



## Stellenbosch University – an Overview



### Introduction

Known colloquially as ‘Maties’, Stellenbosch University (SU) aspires to be Africa’s leading research- intensive university, globally recognised as excellent, inclusive and innovative, and advancing knowledge in service of society.

SU is a public research institution situated in the Western Cape province of South Africa and counts as one of the top higher education institutions in the country, on the African continent and in the world, according to various independent international ranking systems.



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### History

After being founded, first in 1859 as a theological seminary, and in subsequent years developing into a college, the institution was officially established as a university in 1918, and commenced its operations with four faculties – Science, Education, Arts and Social Sciences and AgriSciences.

Just over 100 years after SU started out with 503 students and 40 academic staff, today the University’s five campuses in the Western Cape are home to 10 faculties and a vibrant and cosmopolitan community of more than 32 000 students and more than 4 000 staff members. The ten Faculties are AgriSciences, Arts and Social Sciences, Economic and Management Sciences, Education, Engineering, Law, Medicine and Health Sciences, Military Science, Science and Theology.

As an institution, its complex history is marked by both great academic achievements and valuable lessons. These form the backdrop to the institution’s pursuit of an integrated, transformed, multilingual and multicultural academic community, as rich in diversity as the country and the African continent, where it celebrates critical thinking, promotes debate and remains committed to democracy, human rights and social justice.

SU, therefore, acknowledges its inextricable connection with generations past, present and future. In its responsibility towards the present and future generations, the University renewed its unconditional commitment to the ideal of an inclusive world-class university in and for Africa and continues to do so.



## Future focused

The institution used the commemoration of the centenary in 2018 not only to reflect on the past, but also to chart its path into the future, and launched its Vision 2040 and Strategic Framework 2019–2024 to guide it towards being a major change agent in the future, with global impact.

The University sets out six core strategic themes in Vision 2040 and Strategic Framework 2019–2024. Since SU's aim is to achieve a thriving Stellenbosch University, this is Theme 1. To do so, SU's stakeholders are crucial partners, and therefore Theme 2 is a transformative student experience (students being our largest internal stakeholder group) and Theme 3 is purposeful partnerships and inclusive networks, engaging our external stakeholders. These are followed by SU's main drivers and core business, i.e., Theme 4, networked and collaborative teaching and learning, and Theme 5, *research for impact*. Theme 6, *employer of choice*, positions our staff as a critical enabler.

Underlying these themes are SU's institutional values of excellence, compassion, equity, accountability and respect.

## A thriving university

For the University to thrive, it aims to be a systemically – i.e., economically, socially and environmentally – sustainable institution.

SU's pursuit of economic sustainability not only takes account of the financial challenges facing South African universities and students, but also of the opportunities presented by innovative funding models and entrepreneurial initiatives. Working towards social sustainability, it focuses on the well-being of staff and students by offering them a chance to develop personally, academically and professionally.

At a communal level, the University's social sustainability efforts include promoting social cohesion, responsible citizenship and a welcoming campus culture for people from all backgrounds. SU also aims to be environmentally sustainable in both institutional operations and academic curriculum.

## A transformative student experience

SU offers students more than a world-class academic qualification – it seeks to deliver a transformative student experience. It does this by broadening access to the University, and by looking beyond the classroom to help students become well-rounded individuals. Its student pass and throughput rates are also consistently among the highest in the country.

## Purposeful partnerships and inclusive networks

To broaden and enhance its social impact, SU fosters purposeful partnerships and inclusive networks with many stakeholders at a local, regional, continental and global level, and works with government structures, industry, civil society, university partners, alumni and donors.

The University has an established network of formal [international partnerships](#) and bilateral arrangements with institutions across six continents. While nurturing longstanding ties, it also continues to explore new geographic areas of engagement, including an intentional shift towards more collaboration in the global South. Among others, SU was the first African university invited to join the prestigious [Global Alliance of Universities on Climate \(GAUC\)](#) and to be admitted to the ranks of the [Venice International University group](#). SU is also an active member of networks like [PANGeA](#) and [PeriPeri U](#), which specifically cater to a new generation of academics.

SU's global community of more than 120 000 [Matie graduates](#) stay connected through a growing number of alumni hubs in various parts of the world.

## Networked and collaborative teaching and learning

In its learning-centred approach to teaching, students serve as co-creators of knowledge and actively participate in their own learning. This networked and collaborative teaching and learning strategy encourages an inquiring mind as well as critical and creative thinking.

SU remains a residential university, and the traditional mode of delivery is in-person classroom-based teaching. Yet it continues to adapt and enhance its offering, using the latest technologies to create connected communities that can learn interactively. The response to the Covid-19 pandemic has shown its agility and ingenuity in this regard, having switched to emergency remote teaching, learning and assessment within three weeks of the country going into lockdown. It has since also successfully transitioned to augmented remote teaching, learning and assessment, offering both conventional face-to-face and online learning and teaching.

Apart from being taught by world-renowned academics, SU's students also have access to state-of-the-art learning and campus facilities as well as a range of support services. Its [Library and Information Service](#), for instance, runs a network of some of the best-equipped university libraries in South Africa. In addition, SU has invested substantially in advanced information and communications technology (ICT) through projects such as fibre-optic cabling and installing Wi-Fi in lecture halls.

## Research for impact

The University's five strategic research areas are designed to generate maximum impact. These are the **natural environment, health and human security, social justice and development,**



**human creativity and social innovation and systems and technologies for the future.** As SU researches and innovates in these areas, it aims to meet real-world needs and promote sustainable development.

Its research chairs, centres of excellence and institutes, bureaus and units are key contributors to our high-impact scholarly work. SU has established seven centres of excellence funded by South Africa's Department of Science and Innovation (DSI), and 49 research chairs, 26 of which form part of the DSI- funded South African Research Chair Initiative (SARChi) of the National Research Foundation (NRF).

It currently has **494** NRF-rated researchers, of which **20** are A-rated, being regarded as world leaders in their fields. Collaborating with research staff on various cutting-edge studies are postgraduate students, who constitute roughly a third of the student population. The University also hosts some 350 postdoctoral candidates from across the world every year. Collectively, these stakeholders have established SU as one of the country's most productive institutions in terms of weighted research output per capita. The University has also registered the most patents of all tertiary institutions in South Africa.

## Employer of choice

Knowing that staff are key to achieving our vision and objectives, the University aspires to be an employer of choice. It works purposefully to create a diverse, equitable, inclusive and welcoming work culture, and a healthy and safe working environment and its institutional values guide its efforts in this regard.

The University's Staff Health and Wellbeing Plan includes an [Employee Assistance Programme](#), which supports and empowers staff to overcome any challenges they may experience at work or in their personal lives. And through Siyakhula, a diversity capacity development programme, it addresses employment equity, diversity and transformation challenges at the University.

## Major recent developments

The University has, in recent years, taken a bold step towards cooperation across the silos that traditionally divide various academic disciplines, and in 2019 established a **School for Data Science and Computational Thinking** – a structure spanning all 10 faculties with multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration.

It also launched the **Centre for Epidemic Response and Innovation (Ceri)**, to provide genetic sequencing for the development and evaluation of vaccine therapies. Ceri is based in the new **Biomedical Research Institute (BMRI)** on the Tygerberg campus, which is one of the most advanced facilities of its kind in the world. It is the single largest infrastructure investment by the university in recent years and is earmarked to host more than 1 000 multidisciplinary researchers from all over Africa and dozens of world-class research groups.



In order to amplify scientific research on the most pressing issue of the time and contribute to research, SU is also investing in climate research and officially established a **School for Climate Studies** in 2021 – the only university in Africa to do so. The School for Climate Studies positions itself as a world-class institution for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary climate and related studies in and for Africa, and support and encourage research partnerships with other entities, both nationally and internationally.

## Conclusion

SU's mission statement says that it aims to attract outstanding students, employ talented staff and provide a world-class environment; a place connected to the world, while enriching and transforming local, continental and global communities.

### About the Author

*Prof Wim de Villiers is the Rector and Vice-Chancellor of Stellenbosch University (SU) in South Africa, when he joined his alma mater again after more than two decades abroad. After graduating from SU with an MBChB, he went to Oxford University for his PhD, and then to America, where he studied at Harvard and held several senior positions at the University of Kentucky including Head of Gastroenterology, and Administrative Head of the Good Samaritan Hospital. He was included in the publication Best Doctors in America. He was appointed Dean of Health Sciences at the University of Cape Town and returned to South Africa before joining SU in his current position. On the national stage, he serves as vice-chair of Universities South Africa as well as chair of the Finance and Investment Committee of Universities South Africa, chair of Higher Health, and on the international stage as council member of the Association of Commonwealth Universities.*

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