

1. Introduction and acknowledgements

Good morning Chairperson of Council, Vice Chancellor and members of the NWU, and thank you for this opportunity to present on key developments and directions to be pursued in teaching and learning & research and innovation in 2024.

2. Engaged learning, teaching and research: initiatives for 2024

Quality and alignment are key relayed themes for teaching and learning in this new year. Within Semester 1 the University will have put together its Improvement Plan arising from the 2023 CHE Institutional Audit for submission to the HEQC. It is evident from the work that needs to be done, all of which I have to say is really exciting work for us pertaining to student success, that student centricity and renewed efforts to align programme and modular offerings across our campuses, still requires attention.

This year we will see the implementation of the Student Information System which will have an impact on administrative and academic staff. During the course of the year, faculties will be consulted on roles and responsibilities in the new system, and those affected will undergo training to ensure a smooth roll-out at the beginning of 2025. Please be alert to this and help facilitate the integration of such into our ways of working. With our examination processes under focus in 2024, I would like to suggest that the Terms of Reference for Examinations Committees be revisited by each School, and Faculty and that these be taken forward to Faculty Teaching and Learning Committees and Faculty Boards, as the SIS will be able to automatically process calculations (for example confirming graduates, degrees with distinctions, final assessment opportunities etc), freeing up Examination Committees to engage with substantive oversight over assessment trends and deviations. We are concerned that this is an area of uneven application in our Faculty environments.

Then also “in the pipeline” in 2024 are three key teaching learning university-wide projects with curriculum impact: first up, is the identification of a new LMS (with a view to replacement of eFundi). In late 2023 live demos of the provisionally selected providers have already been identified: please familiarise yourself with these and give feedback to Kobus Le Roux at CTL who is the Project manager for this initiative: it’s really important that input is received in making a decision because a new LMS is going to be critical to student experience of the curriculum and for staff functionality in terms of assessment, engagement and record keeping (marks etc). We aim to finalise a choice of new provider and new LMS by August 2024 and to commence with implementation in 2025. At this stage it is anticipated that eFundi will need to be maintained for purposes of phasing out in 2025 and 2026, but more news of this will be shared as the project moves along this year.

Also this year we will need to take forward the PQM project- in particular to generate at Faculty level, a list of modules to be phased out, or placed into abeyance (in terms of our Rules we can place programmes under abeyance should module numbers not justify a new intake in any given semester), or programmes which are too closely duplicated to justify separate qualifiers. The first workshop on setting up a University wide methodology to be used by Faculties to derive those sets of data, was held in early February- so we are up and running with Prof Siriram coordinating efforts. There are some complex matters to be managed in relation to the PQM as it is evident to us that new programme development as already in progress in faculties cannot be paused until such time as the PQM review is complete; in other words it is not possible to pause new programme development so that this large scale university wide project can yield the outcomes in terms modules, programmes and qualifications that need to be phased out. The risk it too great for the University at a time when our new strategy requires us to reposition ourselves in the sector and market. To place new development on hold when we do not know how long it will take to phase out what is needed to be phased out, is a strategic choice for us. Instead PQM related process regarding scrutinization of programme overlaps, module viability considerations and enrolment intakes, and phasing out of programme duplicates and non-viable modules should be the normal work of every Faculty teaching Learning Committee tasked as these are with not only issues pertaining to quality, but also stewardship of the PQM. Additionally the External Quality Review of the Understanding the World modules concludes early in Semester 2, and so the rearticulation of our general degrees such as the BA, BCom, and BSc, should ideally only commence once the review findings pertaining to the core modules are tabled and we have identified a clear way forward as regards their place, purpose and future-fitness, in relation to the broader design of the general degrees in particular, and all qualifications in which these feature.

Thirdly, we have a new Project which has commenced in February with the successful securing of European Funding for the CHE lead Project on Micro-credentials in South Africa, known as PoMiSA. NWU is part of a 7 nation and 18 institution project spanning Northern (Ireland, Estonia and Belgium) and Southern hemisphere (SA, Namibia, Lesotho and Mauritius) countries. Our NWU team is headed-up by Prof Alida Herbst from the Faculty of Health Sciences, Prof Herman van Der Merwe from FEMS are responsible for providing the Desktop review of existing information as guided by 7 country project participants; developing a report on State of Play as regards Microcredentials, as a baseline for the projects activities throughout 2024 and 2025. This challenging task must be completed within the first year. In 2024 we are also seeing a transition to new leadership in many of our Schools with new appointments being made in respective environments: you may recall that the last time we had such a sea-change was in 2017 when we implemented the new operational model associated with the unitary structure: there arises in 2024 an opportunity to re-fit ourselves for purpose in light of the new NWU Strategy.

Please communicate with colleagues on the need to deepen engagement with multilingualism in our classrooms and facilitation: feedback from students affirms this is really helpful from a learning and inclusion perspective. Did you know our multilingual SLPs (offered through UCE) are free for staff and student assistants to attend? Ideally, this opportunity is part of personal development planning. You may also be aware of the AI (academic integrity) Training coming in 2024. The COPAI Office itself is located in the Teaching-Learning portfolio: the work began in 2023 and has rapidly had to take into account of AI (artificial intelligence its ethical uses and other). Please utilise the Guidelines we developed in 2023 for this purpose. CTL has communicated training dates for us on LibCal for staff to register on, for free. NWU AI (academic integrity) material has also been specifically developed for first students in 2024 and is part of the R&O programme (please contact Yolandie Stewart).

Finally, our commitment to providing from a cross campus hybrid teaching and learning experience in 2023 gained further traction and even more is planned in this year. In a continuation of our strategy to provide for selected venues (earmarked at least initially for programmes that are team-taught across campus, or where contact and distance education modalities are offered, across campuses) we have equipped a further 38 venues with hyflex capabilities bring the total to 120 thus equipped since 2021: 9 at MC, 18 at PC and 4 at VC all of which had been completed by the end of 2023. The development of teaching and learning facilities across our campuses also received attention this past year with 34 new laboratories and lecture venues with a total capacity of 2620 under construction in 2023 and 14 venues with a capacity of 2154 being refurbished. 34 venues were fitted with inverters to curb the impact of loadshedding as phase 1 of the project.

Our Research and Innovation (R&I) activities continue to be conducted predominantly but not exclusively in research entities, consisting of eight (8) Research Chairs, eight (8) hosted research entities which includes a Centre of Competence, five (5) Centres of Excellence, 11 Research Units, 17 Research Focus Areas and 10 Research Niche Areas. The institutional research output trends (specifically journal articles, books, book chapters and conference proceedings approved by the DHET) have been on an impressive upward trajectory since 2005. The latest DHET audited NWU subsidy units (2022) were 1 786,88 (against 1 656,04 units for 2021). Building on the previous successes, we will strive to improve our metrics on research outputs and global research standing in 2024, translating the ambition of the newly approved NWU Internationalization Strategy.

One of our exciting projects is the alignment of Research Support Department (RSD) organogram to effectively support the new institutional strategy 2024 and beyond. The re-organised RSD, once fully approved by all relevant structures, will be named the Directorate of Research and Postgraduate Support, which will include the Postgraduate Support Centre. The new Directorate will, in addition, be responsible for Research Quality, Research Ethics and Integrity, Grants Management and Research Development. The establishment of the Postgraduate Support Centre within RSD will put the Research and Innovation portfolio in a competitive position to address the NWU strategic priorities including 'impact' and 'growth', and the declining postgraduate throughput rate. In serving the higher degree students, the Centre will work closely with Faculties by focusing on support and development to ensure students success in terms of improved enrolment, supervision experience, throughput, and graduation rates. The Centre is one of the cross-cutting areas of improvement central to addressing the Council on Higher Education (CHE) recommendations and reducing the long time to degree/graduation and high drop-out rates.

The Research and Innovation portfolio is looking forward to initiating the process of revising the NWU R & I Strategy which is coming to an end in 2025. This will be an opportune moment to revisit Research Entity model. While the Research Entity Model remains a formidable business case for driving R&I investment, some of its well-known limitations (although not prevalent in all entities) include lack of optimal collaboration within and across Faculties and inability to capitalise on cross and multi-disciplinary research. The Post Doctoral Research Fellowship programme will continue to be re-engineered to make it fit-for-purpose, highly attractive and competitive. Increased allocation of positions, improved management with a view of monitoring productivity as well as retention of the best

talent would be some of the critical factors to drive both internal and external Investments.

The NWU revived commemoration of NWU Research and Innovation Week, took place 18 – 22 September 2023, under the theme “Research and Innovation for sustainable impact”. In 2024, the R&I portfolio will introduce Biennial NWU Research and Innovation Colloquium to alternate with NWU Research and Innovation Week.

On the 19th October 2023, the NWU through Research Support Department spearheaded the launch of the Research Output, Outcomes and Impact Community of Practice (CoP-ROOI) in Johannesburg, a collaborative effort by the Southern African Research and Innovation Management Association (SARIMA). The CoP-ROOI represents a group of research and innovation administrators, managers, management professionals, etc. informally bound to one another through exposure to common challenges and pursuit of solutions. The year 2024 and beyond will witness intensive programmes of the CoP-ROOI which will seek to develop social capital, nurture new knowledge, stimulate innovation, and share knowledge on management of research output and impact.

The NWU, through the initiative of Research Support Department, has been selected to partner with SARIMA through a project entitled “Strengthening Research Support Offices at Public Research Institutions” which will be funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation starting in 2024. This project is funded over a three-year period with the overall aim of building and strengthening capabilities of ten (10) Research Support Offices (or equivalent) at selected public research institutions and will be piloted in three southern African countries; namely Malawi, Mozambique and South Africa. The anticipated project outcome is a stronger Research Support Office that is able to manage, support and enable high quality research activities effectively and efficiently. If the capacity building model is successful, the ultimate plan is to replicate the model in various African institutions.

In support of NWU research innovations locally and globally, the NWU through the Technology Transfer and Innovation Support (TTIS) office, continued to facilitate relationships between industry partners, investors, government agencies, and other institutions. The TTIS has also been actively involved in various initiatives to support the development of the Innovation Management Professionals in the southern African Region. In 2023, new incentives were implemented through the NWU Innovation Fellowship Program, and the Patent Incentive Scheme aimed at encouraging early researchers, in enhancing their innovation skills and in commercialisation of their academic research. TTIS staff regularly participates in programmes globally (e.g. Strengthening Commercialisation Skills workshop at Oxford University) with a view of encouraging the commercialisation of research outputs particularly from the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences.

We have been invited by Companies and Intellectual Property Commission (CIPC) to host World IP Day 2024 with the theme “IP and the SDGs: building our common future through innovation and creativity”, in collaboration with DSI/NIPMO, SEDA and TIA. Activities for World IP Day will be 3-fold;

- a) Media launch on 16 April 2024
- b) IP presentations on Mahikeng campus on 25 April 2024
- c) IP presentations and exhibition on Potchefstroom campus on 26 April 2024.

On annual basis, the TTIS office supports student entrepreneurship and women in research and innovation through partnerships with universities and partnering with number of portfolios. For example, the annual Leopards Lair®, a student entrepreneurship competition, which includes entrepreneurship bootcamps, is conducted in partnership with the NWU Business School, Bhive in the Faculty of Economic Management Sciences, NIPMO, IDC, the Bongani Foundation, and the Office of the Vice-Chancellor. In safeguarding and promoting research quality and integrity, the Research Integrity Management System (NWU IRIMS) was introduced since June 2022. To date all eight (8) faculties have structures for the management and maintenance of Responsible Conduct of Research by faculty management, research managers, researchers, and postgraduate students. The system is a powerful and effective tool that provides the management of the full spectrum of research activities within the faculties by focusing on both the “Fostering of a climate for Responsible Conduct of Research” as well as the management of breaches and transgressions in research integrity that is transparent and just. In 2023, we successfully performed external evaluation of ten (10) NWU Research Entities (comprising CoE’s, Research Units and Focus Areas) for the first time since 2017 (i.e. under the NWU Unitary Model). This external evaluation is scheduled to continue in earnest in 2024. This is also the year to submit the last and final report of “Higher Degrees Improvement Plan” to CHE, while its recommendations will continue to be implemented for the foreseeable future.

The NWU Library Information Service (LIS) remains a key player in the R&I (in addition to T-L and CE), enhancing university research dissemination and access. The LIS continues to provide research support services to researchers and students, leveraging Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) to accelerate visibility of NWU research output. Since adoption of Open Access Policy in 2022 that promotes publication in open access journals and other platforms, LIS’ efforts to promote Open Access publishing became a reality with signing of

transformative agreements with large publishers through the South African Library and information Consortium (SANLiC). To date, the savings accrued from this scheme surpassed R21 million in Articles Processing Charges (APC) through increased publication in Open Access platforms.

One of interesting projects in the LIS domain is the establishment of Digital Scholarship Center unit, which will continue to grow in 2024 to support the creation of digital sets by mining online resources, digitizing paper materials and growing expertise in research methods and practices using technologies with the aim of providing academic staff and students with a single point of entry to many digital resources available at NWU with easy accessibility. The digitization activities have been focused on the Theses and Dissertations, to give students, researchers, and members of the public expanded access to knowledge. To ensure the long-term availability and discoverability of the NWU collection, the digitized items are preserved, protected, and made accessible. Easy access to high-quality content is both a public good and a key necessity for good research.

3. Concluding remarks

We look forward to a generative and productive year for the University in 2024 and will endeavour to support the development of our staff from a professional development and also research support perspective. It is critical for us that University contributes to the sustainability of our resources, people and eco-systems, so that our teaching and research remains focused, relevant and aligned to the new NWU Strategy.

Thank you.