

Insights from the SU Council meeting of 4 December 2023

As this challenging and busy year draws to a close, I am delighted to share some insights from the Stellenbosch University (SU) Council meeting held on Monday 4 December 2023. The hybrid meeting, which most members attended in person, was the final Council meeting of the year.

As is customary, the meeting started with **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 present and future generations, SU commits itself unconditionally to the ideal of an inclusive world-class university in and for Africa.

Report by Prof Wim de Villiers, Rector and Vice-Chancellor

The overarching theme of the Rector's report, "Making headway despite strong headwinds", aptly encapsulated SU's challenges and achievements during the 2023 academic year.

The most recent challenges include the increasingly dysfunctional and underfunded National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), which supports our most vulnerable students, and the likely reduction in government support for universities, including SU. Both these challenges will place significant pressure on the University's core academic endeavour, and as you will see from the discussion of the 2024 budget, have required SU to provide exceptional support to our most financially stressed students.

Key achievements include the launch of the Biomedical Research Institute (BMRI), and SU's role as the co-lead institution for four Africa-Europe Clusters of Research Excellence (CoREs). We were also named host of the National Institute for Theoretical and Computational Sciences (NiTheCS) and co-lead for the National Institute for the Preparedness and Prevention of Pandemics (NIP3). Moreover, the School for Data Science and Computational Thinking and the School for Climate Studies both made excellent contributions as vehicles to accelerate the University's quest to deliver impactful research on some of the crucial challenges of our time. To top it all, philanthropic donations to SU increased significantly.

The Rector emphasised SU's active engagement in collaborative research networks on a local, regional and global scale. This reflects a core aspect of the University's ethos, namely to bring about positive societal change through dedicated and purposeful research via interdisciplinary

networks that transcend regional and continental boundaries. This type of collaboration both enriches the depth of the scholarship produced by SU academics and extends the regional and global influence of the University's research, increasingly positioning the institution as a research partner of choice.

Budget 2024 tabled by Chief Operating Officer Prof Stan du Plessis

Council approved the integrated budget for 2024, which incorporates a 6% increase in student fees for undergraduates and 8% for postgraduates, as well as an 8% accommodation fee increase. Staff salaries will increase by 4%. These increases are subject to final confirmation of the amount of the 2024 state subsidy, which is expected in a few weeks.

Council noted that a concerning number of students were in arrears with their tuition and accommodation fees and had experienced food security issues given NSFAS underfunding as well as the overall economic pressure in our country. This also means that many will either not be able to graduate in 2023 or be academically excluded at the start of 2024 because of the funding difficulties they face. Although alumni and other donations can alleviate some of this financial pressure for students, a significant amount of debt remains. In response, the Rectorate has been developing a student loan proposal with a number of commercial banks. At last week's meeting, Council approved the Rectorate's proposal for SU to provide a ringfenced amount of capital as collateral for these student loans to facilitate favourable terms from the banks for qualifying students. This arrangement will apply for 2024 on an exceptional basis.

Proactively responding to these pressures is important and highlights the increasingly critical role played by alumni and other donations. However, it is imperative for key stakeholders to prioritise a sustainable solution to the funding of tertiary education. If not, we place at risk the funding needed to ensure academic excellence, which will have dire consequences for our country.

Annual report by Prof Deresh Ramjugernath, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Learning and Teaching

The Learning and Teaching annual report presented an overview of both the successes and challenges in this responsibility centre. Highlights included a successful 2023 academic year, steps taken towards embedding academic renewal as a gamechanger at the institution, and initiatives to further enhance the understanding of multilingualism across the University. The use of SU's hybrid learning opportunities has also increased, while student wrap-around support continues to be scaled up to address the multifaceted scope of student needs. Donor-funded wrap-around support programmes have proved pivotal in driving student success, and SU is looking to expand this type of support to all first-years from 2024, phasing it in across all academic years over time.

Particular focuses are student governance and ensuring that all students experience the welcoming activities in 2024 as positive and welcoming.

General matters

Council also granted approval for a number of other matters, including the draft Management Guidelines for Discretionary Residence Placements (which, among others, provide for a panel to make discretionary placements in residences) as well as the 2024 executive management scorecard (through which Council will track the delivery of key strategic imperatives).

I am most grateful to have been supported this year by committed Council members, whose active and constructive participation has enriched our discussions. Thank you, too, to the Rector and his team for guiding SU so well through a tricky year. As I have come to see up close, a university is a complex and dynamic organism, more so because by its very nature, its people are intellectually inquisitive and prize the contestation of ideas. The socioeconomic winds ahead are substantial, but so are the opportunities. SU's leadership and academic strength position the University well for 2024.

As we bid farewell to 2023, I extend my warmest wishes to the entire SU family for a joyous holiday season and a well-deserved rest.

Kind regards

Dr Nicky Newton-King
SU Council chair