



SRC 2020/2021 Annual Report

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Constitutional Responsibilities

According to the Stellenbosch University Student Constitution, 2018, the Secretary is at least responsible for:

- Maintaining internal communication within the SRC.
- Managing knowledge and institutional memory within the SRC.
- Ensuring that SRC meetings, and any other meetings or consultations where the SRC desired record keeping, are properly recorded; and
- Updating, safekeeping and making available records, policies, and other documents of the SRC.

Portfolio Overview

Role in the SRC

The Secretary General is primarily responsible to uphold internal communication within the SRC.

This means that the Secretary General makes all relevant documents available to the SRC, including, but not limited to, the minutes and agendas of SRC meetings, the minutes, and agendas of Executive Committee meetings as well as the minutes and agendas of Executive SRC Members and Management meetings.

What is notable about this is that internal communication is most definitely, not limited to these formal circumstances. Because of this extension of definition, additional responsibilities befall the Secretary General such as keeping members and managers of the SRC on the various happenings and stances of the SRC.

The Secretary General is also responsible to ensure smooth communication lines within the SRC, using different platforms, including, but not limited to, emails and cell phone communication.

Role in the University

The role of the Secretary General in the context of the University stretches as far as maintaining communication lines with the Rector’s Management Team. The Secretary General is responsible to set up the agenda as well as to minute all meetings held between the Rectorate and the SRC Executive. They are also responsible to make these minutes and agendas available to all the people included in the SRC Executive and Management meetings contact list (listed in important contacts).

Further, the Secretary General plays a pivotal role as the direct communicating link between the SRC and the Rectorate Management Team

Role in South Africa

SRC’s around the country have a very important role to play in representing students on the different campuses. The Secretary General is an Executive position in all SRC’s, plays a very important role a store of and main point of access for SRC Members and managers, Management, and students to all

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information relevant to the SRC. When Secretary Generals from various University's hold effective communication it helps unify the students of South Africa especially in extraordinary circumstances such as the ongoing pandemic. The Secretary General typically accompanies the Chairperson to meetings of the South African Union of Students, to articulate students' needs on a national level.

Committees / Task Teams

- RegisterAll Task Team
- Workstream for Student Services
- SRC Executive Committee
- Communication Policy Task Team

Please see specific feedback under Year Overview.

Year Overview

Term I

Portfolio allocation & handover

Although I did not initially avail myself for the Secretary-General portfolio, its merger with Communications Officer (which I did avail myself for) and its various parallels with said portfolio, lead me to accept the position as no other members showed interest.

The outgoing Secretary-General, Fadeelah Williams, provided exceptionally detailed, thorough and personalised handover and training session. It included, amongst other things:

- Updating the SRC website
- Accessing the SRC mailbox
- Important contacts, meeting arrangements and conducting meetings
- Constitutional Responsibilities
- Working with institutional structures

First steps

I caught up on emails which came during the handover period, and unsubscribed from dozens, perhaps hundreds of mailing lists. I have come to suspect this was a malicious attempt by a student to inundate the SRC by using a bot to subscribe the address to junk mail. I formulated email signatures for each member as per SU's Corporate Identity Manual. I created new templates for all formal documents (agendas, minutes, letters, formal documents) with the intention of refreshing the SRC's professional appearance.

The SRC website was brought up to date with agendas and minutes from meetings which occurred very early during our term and during the handover phase. Unfortunately, the SharePoint Web Editor is not user-friendly, making it difficult to find the desired options, locate the necessary files, whilst making it easy to lose files in the dozens of directories. This is a challenge with institutional knowledge that I hope the next Secretary-General can address, and which will hopefully be addressed anyway when the entire SU website is revamped.

Meetings

All meetings during this term were online, on account of the National Lockdown and the extended holidays. It necessitated rapidly becoming very proficient with Microsoft Teams in a short period of time. However, the fact that the meetings were easy to record and participants were usually clearly audible proved to be a boon during minuting. Minuting itself, whilst not inherently difficult, became very time consuming. At the time, I did not employ a scribe, on account of trying to be frugal with

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SRC funds and knowing that a minute scribe might not have the same institutional knowledge, which may lead to inaccuracies or lengthy editing.

Term 2

Welcoming Week

I created a PowerPoint presentation to introduce the newcomers to all SRC members & their portfolios, and to give an outline of the student leadership structures at SU, how they fit into each other, and what the SRC's role is in them. I contacted all Prims and requested them to provide a 15-minute timeslot for several SRC members (depending on who was available) to do the presentation. Fewer than half of the Prims responded, but arrangements presentations were done for all of those who did. In subsequent years, this initiative must be made longer and more interactive – perhaps by encouraging students to role play in a difficult student leadership scenario and discuss the approaches to and importance of student leadership.

Registration Period & Protests

The last few weeks of registration were the most difficult period of my time on the SRC. This year, registration was completely online, unless a student was unable to register online or via email. In the first week after registration opened, there were several complaints about glitches in the online registration system. However, these were soon ironed out by the Registrar's Division & IT. The next month of the registration period was almost completely quiet. Then, in the last week before registration was set to close, the situation escalated rapidly.

Dozens of NSFAS-funded students emailed the SRC because they had not received their funding outcomes from NSFAS yet and were about to be financially excluded. At other universities, student unrest developed as they insisted on registration blocks being lifted, regardless of their student debt. Those sentiments were shared by the "People's Movement", who orchestrated a protest and closed all entrances to the Neelsie Student Centre, intending to shut it down until all their demands were met. In an effort to get students registered, whilst attempting to mitigate student protests (as these could result in criminal charges or violence), the SRC urgently met with SU Management several times. We communicated the gravity of the situation and contextualised how harsh financial exclusion is during a pandemic. To protect the integrity of the registration process, especially its fairness, Management would not lift the registration block. However, they made an extraordinary effort to secure funds to clear the debt of these students, which is a much more favourable solution for these students. By pooling funds from external donors such as the Metje Foundation, as well as internally from SU's contingency reserves, we jointly secured more than R20 000 000 to completely clear the debt of 438 students and the #Action4Inclusion campaign. This was an absolute triumph for students and our council.

During this time, the SRC chairperson (Xola) and I attended a meeting of the South African Union of Students (SAUS, a union of all universities' SRC's) where we met with Prof. Ahmed Bawa (USAf), Mr Buti Manamela (Deputy Minister: DHET) and NSFAS Executives. We articulated the dire situation brought about by NSFAS, including laptop loans being a year late, unfunded First-Time-Entering-Students (FTEN's), defunded PGCE students, and no allowances having been aid, even as the academic year started. The productivity of the meeting was however hampered by members digressing into demands for free education and dismissing explanation offered by the executives. Still, the national shutdown which SAUS called afterwards placed the government under sufficient pressure to return much-needed funding back to NSFAS & DHET.

COVID-19 Protocols Campaign

In collaboration with Students Governance and our Branding & Marketing and Safety & Security portfolios, we created and distributed posters on campus to encourage students to stick closely to

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the COVID-19 protocols. I contacted the managers of various computer user areas to display it on their screens and contacted Neelsie Management with concerns about the Neelsie's potential to become a COVID-19 hotspot. If we are to measure the success of the campaign by the fact that Stellenbosch's R-value (rate of spread) has consistently remained under one, then it was successful.

SRC Meetings

SRC Executive Committee meetings continued on a weekly basis, SRC General meetings fortnightly. This, along with other meetings, SRC responsibilities, and academics, made it impossible to continue writing all minutes myself. I applied for a budget amendment to charter the support of a minute scribed, paid per meeting minuted. This was both a necessary and effective measure, as it allowed me to pay due diligence to constitutional requirements (timely scheduling of meetings, drafting of agendas, managing sr@sun.ac.za) and other SRC responsibilities (office duty, committee representation, SAUS travels).

The method of submitting apologies was changed to a Microsoft Form with a conveniently shortened bit.ly link. Members could indicate whether they will arrive late, leave early, not attend at all, or attend online instead of in person, as expected. This initiative worked excellently, as all apologies were consolidated in one place, and could never be lost or missed. It will help keep members accountable to their constitutional responsibility of attending meetings.

Term 3

Venue Booking System

The SRC Boardroom and Conference room booking system was changed from an email-based system to a Microsoft Bookings system, with a shortened bit.ly. This was done to streamline the process, prevent the occurrence of missed emails & bookings, and reduce the administrative load. This was challenging however, as Microsoft Bookings is intended to book a staff member for a consultation within a company, rather than a venue. Nevertheless, the system worked well and I will recommend that my successor set up forms for other processes like agenda point submissions as well.

F2F Assessments Discontent

The term was relatively ordinary, until one week before the exams. At this point, the SRC received a huge influx of complaints about F2F assessments proceeding despite the third wave. The SRC promptly requested an emergency meeting with the SU Rectorate. We brought the various concerns of students to the rectorate's attention and advised them that students would be outraged if in-person assessments were to continue. The rectorate responded with the following points:

- Students knew about in-person examinations since the beginning of the year
- Faculties would not be able to restructure assessments within a week
- SU meets or exceeds all COVID-19 protocols and legal requirements
- Scientific data indicated transmission under these circumstances is extremely unlikely

We subsequently issued a statement and made one critical mistake: In trying not to sound like messengers of the rectorate (which we were accused of during registration), we informed students that the rectorate declined the demands for online assessments and added that the Academic Affairs Council's polls indicated that the majority of students were not opposed to F2F assessments. At this point, students criticised the AAC's data and blamed the SRC as the reason online assessments were declined. However, the SRC did, in fact, expressly request online assessments to be urgently and seriously considered, and the rectorate's decision was not and would not have been influenced by the AAC's data. This should serve as a cautionary tale for the next SRC: make statements with the utmost care and contemplate ways in which it may not be received as intended.

Term 4

This term was relatively ordinary, but as it is near the end of our leadership term, most members became fatigued. The focus for most members, including myself, was to tie up any loose ends and end of the term on a high note.

During this time, the Office of Student Governance began to communicate with us very frequently again. This was to supply us with the handover framework, peer assessment rubrics and deadlines for annual reports. All the supporting documents were well received and appreciated. I would recommend that the Secretary General or Vice Chair send frequent reminders about these deadlines to avoid a rushed effort.

Several challenges arose regarding the Inauguration of the incoming SRC. Student Governance scheduled a meeting with the SRC Exec to request a nominee for a guest speaker at the event, as well as a 50% contribution to the production costs of the Inauguration video. I raised this repeatedly at subsequent SRC Exec meetings, but we were unable to approve the request because:

- The cost seemed exorbitant for a video only, with insufficient interactivity and opportunities for networking.
- The SRC had spent virtually its entire budget, and could not afford to contribute. There had not been the time or means to reallocate funds for such a large expense.

At the time of writing, the matter is not yet resolved. I recommend that the incoming SRC list events that will definitely happen, irrespective of the committee's or the portfolios' plans, and consider these when drawing up their budget. It is also essential that Student Governance communicate any funding requests or foreseeable expenditure to the incoming SRC during the budgeting phase already.

Year

Workstream for Student Services (WSS)

When the National Lockdown commenced, SU instituted the Institutional Committee for Business Continuity (ICBC), which would make operational decisions for as long as the contingency persists. The ICBC created several workstreams to advise the committee on its decisions. Each Workstream has a specific focal area, and consists of members from various departments, faculties and divisions. This ensures that the workstream's recommendations include the input of a variety of stakeholders. In reality, a limitation of this model is that recommendations are made based on the consensus of the members. If only a few members object, it may not override the consensus, no matter how critical those objections may be.

The WSS was chaired by the registrar, Dr Ronel Retief. The topics discussed were broad, but related to services which SU offers to its students. This included

- Planning the outline of the 2021 calendar
- Refining the registration process
- Facing NSFAS operational realities
- Making concessions for students with study visas due to backlogs
- Commenting on the COVID-19 code of conduct
- Devising plans to offer hybrid services to students, especially for Admin-A related matters
- Defining and refining procedural matters like venue protocols during assessments

My strategy in representing students on this workstream was:

1. To advise against taking unnecessary risks.
2. To pre-empt what students will do (their perception and response to motions / scenarios)

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3. To assert that students' needs must be placed first.

A recurring issue of contention was the conflict of interest between academic obligations and social solidarity regarding COVID-19. For example, the SRC cautioned that students may misrepresent themselves on the Higher Health screening app if they felt their complete honesty would have a severe academic consequence – for example, not being allowed into a test venue and failing a module as a result. We advised the assessments to be structured in a way that would not make students choose between academic success and others' safety, but with the third wave apparently coming during test & exam times, this might happen yet.

Communication Policy Task Team

Stellenbosch University decided that it needed a communication policy to regulate how students and staff communicate with each other and with university stakeholders, especially since many other universities and institutions of this size have such a policy.

My strategy in representing students on this task team was:

1. To ensure SU's commitment to multilingualism is upheld in the policy, by ensuring situations where multilingualism is reasonably practicable are included, and to include an accountability mechanism to this effect.
2. To put forward a motion for SU to break away from its email-heavy communications in favour of more centralised and organised communication channels. Staff members should not be saying, "If to need support with 'this matter' send an email to 'this person', because:
 - a. Emails are time-consuming, for both students and staff. Email chains can get very drawn out and extend the time needed to resolve a matter.
 - b. During busy periods, emails routinely get lost and students are left with urgent yet unresolved matters. Emails do not have tracking (like support tickets do) to ensure matters are resolved.
 - c. Emails can be ignored. This year, it was not uncommon for staff members to set an automated reply, mentioning a 3-5 day waiting time for responses. A support ticket system could be monitored by the head of that responsibility centre to ensure no query is unintended to.

However, because the policy is being drafted completely from scratch, the progress was very slow and we had not yet reached a section where I could make these inputs. As such, I will recommend my successor to take these forward and to add their own inputs.

Unsuccessful Projects

In the spirit of accountability, I decided to list any project that I mentioned or planned which did not materialise. To this effect, all that comes to mind is my intention from Term I to update the Afrikaans version of the website. Because the Afrikaans version is outdated to the point of containing completely different pages and directories to the English version. I engaged with Sandra Pow Chong, Digital Channels Co-Ordinator: Web and discovered that this was not possible and that the pages would mostly need to be created from scratch and content copied in. Due to the complexity of the pages, the risk of data loss within SharePoint Web Editor, and SU's plans to revamp the entire website in the coming years, I found it neither urgent nor prudent to pursue the rebuild.

Due to Student Parliament's extensive criticism of unsuccessful / abandoned SRC plans, I will recommend that my successor considers the permanent inclusion of this section in subsequent term report templates. It would be a bold and righteous move.

Budget

Budget & Reasoning

Item	Cost	Purpose
12GB Long-term Data Bundle	R899.00	SRC Meetings, emails, etc. Live off-campus without uncapped internet
Mass Mailers	R9000.00 (6x R1500.00)	Keeping students informed about SRC activities, issuing statements on urgent / wide-reaching matters.
Minute Scribe	R3690.00	Ensuring SRC meetings are minuted accurately & on time.
Discretionary funds	R1000.00	Other portfolio-related costs.

Expenditure so far

- R403.20 from discretionary funds for transportation costs outside of academic days
- ~ R3300.00 for minute scribe meetings during Term 2
- ~ R750.00 for data costs

Recommendations to improve portfolio

- Plan activities and manage your time very well.
- Always assign a responsible person and a deadline for any decision, instruction or undertaking, especially during meetings.
- Set up efficient, fool-proof systems to assist with constitutional duties and other time / admin intensive activities. This can include Microsoft Forms for agenda point submissions, meeting apologies, venue bookings, asset check-outs, etc.
- Partner with the incoming Branding & Marketing the manager to improve the perception and visibility of the SRC.
 - Create a WhatsApp business account as the outgoing Branding & Marketing Manager, Almé, brilliantly suggested.
 - Reach newcomers during welcoming with an amazing presentation to introduce newcomers to the SRC and student leadership per se. If possible, do interactive sessions, perhaps by roleplaying with newcomers on ethical dilemmas or challenging student leadership situations. The more interactive, the better.
- Find ways to reduce student apathy, and increase involvement, especially in meetings. This will probably be difficult to accomplish, but it should be a priority nevertheless.
- Set up two calendars as early as possible:
 - SRC Member Birthdays calendar (the vice-chair might opt to do this)
 - SRC events / activities calendar (to be discussed in the first few meetings, to ensure events are well-timed and members are informed for good participation)

Finally, and this is more a recommendation to the entire SRC: Make room for collaboration with other student leaders and external organisations. This year, we often received requests for collaboration, but because members had their plans and did not leave much room for anything else, nothing much came of it. Set time and funds aside for others who approach you for collaboration.

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Important Contacts

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Division for Student Affairs

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Other Contacts

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J.C. Landman	Communications Coordinator	jclandman@sun.ac.za
Sandra Pow Chong	Digital Channels Coordinator: Web	spowchong@sun.ac.za

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