



PDS Monthly Meeting

Minutes of the Meeting

Friday, 7 August 2020

Microsoft Teams

15h00 to 16h25

Main themes of the meeting

- Expanding of COVID19 strategies
- Research Day and Top 20 Awards

1. Welcome and Opening Remarks

Tando welcomed members to the meeting and confirmed that they all received the agenda that was sent through the Teams platform and via e-mail by Maaïke. Natasha was going to join the meeting in order to give an update of the international postdocs especially those that are still at home or had to go home. Feedback on work contracts that need to be extended and some funding requirements on those who work during the pandemic will be given. Research day and Top 20 awards preparations will be reported on and all necessary updates given.

Absent and excuses

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

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

2. Overview of Agenda

Tando gave a brief overview of the agenda items.

3. Overview of minutes from Friday, 3 July 2020 meeting

The minutes were considered read and members confirmed and accepted them.

4. Any Other Business

There were no additions to the agenda.

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

a. International postdocs

The issues that were looked at included travel and repatriation, international postdocs and foreign home office, possibility for joint postdoc projects and collaborations and extension of work contracts and funding. Natasha wanted to confirm that postdocs received emails from her about the updates from immigration and Home Affairs offices, and the extension of visas to 31 October

2020 and to end of January 2021 in some cases. The Home Affairs offices will be sending new updated statements because there were postdocs that needed to leave and that is usually handled through the international office and through the embassies. Those postdocs that know that they are completing soon and their contracts are ending soon need to make arrangements in advance because it is very difficult to manage the postdocs that are leaving because the systems are just blocked. Natasha advised that they should contact her office in communication with their home offices as well in South Africa.

The postdocs that were appointed way before the lockdown but could not travel to the country had an opportunity of the joint postdocs programme then can be hosted in their home institutions in the meantime whilst the borders are still not open. An arrangement will be made for co-payments for the postdocs. Systems are being put into place in order to meet these challenging issues. At the moment 7 postdocs have left and 4 of them left at the end of May whilst 3 left at the end of June 2020. These were helped by their home offices to get back to their countries. Some postdocs want to finish their contracts whilst they are in their countries but this can be discussed with their hosts whilst the office tries to facilitate that process. This seems to be working at the moment especially that Natasha had a meeting with Home Affairs and there appears like there is going to be some change in the new updated information. An e-mail to update the international postdocs will be sent in due course.

b. NRF updates

The NRF will look at its funded postdocs on a case by case basis. Natasha was doing a need assessment and she already had done a survey to identify those needs. The ideas will be written down as a report to send to NRF. Decisions will then be made on who will or will not get extensions of contracts. During the last meeting with Prof Cloete an agreement was made that applications will be made for extra funding from the Strategic Funds of the university. Natasha will have to compile a report on that in order to see how much money will be required but postdocs were also encouraged to apply for the funding. The Research Office has put into place some research funds in order to support researchers during this pandemic. Postdocs can then be supported for 3-6 months especially non-

NRF postdocs who may have specific challenges. Postdocs are encouraged to write to their funders along with their hosts to see if they can extend their contracts and get extra funding especially if they discover that they cannot finish their work. Applications for funding or efforts from Natasha's office to provide extra funding do not guarantee that everyone will get the funding. However, postdocs are encouraged to make an effort to apply for the funding, approach funders to see if contract can be extended and also discuss with hosts.

c. Questions and comments

Tando requested Natasha to elaborate on the issue of newly appointed international postdocs who are supposed to be physically at SU for registration but could not come because of the lockdown in their countries. Natasha indicated that it was not a formal process at the moment but she agreed with Prof Cloete that they discuss with partner institutions that they host the postdocs so that they start their projects without having to be in the country. Generally postdocs are supposed to be residential and come to do the work at SU. They are able to be hosted in a partner institution then after the pandemic they travel to SU. In future SU will do a joint postdoc programme where postdocs can do part of their time in their home countries in partner institutions then part of the time will travel to SU. This will save a lot with the issues of visas that are a big challenge.

Without an appropriate visa, SU cannot appoint anyone and if visa offices are closed no one can apply for a visa. But if postdocs can be appointed in their home country at a partner institution then they do not need a visa, they get appointed there. It is just a matter of having funding with a particular host at a partner institution, then there is no need to worry about them they can continue with their postdoc then as soon as the pandemic is over they can come to SU. The university can worry about them when they come to SA. Currently there are postdocs that are in Malawi and got registered in their universities. The primary hosts are in SU then they have another host to support the postdocs in the home university. Then when the borders open SU can apply for them then they just come to SU. It is a testing period for postdocs who could not get visas and could not travel in time. Another postdoc followed up the issue of postdocs that wanted to go home and she wanted to know about the process they used whether they

first connected the home office or the Postdoc Office. Natasha explained that the postdocs that came to her office first went to their foreign Home Office to get information about repatriation. The flights only go out when the embassies arrange and pay for the flights. Then from there the Postdoc Office assists the postdocs but does not even have to pay for those flights.

Another postdoc asked if there was an extension of the consolidoc. Natasha said consolidoc funding is one of the most difficult ways of funding because it is for a very short time, 6 months and was so little. Other departments have managed to support their postdocs from their departmental funding and so far had used SubCommittee funds to fund postdocs. The funds usually run off fast and funding cannot be taken from SubCommittee B to SubCommittee A and by March 2020 all funds were already allocated to those that were nominated. Postdocs are encouraged to approach their hosts to check if there will be departmental funds for the additional months. After that if there is no money they can go to the departmental Head then to the Dean. If not then the postdocs can come to the office where efforts can be made to get funding from elsewhere. The departments will always write to the office to check if there will be funds. Most departments usually have money to support the postdocs for 2 or 3 months, some to up to September and some have offered them full postdoc posts as international postdocs. The key point is to speak with hosts and the department in order to see if they can get additional funding support.

d. Research Day 2020 and Top 20 Awards

The logistics around the virtual event and international invitations for participants and invitations of past winners to the Review Panel were discussed.

i. Research Day

Natasha reported that the date was 26 October 2020. Tando thought it was going to be a 2-day event for 25-26 October 2020 and that the Postdoc Executive Committee members were requesting that it be an online event so that international guests and postdocs can be invited. She took the chance to open up a discussion on the issue of opening up the competition for winning prizes to international postdocs which

SU postdocs will have to compete with. Natasha in response said that the Research Day is usually a one day event and almost like a mini conference where the university community and students are also invited. Postdocs make presentations and showcase their work. This year there was supposed to be a 2nd postdoc conference like the one which was held in 2018 and Daniel worked hard in that conference which was a great success. People have been asking through emails on when the conference was going to be held.

Concerning the issue of prizes if a virtual conference is held this would give access to many people because no one will need to travel. Just like her she was attending the last day of a virtual conference in the morning but was also able to attend this virtual meeting since there was no travel involved. The preparations can still be made for a big conference next year. The team should agree that if this year a virtual conference is to be held, it should be for one day or two days. Virtually it will allow for invitations for international speakers and there will not be need for spending more money. There will be virtual keynote speakers, virtual rooms, etc. There will be breakaway rooms and it can be really interactive. The Postdoc Office would support this arrangement and will provide funding mechanisms in order to make it more valuable for all postdocs.

A postdoc who contributed at this juncture commended the idea of a virtual conference and liked the idea of opening up to international postdocs and there will be more competition for prizes. She felt that this was going to be a good opportunity to face a challenge in their different fields. Invitation to international postdocs opens up to more funding channels, and she was already thinking of collaborators that had more funding and could be invited to the conference. It would be a great chance for postdocs to build up their collaborations and networking and can be more open to more funding opportunities. Natasha said that Prof Cloete had been talking of having exhibitions. There was one exhibition that was held on the previous day. Exhibitors

from all over came and people could engage with them, ask questions and they had prizes. Publishers were also selling books.

The travel grant will be an in-house thing and would not be given to anyone who is not based at SU. The PDS Executive with the help of the society will not find it hard to look for sponsorship that can be used for funding prizes. The suggestions came from some members as follows: Martina said 2 and half days and that can be done from 9am to 2pm due to online fatigue. Patricia suggested online sessions so as to target more people from all over the world. Another postdoc was in agreement with the in-house prizes then the team can have sponsors. Tando suggested that they keep to 2 days sessions and encourage postdocs to invite other key note speakers then can send information to Tando or postdocs@sun.ac.zw.

ii. Top 20 Award

Natasha will send an e-mail to invite postdocs for the call of the Top 20 Awards. Exceptional postdocs can submit applications for the award which is R10 000 cash, nice certificate and a recognition note on the Research Day. The announcement of the conference will be made on the day. STIAS has agreed to take only 50 people for the events. The call was supposed to be sent on Monday but there are small changes that are being effected and Dominique is going to send the e-mail out on the 11th of August 2020 then postdocs will have 2 months to submit the application. This will then go through a review panel process that will be made by previous winners. Prof Cloete and Therina will take part in the review process this year then later the work will be scored. The guideline on how to do that is provided then an announcement will be made for the Top 20. The Communications technician always writes an article and puts it on the Website. This is a very good way of recognizing postdocs.

Last year a lot of people did not come to the Research Day. It is always good that those who apply for the awards attend the Research Day

where an announcement for the Top 20 gets announced. This is also very important for the office where people get to see what postdocs do and see the relevance of postdocs. People are helped to stop treating postdocs as students but instead give them some respect and recognition where it is due. Postdocs should expect to see the e-mail with invitations from next week then should start the application process. Dominique will provide very detailed information on that. Natasha suggested that a Research Day organization committee be formed. Chairpersons of sections and any other people that can assist the committee for that day to set up the rooms, etc. get selected in advance. Prior arrangements assist people to enjoy the conference. Natasha can arrange to meet with the organization committee and Tando tasked Maaïke to send this information to other colleagues.

6. Publication of events on PDS YouTube channel

Prof Cloete agreed that presentations on the Webinar can be published on YouTube. He, however, advised that the committee confirms with the university expectations or policies as far as publications are concerned. Tando wanted to know if postdocs were in agreement with the procedure to publish the video or if they had any opinions they were to register them. No objections were raised.

7. Feedback by Prof Cloete on the Think Tank for COVID19 strategies

He was very happy about the Webinar and expressed a lot of gratitude because everyone was very generous with comments, contributions and questions.

a. Participation of Postdocs requested

Tando reminded him of the think tank and he requested that members should forward to him suggestions of strategies that could be employed in mitigating the problems that have come about during this pandemic especially the lockdown. If any ideas of how the lockdown has affected job creation, economy, production or general productivity arise and how the situation can be improved, members need to suggest them. Tando will need names and

suggestions then can compile the information that she will submit to Prof Cloete by Monday. Prof Cloete also asked the members to be involved in the marketing of the think tank. Suggestions can be emailed to Maaïke via postdocs@sun.ac.za then she will forward to Tando. Members can access the video on the Webinar that will be sent on the Teams stream. Martina posted some reading and links on the impact of COVID-19 on the environment and conservation.

8. PDS website

A job portal initiative in order to generate revenue through advertising was suggested. A request will be sent out for assistance from societies, etc.

a. Website

Natasha requested that the PDS Executive Committee creates a job portal on the website which make it possible for job opportunities to be advertised especially those not coming from SU. Prof suggested that the job portal can be made more profitable to generate some revenue through advertising job opportunities. Different departments could use the website to post their jobs or conferences. Accommodation offers and requirements can also be advertised. Postdocs were encouraged to contact Tando and Vikas if they had any contributions. Maaïke and Marguerite were encouraged to add on anything on the website especially if they had emails from the DRD on job opportunities. They had nothing to report on but if they get anything they will post on the Website. Tando mentioned that if postdocs do not receive any emails from the DRD they should be free to contact Natasha.

9. Focus on Postdocs with families

a. Parents' Forum

Tando gave chance to postdocs to be involved in the forums in order to exchange ideas or to share any relevant information with the team that is related to their families. One postdoc who has one child shared her experience that it was challenging sometimes to be able to balance her work and expectations and taking care of her baby. Having a forum for parents can be very appropriate especially that some postdocs doing, for example,

Psychology, Mental Health, etc. could help. In response Natasha had a meeting with a staff member for mental wellness and she questioned them about arranging a workshop to support postdocs, etc.

It looks like the workshops will be successful. The programme of mental wellness will be developed for postdocs only in order to support them. Natasha will give an update of the date as soon as she knows who the presenter will be. Tando announced that the next Happy Hour will be on 21 August 2020 at 6pm. She also encouraged postdocs to get out with their families. One of the postdocs' children suggested a parent and kid team up competition, kids will be given a chance to ask questions and prizes will be given. Tando had arranged for funding to get prizes for the kids. Postdocs were given a chance to make comments about the proposed ideas.

10. Events calendar contributions

- a. Movie night
- b. Happy Hours for Wellness. "Travel and Tell" virtual sit-in party
- c. Journal Club

Events calendar

No events were on the calendar currently.

a. Movie night, Family trivia night (prizes for the kids) - Travel-and-Tell Virtual Sit-in-Party and Journal Club

A suggestion of an event idea during this lockdown was made by one of the postdocs. She shared her experience of having worked so remotely during this lockdown but got so worked out. Before the lockdown she had always wanted to take some days off using her annual leave. But this was not possible because during the lockdown everyone had to stay in one place but continued to work until she developed a terrible turnout. She discussed with some fellow postdocs and was given ideas of how to deal with the problem. It was from those ideas that she came up with this suggestion of having postdocs from different countries and

regions to share their travel experiences or listen to others' stories. She used examples of things that postdocs can share to their colleagues, on culture shock, surprises, etc. This would be a virtual hangout, having fun in sharing stories, and postdocs can bring their friends, families, and socialise as a community.

This will be a time to hang out with other postdocs and engage in the following:

- Share travel stories and listen to others
- Have a community conversation at leisure
- Chat and socialize
- Laugh, cry or wonder

The Benefits are:

- Social
- Educational
- Motivational
- Networking

The purpose is to produce a healthy, happy, motivated, confident, driven, passionate and energetic postdoc. If people are interested this sit-in party can be held once a month. Postdocs can share pictures of where they had travelled and what happened. Those with similar experiences can share their experiences and the party can be combined with games. Tando suggested that she will create a separate key for the events so as to invite all the postdocs through the Teams platform. Other members preferred the use of one Teams platform for all events. The agreement was that they will stick to the Teams platform but should a need arise to form another platform for the events, a notification will be sent to all. Next Friday, 20 August 2020 evening was scheduled for a first Sit-in-party.

A journal club will be organised and postdocs were encouraged to suggest any interesting topics and any controversial issues for the club. A movie night was suggested too. One of the postdocs can post a movie and all watch it at the same time then a discussion around the movie can be held. Another suggestion will be to have a family night at the end of the year with some glitter and prizes. Postdocs were

encouraged to submit their suggestions, topics and ideas around the think tank on issues affected by the lockdown and strategies to try and circumvent the damage of the lockdown. Names and suggestions can be sent to Tando or postdocs@sun.ac.za or to just leave a message on the chat box. A Happy Hour event will be held on 21 August 2020 at 6pm.

There being no other business the meeting ended at 16h25.