PSO VIRTUAL APPROACH

A LOOK TO THE FUTURE

Report by Yanga Keva | PSO Content Development Assistant

SUMMARY

When the year 2020 began, no one could have anticipated the avalanche of trouble that would fall upon us, the COVID-19 pandemic caused the indefinite closure of the University, the restriction of physical contact and what we have no come to know as the 'hard' lockdown. In response to those unprecedented circumstances, student communities were forced to engage with their communities via virtual platforms. This prompted the PSO Office, working in collaboration with the PSO Student Leaders, to create a PSO virtual engagement strategy. The results of which were a notable increase in community engagement, an expansion of the reach and influence that the PSO environment had and the development of new means of communications.

This report reflects on the success of the virtual engagement initiatives of the PSOs and the PSO Office, it reports on the ongoing developments within the PSO environment including the initiatives which are geared towards developing a platform that will enhance the integration between the academic and social lives of students and thus result in a more transformative student experience, which provides opportunities for growth and personal development.

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INTRODUCTION

There comes a time, in the life of people, organizations and institutions, which calls everyone to revert to survival, it is often a time of panic and crisis. However, a crisis presents two polar yet related paradigms, the first is the reality of an imminent threat and the second is that of opportunity, it is up to the individual within said crisis to determine whether they will be overcome by the crisis or whether they choose to ride the waves of opportunity. No crisis presented itself like the COVID-19 pandemic, indeed 2020 was a difficult year, filled with challenges and unremitting winds of change, but as an ancient Chinese proverb reminds us: "When the winds of change blow, some people build walls and others build windmills." The new reality presented by the COVID-19 pandemic unleashed waves of creativity and innovation within the PSO environment. The progress which has been made in the development of the PSO virtual community engagement model is a monument to the hard work and dedication of the constituents of the PSO environment.

The PSO Office, as the institutional body that is responsible for the management and oversight over the PSO structures and which works with elected Student Leaders to ensure that PSO students are afforded a holistic and transformative University experience, has commissioned this report for the following objectives:

1. To report on the PSO developments in the year 2020, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. To reflect the development of the blended approach to community engagement for the future.
3. To report on the past and ongoing initiatives of the PSO Office.

This report accordingly reflects the PSO response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it further reports on the enhanced community engagements which were made possible by the PSO virtual community engagement strategy, lastly, this report defines the continuing PSO initiatives as the PSO environment introduces the blended model of community engagement. This reporting is conducted through reflecting on the work done by staff members and student leaders which is recorded in PSO Office reports, PSO Office presentations, PSO training presentations and stakeholder engagement presentations and material that have contributed to the Stellenbosch University PSO ecosystem and its continuing development.

2020 OVERVIEW

Covid-19 cases

- From the first identified case on March 6th, the country saw a steady rise in Covid-19 infections.
- The rise in infections prompted the extension of the stay-at-home lockdown and thus prolonged the physical shutdown of the University.

Priorities

- As the University scrambled to save the academic year certain priorities were outlined, most of which were geared towards academics.
- The mental and emotional wellbeing of students was prioritized by student communities who developed means to reach out to students.

A NEW BEGINNING

The year 2020 began as an ordinary year, the PSOs conducted very successful welcoming periods and students had begun classes, although developments globally indicated that a storm was approaching, it appears that the welcoming and second welcoming of the PSOs was left relatively undisturbed. This mask-less reality of unrestricted social interaction was the lifeblood of Campus life, there was a poetic beauty to it. Unfortunately, before even the end of the first academic term, our entire notion of Campus was completely turned upside down, the University practically shutdown, all students were asked to not return to their residences or classes. When the University opened again for the second academic term, students returned to a completely new reality; a virtual reality. None of the typical methods of learning, teaching or socializing were permitted and this meant that students had to start a new way of life, of learning, of socializing and of leading. It was the beginning of a new era, a time of virtual prominence and physical isolation.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

For the first 2 months of 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic ravaged through most of Eastern Asia and Europe, showing no signs of slowing down, and in those two months our country was left uninfected. On the 6th of March 2020, South Africa identified its first Covid-19 case, from there on a series of rapid and sweeping measures were implemented to control the spread of the pandemic. On the 15th of March the President declared a National State of Disaster, this prompted the University to take an early

Innovation

- Covid-19 forced the world to have to rethink how to connect.
- Stellenbosch University and indeed PSOs were not immune from this reality.
- The PSO office working with PSO student leaders devised an innovative strategy to keep students engaged and active throughout the lockdowns.

recess indefinitely, and on the 18th of March the University was shut down, soon thereafter the first 21-day stay at home lockdown began. During this lockdown, the University remained closed as it scrambled to implement a contingency plan to save the academic year, the ICBC was established to coordinate the University response to the pandemic. During these times the students were in various states of fear, confusion and frustration. As the Lockdown was extended and the University resumed virtual learning it soon became very clear that this was the new normal and all structures needed to be as innovative as possible in order to remain active.

A NEEDED CHANGE

As various structures began acquainting themselves with the concept of using virtual platforms for even the most basic tasks, the PSO environment required an enhanced approach to ensuring that PSO members remained engaged and involved in activities within their communities. Fortunately, the PSO environment was founded on the notion of finding innovative means to allow people to remain engaged even though they are physically apart, this resulted in the PSO virtual engagement strategy which brought Campus to the homes and screens of thousands of PSO members.

PSO RESPONSE[1]

While the challenges experienced as a result of Covid-19 were at times difficult, they have also presented PSOs with an opportunity to develop and innovate their methods of engagement to ensure that students at Stellenbosch University remain connected to their communities. This has been crucial to ensuring that students experience a sense of belonging and support in order to encourage and support them along their vastly different virtual academic journey at SU.

PSO VIRTUAL ENGAGEMENT

The Covid-19 Pandemic and the consequences thereof at SU prompted the PSO leadership to drive a virtual engagement strategy as a way to keep in contact with all members of their PSOs. PSO students at SU have always been geographically distanced and as such, it was agreed that the benefits of engaging virtually would extend beyond the lockdown. The lessons learned through this process will allow PSOs to offer a hybrid community platform in the future where more students will be able to engage with the opportunities offered. This will also help create more value for students who are looking to engage more with PSO's but were unable to do so previously, due to clashes with sporting commitments or location-related problems.

A huge focus was to look at both high data and low data density platforms. This ensured that students who did not have access to wifi or sufficient data were not excluded, while also developing higher-quality engagements/opportunities that would be universally accessible once students were back on campus and have access to University Wifi. PSO's continue to make engagement opportunities available on a multitude of platforms, such as Microsoft teams, Zoom and google hangout.

This journey was kickstarted through a co-creation process (between Student leaders and staff from the PSO Office in the Centre for Student Communities) where a Strategic push for virtual engagement led to the development of the PSO Virtual Engagement strategy. This was then further developed on a thematic level to ensure that the various needs of SU students in isolation were met. The implementation phase then followed which has proven to be exciting and stimulating for both the staff and students involved. The resilience of the PSO student leaders, despite the various academic and personal challenges they faced, has been truly remarkable. Their energy has often been the catalyst in re-energising the PSO Office staff to delve deeper into how they can carry on offering a world-class university experience to students.

PSO VIRTUAL TRENDS

In the course of this new virtual community engagement, a few interesting trends were noted by PSO Student Leaders across the 11 PSOs, some of these trends have allowed for the PSO environment to envision a future where virtual community engagements could be used even after the restriction of physical encounters have ended. The trends are also worth noting because they provide insight into how students are engaging with each other and with their communities in this new context. The following are some of the most noteworthy trends:

- As PSO Student Leaders began shifting their concerns from 'how to carry on engaging' to 'how to make engagements more meaningful' there has been a notable increase in the efficiency and efficacy of meetings at all leadership levels.

- The ease and familiarity in communication that virtual interaction allows, has developed into PSO leaders interacting more with PSO members, the virtual and engaging environment has allowed members to feel more comfortable with contacting PSO leaders when seeking assistance or guidance.

- As PSO leadership began finding more platforms to boost community engagement, it appears that none was more popular than Instagram, the multimedia content sharing app has opened up a new world for community engagement, with Lifestyle themed events gaining the most rapidly growing popularity.

- The restriction on physical activities has allowed PSO's to begin considering how best to grow the cognitive development and perseverance of PSO members, in this regard external stakeholders were engaged in order to begin developing leadership development programs.

- There is always a concern that in a high-stress environment a team may begin to collapse, however, a much-appreciated development that has been noted was that PSO leadership dynamics have improved, there was a notable improvement in the overall team performance and functioning.

- As PSOs began engaging and hosting meetings on various platforms, it has been notable that PSO members engaged more during meetings on virtual platforms than in in-person meeting, this is largely due to the side-bar chat function available on meeting apps which allow for better participation during meetings.

IDENTIFIED THEMES

As PSO leadership became more active and began engaging with their Houses a few notable themes developed and proved to be fertile ground for community engagement, the following are a few notable themes and how some communities engaged on them:

Academics

Due to the resumption of academic activities during the stay at home lockdown, it became crucial for PSO leadership, especially mentors, to assist PSO members with managing the complex and new academic reality, this was done through initiatives that focused on providing peer support and assistance with academic-related concerns, distributing tips on how to manage the workload and stress, it further consisted of initiatives such as using platforms like google docs to share approved materials, while ensuring copyright and plagiarism rules are not broken. PSO's also initiated platforms where students could come together in a study group on various platforms and engage around their academics.

Venustia PSO launched an Academic Team and created online Academic Tips: the following is the testimonial from the community leadership:

> *"In order to support our members on the academic front, we launched an Academic Team. This team consisted of 16 Venustia Leaders who availed themselves to assist fellow Venustia members on their mental wellbeing associated with academics. We also launched an online Academic Tips Campaign before the second academic term started."*


Figure 1: image of the 16-member academic team

Sports and Lifestyle

Due to the lockdown, most students who take part in sporting activities on campus were not able to do so. The introduction of E-sports (Fifa, League of Legends) to PSO's was a good way to still create a

competitive spirit between PSO's and to also establish new friendships. PSO's also incorporated other ways that students could keep fit while at home. These included fitness/workout challenges.

Aurora PSO Organised a virtual 'games night':
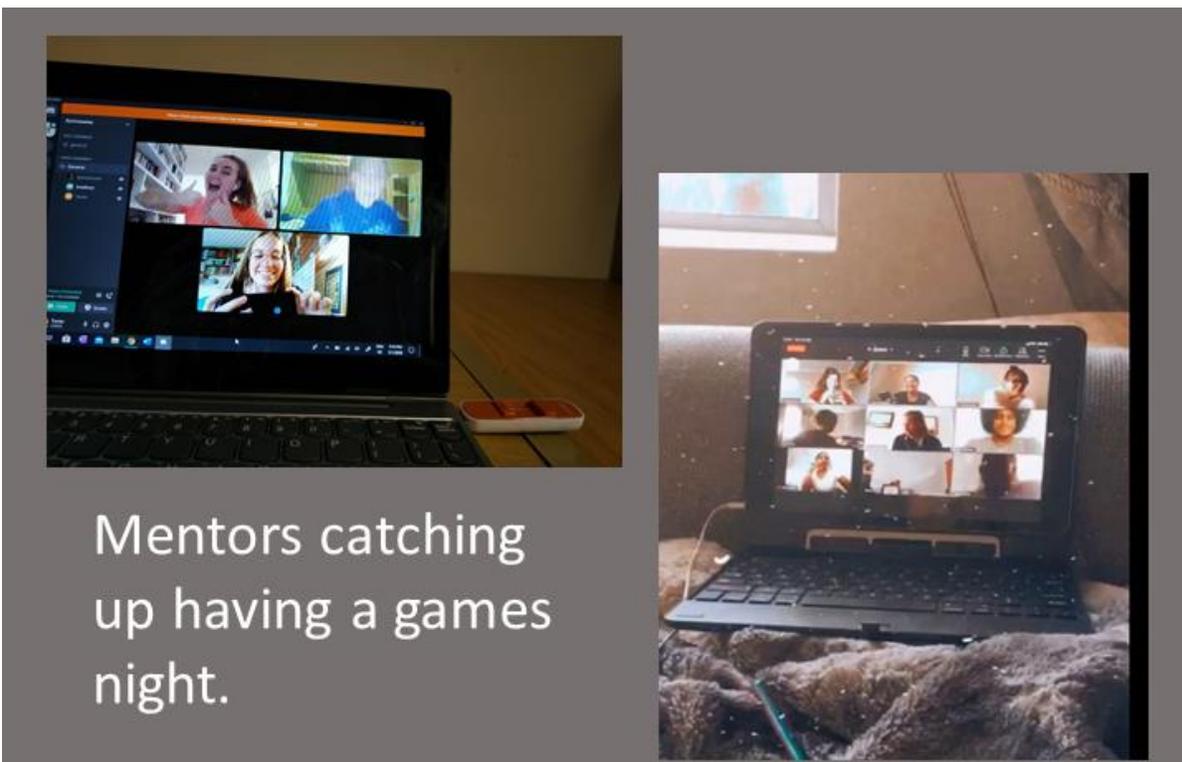
Figure 2: aurora games night

Culture
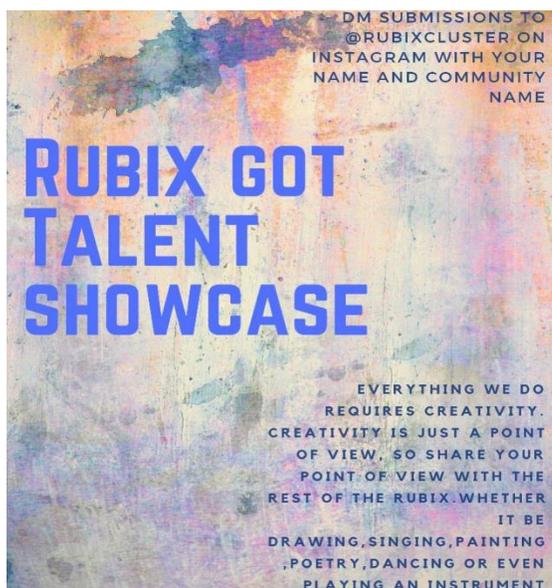
Culture Evenings form an integral part of the Culture portfolio in many student communities. PSO's hosted Virtual culture evenings over various social media platforms, which allowed students to share their talent with other members of their community. Activities such as virtual museum viewings and dance collaborations were also initiated:

Members of Pieke PSO and Venustia PSO participated in the Cluster Talent Showcase.

Sustainability

The Covid-19 pandemic is a clear demonstration of humanity's disregard for mother earth, cognisant of this, many organisations and activists utilised the time to grow awareness with regard to sustainability, PSOs likewise invested in similar initiatives by hosting campaigns to encourage members to be more conscious about activities that may be detrimental to the environment.

Venustia PSO hosted a critical Engagement on Earth Day, the following is the testimonial from the community leadership:

> *"Venustia's events featured in MatiesMedia and DieMatie – It was such a special moment for Venustia when MatiesMedia did a story on the successful Online Critical Engagement we had on Earth Day. DieMatie also released a story at the start of lockdown on a Sustainability Project (Venustia Eco-Closet Swap Shop) we launched in the first term. Not only could we celebrate the success of these events, but the events could be put in words for others to enjoy as well."*

https://www.matiemedia.org/aardedag-op-instagram

https://diematie.com/2020/03/fashion-on-a-budget/
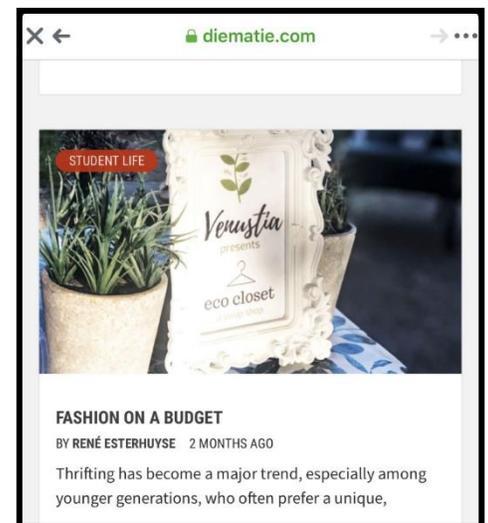
Critical Engagement

PSOs are hosting critical engagement events through social media as a way for all members of the community to engage and unpack some issues surrounding certain topics. Critical engagement is so expandable and enables a platform for people to also gain more knowledge. Topics that will be or have been discussed include but are not limited to Covid-19, Gender-based violence(GBV), finances, religion. PSOs are also creating incentives to encourage participation and to create a better return on investment for their members.

Olympus PSO hosted a critical engagement on Covid-19, the following is a testimonial from the House leadership:

"The critical engagement we hosted, which was a three-part series on Covid-19, discussing the following: Debunking of myths- with Doctor Dowling; the economic impact and how the virus has influenced the GBV and domestic violence statistics."

Figure 3: Olympus critical engagement poster

Mentoring and Mental Health

One of the most difficult challenges presented by Covid-19 was the exponential increase in mental health problems especially among students, the PSOs, therefore, took it upon themselves to be intentional about creating opportunities for PSO members to receive emotional support, whether it was through a dedicated mentorship initiative or through inviting various life coaches to share advice on their platforms about stress management.

Aurora PSO invited a life coach to speak on their social media platforms, the following is the testimonial from the House Leadership:

> *"We organised a zoom webinar with a life coach. We were excited to hear some productivity tips especially during this period."*
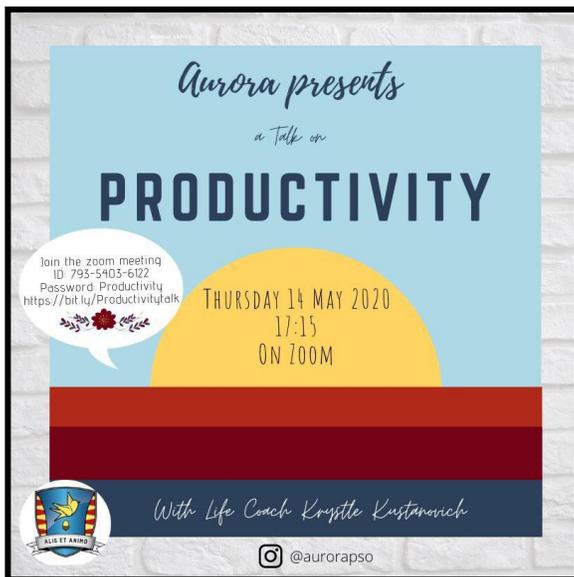

Figure 4: Aurora PSO life coach session posters

A transformative University experience requires purposeful and programmatic efforts which encourage the personal development of students, PSOs provide this through various initiatives aimed at developing the leadership potential within their members. These initiatives also create a platform for students who are interested in signing up for leadership opportunities to engage and gain more insight.

Aristea PSO engaged in a unique leadership development programme, the following is the testimonial from the House leadership:

> "Leadership development is still on the go within Aristea. We have a google form being sent out where the members who are potentially standing for HK or mentor positions will get to fill in a questionnaire. These questions are scenario-based where we want to give the members situations that have happened in the past and see how they plan on handling them. A feedback session then will be given to guide them as to what is the most appropriate steps to be taken in each instance."

ENTERTAINMENT AND INNOVATION

As PSOs began innovating and creating an ecosystem of support using virtual platforms, a trend began, one which is best characterized as the creation of local entertainment platforms, PSOs began developing multimedia content that was organized into PSO tv and radio stations or blogs. Below are some examples of such initiatives:
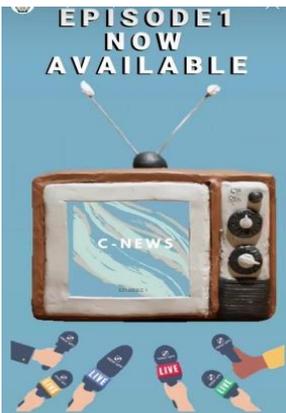
Capri PSO

Capri developed a House specific news platform, the following is the testimonial from the House Leadership:

"*C-News is Capri's very own news channel where we share stories, virtual offering updates and rankings etc. This is a light-hearted and humorous way for our members to find out what is happening with our virtual offerings. We have two news reporters and they share Capri's latest news biweekly. The C-News episode is shared on our WhatsApp groups and Instagram for our members to enjoy! A BIG HIT!*"
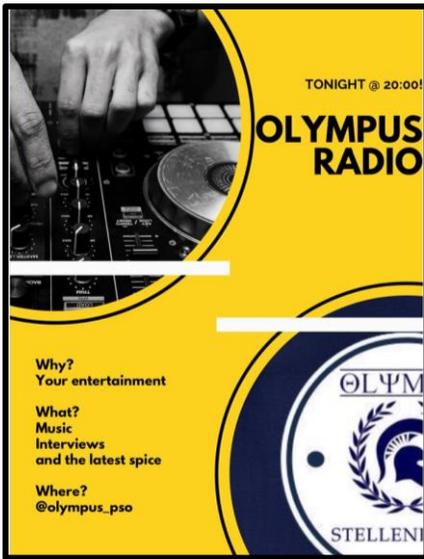
Olympus PSO

Olympus developed a House specific entertainment platform, the following is the testimonial from the House Leadership:

"Our weekly Instagram Live show (aka Olympus Radio) that we've started hosting, where various people (celebrities, medical professionals, student leaders and House members) get interviewed on numerous topics, Olympus radio is a fun space to discuss matters of particular interest to our members."

Aurora PSO

Aurora developed a House specific news platform, the biweekly newsletter featured numerous topics and collaborations.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

LESSONS LEARNED[2]

The lockdown created an opportunity for the PSO office to introduce further structural developments to the infrastructure of support which was offered by the PSOs, such as:

- ♣ The PSO House Branding was redesigned and modernised to reflect the contemporary offerings of each PSO.
- ♣ An initiative was introduced for the creation of a Senior Community, thus the Task Team which was tasked with initiating that project began its work.
  - o The initiative is an Integrated collaboration with the SLS, Alumni and Postgraduate office.
- ♣ An initiative was introduced to collaborate with other African Universities and engage on the various types of offerings for commuter students.

BLENDED APPROACH

There are 13 125 PSO students, representing a significant percentage of all Stellenbosch University students, a consistent concern over the years was the lack of meaningful engagement and participation in PSO activities by these students, this trend was upset by the recent virtual engagements which PSOs began to offer in response to the Covid-19 crisis. There is overwhelming consensus within the PSO environment that the outcomes of the PSO virtual offerings were resoundingly positive. Students exhibited an enthusiasm and need to engage during the period of isolation. In some instances, engagement with the virtual offerings online was significantly higher than what the PSO office had previously experienced on campus. This has resulted in the PSO office pursuing a long term outlook; where a blended community engagement model will be at the forefront of the current and future planning of all PSO related activities. The blended model hopes to explore the benefits of both physical and virtual engagements, even in a post covid reality, the purpose is premised on the idea that the more students are able to engage through various platforms the more they will continue to benefit from the support and resources that the PSO environment offers. In addition to the above; the blended community model can be implemented throughout various structures and provide students and staff with more versatile engagement options to connect in the future.

This is due to various advantages which have been discovered with the virtual engagements, such as:

- ♣ The virtual engagements created an opportunity for PSOs to focus intently on understanding their context and the needs of their community and collaborating with the other PSO Communities, this resulted in –
  - o The PSO development of the PSO Virtual Engagement strategy was done through an intense collaborative effort which resulted in the Virtual offerings outline.
  - o The realisation that engagement can be done in dynamic and innovative ways when the wealth of resources around us are used effectively.
  - o The PSOs recorded on average the highest number of applications for PSO leadership positions, for HC & Mentor Applications, this resulted in the most integrated and holistic election season yet. This is a clear indication of the ability of the virtual engagements to drive enthusiasm amongst students.
  - o The enhanced audience penetration due to the virtual engagements resulted in the highest attendance of Caucuses, events, virtual engagements, virtual support systems, etc (In particular critical engagement sessions on Instagram Live).

As the PSO environment plans for a future with or without Covid-19, it is clear that moving forward, social media will be key in future engagements. Although the Covid-19 pandemic led to what may be considered a crisis, it presented many opportunities. In the future, education will be at the centre of the blended model, this will include specialized training in –

- ♣ Social Media Sensitivity
- ♣ Privacy and Alignment with SU Policy
- ♣ Mahara and SunLearn

In order to ensure sustainability and efficacious implementation of the blended model, the PSO environment will engage in multiple Collaborations as information sharing is key to the future success of this model. The model will require holistic institutional support and a wealth of resources such that the PSO environment is capable of participating in explorative conversations with Corporate Marketing and communication specialists to map the way forward. This will be done through purposive collaborations with student leaders and will include training and development of students and staff members who are responsible for media management

VIRTUAL EDUCATION

A final initiative by the PSO Office worth noting is the virtual education initiative, which, if successfully implemented would result in –

♣ **The Creation of a module on SunLearn titled *Student Communities*[3]**

This module would serve as the home base for the CSC's residential education programme and would increase student access to support and learning opportunities provided by the CSC. Students would also be able to submit evidence of learning opportunities, request support and have access to functionalities such as live chats to enable in-time support as determined by CSC. Events and communication can take place through this medium which is centralized to all students.

The intention is to provide an immediate link to the support offered and by residential education in the same place as the academic courses which will encourage greater student participation and engagement. Additionally, the convenient placement of the module will improve the access to the support and learning services provided by CSC.

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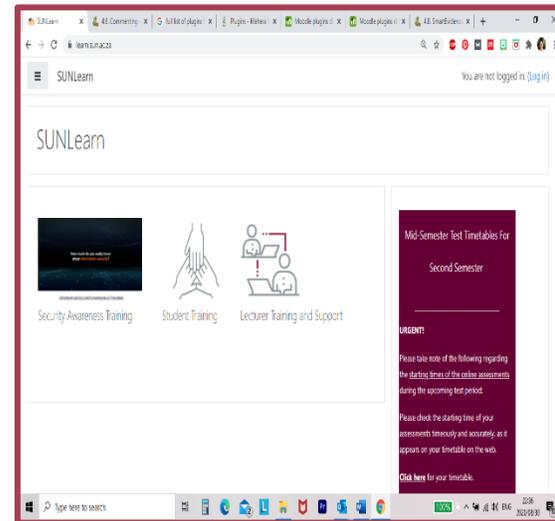
"Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn"

– Benjamin Franklin
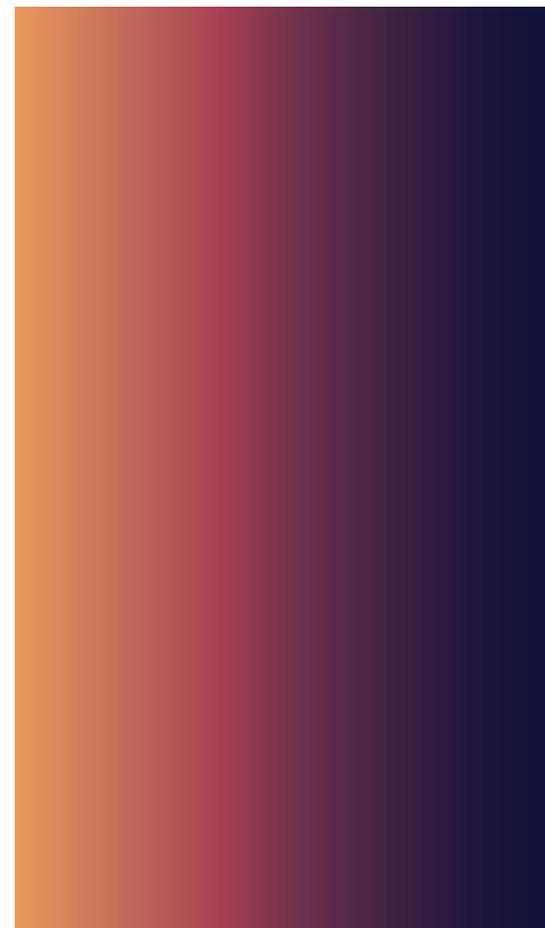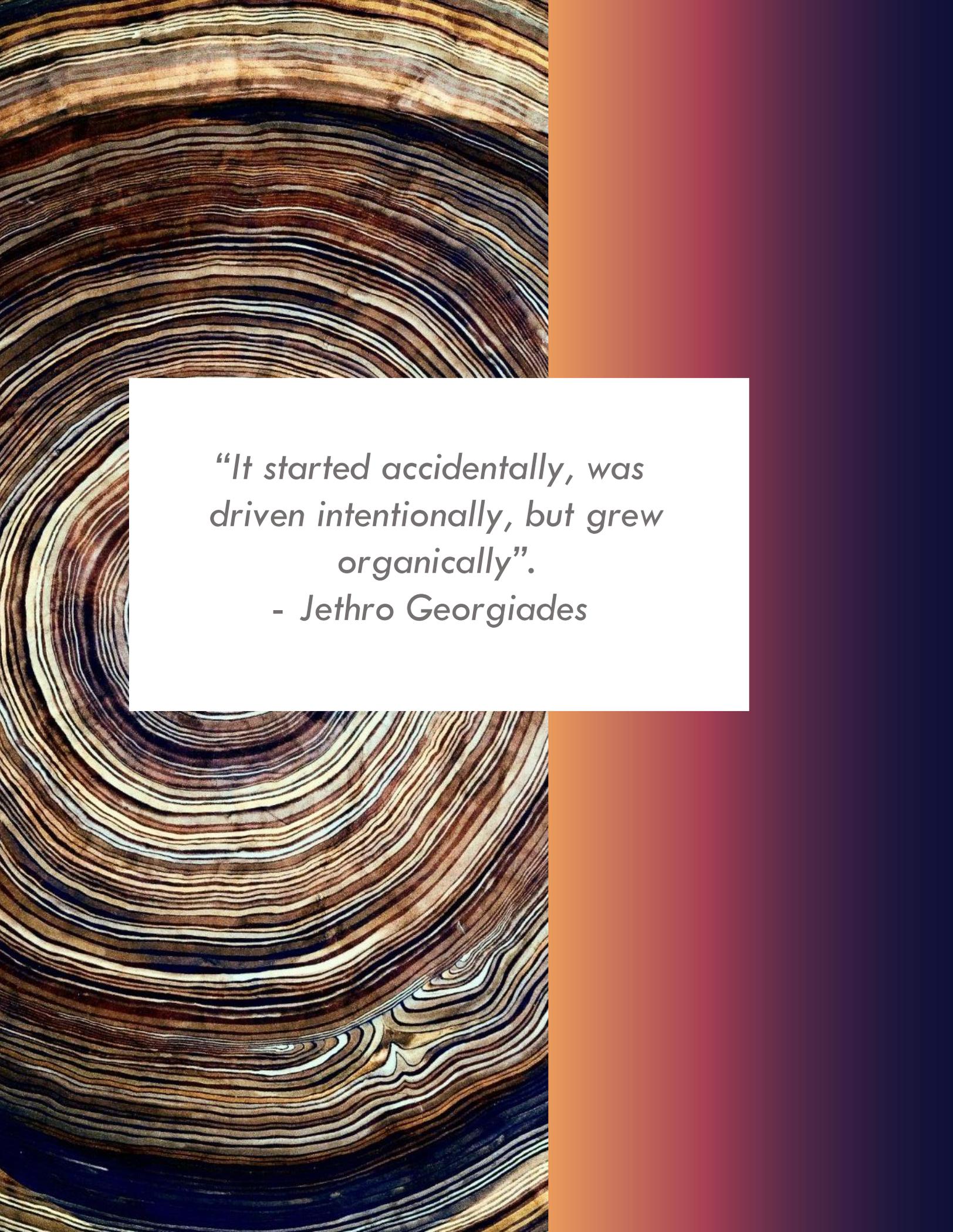
"It started accidentally, was driven intentionally, but grew organically".
- Jethro Georgiades

CONCLUSION

Indeed 2020 was an extraordinary year, best characterised as a year of continuous unlearning and relearning, with the sudden onset of the stay at home lockdown, the closing of the University and the restriction on all physical activity, the PSO environment proved resilient. The innovation and enthusiasm which was bred out of the experience has resulted in not only outstanding results but has allowed for the many lessons to be learned from the experience.

This report was commissioned for the purpose of reporting on the work done by the PSO office in collaboration with Student Leaders in order to ensure that the PSO environment remains active, engaging and relevant despite the change in circumstances. Due to the vast changing climate within which PSOs had to act, it is nothing short of remarkable that they were able to establish a virtual engagement infrastructure that proved to be even more effective than the physical structure with which the PSO environment had been acquainted with. It is because of the success of the virtual engagement that a blended model to community engagement has been considered as the outlook for the future, and PSOs are again tasked with finding innovative ways to sustain and develop their community engagements whether it be for an adjusted lockdown or a post covid world.

This report has reflected the various successful community engagement initiatives which PSOs engaged in over the course of the year, in addition, this report has reflected on the various initiatives that are planned for the future, initiatives which intend to enhance the virtual community engagement by further integrating the academic and social lives of students in order to produce a more transformative student experience.

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

[1] Georgiades, Jethro & Sieberhagen, Minette. PSO OFFICE VIRTUAL ENGAGEMENT TRENDS. 2020. PSO Office:Stellenbosch University

[2] PSO Reflection points presentation, 2020. Stellenbosch University

[3] PSO sunlearn engagement presentation. 2020. Stellenbosch University,