



**RESEARCH ENTITIES EVALUATION
COMMITTEE**

RESEARCH UNIT: LAW, JUSTICE AND SUSTAINABILITY

8 September 2021

The RU's vision correlates with the vision of the NWU, in terms of getting international recognition, being distinguished for engaged scholarship, social responsiveness and to excel in innovative teaching and cutting-edge research. The five projects (subareas) in the RU are:

- Environmental change
- Vulnerable societies
- Cities, law and environmental sustainability
- Trade, finance and investment
- Justice and practice

The focus of the Unit is aligned with the goals of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals, for which the RU should be commended. However, the subprograms seem to be broad and generic in nature, and some of the subprogrammes' names are vague. (This is also an issue raised in a previous evaluation of the RU). As it stands, it seems as if any study in Law can resort under this RU. For example, what is the focus of researchers in 'Justice in practice'? It is recommended that the names of the sub-programmes are revisited, in order to ensure that the RU has a unique and clear research focus.

Scientific quality

High quality research is being done in the RU. The RU is also closely linked with the accredited journal, 'Potchefstroom Electronic Law Journal'. (It is important that the editors of the journal ensure that NWU researchers are not over-represented in publishing in this journal, as it could negatively impact on its accreditation). There is sufficient evidence of a diverse range of high-quality journals in which research is disseminated. The high NRF ratings of some members (2 B-rated, and 4 C1 rated) researchers is commendable. In addition to these, there are also 2 C2 ratings, and 3 Y ratings. However, the percentage of NRF researchers (11) in relation to the number of members (72 + 36) is low, and needs attention.

Relevance

As stated above, the relevance of the RU is clear, especially if one considers the good alignment with the NDP and the United Nation's goals of sustainability. The Unit applied considerable

foresight in deciding to build a niche around environmental issues. The RU is formally involved in an impressive range of international networks, e.g., the University of Lincoln, the Jan de Groof Global Working Group, links with the Alexander von Humboldt scholarships, to mention but a few. There is also strong liaison with other African countries. Accolades include the externally funded Nedbank/ SARCHI Chair for Cities, Law and Environmental Sustainability.

Sustainability

The RU is well structured and managed, and should be viable for a long period to come. The amounts of external income generated is very low for a RU. Only R 190,480 is external funding (SOF 3- funding from institutions within South Africa, namely the NRF, UCDP and PA Malan Trust); the rest (R 8 million) is NWU funding. The RU will have to actively focus on generating external funding. A workload model is urgently needed. The planned Short Learning Programmes might be a source of additional funding in future.

Productivity

The ratio of international publications in relation to national publications is quite good. The RU was able to continue involvement in national conferences in spite of the Covid-19 pandemic, which is commendable. Unfortunately, the output rate is on the low side. In 2020, for example, 53 papers were published in journals, and 23 chapters in books, whereas the RU has 72 permanent academic members, and 36 non-permanent members. The high number of academics not contributing to research is especially a cause of concern. It seems as if the RU is driven by a core group of strong researchers, but that a sound distribution of mass expertise lacks. Of special concern, is the number of researchers who did not produce any outputs over a number of years. One reason for this, seems to be that retiring experienced researchers are replaced with inexperienced staff. Future appointments will have to be well managed. Special interventions are also needed to increase the number of RU members who hold PhD qualifications. We acknowledge and salute the mentoring programme that has been introduced for inexperienced academics, to build capacity. We also commend the RU for engaging in interdisciplinary research and collaboration, e.g., co-supervision with FEMS. The number of

post-graduate students are quite high. Some doctoral students have been in the system for a considerable period of time. The throughput rate could be improved- in 2020 it was 23% for Masters students, and 11.5% for PhD studies.

Recommendation

We recommend that Law, Justice and Sustainability continue to operate as a Research Unit. Special attention should be given to (a) improving the research output rate, which is relatively low, taking into account the large membership of the RU, and (b) attracting more external funding.