



**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**INSTITUTIONAL AUDIT REPORT**

**ON THE**

**SOL PLAATJE UNIVERSITY**

**(12 July 2024)**

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## List of Abbreviations

CTLPD	Centre for Teaching Learning and Programme Development
SPU	Sol Plaatje University
SAPPS	School Annual Performance Plans
GES	Graduate Employability Survey
SRC	Student Representative Council
VC	Vice Chancellor
SASSE	South African Survey of Student Engagement
WIL	Work Integrated Learning
HOD	Head of Department
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
LMS	Learning Management System
FET	Further Education and Training
PQM	Programme Qualification Mix
CPUT	Cape Peninsula University of Technology
HEMIS	Higher Education Management Information System
IQA	Institutional Quality Assurance
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Committee
CHE	Council on Higher Education
APC	Academic Planning Committee
DVC	Deputy Vice-Chancellor
SRC	Student Representative Council
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
SER	Self-Evaluation Report
CAT	Credit Accumulation and Transfer
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training

## Executive Summary

The Council on Higher Education (CHE) was established through the Higher Education Act (No. 101 of 1997, as amended) primarily to assure quality in the South African higher education sector and to advise the Minister on aspects of higher education. The National Qualifications Framework Act (No. 67 of 2008, as amended) conferred additional responsibilities on the CHE as the Quality Council for higher education, with overall responsibility for the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF). The CHE executes its quality assurance responsibilities through its permanent committee, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC). The CHE, through the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), exercises its quality assurance function using a variety of mechanisms, one of which is institutional audits that are mandated by the Higher Education Act.

The Framework for Institutional Audits (2021)<sup>1</sup> and its attendant Manual for Institutional Audits (2021)<sup>2</sup> are key instruments to regulate the implementation of institutional audits. These documents are also aligned with important aspects of the new Quality Assurance Framework (QAF)<sup>3</sup> that was approved by the HEQC and Council in September 2020 and which will be implemented in the medium term by the CHE. Institutional audits are strongly influenced by both the specific context within which each HEI works and by the national transformational agenda within which higher education functions. The HEQC has identified a need to do full audits of all HEIs in South Africa. A full audit of an institution determines whether or not, and to what extent, an institution's IQA systems, policies, and procedures ensure the effective provisioning of good quality higher education that enhances the likelihood of student success through quality learning and teaching, research opportunities, and integrated community engagement. The emphasis is less on ensuring that required standards are met at a particular threshold than on the deliberate, continuous, systematic, and measurable improvement of the student experience, as well as on building reflexive praxis to develop quality cultures in institutions.

The following principles guided the institutional audit of Sol Plaatje University:

1. The primary responsibility for internal quality assurance rests with individual HEIs. Each institution is responsible for the establishment, implementation, maintenance, improvement, and enhancement of its own quality management and assurance systems.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.che.ac.za/publications/frameworks/framework-institutional-audits-2021>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.che.ac.za/publications/frameworks/manual-institutional-audits-2021>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.che.ac.za/publications/frameworks/quality-assurance-framework-qaf-higher-education-south-africa>

2. The uniqueness of each institution's size, shape, location, context, and mission is recognised.
3. The value of institutional audits rests on the compilation of credible, contextually relevant, and reliable information that is required for internal quality-related planning and self-evaluation, peer review, and public reporting (for example, by publishing executive summaries).
4. Student experience, student engagement and participation and the student voice are central to an evaluation of an institution's quality management system.
5. The institutional audit is a peer-driven and evidence-based process to ensure that the HEQC and its audit panel reports are transparent, informed, and consistent.
6. Institutional audits are developmental and intent on supporting continuous quality improvement and enhancement.
7. Institutional audits are required to balance their developmental character with the regulatory requirement that the CHE and the HEQC act on poor provisioning where institutions have no clear commitments, processes, practices, or plans to improve.
8. Institutional audits are a key component of the HEQC's broad-based quality assurance mandate.

Aligned to international practice, the HEQC uses a review methodology consisting of an institutional self-evaluation report (SER), and an external peer review which verifies, triangulates, and validates the institution's self-evaluation. The external peer review consists of a document analysis of the SER and institutional portfolio of evidence, as well as a site visit at which interviews are conducted with constituencies and physical infrastructure is visited. This audit report forms the outcome of the institutional audit of Sol Plaatje University (SPU).

### **Brief Overview of the Institution and the Audit Process**

Sol Plaatje University (SPU) was formally established by Government Gazette No. 630 under the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 (Government Gazette No. 36771) on 23 August 2013. It is one of two South African public universities established post-democracy, the other one being the University of Mpumalanga. The idea of establishing universities in the Northern Cape and Mpumalanga, the then only two provinces in the country without institutions of higher learning that awarded degrees, dates to the pre-democracy era. After democracy in 1994, the respective provincial governments advocated for the establishment of higher education institutions in the two provinces. These discussions were concluded with the release of the National Plan for Higher Education in February 2001, which proposed the establishment of the National Institute for Higher Education in the Northern Cape, NIHE-NC, and the National Institute for Higher Education in Mpumalanga, (NIHE-Mpumalanga) *“to serve as the administrative and governance hubs for ensuring the coherent provision of higher education*

*in response to regional needs through programme collaboration between the higher education institutions currently operating in Mpumalanga and the Northern Cape<sup>1</sup>.*

Based in Kimberley with a satellite campus in Upington, the NIHE-NC has been providing access to higher education for those who were disenfranchised by apartheid since its establishment in the early 2000s. The NIHE-NC did not award autonomous degrees or diplomas. Driven by the increasing number of Grade 12 school leavers with academic results sufficient to enter university and the need to increase South Africa's higher education participation rate, the need for a university with degree-awarding status became increasingly evident and compelling. It was within this context, and after consultation and planning that an institution to be called Sol Plaatje University (SPU) was established with its academic seat in Kimberley. The formal launch of the University took place on 19 September 2013.

*The University was established as a comprehensive university - Offering a range of formative and technology-focused undergraduate programmes catering to youth with diploma and bachelor entry NCS qualifications and NCV qualifications and strong postgraduate programmes in niche areas.*

During its short period of existence, SPU, hereinafter referred to as "the University" has seen significant growth in its academic, infrastructural, governance, and management functions. From its inception, in August 2013, the first Interim Council and subsequent Councils have guided and steered the University well in its formative, foundational years. It has ensured that appropriate systems, procedures, policies, and support structures are in place to support the work of the Management Team and the Council itself in terms of the Higher Education Act and the Standard Institutional Statute. The various governance structures perform their duties in accordance with both the word and spirit of King IV. This regulatory framework ensures a clear delineation of roles and responsibilities and safeguards that the Council remains an oversight body, not directly involved in the operational management of the institution. Thus, during these formative years, the Council has remained focused on its governance function and has not infringed on the management and operational responsibilities of the Vice Chancellor and the senior management team.

The University has made major strides in terms of student enrolment and the number of academic programmes offered. In its first academic year, 2014, the University registered 124 students in three inaugural offerings, a Bachelor of Education (B Ed) in Senior Phase and Further Education and Training (FET), teaching in the fields of Mathematics, Life Sciences and Geography; a Diploma in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) specialising

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<sup>1</sup> The Establishment of a National Institute for Higher Education in The Northern Cape Report of The Working Group, April 2002.

in applications development and a Diploma in Retail Business Management. The programmes, developed with the assistance of senior academics from the University of the Free State (UFS) and Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), were either a new qualification; Diploma ICT applications development and Diploma Business Retail Management; or a re-curriculated version of the existing B Ed degree, and were being offered for the first time in the South African higher education system.

Following a successful implementation year, in 2015, the student numbers more than doubled to 329, and to 696 in 2016. The rapid growth of student enrolments continued in 2017 as the University saw a 66% increase in student numbers. This was made possible by the infrastructural investment provided by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). To date, the Department has invested over R5 billion in the development of academic facilities, administration buildings, residential accommodation, and sporting facilities for students.

In 2016 the University reached two major milestones. Firstly, the introduction of the core formative university programmes: the Bachelor of Arts (BA); the Bachelor of Science (BSc), and the Bachelor of Commerce (BCom) as generic qualifications. Like the inaugural programmes, these programmes were developed by drawing on experiences and good practices from several established universities and adapted to suit the University's long-term academic intentions. Since the BA, B Sc, and B Com are considered foundational programmes in academia, the introduction of these programmes marked a 'coming of age' for the university (Annual Report, 2017).

Secondly, the University produced the first Bachelor's degree graduates. At the graduation ceremony, degrees were conferred on 32 B Ed and thirteen B Sc (Data Science) students. The graduates were part of the cohort of students who started in 2014 and 2015, respectively. The number of graduates increased to 111 graduates in the following year, 2017, with a 65% cohort completion in minimum time. This is a remarkable achievement, given that the national average is close to 27%.

In 2019, the first postgraduate programmes, the BSc Hons (Data Science); BA Hons (Sociology), BEdHons Ed Hons (Curriculum Studies) and Postgraduate Diploma in Public Management became part of the suite of academic offerings of the University. Student enrolments, including postgraduate enrolments, grew by 26%, while the number of graduates grew by 46% over the 2018 figures. In 2020, 404 students graduated: 399 undergraduate and 4 postgraduate students. To date, the University has graduated a total of 2459 students. Approximately 45% of the 2459 graduates to date, are in its anchor qualification, Education.

The University exceeded its first-time enrolment target of 1262 by 195, enrolling 1457 students

in 2022, and has seen a significant increase in numbers from the initial cohort of 124 in 2014 to 3693 in 2023.

In terms of shape and size, the Faculty of Education enrolments comprise 44,2%, the Faculty of Natural and Applied Sciences, 21,4%, Humanities, 18,9%, and the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, 15,5%. According to the revised enrolment plan (2023 – 2025), the University's intention is to plateau enrolments in the Education Faculty and steadily, grow the student numbers in the faculties of Natural and Applied Sciences, and Economic and Management Sciences.

Sixty percent (60%) of students admitted during the inaugural year were from outside Kimberley and 10% were from outside the Northern Cape. In 2022, the profile had changed remarkably to 64.98% of students coming from outside the Northern Cape, indicating the national reach of the University, and a positive outcome of the University's strategy of purposefully recruiting students from all nine provinces and from across South Africa's borders.

In terms of staff members, the University commenced with a staff complement of 33 in February 2014, 10 of which were suitably qualified academics to teach in the three approved academic programmes. In February 2019, the numbers had increased to 120 academic staff members, of which 36% held Doctoral degrees, a further 53% held Masters' degrees and the rest had Honours degrees. By November 2019, there were 133 academic staff members, with 48% who held Doctoral degrees and 43% who had Masters' degrees. In 2023, the University has a staff complement of 630 of which 162 are academic.

The average course pass rate was 89.9% for the inaugural three programmes. Like the first cohort of 2014, the students admitted in 2015 produced equally good academic results. Seventy-five percent (75%) passed all their courses, and the average course pass rate was 90%. Over only nine academic years, the University has increased its undergraduate academic offerings from the initial 3 in 2014 to 18 in 2023. The postgraduate programmes (Masters and Honours degrees) have increased from 0 in 2019 to 16 in 2023 and the throughput rate to 66.38% for undergraduate students. The throughput rate for postgraduate students is, however, low at just over 56% considering that SPU has had only 16 students since the inception of its postgraduate programmes. This is a concern because the NDP requires universities to increase postgraduate throughput rates. The first PhD programmes will be offered from 2025.

Arrangements are in place for enrolment planning, the capturing of student information, and the certification of qualifications. The dedication of teaching staff and individual care for students enabled the University to complete the 2020-2022 academic years successfully,



despite the national lockdowns.

In terms of racial profile, African students have increased from 74% in 2014 to 86% in 2023. On the other hand, all other racial groups; Coloureds, Indians/Asians, and Whites have decreased, from 2014 to 2023; Coloured students decreased by 11% from 24% to 13%; 1% to 0.2% for Asian students and 1% to 0.8% for White students.

In 2014, the staff racial profile was 40%, 40%, 15%, and 5% for Africans, Whites, Coloureds and Asians/Indians respectively. This has changed significantly with an increase of 32% to 72% for Africans, a marked decrease of 27% to 13% for Whites, a decrease of 4% to 11% for Coloured staff members, and a marginal decrease of 1% to 4% for Asians/Indian staff members. Female staff members increased from 52% in 2014 to 63% in 2023, while males decreased from 44% to 37% in the same period.

In 2014, 40% of staff held PhD degrees, 45% Masters, and 15% Honours degrees. In line with the University's strategy to increase the number of senior academic staff, the percentage of staff with PhDs increased to 59% in 2023. There was a desirable trend in the decrease of the Masters and Honours degrees to 32% and 9% respectively.

Since its inception, the University has had a clearly stated vision and mission, with a specific calling in the province as well as a national and international reach and aspirations. The audit panel notes that the University adopted a pragmatic approach in its strategic planning. The inaugural strategic plan 2014-2019 was focused on providing a firm foundation for the academic project by foregrounding good governance and management, together with associated structures, processes, and procedures; excellence in teaching and learning at undergraduate level and related quality assurance practices that focused primarily on programme development and review; the First Year Student Experience, student support; elements of a digitally driven university in teaching and learning through the Centre for Teaching, Learning and Programme Development (CTLPD), and the adoption of Moodle as the Learning Management System (LMS) for the University. To date, the current management structure reflects the emphasis of the inaugural strategic plan with one Deputy Vice Chancellor focusing primarily on undergraduate teaching and learning, no research office, and no quality assurance office. The University introduced a strategic goal that focuses on community engagement function in 2021. The latter core function together with research and the establishment of a quality office still needs to be developed further.

The strategy to prioritise undergraduate education has been successful, despite the limitations of not focusing on research and community engagement in the University's first strategic plan. To a large extent, the University has over the last ten years of its existence, differentiated itself within the higher education sector of South Africa and is playing an impactful role in the lives

of quintile 1 to 3 students and also through a Programme Qualification Mix that is responsive to the needs of the Northern Cape and South Africa as a whole, by offering unique programmes such as the Higher Certificate in Heritage Studies and the B Sc (Data Science). The latter are new qualifications, never offered in the South African higher education system. Approximately 56% of students are from the no-fee-paying schools or quintiles 1-3.

The audit panel received positive and enthusiastic reports from graduates on their level of satisfaction with the quality of teaching and learning and overall academic experience, and several of them opted to register to further their studies with the University. The employers interviewed by the panel were equally satisfied with the readiness of graduates for the workplace, barring a few concerns relating to what seems to be a disjuncture between the excellent digitally driven training and the reality in the workplace. The latter is evident among graduates from the School of Education. Employers also spoke of the lack of soft skills of the graduates which the audit panel established is due to lack of defined graduate attributes. Recommendations on how to address both these challenges are provided under the appropriate Standard.

Currently, quality assurance in the University is evident in the process of programme approval and review which is established throughout the University. The panel was impressed by the fact that to date, the University has subjected all its undergraduate programmes to external review. In the absence of an approved policy on quality management, the University has adopted what could be described as an informal quality management process. The efficacy of the process, though with some major shortcomings that need to be addressed, is evident in the minutes of the meetings of the Academic Planning Committee and Senate which show rigorous debate and discussions during the approval of programmes and when considering the outcome of external programme reviews tabled at the meetings. For example, the B Com degree which was initially developed, was discontinued in its current form, and it is being phased out following a recommendation by the external review panel.

The 2nd generation strategic document 2020-2024 has been characterised by the consolidation of the 1st phase and foregrounding of research and scholarly work. The University has made significant strides in defining and initiating distinctive multidisciplinary research niche areas aligned to the needs of the Northern Cape Province in fields like Data Science, Languages, and Heritage Studies. To support the newly established research function, the University introduced a Postdoctoral Fellows Fund, and the position of Director of Research was advertised in 2023.

From what the audit panel could observe, the University has established a collegial institutional culture and has differentiated itself through its visual branding with a strong,

recognizable corporate identity, intimately connected to the Northern Cape Province and the town of Kimberley.

The audit process was conducted in two phases. Phase 1 lasted two days and consisted of an on-campus site visit including a one-day tour of the University facilities in Kimberley. The audit panel was taken on a tour of the North Campus which is the seat of administration, the Central Campus which is the academic hub comprising lecturers' offices, wet and dry laboratories, computer laboratories, lecture halls, the library, the campus health centre, and some student residences; lastly the South Campus or Sports hub comprising facilities for several sporting codes including the newly acquired Griquas Rugby Stadium, as well as student residences and the Office of the Dean of Student Affairs. The second day was dedicated to in-person interviews with the Vice-Chancellor and Principal, members of Senior Management, and the Institutional Forum. Interviews with Chairpersons of various Council sub-committees were held on the same day in a hybrid mode with the majority of members online.

Prior to the site visit, the panel held an induction workshop and weekly meetings over eight weeks with the audit officer, Dr Precious Sipuka from the CHE. Each panel member was allocated a Focus Area based on their expertise and was required to develop lines of inquiry to be used during the interviews and the site visit. The questions for the lines of inquiry were drawn from the Self Evaluation Report (SER) and the Portfolio of Evidence (PoE) provided by the University. Panel members refined and agreed on the questions to be presented to interviewees for each session.

Phase two comprised twenty-six (26) sessions of online interviews conducted over two (20) days with various internal and external stakeholders. The largest session comprised fifteen (15) participants and the smallest, four (4) participants. It was important to emphasise confidentiality at the beginning of each session and the fact that the sessions would not be recorded.

The panel met committed and passionate staff on all the campuses visited. The reception was welcoming, positive, and accommodating with all interviewees participating in both the hybrid and in-person sessions engaging freely. This experience continued in the 2nd phase of online interview sessions. The panel was left with a unanimous appreciation of the synergy and drive that unifies the University community at all levels. The panel was appreciative of the meticulous preparation for the audit by the Registrar's Office. Follow-up questions via e-mail were also attended to timeously with the required information provided. The panel did not experience any technical glitches in any of the sessions.

The SER is a crucial component of the audit process that the audit panel relies on for

preparation for the site visit and the interviews. The panel found the SER was not sufficiently reflective and under-represented the achievements and challenges of the University in some cases. In discussions with senior management, it also became apparent that there was minimal participation in the preparation of the SER by both students and the Institutional Forum. The portfolio of evidence (PoE), however, made up for these limitations, albeit, with a lot of effort from the panel members to locate information and construct a full picture of the University, and its significant achievements in a short space of ten years. In a few instances, the attachments referred to in the SER did not always provide the information that was referenced.

In all its engagements with the University, the panel recognized and appreciated the contextual reality of the University as a young institution which has operated for only a decade. We also recognized the challenges for the academic project that may be presented by the unique location in the Northern Cape, while at the same time fully appreciative of the opportunities its unique status as one of only two Universities established in the democratic era in South Africa presents.

It is within this developmental context that the panel offers both commendations and recommendations within the sixteen (16) standards. The SER and the supporting PoE as well as evidence derived from the site visit and the interviews held with various internal and external stakeholders formed the basis for the panel's judgements for each standard.

## **Conclusion**

Despite two major destabilising events in the higher education sector during its decade-long existence, namely the 2015/2016 #FeesMustFall campaign and the COVID-19 pandemic, and subsequent lockdown periods between March 2020-2021/2, the University has made tremendous strides in all facets of governance and management of its core academic and support functions, especially in undergraduate education and infrastructure investment. Effectively, the University has had only six uninterrupted years of existence out of the ten. The University has, nevertheless, been successful in designing and implementing new academic programmes in collaboration with other universities, responding to disruption, and the changing contextual needs (identified in the programme reviews), all while it manages major infrastructural projects simultaneously with institutional and academic development and recruiting high calibre academic staff to a less well-known university and a town with specific challenges that make the attraction, recruitment, and retention of staff particularly complex. The latter includes the highly-priced real estate market, few chances for employment for spouses, and limited school options for the education of staff with children.

Notwithstanding these challenges, the University has made a significant impact in the lives of

the most disenfranchised by producing quality graduates, forging partnerships with several employers and other stakeholders, building a new alumni base, and developing strong and distinctive research niche areas aligned to the needs of the Northern Cape Province. In its ten years of existence, the University has developed a significant national footprint becoming a national player with more than 65% of its students coming from outside the Northern Cape Province, while still being anchored in the town of Kimberley and serving the needs of the communities around the province.

Starting a new University is a mammoth task which cannot be underestimated. It is for this reason that the panel deeply appreciates the significant work done by all stakeholders of the University. The progress made thus far needs to be applauded.

The following is a summary of the audit panel's commendations and recommendations for the University.

## **Focus area 1: Governance, strategic planning, management, and leadership support the core academic functions**

The four standards in Focus Area 1 concentrate on the role that an institution's governance, strategic planning (as contained in its vision, mission, and strategic goals), management, and academic leadership play in its quality management in order to enhance the likelihood of student success and to improve the quality of learning, teaching and research engagement, as well as accommodating the results of constructive, integrated community engagement. These standards are:

***Standard 1: The institution has a clearly stated vision and mission, and strategic goals which have been approved by appropriate governance structures, subject to comprehensive stakeholder engagement.***

The vision, mission, and strategic goals of the University are clearly and concisely formulated in the founding strategy document 2015-2019 and in the second-generation strategy document 2020-2024. The Council approved the inaugural Strategic Plan on 3 February 2015; the second strategic plan 2020-2025 on 27 November 2019 and the Revised Strategic Plan 2020-2024 on 24 November 2021. The Annual Reports of 2015 and 2019 provided evidence that the Strategic Plans were developed with due consideration to the contextual reality, institutional strengths, threats, and opportunities that the location of the University in the Northern Cape Province presents.

The vision of SPU is to be a "university critically engaging in learning, research, and development while enhancing democratic practice and social justice in society". The vision

commits the University to democratic practice and “social justice”. The SER further states: “Given the growing racialized disparities in wealth and income in South Africa, this vision enjoins the University to adopt a critical stance in its curriculum and knowledge endeavours that question the kind of development, social and economic structures that produce and reproduce such disparities” [ p. 37]

The panel recognizes that the University adopted a pragmatic approach in its strategic planning. The inaugural strategic plan 2014-2019 focused on providing a firm foundation for the academic project by foregrounding good governance and management, together with associated structures, processes, and procedures. The University also prioritised excellence in teaching and learning at the undergraduate level, and related quality assurance practices that focused primarily on programme development, approval, and review. The first postgraduate programmes were introduced four years after the establishment of the University in 2019, and a new strategic goal that focuses on “community engagement as a scholarly activity” was added during the review of the second plan in 2021.

Despite these limitations, the focus on undergraduate teaching and learning appears to have been successful. To a large extent, the University has over the last ten years of its existence, differentiated itself within the higher education sector of South Africa and is playing an impactful role in the lives of quintiles 1 to 3 students, and also through a Programme Qualification Mix (PQM) that is responsive to the needs of the Northern Cape Province, and South Africa as a whole by offering unique programmes such as the Higher Certificate in Heritage Studies and the B Sc (Data Science), which are new qualifications, never before offered in the South African Higher Education system. It is notable that the University has been able not only to develop new programmes but also to conduct an external review of all its undergraduate programmes. To date, the University has graduated 2459 graduates, mostly in its anchor qualification, Education. There was general agreement among graduates on their level of satisfaction with the quality of teaching and learning and overall academic experience.

From what the audit panel could observe, the University has established a collegial institutional culture, and it has differentiated itself through its visual branding with a strong, recognizable corporate identity, intimately connected to the Northern Cape Province and the town of Kimberley.

Interviews with staff and students revealed, however, that the two generations of the strategic plans, like the SER, appear to have been developed with the involvement of Senior Management and Council only without rigorous and engaged involvement of students, academic staff members, or external stakeholders except those represented in the Council. While the panel is concerned about the lack of engagement, they are also aware that several

contextual factors that relate to a growing university and no track record of an iterative approach to strategic planning could have given rise to this approach during this early phase of the establishment of the University. The panel was particularly cognizant of the fact that the University did not have established governance structures during the development of the first strategic plan.

Interview discussions with Heads of Schools, senior academic staff, students, and the Institutional Forum on how the concept of social justice translates in different academic and support functions of the University, confirmed the panel's initial concerns that the concept is variously interpreted with different levels of depth and clarity within the University. The staff of the CTLPD, which guides all schools in curriculum design and programme development, acknowledged that the process of curriculum design and programme development does not include a specific stage at which the developers engage critically on how the concept of social justice should be embedded in materials development. The panel, nevertheless, found one interpretation of this concept in the undergraduate curriculum which was commonly understood by both staff and students; three foundational modules offered at the first-year level, Academic Literacies, Digital Literacies, and Computer Literacy are considered "social justice modules" by many students and staff members the panel interviewed. While this is a good start, the panel believes that as an institution that is not encumbered by the past, the University must initiate robust institution-wide discussions on how the concept of social justice is embedded in its core academic functions, and support functions. It was also not clear either, how the understanding of the concept finds expression in the University's operational aspects that would mark them as unique or distinguishing features of the University.

The University should be commended for introducing new academic programmes aligned to the needs of the Northern Cape Province, and never before offered in the South African higher education system.

Currently, the University is working towards its third planning phase, 2025-2029 which will also see a handover period from the current Vice Chancellor to a third incumbent over the next two years. The University should adopt a more inclusive approach, in this planning cycle and align the plan to a particular higher education business Model.

### **Commendation(s)**

- a. The University is commended for establishing itself as a niche university, with a clearly articulated vision and mission. In ten years, it has made an undeniable contribution to the underserved community of the Northern Cape and has the potential to impact the South African Higher Education landscape by offering unique academic programmes that are responsive to the needs of the province.

## **Recommendation(s)**

1. It is recommended that the University adopt an inclusive and collaborative approach in the third cycle of planning. Wider participation is needed; therefore, students, the Institutional Forum, junior academic staff, and external stakeholders should play a prominent role in the review of the University's mission and the (re)formulation of strategic goals.
2. It is recommended that the University work towards a shared understanding of the key concepts in its vision and mission, specifically the notion of social justice and how it should be enacted in the academic core and operational functions in the next planning cycle 2025-2029.
3. It is recommended that the University consider producing discussion and/or position papers on, e.g., social justice in relation to teaching and learning, research, and community engagement, curriculum design, the implementation of the quality management policy, and decisions made regarding infrastructure (including the underpinning business model for residences and/or other forms of student accommodation) and continue the debate on the University's positioning to inform the next planning cycle 2025-2029. This responsibility could be assigned to the Academic Reference Group as part of the breakthrough project.
4. It is recommended that the University consider adding a breakthrough area that focuses on an aspect of undergraduate education such as student access and success to build on and consolidate the good foundation it has laid on undergraduate learning and teaching in these foundational years of its existence.
5. It is recommended that the University consider the feasibility of either introducing Extended Curriculum or Higher Certificate programmes, especially in the Natural and Applied Sciences to articulate with the degree programmes. This should widen access and help the University to fulfil its stated intentions to change its size and shape and grow its component of Natural and Applied Sciences programmes beyond the current 21.4%. In addition, it would speak to the University's social justice mandate and strengthen its identity as a comprehensive university.
6. It is recommended that the University align the 3rd generation Strategic Plan 2025-2029, to a particular higher education institution business model as alluded to in the SER.

**Standard 2:** *The stated vision, mission, and strategic goals align with national priorities and context (e.g. transformation, creating a skilled labour force, developing scarce skills areas and a critical citizenry, and contributing to the fulfillment of national goals as informed by the NDP and planning), as well as sectoral, regional, continental and global imperatives (e.g. Africa Vision 2063 or the Sustainable Development Goals).*



Since its inception, the University has had a clearly stated vision and mission, with a specific calling in the province and strategic goals that have been reviewed and approved by the Council and progress continuously reported to the Council. While the strategic choices embedded in the two strategy documents, 2015-2019 and 2020-2024 recognize the prevailing conditions in South Africa and the evolving nature of higher education nationally and globally, the University has not aligned its strategic plans to the National Development Plan 2030, Africa Vision 2063 or the Sustainable Development Goals explicitly.

The SER nevertheless draws parallels between the contents of these three documents and the content of the University Strategic Plans and the Academic Plans. In the Self Evaluation Judgement requested as additional information by the Panel on 12 June 2023, the University acknowledges that “in both our Strategic and Academic Plans, we have emphasised social transformation and national and regional matters. However, matters that relate directly to the National Plan and Sustainable Development Goals are not included at this stage. Regarding scarce skills, our current offering is limited to Education and Life and Physical Science, but we plan to continue addressing the matter via our PQM and considering financial affordability. At the next Strategic Plan review, emphasis will be placed on aligning it as closely as is feasible with the National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa, Sustainable Development Goals, and scarce skills”.

At the end of 2019, the University decided to pursue four strategic goals in the period 2020 – 2024 namely, to (1) become research-active in prioritised niches, (2) deepen its academic programme and orientation to quality teaching and learning, (3) facilitate the development of a digitally empowered university, and, (4) establish the foundations for long-term sustainability.

Two examples of developments necessitated an additional objective in 2021. According to the Strategic Plan document 2020-2024 (page 3) – in considering the fifth strategic goal, the University took cognizance of the changing socio-political, economic, and public health landscapes and a future which involves the community in which it is embedded. It also considered the impact of the technological shift in global and local markets and the changing enrolment patterns and repositioned its strategies within this context and a focus on engagement as a scholarly endeavour. As a result, for the years 2020-2024, the University added a 5th strategic goal; “community engagement as a scholarly activity” to the current four goals.

The University hosts a regular Strategic Plan review session with senior staff members, including the Executive, Heads of Schools, and other Senior Staff members, to evaluate the mid-year performance, implementation of the Annual Performance Process (APP), and a review of the Enrolment Plan. A sample Strategic Retreat Workshop agenda was provided in

the PoE. [Annexure A19]

### **Recommendation(s)**

7. It is recommended that the University strengthen its recruitment initiatives by targeting students within the Northern Cape area.
8. It is recommended that the University improves its enrolment planning processes and management in its third Strategic Plan 2025-2029.
9. It is recommended that the University aligns its third Strategic Plan, 2025-2029 as closely as is feasible with the National Development Plan 2030, Africa Vision 2063, Sustainable Development Goals, and scarce skills.

**Standard 3:** *There is demonstrable strategic alignment between the institution's quality system for core academic activities across all sites and modes of provision and its vision, mission, and strategic goals, as well as its governance and management processes.*

The University approved the Policy on Quality Management on 29 March 2023, and at the time of the audit, the position of Quality Manager was still vacant. Therefore, it is too early to assert that a "quality management system" is in place. In the absence of an institutionalised Quality Management Policy, the SER [Guideline 3.2] states that the present strategic plan, as well as the various terms of reference of its governance structure, constitute the basis of an internal quality management system. The governance structure of the University is anchored by the Council, the Senate, and the Executive, each of which is supported by several sub-committees. Further discussion on the quality management processes is in Standard 5.

The University's mission and goals have been incorporated in annual planning documents and have been institutionalised to the level of Heads of Schools within the academic departments. Similar planning did not seem to be institutionalised within support departments. Risk planning is integrated into the five-year strategy plans, as well as annually in the risk registers at the School level, which are merged into an Institutional Risk Register and monitored and reported in the Annual Performance Plan. Risk mitigation is accomplished through identified risks and mitigation plans developed by executive management and reviewed by the Audit and Risk Management Committee of Council which also monitors the top ten risks of the University.

Each School draws on the Strategic Plan to develop its operational plan, a sample of which was provided in the SER [Annexure A15]. Therefore, up to the School level, there is consistency in terms of strategic planning. The four Heads of School confirmed that they each manage an Annual Plan for their School with specific deliverables and timeframes. However, there was no common understanding of the guidelines for resource allocation for specific

strategic goals or the existence of an approved budget allocation framework. The Senior Management mentioned that they consider criteria such as financial sustainability and affordability, “seniorization” of academic staff, and needs for staff development.

An example of the institutional Annual Performance Plan (APP), that was provided in the PoE, gives clear measurables, and timeframes toward the strategic goals [Annexure A3]. The timeframes for the specific years are transgressed into an example of an Institutional Scorecard provided in the PoE. This plan is drawn up with input from the various Schools and other Divisions within the University. As indicated in Standard 2, at the end of each semester, the University hosts a Strategic Retreat Workshop to review the progress of implementation.

The University has a functional performance management system up to Peromnes level 5. Council considers the performance of the University in accordance with the annual implementation plan and the relevant five-year plan. The Vice-Chancellor tables a regular report to the Council and the Senate and performance bonuses of the Vice-Chancellor, and the members of the Executive are considered against the backdrop of the institution’s performance relative to the identified key performance areas and related KPIs and targets set for the previous year. Staff members are held accountable by means of a work agreement and performance management system that is aligned with the Strategic Plan. The Vice-Chancellor confirmed that the members of Senior Management need to attain at least 80% or greater of the targets set by the institutional scorecard per annum for satisfactory performance. He provided examples of corrective action that was taken in cases where Executive Members did not meet set performance targets. Heads of Schools meet regularly with their Line Managers and similar corrective action applies to them.

The performance management system was recently cascaded to all levels from January 2023 and the Heads of Schools conceded that it is too early to comment on its effectiveness at the lower Peromnes levels while staff members who were interviewed by the panel expressed dissatisfaction with its implementation. There is a need for the performance management system to be institutionalised and applied consistently at levels lower than Peromnes level 5 across the University so that all staff in the entire value chain are held accountable for their performance.

The new workload model encompassing teaching, research, and community engagement, complemented by the performance agreements is a good strategic initiative. However, the implementation seems to be managed differently across Schools. The application of the workload model and the performance management system below Peromnes level 5 seemed to be inconsistent, leading to dissatisfaction among staff.

From a governance and managerial perspective there is a keen awareness of the main risks

of the University, including the importance of ensuring financial sustainability in terms of the block grant funding which will be implemented by the DHET from 2030 onwards. Ethical standards and integrity are among the values cherished by the University. The governance structures are guided in terms of ethical leadership by the University Statute, codes of conduct, and a comprehensive suite of policies, including a framework of delegated authorities for financial and human resource decisions.

### **Recommendation(s)**

10. It is recommended that the University implement the approved Policy on Quality Management. There should be alignment between quality management reporting and budgeting.

**Standard 4:** *There is a clear understanding of and demonstrable adherence to the different roles and responsibilities of the governance structures, management, and academic leadership.*

The various governance structures, established in terms of the Higher Education Act and University Statute, perform their duties in accordance with both the word and spirit of King IV. This regulatory framework ensures a clear delineation of roles and responsibilities and safeguards that the Council remains an oversight body, not directly involved in the operational management of the institution, which responsibility vests in the Executive structures of the University, or the academic responsibilities that vest in the Senate and its structures.

Risk management is a critical element of the University's internal control and governance arrangements. The Council prides itself especially on financial management and sustainability and indicated that barring the financial sustainability of residences which is a self-identified area of improvement, the University is in excellent financial shape and has had only clean audit outcomes.

The Council annually completes a self-evaluation report in terms of which it evaluates its performance as a collective as well as that of its committees based on a scorecard. The Council members, however, identified the need for an external independent evaluation of the Council.

While the panel acknowledges the expertise and calibre of the current Council members, it is important that the University nevertheless conducts a formal induction of new Council members. Currently, Council members are invited to attend an informal induction session which, to date, has consisted of a tour of the campus academic, support, and administrative facilities. No formal workshops are arranged during this period. As a growing university, and to safeguard its tradition of good governance, the University should induct new Council

members to ensure continuity.

The governance structures, management, and academic leadership have effective reporting and accounting mechanisms for their roles, responsibilities, and performance in general. As indicated in Standard 3, the University has an effective performance management system up to Peromnes level 5. The Vice-Chancellor contracts with the Council and his Executive in turn enters a performance contract with him. This is cascaded down to the level of Heads of Schools.

Opportunities available to the Council and Senior Management to empower themselves to effectively play their roles, take responsibility, and make decisions with integrity are not clearly defined, while members of Senior Management attended a few workshops that were organised by the Department of Human Resources.

Examples of appointment policies and procedures, provided in the PoE take cognisance of the need to be responsive to the country's transformation and development imperatives as well as the employment equity plans and priorities of the University. Of note are the nGAP programmes for recruiting emerging academic staff members and the Future Professors programme that identifies talented young academics to benefit from a structured and intense programme aimed at accelerating their readiness for the professoriate. The portfolio of Human Resources requires urgent attention, especially in light of the particular conditions in Kimberley and the Northern Cape that make recruitment of high-calibre staff and their retention challenging. Management also acknowledged that the Department of Human Resources needs attention. Standard 6 elaborates further on the challenges of recruitment and retention of staff.

### **Recommendation(s)**

11. It is recommended that the University considers developing and implementing an induction or training opportunity for new Council members.
12. It is recommended that the University ensure that opportunities are made available for the continuous development of Council members to enable them to execute their functions. Leadership development and mentorship opportunities for new and existing Senior Management as well as other academic and support staff should be enhanced.

### **Focus area 2: The design and implementation of the institutional quality management system supports the core academic functions**

The four standards in Focus Area 2 concentrate on how the design and implementation of an integrated quality management system in the institution enhances the likelihood of student success and improves the quality of learning, teaching and research engagement, as well as

accommodating the results of constructive, integrated community engagement within the context of the institution's mission. These standards are:

**Standard 5:** *A quality assurance system is in place, comprising at a minimum, of: (i) governance arrangements; (ii) policies; (iii) processes, procedures and plans; (iv) instructional products; (v) measurement of impact; and (vi) data management and utilisation, as these give effect to the delivery of the HEI's core functions.*

The panel acknowledges that the approval of the Policy for Quality Management is a first step towards the promotion of a quality culture but the University still needs to implement the policy. Currently, the mandate to implement the Policy on Quality Management (March 2023) lies with the CTLPD. This should perhaps be reconsidered, given the range of responsibilities already located within the Centre, including the coordination of academic support to both staff and students; guidance and advice on and processing of module and programme design information; the provision of pedagogical training; induction for and support related to the learning management system for both staff and students; student feedback, and the coordination and facilitation of programme reviews. In the absence of a research director, the Centre has also been providing guidance and support to lecturers on research grant applications, proposal writing, postgraduate supervision, and increasing research output in general. The establishment of a separate, centralised unit for the management of quality assurance processes should be strongly considered, as departments and support services may require dedicated advice and guidance on how to reflect, draft self-evaluation reports and schedule peer review site visits. Such evaluations should include mechanisms for evaluating and acting on staff wellness and satisfaction.

For the most part, the University has appropriate committees and quality control mechanisms for considering new academic programmes and reviewing existing programmes. However, the University does not seem to be functional with regard to the measurement of the impact of the quality management system and data management and utilisation, except for initiatives such as the research information management system which was reportedly approved to manage the research activities more efficiently. One of the current limitations of the quality assurance processes of the University is that clear lines of authority and mechanisms for holding staff accountable for non-compliance for quality-related activities in their functional areas of responsibility are not in place either. Effectively, the quality assurance function is fragmented and can only be effective after the implementation of the policy and putting in place appropriate budget allocation processes.

Policies play a crucial role in any quality management system. From what the panel could establish from management, the University does not have an approved "Policy on Policies"

but has an approved approach to policy development with an agreed-upon template. Executive Management members take responsibility for policies in their portfolios. New policies are debated by different stakeholders and then introduced into the appropriate management or governance structure of the University. A self-identified area of improvement is to introduce a period of public comment. While there is an approved process for the development and approval of policies, there appears to be a gap in the review of policies and how effectively they are being implemented.

### **Learning and Teaching**

While the Policy of Quality Management has not been operationalized, the SER and the accompanying PoE provide evidence of some quality management practices and purposeful alignment of teaching and learning activities with the University's strategic goals, especially as regards quality management of undergraduate academic programmes. Delivery of most aspects of learning, teaching, and assessment, including learning material, is coordinated except for work-integrated learning (WIL) and curricular community engagement, which still require improvement. The mode of provision (which is mostly blended) is also well coordinated.

There are arrangements in place for enrolment planning, the capturing of student information, and the certification of qualifications barring the certification of short learning programmes. (See Standard 9 for further discussion and a recommendation.) The University does not seem to have arrangements for credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) and recognition of prior learning (RPL).

Student experience and student satisfaction are addressed, as are psycho-social wellness and overall well-being. A student representative council, SRC, is in place, but the class representative system is not formalised. Class representatives are appointed to attend to class-level matters including evaluation of module offerings and are expected to provide the feedback needed for improvement of student feedback mechanisms but there is no formal training and report-back system.

From the interaction with student representatives, it became evident to the audit panel that the institution takes the student voice seriously, especially in matters related to learning and teaching. The institution also has an integrated support system to support student learning consisting of an orientation programme, a tutoring system as well as a School-based academic advising system. The SRC confirmed that mechanisms for student appeals and complaints are available to all students.

Academics play a crucial role in ensuring student success in teaching and learning, research, and community engagement. The quality of teaching also depends on the level and

experience of academics. Thus, the University must strengthen its senior academic staff complement as the academic staff also contributes to quality assurance in many ways. They set the standard, and inform the teaching and learning with research, and they can help to mentor junior staff.

## **Research**

The University has made significant strides in defining and initiating distinctive multidisciplinary research niche areas aligned to the needs of the Northern Cape in fields like Data Science and Heritage Studies. The University has also introduced a Postdoctoral Fellows Fund and the position of Director of Research was advertised in 2023.

The development and support of researchers in a newly established research portfolio is crucial. The SER stated that academics were supported through ongoing capacity-building workshops and to study towards higher degrees – see also Standard 15. The interviews revealed, though, that there may be inconsistencies in the development and support offered to emerging researchers. The support needs to be extended to researchers who are not in the nGAP programme.

Balancing teaching load, research, and own studies was reported by most staff members as a deterrent to fully engaging in studies and scholarly work. Senior academics we interviewed expressed that they are inundated with a high teaching load, and are expected to participate in several other activities, e.g., committee work. Thus, care should be taken to manage the learning and teaching workload for all academic staff as the University becomes more focused on research. The management of the academic workload is discussed further in Standard 11.

The Policy on Research states that “The University framework for research ethics governance resides in the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) which is a sub-committee of the Senate, and holds the central responsibility for approval, monitoring, and training on research ethics at SPU” (SER, p.10-11). Interviewees confirmed that training on research ethics is included in a suite of research management and support services offered by the career path development programme at the CTLPD. The programme also facilitates training for various categories of academics (early career, mid-career, and established academics) through the research function located within the CTLPD. Examples include writing workshops, funding proposal workshops, and international mobility workshops. It was not clear from the SER how students are supported on research ethics. Interviews also show that the research ethics support for students seems to be limited to the use of Turnitin, and the training and monitoring is left to Schools.

Though not formalised yet, the evaluation and impact of the research output include journal citations, and community engagement initiatives/projects.



## **Community engagement**

The audit panel learned from the SER that SPU added Community Engagement (CE) as a scholarly activity to its goals in the Strategic Plan in 2021. Several initiatives taken to build meaningful and long-lasting associations with the different communities in Kimberley and the Northern Cape Province are herein acknowledged (p.62). However, the ethics of the engagement and protection of communities from possible exploitation by researchers were not clarified by the interviewees.

The Policy on Research (p.3) expects that community-based research will both draw from and inform teaching and academic citizenship to contribute to the development of new knowledge and understanding in South Africa and globally and to present the university as a competent knowledge partner to sustainable development in the greater Northern Cape region (Policy on Research, p.3 - Academic Citizenship). Interviews revealed that community engagement is not formalised for most programmes, except in the School of Education where teaching practice is a compulsory requirement for completing/graduation. The School of Economic and Management Sciences is also involved in community engagement through WIL. The monitoring and reporting function is also not formalised.

External stakeholders (including current employers and potential employers) corroborated the facts stated in the SER that SPU has been impactful in Community Engagement as an anchor institution in Kimberley and the Northern Cape Province. However, employers (mainly from local schools) reported that they have observed a disjuncture between the excellent digitally driven training and the reality in the workplace. Standard 16 provides a recommendation on how this challenge could be addressed. Overall, a quality assurance system is not yet fully in place. There are governance arrangements, and a quality policy, but processes, procedures and plans, instructional products, measurement of the impact of the quality system, and data management and utilisation are not in place.

## **Commendation(s)**

- b. The CTLPD is commended for playing a key role in supporting learning and teaching processes, the development of staff and students, and the quality management of programmes.

## **Recommendation(s)**

13. It is recommended that the University strengthen its senior academic staff complement. Senior academic staff contribute to the quality assurance in many ways. They set the standard, they inform the teaching and learning with research, and they can help mentor junior staff.

14. It is recommended that the University support all emerging scholars, including those who are not in the nGAP programme.
15. It is recommended that the University formalise the class representative system through a training or induction programme.
16. It is recommended that the University develop and institutionalise a community engagement policy.
17. It is recommended that the University as a matter of urgency implement the approved Policy on Quality Management.
18. It is recommended that the University establish a separate organisational unit to plan and monitor all quality assurance processes.
19. It is recommended that the University devise a budget allocation model that allows for the devolution of management of quality to schools and faculties.
20. It is recommended that the University establish a subcommittee/workstream of the APC to oversee the quality management system including the regular departmental and academic programme reviews. The sub-committee/workstream should include representatives of both service, management, and academic departments, and students.

**Standard 6:** *Human, infrastructural, knowledge management, and financial resources support the delivery of the institution's core academic functions across all sites of provision, in alignment with the concomitant quality management system, in accordance with the institution's mission.*

During the site visit, it was evident that the infrastructural developments have been implemented with great care, and that integrated systems for knowledge management are being used. In terms of infrastructural developments, the University has invested approximately R5 billion to construct new state-of-the-art lecture halls, laboratories, computer user areas, student residences, sports fields, and recreational areas, and to refurbish and repurpose existing buildings for administrative and academic functions, and student accommodation. As such, financial resources have been and are being used to support the academic project, and current financial planning is informed by future viability and sustainability projections in terms of the Financial Sustainability Strategy. This is important as the University transitions from the new universities' earmarked grant to the regular funding formula applied by the Department of Higher Education and Training in the year 2030.

The number of executives, instructional, professional support, and administrative staff has increased in line with the student enrolments, with further growth anticipated as the University's "schools" are repositioned as "faculties", and more senior academic appointments

are made. As articulated in the SER (on page 65), there is “a need to increase the number of staff to lead key portfolios and ensure continuity”. Indeed, it may be necessary to contemplate new “vice deans” or “deputy heads of school” positions to focus on learning and teaching issues and to coordinate the range of school or faculty-specific academic planning-, curriculum review-, and quality assurance and enhancement activities. As indicated in Standard 4, the Senior Management concurred that it is essential to recruit and maintain senior academics without whom the quality of the academic project could be at serious risk. An increase in the number of senior academic staff (at the professorial level) is needed, not only to serve as heads of departments, but also to strengthen the level of academic debates, ensure the theoretical underpinning of policy and management documents, and enact a shared culture of quality enhancement within and across academic departments.

In discussion with Heads of Departments, Senior and Emerging Scholars, the Department of Human Resources (HR) was flagged by some staff, especially senior scholars as an area of concern. The long turnaround time for recruitment and selection seems to be the main concern. Incentives, remuneration, and support were also mentioned as areas that the interviewees felt could improve, especially the time it takes to handle administration around requests such as research leave.

There was an appreciation for the support that is available, but some interviewees felt that emerging scholars who are not in the nGAP programme should be supported. Overall, emerging scholars also cited the Department of Human Resources as requiring urgent attention in terms of its responsiveness to the contextual reality of the institution and the difficulties in attracting and retaining staff. There was general agreement that the unique circumstances in Kimberley such as a shortage of appropriate schools for the children of staff members, the very competitive and high-priced real estate market, and limited work opportunities for spouses, are some of the main barriers to attracting and retaining staff. While these factors are outside the University’s control, the University needs urgent intervention in areas that it can control such as a well-functioning and responsive HR Department. The vacant position of Director of HR exacerbates an already complicated situation.

The perception exists that a limited number of senior academics are inundated with a high teaching load and are expected to participate in several other activities, such as institutional committees. This takes away their focus from teaching and research. The University has an approved Policy on Work Integrated Learning (2022) that foregrounds a commitment to integrate work-integrated learning into curricula, where applicable. As indicated in Standard 5, currently WIL is prominent in the Faculties of Economic and Management Sciences, and Education, and some issues such as the indemnity of students, their placement in industry, and the management of stipends, are receiving attention and were identified as areas of

improvement in the SER (p. 68).

The CTLPD provides pedagogical training for all academic staff including teaching in various modalities such as face-to-face, blended, and online learning; although, staff attendance of these training opportunities could be improved. Further discussion and a recommendation are provided in Standard 15.

The panel noted that the University has a Wellness Centre that provides services to both students and staff. The Wellness Centre also hosts a social worker and student counsellor. Students can access the Wellness Centre through a booking system, which to a large extent functions well. The University also has a system of “Student Wellness Warriors” and every Wednesday is designated as a Wellness Day. Staff members have e-cards they can use to contact counselors telephonically. The staff at the Centre, however, pointed to increasing work pressure as the student numbers increase, along with an increase in psychological problems and incidents of, e.g., drug use among students.

The University’s library is a centrally located, stand-alone building, managed with great pride and a sense of ownership. It has functional spaces across multiple floors, designed for, and used by students. The University has self-identified the need to further develop its plan to become a fully digital library. In doing so, it should not neglect the procurement of hard-copy books, as it may be needed to promote a culture of reading among undergraduate students.

In terms of the academic environment on campus, the University can be commended for creating people-centred spaces, conducive for learning and teaching. The typical classroom podium setup for lecturers seems to be functional and user-friendly, and the undergraduate students appreciate the laptops provided to them, as well as the ubiquitous Wi-Fi connectivity on all the campuses. Adequate information and communications technology infrastructure, facilities, and support are provided, and the University is fortunate to be positioned in a geographical area free from load shedding, which means that it does not have to mitigate the disruptions caused by regularly scheduled electricity blackouts. What does remain a contextual challenge, though, is adequate water provision. This municipal issue is being mitigated in various ways but remains a risk to the University and the town at large.

In terms of student residences, there seems to be a concern about the financial viability of the current model. As indicated in Standard 4, this is a self-identified area of improvement by the Council.

The panel agrees that the University has made substantial strides with the appointment of qualified staff, the development of infrastructure, and the introduction of good knowledge management and financial systems to support the delivery of teaching and learning, and student support at the University. But there are some serious concerns, and it cannot be said

that there is a functional quality management system in place. The lack of continuity when it comes to senior academic staff is a serious concern, not only in terms of expanding the research function of the University, but also in terms of the management and leadership of academic departments, and the Senate. In terms of core academic functions, no quality management system has been conceptualised yet to measure the impact of research and community engagement initiatives.

### **Commendation(s)**

- c. The University is commended for providing laptops to all students, along with computer and internet services. This enabled staff and students to continue with lectures and assessments during the COVID-19 lockdown period.
- d. The University is commended for creating people-centred spaces and proactively responding to the water scarcity issues of the region. This contextual responsiveness is echoed in the University's intention to focus on the niche area of arid and desert studies.

### **Recommendation(s)**

- 21. It is recommended that the University recruit on an urgent basis a suitably qualified Director of Human Resources to focus especially on matters of recruitment and retention of academic and other staff.
- 22. It is recommended that the University, as it moves from a school to a faculty structure, clarify the roles and responsibilities of future deans, heads of departments, and other role players as they relate to the continuum of quality control to enhancement activities.
- 23. It is recommended that the University revisit the live-and-learn model for student accommodation to ensure the financial viability of student residences.
- 24. It is recommended that the University conduct a baseline study of the information-seeking habits of undergraduate students to find out if any interventions are needed in this regard and/or to measure the impact of Library projects.
- 25. It is recommended that the University consider the adequacy of the staff complement of the Wellness Centre in light of the increasing student numbers and increasing psycho-social problems among students.
- 26. It is recommended that the University introduce workplace literacies, e.g., as part of a module or work-integrated learning (WIL).

**Standard 7:** *Credible and reliable data (for example, on throughput and completion rates) are systematically captured, employed and analysed as an integral part of the institutional quality management system so as to inform consistent and sustainable decision-making.*

The University's SER (p.71) states that the Department of Information and Communication Technology "assumed full control of the institution's data processing, management, and storage" from 2016 onwards. The learning management, financial, Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS), student information, and other data capturing systems at the University are sourced and developed with integration and user-friendliness in mind. The data extracted is deemed credible and reliable, and as such the University has, for example, received unqualified HEMIS audit reports.

The identification of at-risk students and modules with low pass rates, and remedial actions for both are undertaken by individual academics within schools. In discussion with academic staff and students, it became evident that there is room for better coordination and intentional collaboration between academic development, student support, academic advisors, and other role-players who should interrogate the available data proactively and identify the most effective ways of supporting staff and at-risk students, even if some might be resistant to take up the offer for support.

Both the SER and interviews confirmed the concern of the Senior Management regarding the effectiveness of quality assurance at the module level and specifically the student feedback system which has a low response rate and does not seem to be yielding useful information. Standard 15 outlines reasons provided by students for the low participation rate as well as a recommendation.

There are examples of data-led interventions that have been successfully undertaken to improve student success and student experience, but a fully coordinated quality management system in this regard does not yet seem to be in place. The SER (p.77) states that there is the intention "to develop a data catalogue to integrate various sources of data from the institution, aimed at facilitating the sharing of data and providing a self-service query and reporting facility for the analysis of student data". Members of Senior Management were of the view that there is a "nucleus of a data analytics project" established within the CTLPD". Information systems that capture community engagement- and research activities may still have to be developed and integrated into existing systems, and policies and procedures to guide data and information management, including privacy and cyber-security guidelines are still under development.

The University recognises that it should continuously review its information technology operations and work towards integrated systems that can provide accurate data in real-time. The panel encourages the University to further develop its capacity to interpret data and act on the results, not merely in an ad hoc manner, but as part of an integrated and coherent student success strategy.

## **Recommendation(s)**

27. It is recommended that the University consider the best structure within which to locate the institutional research function. As the University continues to expand its academic offering, it becomes increasingly important to consider what data should be captured, integrated, analysed, and displayed to, e.g., pre-emptively identify at-risk students. Also, to identify the actions that should be initiated based on such information, and the institutional research to be carried out to gain insight into the contextual factors that may influence student success.

**Standard 8:** *Systems and processes monitor the institution's capacity for quality management, based on the evidence gathered.*

In Standards 3 and 5, the Panel noted that in the absence of an approved policy for quality management, the University relies on committee and management structures, and regular reporting requirements (e.g., the Annual Assessment Plan) to coordinate and share information for decision-making. In addition, the CTLPD facilitates programme reviews.

Members of Executive Management were of the view that they have adequate access to data via the Integrated Tertiary Software (ITS) system to make informed decisions. Similarly, Heads of Schools also confirmed that they have access to appropriate, reliable, and current information on teaching and learning from the ITS system. However, such information is not readily available for research, and community engagement.

As regards engagement with students and staff, the Institutional Forum referred to two surveys, the Institutional Culture Survey as well as a Student Wellness Survey that had been conducted but not yet implemented. See also Standard 15 for other ways in which students are engaged and involved in matters concerning their academic, co-curricular, and extra-curricular lives. The University should ensure that students and staff are allowed to regularly and substantively engage in all aspects of quality management, including the implementation, support, enhancement, and monitoring of improvement actions emanating from such surveys.

As indicated in Standard 5, the panel acknowledges the agility of the University in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as its foresight in introducing the Moodle Learning Management System and the provision of laptops to all first-year students through a laptop policy in 2015. This enabled the University to reassess strategic priorities as it moved swiftly to provide online teaching and learning while simultaneously capacitating staff and students to navigate in this new mode. Additionally, the University had to maintain the integrity of the academic project while keeping the institution fully operational. The students and class representatives the panel interviewed, confirmed the effective academic support programme established during the lockdown, adequate provision of data, access to a social worker, an

online booking system to access psychological assistance, and an effective system for monitoring classroom attendance.

Much still needs to be done to ensure the implementation of the newly approved Policy on Quality Management. To date, the implementation of the Strategic Plan has received precedence, as well as the quality control aspects related to the design and approval of new academic programmes. In this regard, the University has been successful; it has introduced new academic programmes, conducted reviews, and introduced reporting mechanisms that have allowed the University to make informed decisions. Although the institution's quality management system is not yet fully developed or functional, the panel affirms that the University meets the expected thresholds for this standard in terms of where the University is currently at.

### **Commendation(s)**

- e. The University is commended for introducing a system of classroom monitoring during the lockdown as well as other measures to mitigate the impact of the effects of COVID-19 on learning and teaching.

### **Recommendation(s)**

28. It is recommended that the University cultivate a generative, self-reflexive praxis where information is not only used for decision-making but also for sense-making as part of regular, scheduled departmental self-evaluations and peer reviews. The University could also work towards drafting and approving a quality manual for each department (or within the context of a school or faculty) to ensure that regular and substantive engagements on all aspects of quality management are encouraged and documented among staff, and staff, and students.

## **Focus area 3: The coherence and integration of the institutional quality management system support the core academic functions**

The four standards in Focus Area 3 concentrate on the coherence and integration of the various components comprising the institutional quality management system and on how these work in concert to support the likelihood of student success and improve the quality of learning, teaching and research engagement, as well as accommodating the results of constructive integrated community engagement in accordance with the institution's mission.

These standards are:

**Standard 9:** *An evidence-based coherent, reasonable, functional, and meaningfully structured relationship exists between all components of the institutional quality management system.*



Standard 1 and Standard 5, of the SER and interviews revealed that the “system” for the monitoring and evaluation of quality management is interpreted mostly in terms of external programme reviews. These are supplemented by ad hoc internal audits of support services or functions. Therefore, it cannot be said that there is an evidence-based, coherent, reasonable, functional, and meaningfully structured quality management system in place that supports all three core functions. Specifically, the components of the core functions of research and community engagement do not seem to be integrated into the existing schedule of external programme reviews.

One component of the SPU quality system that is in place, and that could support all three functions to some extent is the ‘Policy on Prevention of Plagiarism and Copyright Infringement’. However, the content of the policy seems to be tilted more toward plagiarism than the other types of infringements. The name, ‘Policy on Prevention of Plagiarism and Copyright Infringement’, may also limit the application to the different types of infringement such as fabrication and falsification of results which may occur in the natural sciences and data science fields.

There is no evidence that the quality assurance and enhancement roles are sufficiently articulated in performance agreements or measured with key performance indicators both in the academic and support functions. Though the University “views its Performance Management Policy as a critical component of its ability to achieve its strategic objectives as well as assisting employees to understand and recognise their respective contributions to the improvement of the overall performance of the institution” - SER p.84, the panel found out during interviews that there are inconsistencies across Schools in the application of the policy. These contributed to the dissatisfaction of a few staff members especially those below level P5.

A relationship exists between quality assurance measures only in respect of programme development, teaching and learning, and assessment. The research and community engagement components are not integrated or structured. Also, the self-evaluation report states that student feedback surveys take place every semester but the uptake by students is unsatisfactory. See Standard 15 for the poor uptake of the student feedback system and recommendations. There were also reports about the low uptake of the system of peer evaluation of teaching among academic staff.

It was not possible to obtain evidence that supports the notion that the quality management system in and across the core academic areas is integrated and not contradictory because of the focus on programme development, teaching and learning, and assessment. In terms of short courses, the panel is also concerned about the apparent fragmentation wherein the

Office of the Director of the Institutional Advancement has overall oversight on the management of short courses and the related quality assurance mechanisms and their certification rather than the Registrar's Office. Both the Registrar and the Director of Institutional Advancement confirmed this arrangement was already posing some challenges during the pilot phase in 2023. There is also general fragmentation in relation to core and support functions. For example, Heads of Schools indicated that there was no mechanism for evaluating the service provided by support services to core academic functions.

Little could be deduced from the interviews regarding research and community engagement. In one interview session, the participants did not, for example, seem aware of the contents of the University's Policy on Prevention of Plagiarism and Copyright infringement, and relegated the responsibility of prevention plagiarism to publishers.

### **Recommendation(s)**

29. It is recommended that the University enhances the practice of peer evaluation of teaching.

30. It is recommended that the University considers relocating the oversight and management of short learning programmes / short courses and their certification to the Registrar's Office.

31. It is recommended that the University considers renaming the 'Policy on Prevention of Plagiarism and Copyright Infringement' to broaden the subject to 'academic integrity'. This may assist in encompassing all subjects/academic fields, and principles of academic integrity.

32. It is recommended that mechanisms for coordinating academic provision and academic support holistically are taken into account when implementing the Policy on Quality Management.

**Standard 10:** *Evidence-based regular and dedicated governance and management oversight of the quality assurance system exists.*

The SER stated that "in terms of programme development, accountability rests with departments. Governance, in terms of approvals, takes place through the school committees and Board, the Academic Planning Committee and Senate". Also, the "accountability for quality assurance processes in terms of learning and teaching takes place within the Departments and Schools" (p.89). However, it became evident from the interviews that staff accountability gets "lost" in the committee structures and there are no staff members whose primary function is to participate in the quality assurance system. Some interviewees voiced that they do not feel comfortable escalating concerns including work overload due to prior engagements that were not supportive.

The SER also refers to organograms, terms of reference, and job descriptions that show a flow of authority within the institution. Interview sessions helped to clarify that the flow of authority exists in terms of teaching and learning, research, community engagement, and related management functions. However, these do not include clear lines of authority/reporting at all institutional levels, to report on and be held accountable for the quality management system.

It became apparent during interviews and in the SER that identification of non-compliance with the quality assurance system is articulated only in terms of programme development, teaching and learning, and assessment yet the measures taken for non-compliance are not defined. It is not clear whether non-compliance is taken into account during the regular performance management meetings of senior management.

The Vice Chancellor's Awards for Excellence were emphasised both in the SER and during interviews as a way of celebrating good practice. However, interviews with staff revealed inconsistencies in the selection of awardees across Schools and a lack of clarity on the applicable criteria for the process.

The Council is knowledgeable and engaged with most governance aspects including performance of the executive management. As indicated in Standard 4, the Council receives quarterly reports from the Vice-Chancellor on all management matters of the university and they also get reports from the Senate. Whilst this is good, the panel believes that the Council has to do more in terms of exercising oversight of quality management in the University. The recent implementation of the performance management system and the reported inconsistencies in its implementation below Peromnes level 5 means that most academic and support staff below this level are not held accountable for non-compliance.

### **Recommendation(s)**

33. It is recommended that the University clarify the criteria for the Vice-Chancellor's Excellence Awards and ensure that they are applied consistently across the institution.

34. It is recommended that the University ensures that "quality is everyone's business" by including performance objectives related to quality management for the various levels of staff commencing with Senior Management. All academic and support staff should be held accountable for non-compliance through the performance management system.

**Standard 11:** *Planning and processes exist for the reasonable and functional allocation of resources to all components of the institutional quality management system.*

The University still relies on the Department of Higher Education and Training's new universities' earmarked grant. A budgetary framework is in place to guide and govern financial

planning. As indicated in Standard 3, the interviewees were not clear on how annual allocations for the institution's quality assurance commitments are calculated or how it is distributed across entities. This was mainly due to a lack of detail in the self-evaluation report on how systematic efforts at monitoring and evaluating the quality management interventions are implemented. The audit panel had some concerns about this function and recommends that sufficient consideration, planning, and attention be given to the quality management system at all institutional levels.

The workload, especially the teaching load, was reported by most emerging scholars and researchers as a deterrent to fully engaging in further studies, scholarly publishing, and research work. The senior academic staff also indicated that they are expected to participate in many university committees. There was general agreement that the Workload Policy is not consistently applied.

The panel commends the establishment of a Future Professors Programme as articulated in the Academic Plan. While the Future Professors Programme is a good initiative, the audit panel is concerned about the current workload of staff members as student numbers are growing. The audit panel also notes that there is an increasing number of part-time staff employed on a contractual basis, and as the University endeavours to focus on increasing research output, the workload of lecturing staff at all other appointment levels should also be considered. Further analysis of the impact of part-time staff on the quality of teaching and learning is discussed in Standard 15.

### **Recommendation**

35. It is recommended that the University urgently review the implementation of its Workload Policy to ensure consistent application across Schools and Departments, to ensure that it is applied in line with the University's strategic objective of developing emerging scholars and the professoriate.

**Standard 12:** *The quality assurance system achieves its purpose efficiently and effectively.*

It is stated in the SER (p.15) that infrastructure development is a key focus area, and the panel acknowledges with appreciation, the work done so far the continuation in planning more residences, and the planning of the multi-purpose building to be built on the North Campus. As indicated in Standard 6, the allocated financial resources are used for the intended purpose by constructing academic facilities, administration offices, and student accommodation that are fit for purpose.

In terms of human resources, the panel previously noted the lack of a quality unit and associated resources. More human resources in the form of a director and other personnel

need to be allocated to a new unit which oversees the quality management system.

The SER stated that the University is focusing on being a digitally enabled university. This is a positive and futuristic endeavour. The panel found that there is a need for a clear plan of what this entails, and how all support partners will align all services and resources. An important gap in the alignment is improved joint planning between support services and programme development to ensure that available resources such as devices, eTextbooks, and others are planned and aligned.

While the panel recognizes the good initiative of providing each first-year student with a laptop, it is not clear how the allocation of funding for laptops is managed. At first, the panel had the impression that all first-year students are issued with a laptop with all the reading material readily available. However, upon closer inspection of the prescribed booklist, there appear to be gaps in the implementation of this approach.

The concept of a digitally enabled university rests on the readiness of both students and lecturing staff. A coherent plan for the alignment and collaboration of all literacy efforts (academic literacy, digital literacy, research literacy, information literacy, workplace literacy, etc.) is essential.

The panel found evidence of concerted efforts towards staff and student engagement.

The challenges in the implementation of the performance management system are discussed in Standards 4 and 6. Given the lack of clarity on how the budget allocation for quality assurance processes takes place, the panel could not determine conclusively whether or not resources allocated to quality management are utilised in a manner that benefits the institution except in the area of infrastructure development.

### **Recommendation(s)**

36. It is recommended that the University establish itself as a digitally enabled university through a clear and consistent process. Furthermore, a model for programme design and programme delivery must ensure the same experience among students in the application of LMS and other digital course and information sources.

37. It is recommended that the University develop a clear information source development policy on how e-resources can aid curriculum development and access to information towards student success.

### **Focus area 4: Curriculum development, learning, and teaching support the likelihood of student success**

The four standards in Focus Area 4 concentrate on how effectively the institutional quality

management system enhances the likelihood of student success, improves learning and teaching, and supports the scholarship of learning and teaching. These standards drill down in greater detail in Focus Area 2. These standards are:

***Standard 13: An effective institutional system for programme design, approval, delivery, management, and review is in place.***

The development of new programmes is initiated within academic departments, and they approach the CTLPD for advice. From discussions with staff members, the University does not appear to have documented and approved guidelines to guide the process of initiation, design, and development process although the PQM has remained responsive to the market needs analyses through successive reviews of the Strategic Plan. The SER is not explicit on how CHE requirements and SAQA Level descriptors are considered during the design of new programmes. Given that the University has several programmes that have been approved, though informal, the process of programme design and development is largely functional.

Unlike the design and development of programmes, the approval of new programmes within the institutional governance structures such as the School Board, the APC, and the Senate appears to be rigorous. The PoE provided evidence of minutes of the APC where applications for approval of new programmes were rigorously debated. In some cases, applications were sent back to the school for revision.

It was also evident as indicated in Standards 3 and 5, that the University takes the external review of programmes seriously. An external panel is appointed that reviews the self-evaluation report of the academic programme to be reviewed and undertakes a site visit. During the site visit, interviews are held with staff and management, and facilities are inspected. The review report is presented to the various governing structures and as indicated in Standard 3, the decision to discontinue the BCom programme is a good example of the efficacy of the programme review process. The PoE presented minutes of various meetings where review reports were discussed.

The panel could not establish how the implementation plan that is submitted to the APC is monitored systematically. Additionally, financial allocations in respect of recommendations that might require funding were not clear.

As SPU envisages growing and expanding its offerings and student intake, the area of programme initiation, design, and development, as well as monitoring of the implementation plan, needs to be formalised through the Senate.

As the University aims to improve to function as a digitally enabled university, the COVID-19 experience served as valuable exposure to best practices. Although the SER (p.23) relates

some challenges such as the availability of data and devices, the SER did not expand on the availability of information sources from the library's digital resources and how these were utilised during the COVID-19 disruption.

### **Recommendation**

38. It is recommended that the University develop a coherent system for programme design, approval, delivery, management, and review.

**Standard 14:** *There is evidence-based engagement at various institutional levels, among staff, and among staff and students, with curriculum transformation, curriculum reform and renewal; learning and teaching innovation; and the role of technology (1) in the curriculum, (2) in the world of work, and (3) in society in general.*

Although the SER states that there are currently no frameworks on curriculum transformation and limited evidence of interdisciplinary conversations with academics and students on decolonization and transformation, the panel noted that SPU does invite guest speakers to present on important educational matters on curriculum transformation, reform, and renewal. There was evidence in the portfolio that the following workshops were offered at the University:

- Dialogue on decolonization held in 2017
- Transformation of the curriculum in HE held in 2017
- Imagining opportunities for a decolonized school of education -year not indicated
- Politics of decolonization of knowledge and trajectories of African Studies in Africa held in 2022.

The audit panel is, however, of the view that such engagements should be scaled up to ensure that they are impactful through wider participation of university staff. Interviews with Senate members on how students are involved in the transformation and renewal of curriculum at SPU revealed that there is a need to establish a clearer institutional consensus on what transformation entails as some equated it with the teaching of academic literacy and capacitating students with IT skills. The Audit Panel therefore recommends that conversations, discussions, and workshops on the transformation of the curriculum which could lead to, e.g., a Framework on Curriculum Transformation for the University, should also involve students at all levels.

While the SER indicated that the University does have graduate attributes, Senate members and other academic staff acknowledged that these are not well documented in formal institutional documents. Given the central importance of institutional graduate attributes and how these influence the curriculum design and implementation processes, graduate attributes must be well documented and clearly understood by both staff and students. Site visit interviews with staff and students seem to suggest that the University's graduate attributes

were somehow obscure as many interviewed staff and students could not articulate them easily.

According to the SER (p.96) and interviews with heads of schools and departments, student representatives are actively engaged in institutional conversations around teaching and learning through their involvement and participation in decision-making structures like the Senate, Teaching and Learning Committee of the Senate, and the Council. By participating in these structures, students are afforded the opportunity and space to make important inputs into curriculum matters and the learning discourse. This finding was further corroborated by interviews that were held with student leaders who generally expressed satisfaction with their involvement in decision-making structures at the University. Therefore, it can be concluded that SPU students recognize that the University values their input and contribution to curriculum implementation processes. The University's focus on the use of technology and e-learning in the curriculum and the attainment of graduate attributes is demonstrated through the several workshops that were offered by the CTLPD to capacitate students and staff on digital literacy skills and the use of a blended learning approach before, during and after COVID-19. Furthermore, students were provided with laptops and data to ensure that learning opportunities through technology were enhanced. Interview sessions with student bodies, academics, heads of departments and heads of schools, and staff from CTLPD confirmed the increased use of ICT in the university to support teaching learning, and assessment processes. Students the panel interviewed characterised their institution as having the 'best' ICT infrastructure and resources to support their learning. Despite these positive findings, the SER pointed out that the University does not have a policy on E-learning or the use of ICT in teaching and learning and the panel feels this is something that the University may want to attend to. Interviews with academics indicated that there was no consensus on the concept of engaged scholarship and the scholarship around teaching and learning and how these are integral to the delivery of the institution's curriculum, its approaches to learning and teaching, and educational provision. Responses from academics who were interviewed did not suggest that they have a firm awareness of how research information can be used to inform curriculum implementation decisions. There is therefore a need for the University to establish a robust institutional understanding of the concepts of engaged scholarship and the scholarship of teaching and learning and how data derived from these processes can be used to inform teaching and learning practices.

As indicated in Standard 1, the staff of the CTLPD who guide all Schools in curriculum and programme development, acknowledged that there is no specific stage at which critical engagement on how the curriculum or programme aligns with the concept of social justice espoused in the vision, takes place.



The University has a Language Policy approved by the Council that seeks to promote multilingualism as a mechanism to promote inclusivity in teaching and learning processes and various activities and operations in the University. The policy aims to promote and strengthen the use of official languages across functional domains at the University, including the domains of scholarship, teaching, and learning as well as communication with the wider community.

The SER states that only professional programmes require work-integrated learning (WIL) and as such it is primarily available in the School of Education. The panel would like to encourage the University to expand WIL initiatives to all qualifications in the form of Workplace Literacy modules to create a generic understanding of the demands of the world of work.

The research committees, positioned in the schools, compile research output reports. SPU furthermore has an Open Access Research Repository managed by the library. Sound and planned alignment and collaboration will assist Schools in making sure that recent research informs the curriculum.

The Panel has noted that the University has started engagements, particularly with staff on curriculum transformation and renewal. The Panel, however, noted that for these conversations to be impactful, they need to be scaled up through wider participation by university staff and also students, especially those at the postgraduate level. While graduate attributes have been developed, they remain of little value if they are not well known by staff and students as was evidenced during the interviews. Currently, the University does not have an E-learning policy and more work needs to be done to establish a firm institutional consensus on the concept of engaged scholarship and the scholarship of teaching and learning and how these frame curriculum implementation processes.

### **Commendation**

- f. The University is commended for the 2020 Digital Framework that provides a theoretically and academically sound foundation that must be used to align practice and procedures at all levels.

### **Recommendation(s)**

39. It is recommended that the University ensure that graduate attributes are well documented, approved by the appropriate institutional structures, and understood by all staff and students as a necessary step towards their implementation through various formal and informal curriculum processes.

40. It is recommended that the University capacitate the CTLPD through additional specialist staffing to enable it to perform its roles and responsibilities more effectively.

41. It is recommended that the University conducts conversations, discussions, and workshops on the transformation of the curriculum (which could lead to, e.g., a Framework on Curriculum Transformation for the University) that involve staff and students at all levels.

42. It is recommended that the University develops and implements an E-Learning policy.

**Standard 15:** *The students' exposure to learning and teaching at the institution, across all sites and modes of provision, is experienced as positive and enabling of their success.*

Students were interviewed about their learning experiences at the University, including the quality of teaching and suitability of facilities in facilitating their overall success. The Audit Panel was pleased to note that most students were very positive about their exposure to learning and teaching at the University, which they described as being positive and thus enabling their success. This was clearly evidenced by interview responses from class representatives, the SRC, and the academics themselves. When they were asked to comment on the appropriateness of the ICT, Library, and specialist facilities for supporting their learning, most students gave affirmative comments like, we have the best state of facilities, our library is going digital and we use online database system, lecture halls are smart with projectors, screens, and microphones etc, the library has good facilities and outdoor spaces where students can learn.

While most students were satisfied with the facilities for teaching and learning, students with disabilities informed the panel that they were not adequately catered for. This is due in part to the fact that the University has had few students with disabilities to date. In 2023 a student who uses a wheelchair was admitted and provision was made in the form of a Personal Healthcare Assistant, the fellow student is with the disabled student all the time. While this approach is laudable, its sustainability in the face of increasing student numbers has to be evaluated. Lecturers the panel spoke to also indicated that there is no policy in place to accommodate students who may require extra time to write examinations. The SRC facilitated the formation of "a "committee for students with disabilities" as a forum for engagement with management.

According to the SER and evidence provided, the University recently started to participate in national student surveys such as The South African Survey of Student Engagement (SASSE) which compiles information on students' educational experiences. Student experience is a key focus area at the University. It was noted that recent institutional research was undertaken to determine student-life experiences through the Graduate Employability Survey and the analysis showed that most SPU graduates (69%) found employment within six months of completing their studies while 14% were employed prior to completing their studies. In addition

to this, 60% of education graduates found employment within three months of completing their qualifications. These findings are encouraging as they help show how the graduates at SPU are valued by employers which is an indication of the relevance of the qualifications. There is a need to conduct more surveys that focus on student experience of teaching and learning and assessment so as to generate data that would help inform decision-making in these domains.

As indicated in Standard 1, employers were equally satisfied with the readiness of graduates for the workplace barring a few concerns relating to what seems to be a disjuncture between the excellent digitally driven training and the reality in the workplace. The latter is evident among graduates from the School of Education. Employers also spoke of the lack of soft skills on the part of the graduates.

The University is commended for introducing the system of student evaluation of teaching and modules as well as peer evaluation of teaching as further mechanisms in which students and academic staff are involved in discussions around the improvement of teaching, learning, and assessment. However, the major challenge as confirmed by the SER, heads of schools and departments, students, and lecturers, is that the level of participation in the evaluation process is very low. The University may need to explore ways of ensuring that participation in the evaluation of teaching by students improves so that useful data to inform teaching decisions is generated. During the interviews students participated enthusiastically, indicating that if surveys on student experience are designed and implemented at a time of need, valuable information could be obtained. Class representatives who were asked to share their views on the evaluation of the teaching process indicated that they were not keen to participate because they did not see how the results were used to improve practice. "If we do not see anything improving after the survey or evaluation, we get discouraged..." said one class representative. There is, therefore, a need for student feedback data to be generated from the majority of students and then analysed and acted upon to improve teaching and learning processes.

The student feedback system is also critical for the evaluation of part-time staff or contract lecturers whose number has been increasing steadily within the University. Without an effective student feedback system and poor uptake of the peer evaluation of teaching, the quality of teaching and learning could be compromised.

The University has various mechanisms of engaging and involving students in matters that affect their academic, co, and extracurricular lives. There is a dedicated Student Life and Development Office that is responsible for all student governance-related affairs (support and development) and co-curricular activities. The SRC exists to provide a vibrant voice for students on campus and they also serve in key university committees such as the Council,

Senate, and Institutional Forum and they hold regular meetings with the Vice-Chancellor and Principal and the management team. This was confirmed by both the SER and interviews that were held with SRC members, class representatives, and heads of schools. The University has also increased student involvement in institutional processes and students' sense of belonging is enhanced through residence committees, social media (Facebook) platforms, and MySPU app which enables students to be active participants and change agents. The University is commended for initiating the "Student Affairs News and Updates Mailbox" which is a model for student voice that enables students to share information on various opportunities, and other news that are of interest to them.

The University has a policy on staff development that was approved on 15 March 2015 and reviewed in March 2018. Several academics interviewed indicated that they had benefited from the policy by being supported in the acquisition of Master's degrees and PhD qualifications. Interviews with emerging scholars revealed that staff who are studying towards PhD qualifications are given three months off from work to enable them to concentrate more on their studies. However, heads of schools indicated that staff who acquire senior qualifications quickly leave for greener pastures, and this creates a challenge since it takes very long to fill such senior vacant positions. This prompts the University to resort to employing part-time staff.

While the employment of part-time staff provides some form of relief, heads of schools indicated that it was not easy to manage part-time lecturers, and the quality of research in the school was affected. There was therefore concurrence among management, heads of schools, and academics that the University needs to do more in terms of improving its attraction and retention strategy of senior staff in the University as discussed in Standard 6.

The panel noted through interviews with staff that currently the University does not support its teaching staff to acquire the Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education, a qualification that is key to the professionalisation of teaching staff and the enhancement of scholarship of teaching and learning.

The panel noted that staff from CTLPD offer several workshops to academics so as to promote their professional competencies and effectiveness in teaching, assessment, and online learning which is very good. However, reports from CTLPD and heads of schools indicated that there is a general problem of low attendance at staff development workshops and seminars by academics. The University should therefore work towards disrupting the culture of non-participation in professional development programmes by academics. A possible suggestion is to link these to the institution's performance management system and the individual academics' development plans so that there is proper monitoring of participation

through consequence management.

As indicated in Standard 1, the University has instituted a performance management system for the senior grades 1 to 5 to help improve performance and to hold staff accountable. The same system was only formalised with all employees in other grades in January 2023. During the interviews, one of the heads of schools responded that currently the performance management system is used informally for all other grades except for grades 1 to 5. In Standard 6, we provided evidence for the performance management system to be institutionalised and applied consistently across the University so that all staff in the entire value chain are held accountable for their performance. We interviewed heads of schools and senior academics on the weighting that was placed on the teaching component in the promotions policy, and no one seemed to know what the weighting was, which suggests that they probably were not very familiar with the promotions policy and its requirements or how it is used.

The Panel's engagement with the SER and interviews with heads of schools have shown that key outcome indicators of student success at the University are regularly monitored through schools' annual performance plans which are derived from the institutional strategic plan and through quarterly and annual progress reports that are submitted to Senate Teaching and Learning Committee and through assessment Committee meeting reports. In these reports, schools identify at-risk modules, flag areas that need attention, and suggest improvement plans. However, it was raised that many students who are identified as being at risk of academic failure do not take up the suggested improvement plans, and the University in general, and schools, in particular, are urged to find a way of managing this problem to enable student success. Probably the University may want to investigate how these interventions are perceived by the students who are supposed to benefit from them so as to address any possible shortcomings.

Interviews with management, heads of schools and heads of departments, academics, and students have generally indicated that the University takes full cognisance of students' circumstances and needs in its curriculum decisions and approaches to teaching and learning and the role of ICT before, during, and after COVID-19. As part of the response to disruption as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, we noted that all students were provided with laptops and data and the opportunity to learn through Teams so that their transition to online learning was productive and as least disruptive as possible. The panel noted that the CTLPD played a huge role in capacitating staff and students in terms of online teaching and learning skills through various workshops and seminars. From what the panel heard from the heads of schools, the University demonstrated sensitivity to student needs by postponing classes, devising and implementing a catch-up plan, and also placing the policy of academic exclusion

in abeyance during the entire period of disruption. The University library has also progressed well in terms of developing, securing, and availing online databases and digital resources to its diverse student population and this has been attested by students, academics, and library staff during our interviews with them.

The Panel observed that the University provides positive learning experiences for its diverse student population to enable their success. Both teaching methods and learning facilities used are fit for purpose. Additionally, key outcome indicators of student success are regularly monitored through schools' annual performance plans, assessment committee reports and reports submitted to the Senate Teaching and Learning Committee. Key decisions on curriculum and approaches to teaching and learning before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, take full cognisance of students' needs and circumstances. Peer and student evaluation of teaching are in place as additional mechanisms in which staff and students are involved in reflections around the improvement of teaching and learning although the current level of participation in the evaluation process for both staff and students need to be improved further.

#### **Commendation(s)**

- g. The University is commended for the good throughput rates and high level of student success at the undergraduate level.
- h. The University is commended for its varied mechanisms of involving students in institutional processes and enhancing their sense of belonging through practices such as residence committees, social media platforms, and MySPU app, which ensure their integration into the university culture.

#### **Recommendation(s)**

- 43. It is recommended that the University interrogate the student feedback system to identify why the response rate is low; whether the most appropriate questions are being asked, and if alternative methodologies (such as focus group interviews) could be used to provide more useful and usable results.
- 44. It is recommended that the University urgently develop a policy to cater to the needs of disabled students in teaching and learning and review its access policy to ensure that it caters to all students adequately.
- 45. It is recommended that the University devise strategies for promoting the culture of participation in professional development programmes by academics. This can be done by linking participation to the institution's performance management system and the individual academics' development plans so that there is proper monitoring and appropriate

corrective action taken.

**Standard 16:** *Institutions engage with and reflect on the employability of their graduates in a changing world.*

The panel was pleased by the high employability of SPU graduates as reflected in the first Graduate Employability Survey (GES) and the overall enthusiasm of alumni to give back to the University through the Lesedi la Afrika Endowment Fund.

We received positive and enthusiastic reports from graduates on their level of satisfaction with the quality of teaching and learning and overall academic experience and a significant number opted to register to further their studies with the University. As one Data Science graduate put it: some students went for a master's in data science at another South African University and realised their curriculum was similar to what they did at the honours level.

The alumni also had suggestions about changes that could improve the employability of graduates such as changes in the Bachelor of Science to become a double, not a single major.

Employers interviewed during session 21 (external stakeholder/employers) were equally satisfied with the readiness of graduates for the workplace barring a few concerns relating to what seems to be a disjuncture between the excellent digitally driven training and the reality in the workplace. The latter is evident among graduates from the School of Education. Employers also spoke to the lack of soft skills of the graduates which the Panel ascribed to the lack of an approved document on graduate attributes (SER, p.106) already discussed in Standard 14. Employers felt that the University should publicise the quality of graduates from SPU.

The GES survey was the first that the University administered and there is no common understanding of how graduate tracking information will be used to manage and improve academic programmes. It is noted that the University determines the employability of graduates by assessing the length of time taken to find employment (SER, p.128) as well as gauging entry salaries. The University is encouraged to continue soliciting feedback from graduates.

The Alumni Relations Officer started employment at the University in September 2021. The Panel noted from engagement with interviewees that within this short period, the Office has made consistent efforts to ensure that alumni are active in the affairs of the institution. Located within the Department of Institutional Advancement, the Alumni Relations Office is guided by the alumni plan and policy, and it goes to great lengths to arrange communication, networking, and outreach opportunities. The Office maintains an alumni database, and activities include the sharing of relevant information with alumni in matters of the University, alumni

employability, and employment. The first Alumni Newsletter was produced in 2022.

### **Recommendation(s)**

46. It is recommended that the University consider how the graduate tracking information will be used to inform curriculum renewal and transformation.
47. It is recommended that the University publicises the quality of graduates from SPU and their ability to be employed and to create jobs, in other platforms in addition to the Alumni Newsletter.
48. It is recommended that the University considers the possibility of introducing dual majors for programmes such as the Bachelor of Science. Two major subjects at the exit level will improve the employability of graduates.
49. It is recommended that the University consider how the training of teachers in a digitally driven environment might be impacting the reality of the schooling system and how teachers can be trained to be innovative in such spaces.

### **4. Conclusion**

The University has, within a short period of a decade, clearly established itself as a niche university in the Northern Cape and has effective governance and management structures and a committed council that does not infringe on management. These two achievements constitute the strongest pillars in Focus Area 1, on governance, strategic planning, management, and leadership support for the core academic functions of the university. Shortcomings in this area include the lack of a collaborative and inclusive approach to planning and how key concepts in the strategic plan translate into the institutional culture and academic core functions of the University.

The lack of criteria for budget allocation as well as the partial effectiveness of the performance management system up to Peromnes level 5, presents major challenges for effective management of core academic functions. To safeguard effective governance by the Council, it is crucially important that the University holds induction training for new Council members.

Notwithstanding these limitations, Focus Area 1 as well as Focus Area 4 “Curriculum development, learning and teaching support the likelihood of student success”, are judged by the panel to have the most developed quality management processes in place as compared to Focus Areas 2 and 3.

In Focus Area 4, the University is commended for the 2020 Digital Framework that provides a theoretically and academically sound foundation that must be used to align practice and procedures at all levels.



While the University still needs to improve in terms of ensuring that staff attends professional development workshops, institutionalising graduate attributes, ensuring that students with disabilities are catered for and that the outcomes of graduate tracking information are implemented to inform curriculum renewal and transformation, the panel nevertheless observed that the University provides positive learning experiences for its diverse student population to enable their success. Both teaching methods and learning facilities used are fit for purpose. Additionally, key outcome indicators of student success are regularly monitored through schools' annual performance plans, assessment committee reports and reports submitted to the Senate Teaching and Learning Committee. Key decisions on curriculum and approaches to teaching and learning before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, take full cognisance of students' needs and circumstances. Peer and student evaluation of teaching are in place as additional mechanisms in which staff and students are involved in reflections around the improvement of teaching and learning although the current level of participation in the evaluation process for both staff and students need to be improved further.

Furthermore, the student voice is quite prominent in teaching and learning and both employers and alumni, barring a few areas of improvement, are satisfied with the quality of teaching and learning provided by the University.

The lack of an institutionalised policy of quality management has had a major impact on university quality management processes covered by Standards 5-12 which fall within focus areas 2 and 3: "The design and implementation of the institutional quality management system support the core academic functions" and "the coherence and integration of the institutional quality management system support the core academic functions".

In Focus Area 2, the panel is of the view that the CTLPD is instrumental in supporting learning and teaching processes, the development of staff and students, and the quality management of programmes. It has been key to most of the commendations the panel has presented about the academic core business and learning and teaching. Of particular significance is that the University, through the CTLPD, has conducted the external review of all its undergraduate programmes and discontinued the BCom programme that was not fit for purpose. It was also evident in interviews with staff and students that the Centre played a pivotal role during the COVID-19 crisis.

The lack of continuity when it comes to senior academic staff is a serious concern, not only in terms of expanding the research function of the University, but also in terms of the management and leadership of academic departments, and the Senate. In terms of core academic functions, no quality management system has been conceptualised yet to measure the impact of research and community engagement initiatives.

Other challenges that the University needs to address relate to the support of emerging scholars not in the nGAP programme, improvements in the class representative system through a training or induction programme, and the development and institutionalisation of a community engagement policy. The major improvement area remains the implementation of the approved Policy on Quality Management and a separate and resourced organisational unit to plan and monitor all quality assurance processes. In addition, the budget allocation should allow for the devolved management of quality in, e.g., schools/faculties and consideration of a subcommittee/ workstream of the APC to oversee the quality management system.

As indicated in several standards, the “system” for the monitoring and evaluation of quality management is interpreted mostly in terms of external programme reviews supplemented by ad hoc internal audits of support services or functions. Therefore, the panel could not find an evidence-based, coherent, reasonable, functional, and meaningfully structured quality management system in place that supports all three core functions.

Currently, staff members are not held accountable for non-compliance in how they execute quality-related functions which complicate matters further. The implementation of the workload policy is also not consistent across the different Schools leading to some dissatisfaction among both senior scholars and emerging researchers. Given the lack of clarity on how the budget allocation for quality assurance processes takes place, and the lack of a fully resourced quality unit, the panel could not determine whether resources allocated to quality management are utilised in a manner that benefits the institution except in the area of infrastructure development.).

The panel has offered 9 commendations in which the University should be applauded. In a short space of time, and within the specific context of the Northern Cape, the University has established itself as a niche university serving disadvantaged communities in the Northern Cape and beyond, laid a strong foundation for governance and management, responded effectively to the teaching and learning challenges posed by COVID-19 and produced good pass- and throughput rates while prioritising the student voice in learning and teaching. The 42 recommendations reflect the short period the University has been in operation rather than the ineffectiveness of the University. On the contrary, it is the panel's view that the University and all its stakeholders must be congratulated for the progress they have made in establishing a university from scratch. The recommendations are also a testament to the fact that the University has a strong basis to build on, and to become one of the leading institutions nationally and perhaps internationally over some time.