

## PROTOCOL FOR COMMUNICATING STAFF/ STUDENT DEATHS

Revision with amendments by ICBC, 4 Oct 2021

### 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 This protocol provides Stellenbosch University (SU) with guidelines to respond appropriately to the death of a staff member or a student by:

- assisting affected environments of the University;
- communicating with the University community with appropriate sensitivity;
- ensuring that the life and contribution of all staff members and students, irrespective of post or position, are treated with respect and appreciation; and
- responding to media enquiries under specific circumstances.

1.2 The objective of the protocol is to have a standard process for such incidents across the institution, but due to each situation being unique, good judgment and sensitivity should always be applied.

1.3 For practical reasons, this protocol is restricted to *current* staff members and students.

1.4 Particular SU environments and the institution itself may wish to also honour/acknowledge *former* staff (e.g. emeritus professors) or students (alumni), or individuals *linked* to the environment or the institution as a whole (e.g. extraordinary professors or past recipients of honorary doctorates). Environments are free to do so, and in this regard should note the distinction made in 1.5 below.

1.5 This protocol describes two main ways for communicating staff and student deaths at SU:

1.5.1 The first way is to use the *dedicated institutional channels* utilised for this purpose – i.e. the regular e-newsletters distributed by e-mail to **staff** ([info@stelleboschuni](mailto:info@stelleboschuni), distributed by CCMD every Wednesday, excluding the year-end period when the University is closed) and **students** ([maties@stellenboschuni](mailto:maties@stellenboschuni), distributed by DSAf every second Friday during academic terms, excluding assessment periods). All deaths are to be communicated in this way, subject to the prescripts set out in this protocol.

1.5.2 The second way is to use the *general communication channels* that most environments have at their disposal – i.e. their own communication platforms, such as their web page on the SU website, or their e-newsletter. In addition to following the above mentioned institutional process, environments may also communicate deaths via their own channels, bearing in mind that such communication would also be subject to the prescripts in this protocol.

1.6 Communication, whether internal or external, regarding the death of a staff member or student may only follow after explicit permission by a representative of the bereaved family (preferably written, but to be handled with sensitivity because it may be difficult to obtain this under the circumstances).

1.7 Health conditions and causes of death are confidential matters. No cause of death may be revealed in any official SU communication.

## 2. COMMUNICATING THE DEATH OF A STAFF MEMBER

2.1 Irrespective of the point of entry of information regarding the death of a staff member, the line manager of the division/department within which the death occurred must be informed. The line manager is responsible for operational communication to internal environments and individuals affected by the death. The line manager determines which individuals require notification to perform their duties, or to make logistical arrangements to ensure business continuity at the University, or to provide emotional support to staff and students.

2.2 The **line manager** informs:

- The head of the particular environment, and so it should be escalated upwards, e.g. head of (PASS) division/(academic) department > RC head/Dean
- Colleagues in the division/department
- The Human Resources Division (relevant HR practitioner or the Head: Employee Wellness)
- CCMD (Director: Communication)
- The Communication officer/unit of the particular division/faculty (if any)

2.3 Contact with the family: The line manager (or, depending on circumstances, the DVC: SITP or an assigned official) contacts the family to (i) inform them of the death if they do not know yet; (ii) convey the University's condolences; and (iii) request permission (preferably written) to communicate about it with the University community without disclosing cause of death (see 1.6 and 1.7 above). The family's decision should be conveyed to CCMD.

This does not preclude the head of the environment in question, or the DVC: SITP or the Rector from contacting the family to convey condolences.

2.4 Communication about the death a staff member via the *dedicated institutional channels* (see 1.5.1) takes place in the following way:

2.4.1 Via an "In memoriam" entry (**template attached**) in the regular e-newsletters to **staff** (**info@stelleboschuni**, distributed by CCMD every Wednesday, excluding the year-end period when the University is closed) and **students** (**maties@stellenboschuni**, distributed by DSAf every second Friday during academic terms, excluding assessment periods). Staff *and* students are informed of staff *and* student deaths, so the same information is included in both channels.

The entry consists of a short obituary/tribute (taking care to use the gender pronoun preferred by the deceased), and includes funeral arrangements or memorial event information if available. A photograph of the deceased is not necessary. The entry also refers to support being available to staff members and students affected by the death.

Multiple entries are combined under the heading, "In memoriam", in chronological order of the date of death, or alphabetically if all dates are not available.

## 2.5 Who provides the information?

2.5.1 The line manager or head of division/department drafts an obituary / death notice (facilitated by communication staff in the particular environment, if any) and provides it to CCMD. Environments can also use this information for *their own* communication, as explained in 1.5.2 above.

2.5.2 Human Resources (the particular practitioner or the Wellness Officer) provides information about the staff member's employment history at SU.

## 2.6 How is the information communicated?

The Deputy Director: Communication or their designate converts the information supplied into a suitable entry, has it edited and translated, and submits it to the DVC: SITP. Once approved, it is supplied to CCMD's Digital Channels Co-ordinator: Electronic Communication for inclusion in [info@stellenboschuni](mailto:info@stellenboschuni) and to the DSAf Communication Coordinator for inclusion in [maties@stellenboschuni](mailto:maties@stellenboschuni).

2.7 This does not preclude a particular environment from also using their own *general communication channels* (as mentioned in 1.5.2) for an obituary/tribute. They could, for instance, include it in their own newsletter, or load a standalone story on their *own* SUNACZA web page. If the latter, they could provide a link to CCMD so that it might be added to the *dedicated institutional e-newsletters*.

2.8 In some cases, a standalone news story (not an "In memoriam" entry in an e-newsletter) will be done by CCMD on the institutional pages of SUNACZA, such as SU Main or the Staff and/or Student portals. Or a news bulletin could go out via mass mailer to staff and/or students. CCMD would take such a decision based on news values<sup>1</sup>, e.g. as the prominence of the individual concerned, their proximity to the institution, or the impact of their death or the circumstances surrounding it on the University. If such a story is done, a link to it could be added to the "In memoriam" entry in the institutional e-newsletters.

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<sup>1</sup> News values are "criteria that influence the selection and presentation of events as published news". These factors help explain what makes something "newsworthy".

### 3. COMMUNICATING THE DEATH OF A STUDENT

(also refer to process flow diagram for reporting the death of a student)

3.1 Irrespective of the point of entry of information about the death of a student, the death should be reported to the Senior Director: Division of Student Affairs (DSAf) and the Registrar. They are responsible for operational communication to internal environments and individuals affected by the death. They determine which individuals require notification to perform their duties, or to make logistical arrangements to ensure business continuity at the University, or to provide emotional support to staff and students.

3.2 The **Senior Director: DSAf** informs:

- The DSAf Communications Coordinator
- The Director and Deputy Director: Centre for Student Communities
- The Director: Centre for Student Counselling and Development
- The Director: Centre for Student Leadership, Experiential Education and Citizenship, who in turn informs:
  - SRC Chair, who in turn informs the relevant student structures / bodies
- CCMD (Director: Communication)
- The DVC: L&T, who could contact the family to convey condolences, bearing in mind that someone else might be chosen to do so. as explained below.

3.3 The **Registrar** informs the Deputy Registrar > all relevant departments within the division > the Division of Student Fees and Debtors > SU International (if appropriate).

3.4 The Registrar also informs the **Dean** of the deceased student's Faculty, who informs faculty staff who worked with the student.

3.5 Contact with the family: The Deputy Director: Centre for Student Communities convenes a discussion to decide who contacts the family. The most appropriate staff member contacts the family to (i) inform them of the death if they do not know yet; (ii) convey the University's condolences; and (iii) request permission (preferably written) to communicate about it with the University community, without disclosing cause of death (see 1.6 and 1.7). The family's decision should be conveyed to CCMD.

This does not preclude the Dean or DVC: LT or the Rector from contacting the family to convey condolences.

3.6 Communication about the death a student via the *dedicated institutional channels* takes place in the following way:

3.6.1 Via an “In memoriam” entry (**template attached**) in the regular e-newsletters to **students (maties@stellenboschuni**, distributed by DSAf every second Friday during academic terms, excluding assessment periods) and **staff (info@stelleboschuni**, distributed by CCMD every Wednesday, excluding the year-end period when the University is closed). Students *and* staff are informed of student *and* staff deaths, so the same information is included in both channels.

The entry consists of a short obituary (taking care to use the gender pronoun preferred by the deceased), and includes funeral arrangements or memorial event information if available. A photograph of the deceased is not necessary. The entry also refers to support being available to students and staff members affected by the death.

Multiple entries are combined under the heading, “In memoriam”, in chronological order of the date of death, or alphabetically if all dates are not available.

3.7 Who provides the information?

3.7.1 (i) The DSAf Communication Coordinator drafts an obituary / death notice notice (with information sourced from the particular student community, faculty, Registrar’s Division and/or the student information system (SIS), as may be required) and provides it to CCMD.

3.7.2 The Registrar’s Division or a DSAf staff member with access to the SIS provides information about the student’s time at SU.

3.8 How is the information communicated?

The Deputy Director: Communication or their designate converts the information supplied into a suitable entry, has it edited and translated, and submits it to the DVC: LT. Once approved, it is supplied to the DSAf Communication Coordinator for inclusion in maties@stellenboschuni, and to CCMD’s Digital Channels Co-ordinator: Electronic Communication for inclusion in info@stellenboschuni.

3.9 In some cases, a standalone news story (not an “In memoriam” entry in an e-newsletter) will be done by CCMD on the institutional pages of SUNACZA, such as SU Main or the Staff and/or Student portals. Or a news bulletin could go out via mass mailer to students and/or staff. CCMD would take such a decision based on news values<sup>2</sup>, e.g. the prominence of the individual concerned, their proximity to the institution, or the impact of their death or the circumstances surrounding it on the University. If such a story is done, a link to it could be added to the “In memoriam” entry in an institutional e-newsletter.

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<sup>2</sup> News values are "criteria that influence the selection and presentation of events as published news". These factors help explain what makes something "newsworthy".

#### **4. EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION**

4.1 SU will ordinarily not proactively issue media statements related to the death of staff or students, but may comment or issue a statement, for instance if it receives a media enquiry, especially if the information about a death is already in the public domain.

Also see 1.6 and 1.7 above.

4.2 The text of the “In Memoriam” entry could form the basis of a media statement.

4.3 Social media will ordinarily not be used for the announcement of staff or student deaths. But if CCMD becomes aware of a social media post regarding a staff or student death, it can respond as necessary with appropriate messaging. And if the University does issue a statement or provide media comment, a social media post by CCMD can be based on it or draw attention to it.

#### **5. FURTHER READING**

This protocol should be read in conjunction with the following protocols, including updates and amendments:

- [Protocol for institutional Communication from the ICBC during the COVID-19](#)
- [Human Resources Management: Bereavement Protocol and Bereavement notice template](#)
- [Student Affairs: Guidelines for memorial and funeral report for SU students 2020](#)
- [Process flow diagram for reporting the death of a student.](#)

#### **6. REVISION**

To deal with changing circumstances, this protocol should be reviewed from time to time – at least once a year – and revised if necessary.

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Via the CSIER Workstream of the ICBC*