

From the VC's Desk

Highlights | Thought Leadership

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**MANAGEMENT COMMITTED TO TURNING AROUND
THE UNIVERSITY BY ENTRENCHING THE CENTRALITY OF
THE ACADEMIC ENTERPRISE AT SMU**



"A successful university is one where the academic enterprise is revered, enjoys special focus and remains firmly at the centre of its operations", Prof Peter Mbatia, Vice Chancellor, SMU

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SEFAKO MAKGATHO
HEALTH SCIENCES UNIVERSITY

**REMAIN
MASKED!**
Covid-19 is real!



The SMU Senior Management Committee (SMC) is chaired by the Vice Chancellor and is composed of members of the Executive Team, Deans of Schools and Directors of various portfolios. At its meeting held on 25 April 2022, the SMC observed that:

“It is common knowledge that the SMU academic project has not been adequately placed at the centre of what the University does, as the concerns of organized labour and students have arguably often crowded out the requisite support to be, ordinarily, provided to the academic project of the University. As part of the institutional effort and renewal to ensure that the academic project of the university takes centre stage of what the University does through the various stakeholders, academic employees, support staff, students and labour, the Senior Management Committee resolved that a special meeting of the senior management be held to discuss this matter dispassionately”.

As a consequence, a special meeting of the SMC was held on 23 May 2022 to engage on this critical point. A well thought-out presentation by Deans’ of Schools foregrounded critical points that were pivotal to the subject matter, including academic leadership at various levels. The crux was eventually to re-imagine the modus operandi of the academic enterprise in a bid to maximize its efficiency and effectiveness. A high level summary of some of the issues discussed is presented below:

- 1) When does a University cease to be a university? (a series of lectures/dialogues were suggested to unravel the intricacies of this question).
- 2) Politicization of the SMU academic space and its negative impact on the academic project as a whole, and the reputation of the University.
- 3) The implementation of the SMU procurement policy and its unintended consequences on inefficiencies experienced in the broader academic teaching and research environment.
- 4) Standard of service and urgency received from supporting departments.
- 5) Striking a balance between “Corporatization of Universities with more resources towards what is considered non-core business and compliance reporting versus resourcing the academic core functions, including research and innovation.
- 6) Resource allocation and prioritization of the academic project activities in a financially constrained SMU.
- 7) Audit of employee efficiency (are all employees adequately and gainfully employed, and what can be done practically to optimize the overall employee performance?)
- 8) Implementation of the New Business Model and improved third stream income generation.
- 9) Better oversight over infrastructure and maintenance projects, ensuring value for money. Every cent that is saved must be re-directed to the academic project.
- 10) Centralized laboratories (shared laboratories) with state of the art facilities.
- 11) Introduction of peer assessment and student assessment.
- 12) Members of the Executives usurping powers of Deans, reversing decisions of Deans, making Deans and HoDs to look weak in the face of the constituencies they serve, including students.
- 13) Re-definition of the meaning and application of the concept “student-centeredness” and where the academics rules of the universities remain sacrosanct. Balance between allowing student-activism to thrive whilst ensuring student discipline.
- 14) Managers constantly browbeaten by the SRC and organised labour.
- 15) Line managers at various tiers unable to take appropriate disciplinary action against errant subordinates due to uncertainties concerning firm support from multi-layered superiors.
- 16) Disruptions to the academic project due to incessant protest action by students and organized Labour has serious deleterious impact on the academic progress of our students and the reputation of the University.
- 17) Aligning staffing plan to the new business model.
- 18) Dialogue/discourse series on various difficult topics as we entrench the centrality of the academic enterprise in the fibre of the University’s being.

The conversation was authentic and honest as the participants identified the current challenges and moved into solution mode. In striving for the requisite academic excellence is a recognition by all, that collaboration and teamwork is essential if we are to succeed in meeting the University’s vision, mission and strategic objectives. All participants need to fully appreciate the role of their function and that of their team, in the growth and development of the University.

The Vice Chancellor has directed that the recommendations of this special meeting of the SMC be implemented by the respective line managers within an agreed reasonable time frame.