

VC Newsletter

Dear colleagues and students,

I trust that you all had a good break during the Easter recess... The first semester is already heading towards the end, and at this stage it is wonderful to reflect on a number of "good headlines" during the first four months of 2007, i.e.:

- We are very proud of Prof Okkie de Jager and the team who won the Descartes Science Prize. In the EU, the Descartes Prize is regarded as the "Nobel Prize" for transnational research teams. The innovative research of our team at the Potchefstroom Campus in the field of gamma-ray astronomy through the HESS (High Energy Stereoscopic System) Group is an inspiration to all of us.
- We had a very successful launch of the Soccer Institute at the Mafikeng Campus. In just a couple of months we have managed to put together yet another showpiece. The Chairman of the English Premier Soccer League, Sir Dave Richards was our guest of honour and he was full of compliments of what we have achieved. The Premier League has given us a sponsorship of R4 m over three years for bursaries.
- The Minister of Education honoured us with her presence at the opening of new buildings at the Vaal Triangle Campus. Minister Pandor met with institutional and campus managements, staff (including unions) and student leadership. She specifically praised the NWU on our approach to, and eventual success with, the merger-incorporation.
- The Merger Unit of the Department of Education, under the leadership of Prof Mbudzeni Sibara, visited the NWU on 23 April. The purpose of this annual visit was to hear firsthand how the merger-incorporation process is doing, with specific reference to HR, IT, Finance and academic programme issues. Having met with the various Institutional Office sections, the Merger Unit congratulated the NWU on the progress with the Oracle implementation (in which they said we had avoided numerous pitfalls) and gave some advice on how to take the process forward. They also congratulated us on our progress with HR, and pointed out that the NWU is the first merged university to have moved to the "cost to company" remuneration system. They also commented favourably on our financial position, and specifically on the more inclusive budgeting process we have been following.
- In essence, the Merger Unit confirmed what we already suspected: that the NWU is the most successful and advanced merged university of all, taking into account both outputs and support functions. In this regard, all of us must take pride and receive a word of gratitude for the hard work that had been done over the last three years. It is recognised, not only internally but also in the higher education sector.

Earlier we had a very constructive Council meeting on 16 March 2007 (see Council newsletter). I would like to highlight the following developments:

Council approved the appointment of Mr Victor Mthobi as Executive Director: Human Capital development. This new portfolio will allow us to give even more focused attention to both staff and student matters. Congratulations to Victor and "sterkte"!

We will soon reveal the final brand identity which was unanimously approved by Council. The new brand identity entails institutional corporate colours, which are informed by campus corporate colours, the brand essence, a brand model and an evolved logo.

Other highlights during this period include the following:

We had a relatively good registration period at the beginning of the year with all the campuses now operating on the Varsity Student System (VSS). Despite some initial problems with slow response times, we have registered 30 914 students thus far with 6 349 new entrants. With the postgraduate registrations continuing, we are again heading to register more than 50 000 students this year (2006: 50 571 students in total). I would like to give a word of thanks to all the staff who have worked so hard during the past months to ensure that our systems are up and running.

The implementation of Oracle applications and technology has been hailed as one of the best in South Africa. The Oracle eBusiness Suite, implemented in June last year, has contributed significantly towards effective management at the NWU. The previously disparate systems are now standardised and the gaps between the functional areas have been bridged. Before the systems were integrated, duplication of work frequently occurred and data did not always

correlate, leading to bad service delivery. After integrating the 28 different systems, this became something of the past. Control is now easier and the information produced is much more reliable. If a person changes his contact details, it is immediately available on all related systems. This is possible because the master database, on which all personal and contact details are consolidated, can be updated from different sources. Because the systems are by way of processes linked to each other, the new information is visible everywhere it is needed. The process integration directly supports the NWU's strategic priority of effective management and has great potential to continue to bear fruit. The Oracle team providing support with the continuous stabilising process comprises three groups, namely internal people in support departments, for instance Finance and Human Resources, internal people at IT, providing technical support, and people from the external firm, Global Bits, with whom the University has a support contract. I would like to thank all involved for their patience and determination to make this work.

The 2006 "academic harvest" looks very promising – almost 4 000 degrees and diplomas were conferred during the March graduation ceremonies at the Potchefstroom Campus, with the Mafikeng Campus having completed their ceremonies last week, the Vaal ceremonies in May and the second round in Potchefstroom also in May. During this cycle, 73 doctorates (7 in Mafikeng, 57 in Potchefstroom and 9 in the Vaal Triangle) will also be awarded. Coupled with the 40 doctorates awarded in September 2006, this also represents a new record for the University. The other 2006 data are in the process of being finalised and I will report on this in June.

At the level of strategic projects for 2007 I can report that we are making very good progress at the following two levels:

- We are in the process of establishing an institutional Advancement Office ("fundraising") to align the institutional advancement structures of the University and to position the University within the donor community. Earmarked as a strategic priority, this dedicated office will assist me to establishment an endowment fund, and we are already busy with a number of innovative projects.

- We have also progressed well with an investigation to establish a Graduate Career Centre at the NWU. Our ultimate objective is to close the gap between our graduates and the marketplace and, through this, to receive valuable feedback on the quality and content of our academic programmes.

In the meantime we are making good progress with the preparation for the HEQC institutional audit in 2008. I have been informed that some of the CAR structures, focusing on the alignment of academic programmes, are making good, albeit slow, progress.

Colleagues may have picked up from media reports that there had been some unhappiness on the Vaal Triangle Campus and that a "whistle blower" report had been received. An independent investigation, assisted by Internal Audit, has shown that there is no truth in the allegations of "corruption, nepotism and fraud" by senior management. The investigations did point out a number of irregularities of a procedural nature, which have now been rectified at a management level. I hope that all the parties will accept this outcome and take the Campus forward.

Finally, I hope that the coming long weekend will be a useful opportunity to rest or catch up on some neglected work (be it gardening or research!). I am off to the USA for a week to deliver a paper at a conference at Yale University and to visit some foundations in New York, with a view to raise some much needed funds for the University.

May all staff and students have a wonderful Freedom Day on 27 April, and remember to cherish the fact that we are a free, democratic country, with a wonderful future!

Regards

Theuns Eloff
Vice-Chancellor