

FACULTY OF NATURAL SCIENCES

Newsletter – March 2026

Professor Albert Thembinkosi Modi, Executive Dean

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1. Executive Summary

March 2026 defined the **test of resilience** we demonstrated during a challenging term. Fortunately, we cultivated an attitude that honours a legacy of **graceful contrast**, working with light and dark, smooth and rough, large and small, and emerging with an elegant design for progress. Constructive habits are built by starting small, developing enabling systems, and remaining consistent over time. During this month, the faculty accelerated administrative efforts to address student-related matters. Both faculty and departmental administrative officers were consistently available to respond to urgent and complex student issues. Students require reliable academic advice and emotional support to navigate **registration challenges, academic exclusion, and compliance requirements**. Our Heads of Department demonstrated their importance as **pillars of academic support**, providing leadership grounded in trust and integrity. Collaboration with university support divisions continues to be a key lesson and a permanent feature of our success model. I remain confident that the Faculty of Natural Sciences is on a strong trajectory to establish a **2026 performance baseline** that will drive our multi-year milestones. Our ambitions for improving **student throughput, research productivity, retention, and institutional impact** will be guided by reliable, auditable evidence. This report presents highlights of performance and progress across our strategic domains.

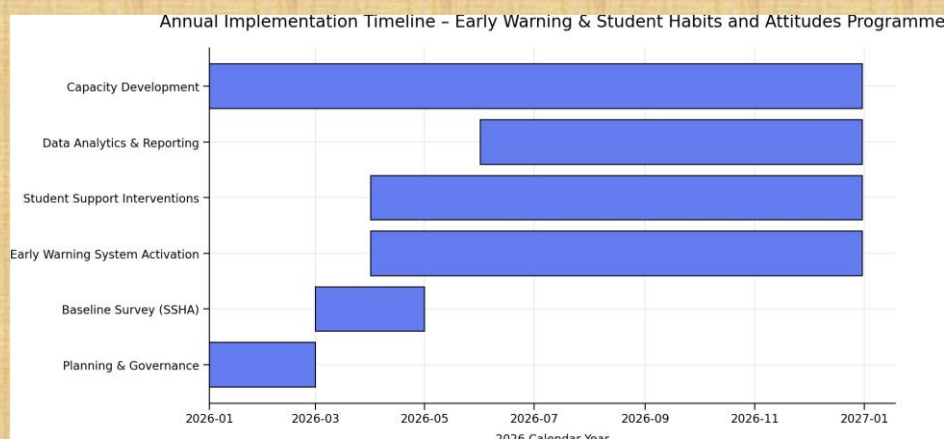
2. Administration and Support Services

By mid-Term 1, the faculty successfully met its **enrolment target for First-Time Entering New Students (FTENS)**. However, registration support for returning undergraduate students progressed more slowly than anticipated, leading to disruptions in teaching and learning schedules. Despite these challenges, the faculty remained committed to executing its **student success agenda**.

We acknowledge the **strategic guidance and continuous support** from the Office of the Registrar. Their involvement ensured the resolution of critical registration bottlenecks.

The **Strategic Training Unit** remained active in guiding the planning and early implementation of the **Early Warning System (EWS)**. Likewise, the **Student Counselling Unit** advanced preparations for the **Survey of Student Habits and Attitudes (SSHA)**, which will be instrumental in early risk profiling and targeted student interventions. **DLT staff** will lead the programmes.

Faculty Will Work Closely With IRP, DLT and Student Affairs To Deliver Effective Student Success Programmes



FNS Welcomes Instructional Designer

- **Mr Tshepo Rabotapi (M.Ed.).**
[Tshepo Rabotapi \(0000-0003-1008-2567\) - ORCID](#)
- Student Perceptions of Utilisation of Learning Management Systems and Blended Learning (2025). Tshepo Rabotapi, Zanoxolo Dlamini, Zikona Macibela, Sanele Mpsi, Minentle Nkebane . Innovative Journal of African Education, 1(1):1-13.



Postgraduate registration challenges persisted, but the faculty gained important insights. We have now developed a **risk identification and mitigation plan**, which was presented to university executive management for long-term institutional adoption. We are confident that the university's final 2026 registration report will reflect positively on our faculty's progress.

Faculty Strategy to Manage Postgraduate Registration Risk

Risk Category	Faculty Recommendation
Low financial risk	Appoint student to perform academic tasks under HR rules; permit residence-stay on probation.
Low academic risk	Temporary probationary appointment to support academic completion.
Moderate financial/academic risk	Conditional appointment plus referral to alternative external funding/support mechanisms.
High academic/financial risk	Consider shifting to part-time registration or temporary deregistration; provide structured support to facilitate future re-entry.

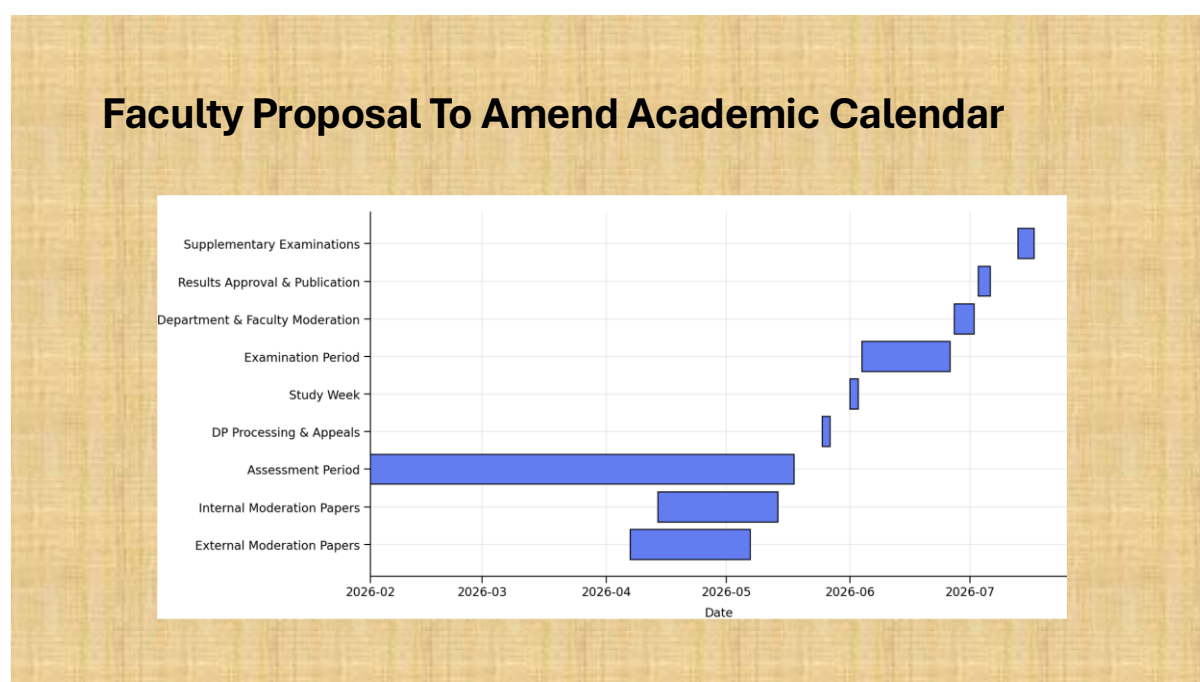
3. Teaching and Learning

Departmental reports indicate notable delays in maintaining alignment with the academic calendar. Fortunately, the **catch-up plan developed in February** enabled departments to mitigate some of these delays where feasible.

The preliminary **success rate** for Term 1 ranged between **40% and 80%** at module level, with an overall estimated **70% success rate** across the faculty. This achievement reflects the dedication of both staff and students in making optimal use of available time.

To safeguard academic integrity and ensure full curriculum coverage, the faculty submitted a proposal to **revise and extend the academic calendar by 7 to 10 days**. A final decision—balancing the needs of all faculties—is expected before the start of Term 2.

The faculty has identified **five academic programmes** for review by the **University Quality Assurance Programme** during 2026. Preparatory work is underway to ensure full compliance and readiness.



4. Research and Innovation

Research remains the cornerstone of excellence in natural sciences, and the faculty continues to strengthen its research culture. The **Term 1 publication competition** remains active, recognising staff members who achieve a minimum of **one productivity unit**, with additional commendation for outputs demonstrating strong **internationalisation**.

This month, the faculty completed a comprehensive review of its overall **research standing**. The review identified strategic opportunities to:

- Strengthen internal research collaboration
- Enhance supervision and mentorship
- Accelerate publication outputs
- Pursue high-value external partnerships
- Increase competitiveness for **research grants**

All NRF rating applications were submitted successfully ahead of the **20 March 2026 institutional deadline**, ensuring timely submission to the **National Research Foundation** by **31 March 2026**.

**PROFESSOR OBAGUUWA WINS GOLD MEDAL
FOR BEST PUBLICATION RECORD OF THE MONTH**
Nine Publications Since January 2026, Generating 2.34 Publication Units for WSU

► This study demonstrates the value of DES as a decision-support tool for analysing patient access in resource-constrained healthcare settings.

► It provides actionable insights for policymakers and healthcare managers seeking to optimize clinic operations and improve patient access in South Africa.



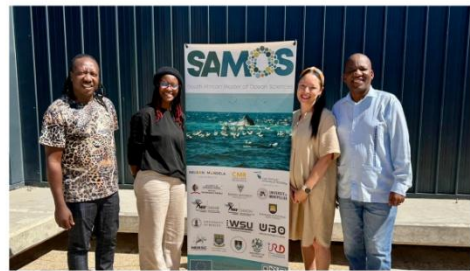
Research Article | March 11 2026
Modelling and simulation of patients' access to healthcare system in South African clinic Available to Purchase
Ibidun Christiana Obagbuwa
ID Neo Moloi
ID Oluwagbemiga David Obaguuwa
Sipheshile Ellen Maseko
Matabane Kgotsotfalo
Palesa Eunice Baisitse
Author & Article Information
Engineering Computations 1–21.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/EC-10-2024-0952>

5. Community Engagement

March marked significant progress for community engagement initiatives. The **SAMOS programme**, in collaboration with South African and European partners, advanced into the intensive teaching phase of the **Master of Ocean Science** programme. In partnership with the Otermans Institute, UK, our faculty introduced a free AI Digital Literacy course that has grown significantly beyond its initial scope. Registration was expanded to include students from other higher education institutions, as well as high school learners, ensuring that the benefits of AI education reach a broader segment of society.

Master of Ocean Science Programme Teaching Phase Started In Partnership With South African and European Universities

- Funded by the European Union
- Lead by the University of Cape Town and hosted by Nelson Mandela University
- Prof Nakin and Dr Dlaza teach Marine Biology



Bridging the Digital Divide: FNS Leads AI Literacy Initiative Across the Eastern Cape (Course Coordinators- Dr William Vambe & Dr Rekha Panicker)

- AI literacy is fast becoming as essential as traditional literacy. Recognising this shift, the Faculty of Natural Sciences (FNS) has taken a proactive lead by launching a **community engagement initiative that extends free, accessible AI education beyond WSU to students and learners across the Eastern Cape.**
- The first cohort enrolled **845 learners**, many of whom are now completing the programme and receiving their certificates.
- A **second cohort of 146 students is currently underway** and nearing completion.
- This initiative reflects FNS's strong commitment to **community engagement as a core academic mandate** — going beyond graduate output to actively empower communities.
- By **equipping young people with future-oriented digital competencies**, the Faculty is contributing to a more inclusive and competitive Eastern Cape.



The faculty also participated in the **Smart Village Conference** and dialogue sessions. Engagement with **Nyandeni Municipality** continues to open avenues for collaboration with **North West University**, the **University of Venda**, and access to the **Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI)** grant mechanisms. These opportunities align with our strategic priorities in **agriculture, food security, and climate change and AI education**. Plans to **revitalise the Agriculture qualification programme** are progressing, and the growing interest from provincial and national stakeholders strengthens the case for renewed investment in this strategic academic offering.

Closing Remarks

The month of March revealed the Faculty of Natural Sciences' capacity for **resilience, innovation, and collaboration**. I remain proud of the collective effort of our staff, students, and partners who continue to demonstrate integrity and purpose during a season of testing. Our course is set, our progress is measurable, and our commitment to excellence remains unwavering. As we close Term 1, I hope that those of us who will be travelling will be safe. Enjoy the short break with family and friends. Let us return next week to continue our good work.

NOTICES

The Dean is calling for FNS postdoctoral fellows, postgraduate students and unemployed WSU graduates to respond to the offer of support by his office to apply for a Summer School international exposure in Brazil.

CALL FOR APPLICATION
Areyeng BRAZIL

WHY APPLY?

- Gain international exposure
- Learn cutting-edge skills in agriculture & sustainability
- Build your academic and career profile

WHAT YOU'LL LEARN

- Agriculture & food systems in tropical regions
- Climate, biodiversity & natural resources
- Bioenergy & sustainability
- Biotechnology & innovation
- Water & land management
- Social issues in rural environments

WHAT YOU GET

- Official USP ESALQ certificate and transcript
- Access to a global agricultural network
- Skills to teach and uplift others in your community
- A credential that opens doors to funding and new opportunities

REQUIREMENTS:

- Letter of Motivation
- Academic Record
- Letter of Recommendation
- Background in Agriculture

To Apply

Scan Here

CLOSING DATE: 25 APRIL 2026

Enquiries: Brazil2026@nyda.gov.za

OUR YOUTH. OUR FUTURE