

Task Team on a Welcoming Culture at Stellenbosch University

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1. Background

Following from the Winter Institutional Planning Forum/Rector's Advice Forum the Rector, Professor Botman, appointed the following members as part of a task team to draft a concept document on the creation of a welcoming culture at SU. The role of the task team is to create a document that 1) defines a welcoming culture, 2) sets out principles that enable units to implement and align the said strategy with the overarching strategies of the University and 3) creates a draft policy.

The following individuals serve on the task team:

- Prof Brenda Leibowitz (CTL) (Chairperson)
- Ms Anina Botha (SRC)
- Dr Elmarie Costandius (Visual Arts)
- Prof Kennedy Dzama (Animal Science)
- Prof Nico Koopman (Dean of Theology Faculty)
- Prof Maureen Robinson (Dean of Education Faculty)
- Dr Evodia Setati (Institute for Wine Biotechnology)
- Prof Julian Sonn (Business School)
- Ms Ziyanda Stuurman (SRC)
- Prof Sam Tshehla (Dean of Military Science Faculty)
- Dr Wilhelm Uys (Institutional Research and Planning)

The task team was asked to deliver a report by the end of September 2012. Members of the team found that this was not enough time to investigate the issue at hand.

The task team gathered data from the following sources:

- University policy and reports
- Literature on inclusion and related issues
- Media coverage and electronic media such as the Vryestudent
- An open-ended electronic questionnaire sent to all SU staff and students (see Appendix Two) which received 964 responses.

What follows is a record of the team's discussion and preliminary suggestions for action. It is intended as an advisory document to the Rector.

2. Reflection on a welcoming culture at SU

Rationale

The University of Stellenbosch has a sound *academic* rationale for reflecting upon a welcoming institutional culture on campus.

Universities all over the globe are in a continuous process of change, transformation and adjustment to new circumstances and contextual, social and institutional challenges. The

composition of staff and student populations are in flux due to demographic fluidity in globalising, cosmopolitan contexts. In such contexts of transition and change the discourse on a welcoming culture is crucial.

Universities in South Africa have to welcome students and staff who were traditionally excluded from higher education. Hence, the development of an inclusive, welcoming culture is of crucial importance at all South African institutions. Those who were excluded do not automatically feel at home. They do not automatically take ownership of their campus. This sense of institutional belonging and ownership has to be intentionally developed.

As a South African university, Stellenbosch University is on the journey from high levels of exclusion to inclusion. In this diversifying context, discussions about the development of a welcoming institutional culture are an academic imperative.

Where a diversity of staff, students, ideas and perspectives are not welcomed, the quality of core academic activities (i.e. research, learning and teaching as well as research-based and learning and teaching-oriented community interaction), suffer. There is no academic excellence without hospitality to a diversity of people and ideas.

Grappling with the Stellenbosch University identity

Well known educationist Etienne Wenger (1998) writes, “As trajectories, our identities incorporate the past and the future in the very process of negotiating the present”. Stellenbosch University’s vision for the future is to be a forward-oriented, innovative and inclusive university which makes a contribution to the well-being of its students and society. It sees itself as a world class university which makes a substantial contribution towards Africa and the region in which the University is situated: the tourist and university town of Stellenbosch and the surrounding farming region. We are proud of our academic achievements, our hospitality and striving towards diversity.

But what of our past?

The University benefits from the resources it has accumulated, including some excellent examples of Cape Dutch colonial architecture, most notably the buildings housing the Theology and Law faculties – not to neglect our prowess in rugby! There is a set of core values and social cohesion derived from a strong sense of community and a shared past.

But the past influences the University in other ways as well. Staff and students who have either been at the university a long time or whose parents and grandparents have been to the university, may have more established networks and a sense of comfort, which could be alienating to those who do not enjoy this history and sense of belonging.

At key moments in its history the University has also been characterised by graduates and academics who have played a key role in developing the thinking and practices underpinning apartheid. This history continues to linger in the minds of many South Africans, providing a particular challenge to the University’s image in a post-apartheid era.

Despite its history, the University has had significant successes in transforming itself out of a racially and linguistically exclusive mould, especially over the last three decades. This task is

ongoing, evidenced by the fact that black staff and students are still in a significant minority at the University. Other factors that impact on the University's image as potentially unwelcoming include the highly selective admissions criteria, the fee structure, problems of distance and travel, the expensive and scarce accommodation and the priority that has been accorded to Afrikaans.

The changes required by creating a new identity has required a degree of soul-searching and humility, placing an onus on all to maintain an open and self-critical stance, as well as a sense of care and responsibility. We see this responsibility as a strength that characterises the identity of this University. We believe this identity is distinctive, giving Stellenbosch University an experience and wisdom that it can share with the rest of the world.

In the same way that the future and the past might influence the present of an institution, so might the future and the past influence the present for each staff member or student. Within the context of South Africa's divisive and difficult past, each of us draws on the collective memories of our parents and grandparents as well as the stories of our own upbringing. These inform who we are, just as much as our aspirations for the future may do. It is the task of the University to take these collective and individual memories of the past and future aspirations, and to turn these into realised dreams.

The building of a new University identity is a complex yet necessary endeavour, evidenced by the fact that over 900 people responded to a questionnaire asking if they felt welcome at Stellenbosch University. What is clear is that much contestation still exists about topics like language, diversity, symbols and even art. How the University deals with these contestations will determine its ability to build a welcoming environment. And this cannot be done through prescription, for a welcoming culture is by its very nature based on the positive generation of particular behaviours.

For the University to function as a productive and inclusive community, it requires a welcoming culture.

Values

The values informing a welcoming culture strategy are thus: introspection, inclusion, honesty, respect, care and responsibility for ourselves and each other.

3. Steps taken towards generating a welcoming culture

The task team has conducted discussions with Deans and heads of several of the support service units, as well as student leaders. A large variety of activities have been undertaken to make the university more welcoming. These include:

- A faculty-wide questionnaire on a welcoming culture
- Curriculum innovations on inclusion

- Faculty-led innovations to be more language friendly to students in a variety of different ways
- Faculty-led innovation to encourage dialogue about culture and institutional ethos
- Faculty-led innovation to depict a more modern and welcoming culture via posters on the walls of key corridors
- Faculty-led bursary schemes to diversify student body
- Dean talking to lecturers, encouraging them to become more student-friendly and empathetic
- Faculty-led discussions with students to find out how they experience university culture
- Welcoming braai to first-year students in the faculty
- Dean accompanying new lecturers on rounds to meet departments
- Student-sponsored open debating forums
- Muslim prayer-room
- Clusters and mentor programme for first-years
- Awê-ness camp for first-generation first-years
- Workshops for students led by international expert on diversity
- New orientation session for new staff developed by HR
- Various activities launched by the international office.

4. Welcoming culture: towards an approach

4.1 Definition of a welcoming culture

A welcoming culture is one which makes staff and students feel

- at home
- that everyone belongs
- that everyone should feel proud to be associated with the institution
- that one has a right to ask for help
- that one's contribution is noticed and valued
- that everyone feels comfortable to study or teach or deliver service
- that one does not have to be in the majority to be included.

4.2 What is the focus?

This topic intersects with other human rights and policy-related issues, most significantly that of transformation, the language issue, and issues of academic support and access. Thus this document must be seen as one of several which contribute to the transformation of Stellenbosch University.

The issue of a welcoming culture pertains most closely to issues of identity and social affiliations, including: religion, language, gender, race, dis/ability, sexual orientation, social

class, and age. Because of the history of the institution and country, it surfaces most often in relation to race. A welcoming culture is for all people, without losing sight of the fact that 'minorities' or 'others' are more targeted or at risk.

This issue involves students, academic and administrative staff – there cannot be a policy or strategy for one group only.

The focus is on the transition period when students or staff arrive at the university, as well as on the reception of visitors to the campus.

4.3 How is a welcoming culture achieved?

A welcoming culture is influenced by *space and facilities, symbols, rituals, interpersonal communication, culture, and curriculum*. Each of these influences are the aspects that SU as a whole and its faculties and units could consider, the extent to which these might make staff, students and visitors welcome or unwelcome.

- 4.3.1 A welcoming culture is more likely to be achieved when *individuals in leadership positions lead by example* as well as encourage others to follow their lead. Concurrently, it requires all individuals, wherever they are placed, to take responsibility and exercise leadership.
- 4.3.2 *Dialogue* is useful. It should be encouraged and accompanied by “*rules of engagement*” which are jointly crafted.
- 4.3.3 We spend time acclimatising new students to the university and a short time *familiarising staff with their new environments*. Welcoming of especially new staff requires more attention. Both these aspects are one-way. We need more attention towards the *university or departments learning about their students*, and units learning about their new staff.
- 4.3.4 There should be more resources, including guidelines, for how to *welcome new staff* to departments and centres.
- 4.3.5 *Continued engagement with the town and region* is necessary in order to ensure that it is more welcoming and that the staff and students interact with the surroundings in a positive manner.
- 4.3.6 *Focus on graduate attributes*, especially that of an “engaged citizen” – and related curricular attributes (from which flows, logically, a focus on the attributes of an SU staff member) – and how to achieve these.
- 4.3.7 A *teaching model* and a staff support model that does not divide the group into the normal/mainstream/us and ‘them’, nor strictly into academic and non-

academic, but sees a continuum of needs as well as a diversity of practices and perspectives.

- 4.3.8 A related concept is the encouragement of *collaboration and teamwork* amongst students, and amongst staff, as well as between staff and students, at the expense of the various barriers between residences, faculties or departments.
- 4.3.9 *Collaboration with other SA and especially WC universities* should have an impact on our culture.
- 4.3.10 *Support for the career development of young staff* (academic and support services) is an important aspect (linked to work in this area that is already happening).
- 4.3.11 Ongoing attention to *language, multilingualism and language-friendliness* is required at macro and micro levels of the institution.
- 4.3.12 An *introspective focus on the rituals and symbols* of the university would be useful, accompanied by a *concrete visual campaign* designating the welcoming 'new' Stellenbosch University. This could include billboards, web pages and other imaginative elements.
- 4.3.13 Attention to *facilities and space*:
- for socialising for students in various buildings and social space for staff
 - for eg prayer rooms
 - for disabled individuals.
- 4.3.14 *Support for the difficult conversations* should be provided by a *unit* which has an academic, research based and 'activist' component. It should work in collaboration with other units on the campus, and should focus more on providing resources and advice than on being prescriptive. It should have a high profile.
- 4.3.15 *Policy* may be needed, but this should be achieved after a process of sharing and dialogue. An alternative is to consider the significant university policies, and ascertain which of these provide barriers to making the University welcoming, and how these should be changed.
- 4.3.16 Ongoing attention as to how to make *residence culture* more welcoming for the majority of students as well as those who are in the minority.
- 4.3.17 *Management* at various levels being seen to be consultative and transparent.

5 Recommendations

The task team recommends

- 5.1 The results of the questionnaire be packaged into a report and be used for a communication strategy across the University to encourage dialogue about how to make the University more welcoming.
- 5.2 Faculties, support services and student committees be tasked to discuss how to make their areas of responsibility more welcoming, linked with areas for consideration referred to in 4.3. In certain instances the areas of responsibility might be own buildings, reception areas or tea rooms. In other instances this might be a central unit taking responsibility for the campus as a whole. Responses should include budgetary implications, to be considered for the following year.
- 5.3 The task team be asked to continue and that the Rector/Council reports back to the task team after Council has met and discussed these suggestions. The task team could be asked to:
 - 5.3.1 Further analyse the results of the questionnaire
 - 5.3.2 Produce a communications and consultation strategy on the basis of the questionnaire
 - 5.3.3 Highlight examples of good practice and disseminate these.

Appendix One: “What is already being done at SU”

1. Faculty Initiatives

All faculties were asked via a telephonic interview with the Dean to indicate what they are doing to promote a welcoming culture. The following activities were noted across the Faculties:

- Academic, emotional, financial and social support for first year students
- Surveys of student experiences, in particular first year students
- Working with student committees

- Social events for staff
- Building staff cohesion
- Establishing a staff room/ coffee shop
- Support and mentoring of new and younger staff members

- Helpfulness, good administration and communication, including for new students and staff, disabled students, international students, etc

- Language plans that include translation, glossaries, tutorials, parallel medium, signage

- Ensuring positive attitudes, empathy, a climate of openness and interaction, an ethos of friendliness and hospitality
- Re-looking at symbols, pictures, names of rooms
- Organising open discussions and debates
- Building indicators of success into the Faculty strategic plan eg high levels of student and staff engagement, career plans, development opportunities

2. Student initiatives

Student initiatives believed to contribute to a welcoming culture:

1. *Awenêss First Generation Success Camp*

This is a camp for students that are the first in their family to study. One of the (main) reasons why first year students (and especially first generation students) fail their first year, is the inability to adjust to student life. This camp thus specially prepares first generation students to be successful at the University. The Camp makes them feel welcome and ensures them that they belong and can/should have a successful University career. The idea started as a student initiative. The SRC helped a lot with the funding and sponsorship for the first one held in 2012 and a lot of senior students helped to conceptualise the camp. Dean Greg Ricks played a massive role in getting the project from the ground. The Centre for Prospective Students and the Student Dean has helped make this a reality and the different role players are now ensuring that this stays a yearly event as the success of the students

who attend this Camp is evident. It is not just academic success- we see a lot of these students in leadership positions in their residences or societies or faculty committees.

2. *Muslim Prayer Room*

The SRC, Society Council, Islamic Society and Student Dean all worked together to ensure that this becomes a reality. Our argument “you cannot invite students from different religions to Stellenbosch and say ‘this is YOUR place’ if we don’t even provide a place for them to pray and practice their religion”. The Rector approved the money from the Strategic Fund and it is currently being build.

3. *MATIEWEEK*

The MATIEWEEK slogan (since 2009) has been “My Plek | I belong |”. The whole week is aimed at celebrating the fact that we are all Maties. That everyone has a place at this institution. Events include a MatieEte on the Rooiplein, Wine Tasting on the Rooiplein, Maties Got Talent, etc.

4. *M4M Bursary Fund*

The SRC’s M4M Bursary Fund was launched in 2012 and already saw almost R100 000’s bursaries given to needy students in the end of 2012. Using Dr. Anton Rupert’s word as inspiration (“ jy kan nie lekker slaap, as jy weet jou buurman is honger nie”) we have to realise that we are all part of the Matie Community and that we have the opportunity to help one another. Emphasizing that everyone belongs here, no matter their financial needs.

5. *Discussions/Debates/Open Forums*

For example : the past week the SRC passed a motion at the SRC meeting that more residences (at least one per cluster) should serve Halaal food. At the present moment Metanoia is the only Residence that serves Halaal food. This isn’t a welcoming culture if there isn’t effort being made to cater for individual’s needs.

Discussions, discussions, discussions.

For example, just in 2012

- Open Forum : Is Stellenbosch Changing
- Eusibius McKeiser : Race, Identity and Politics
- Rooiplein Debat : Role of Religion in Residences
- Open Forum : Koshuisplasingsbeleid
- Courageous Conversations in Residences
- Vrye-Aande
- RSG Praat Saam
- “Transformasie en die US” hosted during Woordfees
- Trevor Manuel Presentation on the NDP

6. *MOJO (Maak Oop Jou Oë)*

MOJO (Maak Oop Jou Oë) was an initiative from a few senior students, including Pieter Odendaal and Gina King. The event will run with five main topics in mind: Identity, Sex and Sexuality, Race, Environment, and Gender. The final day (gender) will also be a feedback day across campus allowing for the students' thoughts surrounding the event. The MOJO Week vision encompasses the idea that over time, Stellenbosch University will be a university potential students long to be accepted to, more so than any university in the country. The creation of a campus that actively engages in critical thought would create the diversity and hope Stellenbosch University needs.

7. Vryestudent/ Bonfire

Vryestudent (now recently re-launched as Bonfire). Aim is that students critically engage with one another regarding any issues they may have by using a blog. Giving a platform for any and every student that wants to voice their opinion.

8. Race Based Room Placements

In the beginning of 2012 it was brought under the attention of the SRC Member for transformation that a handful of ladies residences still did room placement on a race basis. This means white students placed with white students, students of colour placed with students of colour. Their race being the main factor taken into account when determining roommates. Since this came to light, a new policy has taken its place.

9. Anti-Discrimination Policy

Anti-Discrimination Policy was started by the SRC in light of quite a few instances where students experienced discrimination (from racism to homophobic behaviour, etc). The idea is that there should be a system in place and a procedure what students can follow when they feel that their fellow students/ lecturers have discriminated against them.

10. Koshuisplasingbeleid

The Koshuisplasingbeleid has been a contentious issue for the most of 2012 and going into 2013 as well.

11. Welcoming Week

Welcoming Week. The name says it all. There is an (I believe successful) effort to move from "Doop" or "Ongroening" to a welcoming week that is friendly, dignified and hospitable.

12. Clusters

Clusters. A cluster consists of a number of residences and PSO wards that are grouped together. Clusters play a significant role in the integration and support of first year students on campus, particularly by means of mentor groups for such students. Subsequently, clusters ensure that students experience the University as a caring and nurturing place, and that residence students, day students and students who have private accommodation are integrated.

13. The Matie First Years T-shirt

The Matie-First year T-shirt may seem like a simple gesture, but it is symbolic of so much more. We have a very strong Residence Culture at the university. That in itself isn't necessary a bad thing, but it becomes challenging when a student's most important identity is that of their Res. The Matie Tshirts show that we are Maties first. That is our common identity. We have a shared identity, no matter any differences regarding culture, language, financial status, residence, PSO or what other dividing factor there may be.

14. Workshops lead by Dean Greg Ricks

- 14.1 Stand and Declare
- 14.2 Cross the line
- 14.3 Gender

Over the course of welcoming, Dean Greg Ricks (of Stanford University) presented sessions to more than 15 residences. That is roughly 1200 students. These sessions include "Cross the line", "Stand and Declare" and "Gender". These allow students to share who they are, without having to explain or defend it. It also allows everybody to see that their identity is very uniquely theirs, and to see that everyone has come through adversity, in one form or another. And it gets people talking and listening to each other.

15. Student bodies representing students and giving everyone a voice

- 15.1 SRC
- 15.2 Society Council
- 15.3 Prim Committee
- 15.4 Academic Affairs Council
- 15.5 Student Parliament

Student and Academic Support (data collected Monica du Toit in conversation with Ludolph Botha)

Centre for Teaching and Learning

- First Year academy
- PRONTAC training for staff: address diversity in class as part of lecturer learning opportunity – also welcoming outcomes for lecturers
- Extended Grade programme: also create an environment where students can complete degree with more academic support
- Information , Communication technologies are used ranging from e-learning tools, WebCT to facebook and twitter to increase communication and also connect student communities

Centre for Student Communities

- The value driven management and training of student leaders aims to create the kind of environment where students will thrive. Hospitality, friendliness and human dignity are considered key values in this process and are central to leadership training in September every year. (The Frederick van Zyl Slabbert institute plays a crucial role in leadership training)

- “Villager” approach to team student communities in clusters and integrate residential and non-residential students with regards to mentoring and social activities.
- The Hub concept also aims to create positive environments for social inclusion, interaction and support.
- Revised Residential placement policy attempt to increase ability of residences to be a diversified community that welcomes diverse groups of students

Student Affairs

- Coordinate the welcoming programme for new students
- First generation (Awêness) camp to orientate and create a support system for First Generation Maties
- Coordinate student monitors in clusters to help oversee the implementation of core values during the welcoming programme
- Social worker en services to attend to vulnerable students with regards to social problems, food security and support

Centre for Student Counselling and Development (CSCD)

- Very visual welcoming display in the beginning of each year with tables and umbrellas in front of offices.
- VALE : Self- help instrument on mymaties.com to assist students with career choices even before they come to campus.
- Psychological and therapeutic support services for students
- Office for Students with special learning needs offers both academic and psychological support and are also strongly linked to “Dismaties” (Students society for students with disabilities).
- Careers office

Centre for Prospective Students

- This office is responsible for outreach and recruitment initiatives in schools . Builds a relationship and welcoming environment before the student reached university. What seems to be very important is to match this welcoming experience from this office with the reality on campus once they arrive.
- “a Day in the life of a Matie” offers visits and contact with Maties for prospective students

Language Centre

- Language awareness and sensitivity training to staff
- Write laboratory will now be extended to a read laboratory as well
- Language acquisition and real time translation services to support lectures and public events

Welcoming activities for staff (HR)

Staff induction programme:

- Electronic information with interactive abilities
- Induction tea with management
- Wellness programme to increase staff interaction.

Appendix Two: Questionnaire

Submissions on a welcoming culture at Stellenbosch University Invitation for personal experiences

Dear colleagues and students of Stellenbosch University

The Rector of Stellenbosch University, Professor Russel Botman, has appointed a task team to devise an action plan, and later a policy, on how to make the University a more welcoming environment for all staff, students and visitors.

As part of its deliberations, the task team would like to know more about how individuals who work or study at the University experience its climate and culture, and what you suggest needs to be done to make the culture more welcoming.

We are particularly interested to hear your views. Please take the time to answer the following questions in as much detail as you would like. Your response will be anonymous and all responses received will be treated confidentially and with care. This should take you no more than 10 – 20 minutes. [Click HERE to answer by 4 March 2013.](#)

Questions:

1. *What makes you feel welcome at Stellenbosch University?*
2. *What makes you feel unwelcome at Stellenbosch University?*
3. *What suggestions do you have, to make the culture more welcoming?*

More information about the Welcoming Culture Task team

A welcoming culture is one which makes staff and students feel

- *at home*
- *that everyone belongs*
- *that everyone should feel proud to be associated with the institution*
- *that one has a right to ask for help*
- *that one's contribution is noticed and valued*
- *that everyone feels comfortable to study or teach or deliver service*
- *that one does not have to be in the majority to be included.*

Purpose of the task team

The task team was appointed by the Rector's Management Team with the following purpose:

1. *To define the concept 'welcoming culture';*
2. *To set directional parameters that enables environments to implement and align a welcoming culture strategy with the overarching strategies of the University; and*
3. *To create a draft policy.*

Task team members

- *Prof Brenda Leibowitz (CTL) (Chairperson)*
- *Ms Anina Botha (SRC)*
- *Ms Elmarie Costandius (Visual Arts)*
- *Prof Kennedy Dzama (Animal Science)*
- *Prof Nico Koopman (Dean of Theology Faculty)*
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- *Prof Sam Tshehla (Dean of Military Science Faculty)*
- *Dr Wilhelm Uys (Institutional Research and Planning)*

For any further questions please contact Brenda Leibowitz at bleibowitz@sun.ac.za.