the 2025 academic year but, once done, would provide a physical manifestation of a renewed, rejuvenated and reimagined residence.
  
8. On the first prong: it was important to include both current Wilgenhof residents and the broader student and university community in defining the values and culture of the new residence:
  - 8.1. The process will occur during 2025 while the residence building is being renovated.
  - 8.2. It will require the determination of the renewed residence's values, constitution, disciplinary code, and acceptable practices so that these that are aligned with the values of SU, its Vision 2040 statement, its Restitution statement and the South African Constitution.
  - 8.3. This process will be facilitated and student-led and guided by the Division for Student Affairs. Student leadership structures, residence heads and facilitators (internal and external) will be involved.
  - 8.4. It will include elected and selected Wilgenhof residents. This will be necessary to align the culture in the new residence with the values of SU, but also to facilitate the retention of the admirable and wholesome facets of Wilgenhof's current culture. Including both elected and selected students was considered important to ensure that broad perspectives on the appropriate elements of the

existing culture to be adopted as well as those elements not to continue, will be heard as part of the facilitated process.

- 8.5. As I detail below all current Wilgenhof residents who remain at SU in 2026 will be entitled to apply to be part of the new residence.
  - 8.6. The consideration of the name of the residence name will follow the normal course within SU structures and the SU Institutional Naming Committee, and be considered by Council for final approval. Council noted that the Wilgenhof Alumni Association has proposed alternative names for the residence as had others who made submissions. Similarly, Council hopes that those involved in the facilitated process will also propose names for consideration. All proposals, including the retention of the name Wilgenhof, will form part of the naming process.
9. On the second prong, Council decided that it would be most effective to close the residence for the 2025 academic year and to reopen it as the renewed male residence in 2026:
- 9.1. The new residence should be a men's residence (as opposed to a mixed or female residence), based on the following considerations:
    - 9.1.1. While the University preferred co-ed residences when it builds new residences, the costs to convert Wilgenhof to an alternative configuration would be significantly higher than keeping it as a male residence.
    - 9.1.2. Based on the University's extensive experience in upgrading other residences, the total estimated costs and times (which would need to be firmed up post the Council meeting) were:
      - 9.1.2.1. Male residence: R12 725 401 and 7 months;
      - 9.1.2.2. Female: R80 389 461 and 12 months;

9.1.2.3. Male and change bachelor's block to female: R20 113 106 and 9 months;

9.1.2.4. Full co-ed: R90 046 090 and 15 months.

9.1.3. In terms of cost and time, a male residence was therefore the most feasible, and would ensure the residence could be re-opened in 2026.

9.1.4. Women should not be responsible for mitigating the issues arising in a male residence.

9.1.5. The other residences in the Victoria cluster were female residences, so keeping the residence as a male residence would add diversity to that cluster.

9.2. Closing the residence for the 2025 academic year would allow the University sufficient time to engage in a facilitated student-led process to shape the renewed and rejuvenated residence, and to refurbish the residence.

9.3. This timeframe is necessary so as to limit inconvenience or disruption to the residents at this late stage of the 2024 academic year.

9.4. The University is in an ongoing process of upgrading all its buildings, including its residences, to bring them in line with the DHET Standards.

9.5. The Wilgenhof building currently falls short of the DHET Standards in a number of respects, particularly in the number, location and nature of ablution facilities.

9.6. The upgrade to meet DHET Standards would also provide an opportune moment for the University to ensure it was fully compliant with other relevant building standards as well as to make any further upgrades that residents felt were necessary.

9.7. While it might be possible to renovate the building while the residence remained open, based on the University's previous experience with other upgrades, that would have a number of serious disadvantages:



- 9.7.1. It would take significantly longer and would increase the cost of the upgrades;
    - 9.7.2. Residents would not have proper access to ablution facilities and would be exposed to dust and noise while living and attempting to study in the residence;
    - 9.7.3. It would be more intrusive for residents who would have contractors working in the residence while they lived there; and
    - 9.7.4. It was preferable for contractors to work in buildings that were not occupied so they could move freely and do the work for which they had been contracted.
  - 9.8. University management expressed confidence, based on similar previous projects, that it would be able to complete all the upgrades and refurbishments within seven months, so that the residence could re-open in 2026.
10. The Council recognised that the closure of Wilgenhof, and its refurbishment during 2025, would cause disruption to the current residents and staff. This was not a punishment; it was an inevitable consequence of the decision to make a decisive break with past unacceptable and secretive practices. The closure should therefore be done so as to cause as little disruption for the existing residents and staff as possible:
- 10.1. Psychosocial support will be offered to the affected students.
  - 10.2. Current residents in Wilgenhof who qualify for residence placement in 2025 will be accommodated in alternative student accommodation for the new academic year.
  - 10.3. All current Wilgenhof residents will be entitled to re-apply to the new residence in 2026 in terms of the University's Residence Placement Policy.
  - 10.4. All staff employed at Wilgenhof can be redeployed. They will all retain their jobs on the same terms and conditions.

11. The Wilgenhof alumni and the Wilgenhof Alumni Association play an important role in supporting residents at the University, both through bursaries and other means. The Council hoped and believed that they would continue to support both current residents, and the residents of the new, reimagined residence, but their relationship with the University must be aligned with that played by other SU alumni associations.

**Ms N Newton-King**

**Chairperson: SU Council**

**30 September 2024**