REPORT ON THE EMPLOYMENT EQUITY ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS

25 November 2023

Room 3008, GG Cillie Building, Ryneveld Street

1. INTRODUCTION

The CIRCoRe-led roundtable, in partnership with the DVC: SITP and Human Resources, sought to address concerns from the Khampepe Report regarding staff inclusivity at SU.

The aims of the session were:

- to deliberate on and identify immediate short-term measures that can be implemented,
- to identify aspects for further research, information and deliberation, especially by related workstreams,
- and to determine the medium- and longer-term process and practice alignments for reaching our targets.

It was envisaged during the planning of the event that the following questions would guide the conversation:

- What are our EE targets, outcomes and progress?
- What are the EE mechanisms, and are they used appropriately?
- What are the accountability mechanisms for EE,
- Are we using these mechanisms correctly and effectively?
- What are we missing in our EE approaches, and what mechanisms are we under-utilising?

In welcoming the participants to the event, the Rector, Prof Wim de Villiers, explained that it aimed to bolster the University's commitment to accelerating Employment Equity (EE) at the university to ensure a diverse workforce, vital for a well-functioning University.

In her introduction, the dialogue facilitator, Dr Bernadette Johnson, suggested a number of rules for collaborative engagement – to recognise that "our thinking is different but equal", to listen without interruption, not to rush the process, to eliminate competition and to "appreciate more than criticise".

2. EE AND DIVERSITY AT SU – Policy, plans and profiles

The first formal session began with Mr Sello Molapo, Director: Employment Equity and Promotion of Diversity, outlining the EE government regulations with which all universities in South Africa need to comply. He explained that the Employment Equity Act is directly linked to the Constitution in seeking to achieve equity in the workplace by promoting equal opportunity and fair treatment through elimination of unfair discrimination, and to implement affirmation action measures to reduce the disadvantages in employment experiences by designated groups to ensure their equitable representation in the workplace.

While SU has responded to the EE Act in terms of its EE Policy, EE Plan and Code for EE and Diversity, data from SU's integrated report on the race and gender profiles of staff reveals a much slower rate of transformation amongst academic staff than PASS staff. In fact despite talent attraction, development and retention strategies to embed EE in the university, over the last three years, the number of white academic staff has grown slightly.

One of the reasons for this is the criteria used for the recruitment and selection of academic staff - particularly the PhD qualification.

Mr Molapo and the discussion that followed his presentation introduced some of the internal barriers to transformation that have been identified: the perception that the institutional culture is "conservative and unwelcoming", advertisements written in such a way as to exclude some applicants, insufficient investment by the university in training for PASS staff and technical officers, and insufficient attention given to their career paths and promotion opportunities. In this discussion, it was suggested that the aggregated data presented earlier needs to be more carefully analysed to get a more accurate picture of where and how transformation is and is not moving forward. Suggestions in this regard included a more detailed analysis of environmental/organisational units.

It was agreed that the increasing financial constraints facing a research-intensive university that operates in the global context is a challenge that requires a systemic approach to accelerate transformation. It was suggested that the aggregated data needs to be more carefully analysed to provide a more accurate picture of differences across the faculties. While recognising that budgetary and equity imperatives need to be balanced, participants urged that new initiatives for transformation be considered. These should not simply be aimed at "meeting targets", but about an intentional shift and the mechanisms and measures the university puts in place to achieve the targets.

3. THE PRACTICE OF EE AT SU – three examples

Three presentations served as case studies to highlight some of the challenges experienced and the solutions tried at the operational level at SU in the Library, the Engineering Faculty and the Department of Chemistry and Polymer Science.

These included difficulties in matching counter-offers received by applicants selected for appointment, their family members' difficulties in finding employment in the relatively rural location of the university, and the cost of living in Stellenbosch and surrounds.

It was reported that the development of a faculty Transformation Framework for the faculty had been helpful as had setting targets, providing training programmes for junior staff and the appointment of mentors for new staff members.

4. DEVELOPING AN ACCELERATED AND JOINED-UP APPROACH TO EE

Small group discussions allowed for participants to brainstorm ideas around the following headings:

- Barriers to transformation
- Drivers of transformation
- Blind spots
- Unconscious bias.

These ideas were captured in writing and shared in the plenary session that followed. They are listed below:

4.1   Barriers to transformation

i. Stellenbosch University's history continues to influence perceptions of its institutional culture – that of "white privilege and power".

ii. Budgetary constraints limit the financial offers made to prospective staff – and the ability of the university to respond positively to counter-offers they receive from other institutions.

iii. The universities in South Africa are all fishing from a limited pool of candidates with the necessary qualifications, professional accreditation / registration and scarce skills, i.e. this is a competitive market.

iv. The wording used in advertisements - there may be unconscious bias that could exclude potential applicants.

v. The composition of and preparation and training given to selection panels. See comments re blind spots and unconscious bias below.

vi. "Bartering" around promotions processes and decisions – agreements are made about who is supported for promotion in turn.

vii. Promotions are subject to availability of budget.

viii. The cost of living in Stellenbosch along with limited opportunities for employment for applicants' family members. Challenges related to transportation in the area and to and from Stellenbosch were also noted.

ix. The role of HR in the appointment process – it was suggested that HR does not take ownership of the process early enough.

x. Middle managers may "block" new policies and initiatives – particularly if they are believed to be to their own disadvantage.

xi. The role and relative decision-making power of the EE representatives could be bolstered. The question was posed "Do they have teeth?" Their role in relation to those who should be accountable for EE should also be probed as a possible dilution of such accountability.

4.2   Drivers of transformation

i. Given the time needed to qualify for a PhD, it is vital that succession plans in faculties and departments include a 5 – 7-year lead-in period.

ii. Ensure that the criteria used for the recruitment and selection for academic staff are realistic. Where possible, appropriately lower the thresholds and set minimum requirements to facilitate entry.

iii. Give more attention to "growing our own timber", e.g. though NGAP and "targeted internships" that "open up the space" for junior lecturers to grow into roles and responsibilities.

iv. More attention should be given to appointees' non-salaried opportunities, e.g. development and training opportunities nationally and internationally, mobility and exchange visits.

v. Leverage the Rector's Strategic Funds to fund the initiatives above.

vi. It was suggested that while EE is "everyone's business", Deans need to take strong leadership roles.

vii. Promotion criteria need to be clear.

viii. "Excellence" and "equity" need to be seen as two sides of the same coin – they are inextricably linked.

4.3   Blind spots and unconscious bias

i. Assumptions on which decisions are made are often based on our personal histories and experiences as well as the use of racial categorisations.

ii. Create opportunities to "tell our stories" to surface and question these assumptions.

iii. Counter the effects of blind spots and unconscious bias by ensuring that selection and recruitment panels are representative.

iv.   Review advertisements more critically before these are published.

5. CONCLUSION

The day-long event identified obstacles hindering EE progress and responsible, sustainable ways to accelerate EE at the university. Deliberations focused on short-term measures for potential implementation and medium to long-term strategies to achieve EE goals. A number of research areas were also raised, involving relevant University bodies and CIRCoRe workstreams. The results of the discussions will be used to inform HR and EE strategies, possibly shaping future policies, structures and practices.

Suggested topics for follow-up consultations:

i.   Review selection panel appointments in terms of representivity and members' preparation. Consider additional training for new members of these panels. This could also include efforts to sensitise members to advertisements that exclude certain applicants.

ii.   Provide disaggregated data related to race and gender to Deans and HODs and assist them in succession planning and target setting to achieve equity and diversity.

iii.   Further opportunities for "growing our own timber" and for non-salaried benefits and how these might be funded.

iv.   A seminar series on EE related topics, e.g.:

- Sectoral benchmarking – how SU staff profiles compare with universities with similar histories (e.g. Wits and UCT)
- Blind spots and unconscious bias – how these play out in language that leads to exclusion.

Finally, the meeting was reminded that transformation is not just "a numbers game" but is much broader than this – i.e. structures and culture. These issues are being addressed in at least two of CIRCoRe's workstreams.