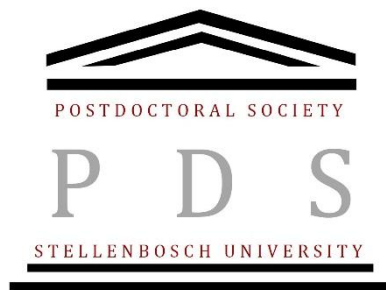




PDS Executive Committee Meeting



Minutes of the Meeting

Friday, 3 July 2020

Microsoft Teams

15h00 to 17h00

Main themes of the meeting

- Postdoc status
- Working during a pandemic

1. Welcome and Opening Remarks

Tando welcomed members to the meeting.

2. Absent and excuses

Priscilla (Apologies but will write down the minutes from the recording).

3. In attendance: Natasha, Tando (Chairing), Martina, Marguerite, Maaïke, Vikas, Kim, Postdocs (attached list).

4. Overview of Agenda

Tando gave a brief overview of the agenda items.

5. Any Other Business

Tando added onto the agenda the issue of emails from the Rector's office. Marguerite was asked to give an input on this. She wondered whether anyone else had been impacted by this fact that she was not receiving anything from the Rector's Office during the lockdown period and misses out on important information. She is, however, fortunate because she works in a division where they always pass information to her. She wondered if there was anyone with anything else pertaining to that issue. Quite a number of postdocs in response seemed to not have been receiving the emails meaning that this was a general concern. In response, Natasha mentioned that she was not aware of this issue. Essentially all emails from Prof Cloete, Rector 's Office were sent by the DRD. Office workers and students received the emails, therefore, it appeared strange that postdocs did not receive the emails. She promised to make a follow up on the issue. All Prof Cloete's information comes through the DRD since staff reported to him. Natasha mentioned that communication issues were on her report list.

6. Overview of minutes from Friday, 5 June 2020 meeting

The team had gone over the minutes which had been previously circulated. The minutes were accepted.

7. Information session from the Postdoctoral office (Dr Natasha Mothapo)

When information comes to every DRD staff member it is circulated according to the clusters and the environments avoiding posting information that does not involve anyone else. The information gets separated and she gets what relates to postdocs and staff who are the hosts then she sends it out using the distribution list. Some information would be coming from the DRD and this is mainly for staff and support staff. Postdocs are not on the distribution list because they are involved in their departments. But some postdocs who sit in different committees of the university end up receiving these emails from DRD and this explains why some postdocs do not get the direct DRD communications. This has been problematic too because even when these postdocs that get information related to staff receive it they come to Natasha to ask why they are not getting opportunities that the staff get. The opportunities will be open for staff members only, and not all staff members get same opportunities. She has a hard time to respond to the emails which Therina and Dominique are responsible for. That is why they send information to the specific groups that the DRD works with. The only time postdocs should be worried is when they do not get communications from Natasha who will always send out related information to all postdocs or to Tando who will share the information.

The DRD office was in the process of updating the details of all the postdocs and working with Information Technology (IT) department. Natasha mentioned that there are historical and friendly emails. When postdocs register they get a historical email with an SU number in the address. Later they get a friendly email which uses their surnames or however they want to be named and this email overrides the other. If postdocs are still using the historical email, they can miss out on some information. It could be that most emails that postdocs are missing out on are still going via their historical emails but this should not be the case. Natasha will check what the issue is. Dr Nolan mentioned that she last received information in March 2020. In response to this she was told that anyone who would have received communication from the DRD in March concerning the lockdown was in the

right communication list. Sometimes communication is for specific courses and lectures.

a. Postdoc status (the pros and cons of salary versus scholarship)

Tando informed the members that in the meeting held last week James (Dr Brown, Departmental representative) asked about the status of the postdocs and he specifically was concerned that generally postdocs do not know their benefits and they do not understand the pros and cons of having one's salary taxed. She asked Natasha to reiterate how the salary can get taxed. In response to this Natasha mentioned that she would not be able to respond as a tax consultant. She has approached Human Resources office to ask someone from the tax office to come and explain the pros and cons and hoping this will happen someday. However, from her experience some postdocs have done external projects and when the money came they got taxed and got tax numbers. But generally for postdocs the issue was still a bit challenging. She and Therina had a meeting with the HR office to discuss the status of postdocs.

For a couple of weeks Natasha has been developing the postdoc office and improving the capabilities of the office. She referred to the fact that when postdoc fellows register they get a card written Postdoc Fellow/Researcher and the idea behind it was that postdocs will get special services and treatment and that people will accept them for the fact that they are on that environment but that is not true. This is because if postdocs go to the university environment like IT for services they type their number and what comes out is that they are students. As a result they do not get the same services that staff members get. Natasha had written a couple of emails and discussed with people around that issue but finally got a chance to sit in a meeting on Wednesday. There was going to be a couple of shifts that would happen in terms of

the resources that are going to be provided for postdocs which require her office to sit down and see what really can be provided for postdocs at SU considering this whole tax issue.

b. Issue of tax for postdocs

The issue of changing the IT system was discussed to have the category of postdocs recognized but also to look at the salary slip. The issue of looking at access to career skills that is available for staff members that would normally be provided by HR was also discussed. At the moment all the career skills staff is from the DRD that is offered to the early career academics on that programme. There also has been skills training on offer and Natasha has had slots where she could put postdocs. She has been looking for additional money for more postdocs to participate in these courses. When the slots become available and she gets enough money, she gets more postdocs for training.

HR has had many courses and certificates are provided at the end when one can get recognition. She emphasized that postdocs are not at the university to hang out but to build up their careers and their efforts can get recognised when they have much more that goes into their CVs. The postdocs need to know how to access HR. People do not recognize who postdocs are yet there are 322 postdocs at SU. That is a big component of the research cohort at the university to not to be recognised and be given the right kind of support. Natasha was very positive after having a meeting on Wednesday that things can work out well for postdocs. The biggest hurdle now was dealing with University of South Africa (UNISA) and SARS.

c. Student supervision contracts

Postdocs are still registered as students at SU and that seems very difficult to change either there is a lot of resistance or postdocs just

want to comply. Natasha feels compliance is necessary but it is important to always cultivate a culture of change. Change is good just as this pandemic has forced people to do things very differently. For example, there have been postdocs who are supposed to be appointed but this cannot happen because they are supposed to be physically at the university. COVID -19 is saying no but university says they have to be at the university in order to work and get a salary. However, some people can work from their homes, doing papers and systematic reviews but people are finding it hard to adapt to the dynamic system of change. Because of this some of the things that she is doing and going to do will raise a lot of eyebrows but will be of benefit in the future.

d. Issue of tax

There is the issue of tax exemption that was implemented about 6 or 7 years ago that the funding of postdocs for them to be exempted from tax is decided by SARS. Basically this money to be exempted from tax has to be considered a scholarship/stipend/fellowship and there is no way it can be called a salary. Postdocs are exempted from tax and there is so much variance in what postdocs get. Some get R800 000 per annum and some get R200 000 per annum. The minimum is what SU agreed on and Natasha did not know what other universities were giving to their postdocs and also how they were managing them. To remove this tax problem seems to be quite problematic because there is an understanding that there is no money to support research.

The idea is that if there is tax which is beneficial then there will be less money to fund postdocs. The salary will have to increase then most postdocs will not be able to get fellowship positions. There would also be restrictions on the hiring processes. It is always great for the university to hire international candidates to be postdocs and there are many benefits for that. In 2015 in one of the NRF postdoc forums a national postdoc forum page of Facebook was established. Discussions on the issues of postdocs were started around that time and that is when the members were working on the postdoc policy.

There is an opportunity for further discussions about the issues but the worrying part is on the issue of funding because there is not enough financial investment into higher education.

Natasha did not know how the SARS regulation can be avoided. She was given a chance to make comments on the review document and she did add all the concerns being raised and postdocs need to take note of the issues if they are to pay tax. In her review she had a salary bracket for postdocs as R400 000 and still with the minimum of R200 000 per annum. Anything above R400 000 will be taxed and that will mean the university should give postdocs a lot more opportunities. It appears restrictive to be a student as a postdoc because there will be no training support that postdocs get. Postdocs need teaching and research experience, formal supervision experience, need to write grants and be Principal Investigators (PI). If one gets a fixed term contract he/she can raise or apply for funds as a PI and can get funding to keep the job for the 2 or 3 years in the contract. There are more grants that would allow one to get a salary. At the moment postdocs cannot do that because they are students. Other benefits are having access to HR resources that are available to staff and one can pay medical aid fees at the university.

Other options involve having to replace a supervisor. This has been discussed with Prof Cloete where postdocs can be allowed to supervise or teach students when their supervisors will have gone for Sabbatical leave. Recognition can be given to recognise that time spent on students and the feedback from student engagement. There are many benefits for being a taxpaying postdoc and can be on a contract then recognized as a temporary staff member. Everything was finalized on 30 June 2020 and Natasha's office was waiting for feedback on what the next steps are. There are also discussions on the education consortium with the university representatives of the Western Cape so that they talk with one voice. She will update the

team on what the decisions were from the discussions and report on whether there is any update on the clause of tax itself.

e. Questions and comments on the tax issue

- Tando wanted to know that if there is going to be a stipulation that postdocs who earn above a bracket of R400 000 will get taxed whether it meant that those with R200 000 or less will not get taxed but will still receive a salary slip. Natasha agreed that this was true.
- Another postdoc asked about when one pays taxes is he/she paying for the privileges of recognition and is there any receiving of the unemployment fund and how does this affect insurance fund, medical aid, and pension? Natasha said that all contract staff members pay the unemployment fund which is deducted from the salary.
- Once one becomes a taxpaying worker and is in this postdoc contract, he/she signs a contract form and the university knows for how long one is in the contract. He/she is registered and monitored by the university and at the end of the contract one fills in an exit form, therefore, will be able to pay the unemployment fund.
- Natasha was not sure of what will happen at the end of the contract but what she was sure of is that one will be able to claim the unemployment pension fund when unemployed and not having any income.
- Natasha would still get a date with the tax consultant in order to get more information on how this tax issue works and specifically how it will affect postdocs. However, emphasis was that postdocs will be able to pay the unemployment pension fund. Even for staff members in different grades they pay the minimal tax that covers hospital stay and she has always wondered why it was not available for postdocs. It will be beneficial to know what could be on offer for postdocs even in

terms of healthcare. She was not sure either of any pension that will pay for postdocs but she will find out more about this.

- Another postdoc asked if there was a national postdoc organization for collective bargaining purposes? Natasha in response said that her office started the whole national postdoc forum and there was a Facebook page and she promised to link it to the current PDS page. There was quite a lot of activity for that forum and discussions on the minimum stipend that comes from the NRF funded postdocs, etc. was discussed.
- Since Prof Cloete joined the university a lot of effort and energy has been put in the funding of postdocs, consolidoc programme, and injection of money into the subcommittee for postdocs and money that is allocated specifically for supporting postdocs. The department was working on establishing a call centre paying for career skills development. Natasha had noticed that other universities had no policies but SU shared its postdoc policies with all universities and now they are all basing their policies on the SU policies.
- The memorandum of agreement (MoU) was also shared with other postdocs on the Facebook page and it was adopted by different universities. She has been working on a report to showcase the research that postdocs do at SU, the statistics, publications and stating the issue of numbers, for example, to say postdocs at SU produce 3 publications per year. That is a lot of money for the university because the publications can be converted to money.
- The purpose is to showcase the value of postdocs as what happened during the Research Day which comes once a year always in October. Prof Cloete decided to have an award for the Top 20 postdoc researchers. She, however, feels that there is a lot more that needs to be done to showcase postdocs in order to place value on them. The recognition of postdocs that they are members of staff and are part of the research cohort

needs great attention. There is need for more advocacies and visibility is it on LinkedIn or any other social media platform and gets voices heard. Postdocs are publishing more than professors; therefore, the value must go where it should go to.

- Another postdoc commented that different type of staff benefits for temporary/contract staff do not usually get medical aid, training, etc. as compared to permanent staff. Natasha agreed that permanent and contract benefits can never be the same. There are things that postdocs will pay for without co-funding from the university. Also there are other things the university can pay for or subsidize. Postdocs can have access to medical systems and training available at HR.
- In response to another question: Will the benefits to be received when you pay tax be affected by the position of permanent residency? Tando responded that when you are a foreigner you do not pay tax, but there are certain fees you can pay as an international employee or student but that is a specific clause.
- James asked if it was possible to get staff status without paying tax. Natasha said that the management through the HR system will not even want to deal with postdocs as long as they are not staff members. That is why Natasha had a meeting with HR for them to see if there are other things that can be offered to postdocs without requiring them to be staff members.
- The plea is that HR should have an understanding of postdocs in order to identify their seniority, high skill and importance so that they feel supported. The issue of courses will now be open for postdocs to do and priority to parking and receiving of communication that comes directly from HR and these are some of the soft things that are provided by the university without requiring them to be staff members.
- One member who is an accountant specialist and has talked to tax people was still worried about the benefits of paying tax but

felt that if this was a requirement to help the status of postdocs then that is ok.

- Another member felt that the issue of postdocs demanding a higher salary that fits them into a tax bracket then have a higher way of living has a great impact on research because this means that people will pay less for research. Postdocs do jobs that other senior staff do unlike the Masters students, supervise students, write papers, conduct physical research in the laboratory, therefore, need to be paid for the amount of education and experience that have been gained. Postdocs should not be treated as students. The issue of paying tax is not that expensive and postdocs with 2 or 3 year contracts can still get home loans, buy cars, etc.
- Postdocs are said to be the heart of research and always on the paper but are not paid for their worth. Natasha in response expressed that she wished this member who shared the same sentiments as her should have been in the same room where she was defending the postdocs. When it comes to the issues of money and the tax the university seems to fear that funders cannot manage postdocs. She sees a possibility of having an organisation or company that can pay postdocs R800 000 or R400 00 and after all NRF pays R255 000, etc. then it can be possible to increase postdocs' salaries.
- She was happy that people can now talk and encouraged postdocs to attend meetings whenever they hear of a call so that they can express themselves and also get to hear what will be going on and can speak with a unified voice. Postdocs need to attend forums, events and engagements and can write to her so that the issues can be discussed then map way forward on how to address the issues. She sits in the Research Committee with Tando and there can present issues then ask for change to happen. Follow ups can later be made and she discovered that

there are other good listeners who are passionate about postdocs.

- Tando said that she was planning to have a form that can be used to invite professionals who can share information so that postdocs can have a richer debate. Tando was planning to send out a survey again to ask about a number of issues, for example on taxation, etc. Then an opportunity will be open to share with stakeholders on what postdocs need.

f. Student supervision contract

Natasha showed members the amended form that postgraduate students fill in at registration. She pointed a section where they nominate a supervisor and co-supervisor. Postdocs are supposed to receive students with that form then sign it. The form is an official form that goes in with the students documents and stays with the Registrar. The name of the postdoc as co-supervisor will be on the thesis of the student and on the university system as part of the supervision panel of that particular student. Postdocs can put that in their CVs indicating that they were official supervisors for so many PhD students and so many Masters students.

Postdocs are allowed to co-supervise but can be a primary supervisor for Honors students. It does not matter even if they come out with projects they can only be co-supervisors for PhD and Masters students. The form is provided by the host. The hosts get the form from their departments or Heads of Departments. Postdocs can sign the general student MoU from the postgraduate office. If they discover that their students do not have an MoU they should ensure that they collect it from the postgraduate office because it protects both the supervisor and the student. It ensures that postdocs get their papers out as co-supervisors and students get their certificates at the end.

Tando alluded to the fact that if postdocs raise questions relating to such issues they get misunderstood by hosts. She, therefore, asked Natasha to send a reminder to departments in order to make the information available to their postdocs and they have to talk about the form and allow postdocs to fill it in. This will officiate their being co-supervisors. The departments need to be reminded that postdocs can be primary supervisors for Honors students because as it stands the departments keep reminding them that they are not allowed to be supervisors. Postdocs do not want to appear like they are ungrateful by expressing their need to be recognised but feel it would be better if it comes from Natasha. Natasha expressed that it was very important to sign documents so that it comes out clearly that one needs to be an official supervisor without just being a supervisor on paper.

Tando mentioned that this also happens to publications and she had a student who was writing a review. She was supervising her but was not allowed to sign as co-author. This could have been happening to many others. Natasha had instances where she was added as a co-supervisor after the student had graduated. She filled in the form very late for recognition. During her time postdocs were not even allowed to be co-supervisors. Postdocs would invest so much time, train, support and do a lot of things. All the supervision work must be on paper.

g. Decision on the Return to work

Tando mentioned that there are different messages, emails, rules and regulations in the departments and it seems like there are different things being said to different laboratories in terms of how to work. In the meeting which was held last week with representatives it seems like some people can go to work and some need to wait not going to work until December. The request was that Natasha can send out a communication so that everyone knows what is going on in terms of

going back to work. Tando knows that she can go back to work next week but that seems to be not the case for everyone else.

In response Natasha mentioned that the issue has been discussed with a lot of detail and there has been a research work committee to discuss about who goes back to work. She has been invited to a Deans' meeting and this was discussed again and that is why she was able to send the e-mail that postdocs can return to work as part of the staff re-integration plan. Each Faculty and each department has its own re-integration plan because of the sizes in departments. There is a message from the Faculty then each departmental head makes each decision for the particular environment.

So far postdocs and/or hosts have been writing to her and that is why the e-mail had to be written to department heads and hosts to mention that postdocs had to come back and be included in the staff re-integration plan. Some departments are still not allowing their staff to come back and they are not coming to the buildings at all and for that reason those postdocs are not invited to come back. The message was that where it was possible that people can work from home, they should continue to do so.

Only those people who have an exceptional need for working in that environment can go back, for example, people that need to work in the laboratory or students that need to finish their work in the laboratory. Some need to go back to the field and process their samples, etc. People received forms and filled in how many times they can come in and be specific for how long they are going to be available. If there is a problem hosts and departments must send the information back to her office. Postdocs need to communicate directly so that the office can see what to do in order to give support. All hosts and departments must have that information.

8. Research day

A call-out will be sent for the Top-20 postdocs where a form will be sent for applications and submit very detailed information about the activities carried out at SU. Each year this celebration is carried out where Prof Cloete will give each of the 20 an amount of R10 000. This is presented during the Research day every year. This year there was supposed to be a conference but because of COVID - 19 it has been moved to next year.

The Research day will be held and hopefully it will be face-to-face and if not it will be virtual. The date is 23 or 24 October 2020 and the emails will be sent out very soon. The call will be sent out by end of July. The Top 3 usually get prizes on the day and the 1st prize is usually a travel grant of R15 000 ranks with the hope that one will be travelling soon. A lot of sponsors come on that Research day and really an important day to showcase research. Postdocs were encouraged to participate and they will also get certificates of attendance. An updated application form for the Top 20 will be sent on email to all.

9. Catching up with International postdocs (Open discussion)

Tando wanted to hear how the international postdocs were doing. The issues of their failure to explore South Africa due to this pandemic were raised although they managed to see around in January, February and part of March. The hope was that in September they will be able to go out again. Tando said she can try to put the September event in one of the PDS events. Another postdoc expressed joy over her contract with the university being extended but was waiting for the visa offices to open again so that she can apply for visa extensions and had a visa expiring end of July 2020.

Tando wanted to know if there were other international postdocs that were working closely with the university visa offices and whether they have been given any information of how they can be helped if their visas expire soon. It appeared that so far there has not been any

information from the international office on the issue of visas. Apparently the arrangement had been that all visas that had expired at the beginning of the lockdown were extended for 6 months up to 31 July 2020 and the concern was that the day was approaching.

International postdocs were encouraged to approach the international office in order to get the necessary information. Another member introduced the others to a Facebook group called International Visa Forum which could help those with fears of the massive backlog that will face the visa offices when the lockdown is over. She had got helped when she applied for her Critical Skills Visa until she got her Permanent Residence status. The information on the group is always accurate and any information that is incorrect gets corrected immediately by the administrator of the group. Regular updates are made and members of the group generally seem to know a lot about visa issues. The recommendation was that members can follow the Facebook page.

Maaiké was tasked with a responsibility to connect the PDS Facebook and Twitter to that International Visa Forum group in order to send out the information to postdocs. After that an e-mail will be sent to the international office in order to get an update of what was going on with the visa issues. He related his experience when he had difficulties in sleeping and needed to know how to manage his work. Sometimes he manages to keep up to pace with his work but was wondering if he was alone in this experience or other postdocs were experiencing the same. He did a research on the lives of postdocs and discovered that a lot of papers were based on having postdocs being happy or unhappy. He went on to share a screen on Psychology Tools which try to answer questions like "What triggers worry and anxiety? Are there different types of worry?" etc. It is a guide that postdocs can follow and discuss, for instance, for an hour in every 2 weeks. The participant is from the Department of Industrial Psychology and members always have a Happy Hour where they just talk about how things are. Tando wanted to know further about the frequency of meetings the postdocs

can suggest. The suggestion was to meet bi-monthly and if members wanted to meet more often, this can be adjusted. Tando received an e-mail from Dr Patricia Swart a representative for the Department of Psychiatry and she had resources that she wanted to share with members. Tando will set a meeting for that like the one set for Board games and an event calender will be sent out soon.

10. Attendance at Research Committee meetings

Tando reported that she attends Research Committee meetings with Natasha and Prof Cloete usually chairs the meetings. Deans, Heads of Departments, etc. participate in these meetings. Tando has a slot to bring in postdoc issues and discuss issues that concern them. Members were encouraged to send in pressing topics to her that they needed to be discussed. So far she identified the following topics that she felt were important for them:

- Returning to work (this has been covered by Natasha)
- Postdocs running out of funding (feedback given to report)
- Extension of contracts (feedback given to report)
- Mentorship programmes for postdocs
- Issues of laptops and data (no need to report, Natasha explained the position).

Members were to continue to give feedback on the issues so that she will know which points to present in the Research Committee meeting. Natasha said that the issue of data and laptops was still under discussion but she reported that postdocs can claim for data the same way the staff members are doing and it has to be through their hosts and the Head of Departments can arrange them for the refunds. The postdocs, therefore, need to communicate that to their hosts. Natasha was also trying to arrange with Prof Cloete to see if there are other funds that can be used for data from the Strategic Funds. She will give a feedback about that. However, the postdoc office cannot provide

laptops. Tando will, therefore, have no need to talk about that issue of data and laptops in the Research Committee meeting.

11. Events calendar

a. Oncoming events

Tando reported on the following events:

- Prof Cloete webinar was scheduled for 10 July 2020.
- Online boardgames night was scheduled for 17 July 2020.
- Journal club by Dr Vikas Kumar on "Spectro-microscopy in Forensic Sciences" will be held on 24 July 2020.
- Trivia night will be on 31 July 2020.

b. Communication

Vikas will be given chance to give a report on the website. Tando checked with the postdocs if they had received the communication and invitations on events through the emails she had sent out. Natasha sent a very interesting documentary movie which shows what a scientist looks like and it can be screened in meetings then discussions can be held afterwards. She gave the members chance to make suggestions of events if they have any and these can be added onto the calendar.

c. Platforms

Maaike has another idea of an event that the team can do together in August. Maaike also prepared a nice presentation on social media presentations. This was shown on the screen displaying Platforms. Tando mentioned that Maaike was responsible for the communication for postdocs. She responds to emails, updates the e-mailing list and takes care of the PDS Twitter account and Facebook.

- So far she has put up the e-mail postdocs@sun.ac.za and so far 15 postdocs have sent suggestions via email.

- Last month 63 postdocs joined Teams and many of them participated in the meetings on Teams.
- Facebook had 229 followers with 15 new ones in the last month. Out of the 229 followers 50% see or interact with postdocs.
- Twitter @PostdocSU has 96 followers with 15 new ones in the last month.
- The new Instagram has 50 followers and all are new from last month whilst 50% see or interact with postdocs. Invitations were made for postdocs to share their career news on LinkedIn and the Research Gate and were all were encouraged to have an ORCID. Tando mentioned that a Webmaster was required to maintain the platforms.
- The Podcast will be out soon and the link will be sent through Facebook and Twitter.

d. Website update

Vikas had sent a link on the website to postdocs so that they send comments. He also showed it on the screen. Tando suggested that Vikas adds oncoming events (Calendar) and Resources section, for example, on how to find directions, how to hook a shuttle, etc. One member indicated that the Events section needs newer pictures. The postdocs from Tygerberg were requested to send some pictures that could be used. More comments can be sent on Vikas' e-mail then editions can be done later. The address needs to be added too.

The next meeting will be in the next month.