

SU gets new Research Chair in Science Communication

In a first for South Africa and Africa, Stellenbosch University (SU) has been awarded a research chair in science communication by the National Research Foundation (NRF), after a competitive process that lasted for more than a year. The Department of Science and Technology will fund the chair for a period of 15 years (three terms of five years each).

This enables SU to pioneer the development of this academic field across the continent. Over the past few decades, science communication has been established as an important new area of research and many universities from across the world launched academic and research programmes in this field.



Promote the learning area

The Minister of Science and Technology in South Africa, Naledi Pandor led the way to promote this learning area locally by means of a research chair. She repeatedly emphasised the importance of science communication in a democratic dispensation.

Professor Leopoldt van Huysteen, the acting rector and vice chancellor at SU said, "Given the lack of research capacity in this area, this poses a unique opportunity for the university to take the lead in research and the training of post-graduate students in the area of science communication."

The new chair will be housed within the Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology (CREST) at SU. Earlier this year, a new DST/NRF Centre of Excellence in Scientometrics and Science, Technology and Innovation Policy was also established at CREST. It is the first time that a new centre of excellence and a new research chair are allotted to the same research group within one year. Professor Johann Mouton is the director of both CREST and the new Centre of Excellence.

Professor Peter Weingart, a world leader in the area of the interaction between science and society, will occupy the new science communication chair. He is a professor extraordinaire at the University of Bielefeld in Germany and has been a visiting professor to SU for the last 15 years.

"We have been working hard to create a comprehensive research plan for the area of science communication and we are sure that this, together with our esteemed candidate, eventually gave us this breakthrough," said Professor Mouton.

Afrocentric basis

"Our plan for research focuses on the challenges for science communication in Africa. Internationally there are already many post-graduate programmes in science communication, but we now have the opportunity, for the first time, to create a programme specifically for South Africa and for the rest of our continent."

The new chair will create opportunities for post-graduate students and researchers to study science communication within an African context, as well as to hone their practical communication skills.

"Apart from post-graduate studies, we will also offer short courses. We are already working on the first accredited, 100% online, short course in science communication in Africa.

"We aim to develop new knowledge and skills that will promote evidence-based communication of research. We also want to ensure that society can become involved with relevant and meaningful public dialogue about science," concluded Professor Mouton.

For more information, go to www.sun.ac.za/crest.

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