

My Reflections on DSAf Transformation

Dr Choice Makhetha – Senior Director: Student Affairs

The DSAf Transformation Forum reached exciting milestones in the period August 2019 – December 2020. This is due to a synergy achieved within the Division Student Affairs environment. Colleagues from all the three Centres worked together, also involving the students in their work, to ensure that every initiative was a success.

In August and September 2019, the DSAf Transformation Forum continued critical conversations on the importance of including students on the Forum. A consensus was reached, and it is wonderful to know that from November 2020, there is representation of the students and this is a huge milestone. I believe that Division Student Affairs can only be successful in its role, when students are part of every plan, as almost every part of our work impacts on the lives of students.

At the **2019 Institutional Transformation Indaba**, the Senior Director Student Affairs shared with the delegates, plans to fast-track transformation in the Division Student Affairs and these plans focused more on eradicating unacceptable practices in the broader student life and residence culture.

The Memorandum submitted by the SU Anti-GBV Movement in September 2019, challenged the whole university to focus deeply on what needed to change and also provided Division Student Affairs a vehicle through which to have critical conversations that would contribute to the institutional work ahead.

When I, as the Senior Director Student Affairs was requested to serve as the Coordinator of the Anti-GBV Working Groups, it became an opportunity to work with talented leaders with exceptional expertise in different areas, who accepted my request to serve as the Chairpersons of the Working Groups. The work started and was completed when the final Report of the Anti-GBV Working Groups was submitted to Rectorate on 12 August 2020. From there, it was for Rectorate to consider recommendations made and provide leadership on implementations forward.

At this point in September 2019, there were serious discussions with Huis Marais, with regard to some of the unacceptable practices and behaviour happening at the residence. After considering all information provided, showing evidence of several months of unacceptable behaviour, Division Student Affairs recommended to Rectorate, for Huis Marais not to be allocated First Years in 2020, and that, that decision be upheld for 2021 if there is no visible evidence of change in behaviour through 2020. Rectorate approved the decision and in 2020 Huis Marais was not allocated First Years. The residence was given time to work on changing its ethos and committing to the values of the university, among others. It now a year later and the University is again at a point of considering whether to allocate first years in 2021 or not, and Rectorate will soon announce its decision in this regard.

In the process of planning for 2020, the DSAf Transformation Forum also had a slot to present its plans and these were acknowledged by the DSAf Leadership Team and given support. The management Teams of the three Centres understood the importance of us having a clear strategic plan on transformation and also with a focus on addressing social injustices.

The year 2020 started on a high note and was dampened by the unacceptable practices, which were reported by a parent of a first year at Wilgenhof Residence. This brought attention to the residence and its practices, and work began to review these. Division

Student Affairs together with the Vice Rector Learning and Teaching, handed over the allegations for further investigation by the Student Discipline Office, and further work continued.

The students, especially the LGBTQI+ Community led by QueerUS, raised the many concerns and hurt they experienced at Wilgenhof Residence, which they had been bottling for quite some time and this period provided an outlet and an opportunity to confront the issues and heal, as well as a chance for the residence to reflect and change. The lengthy, critical conversation held at Wilgenhof Residence in March 2020, provided a chance for the students in their diversity to come together, to condemn unacceptable practices. It was an educational moment, where students took the responsibility to be part of a solution, with the Senior Director Student Affairs facilitating and the session went very well.

The latest feedback received is that Wilgenhof Residence took feedback they received seriously and have been working hard to change the culture and how the residence is perceived. The Centre for Student Communities (CSC) appreciated the involvement of the Wilgenhof Alumni, who came on board early enough and worked with the residence, providing guidance and advice.

The **DSAf Transformation Summit** is among the highlights of 2020. Attendance of students and staff was great. Open, honest and constructive conversations took place. Students with disabilities, LGBTQI+ Community and the SU Anti-GBV Movement were among speakers. We were blessed to have the Vice Rector Learning and Teaching, Prof. Arnold Schoonwinkel as our keynote speaker, sharing the broad picture of the transformative student experience we aspire for.

The next event that followed was the **Gender Indaba** on 5 March 2020, organized by the Students for Law and Social Justice (SLSJ Maties), with a theme – “*Starting a Journey of Understanding*”. Division Student Affairs provided support and colleagues brainstormed together with the students, to conceptualize the Summit. The Gender SARChI Chair, the Transformation Office and the LGBTQI+ Community were represented and shared their views. This Indaba was a success, and the organisers were satisfied.

Then the **Anti-GBV Consultative session was held in partnership with the National Department of Justice and Constitutional Development**, on 6 March 2020. Attendance was not as expected, but there were robust discussions. A network was broadened and working relations were built, for future engagements.

Other work continued in the Office of the Senior Director Student Affairs, focusing on the transformation agenda of the Division and providing support to the DSAf Transformation Forum, to ensure that we maintained the momentum built.

Another initiative, which needed to kick-start in 2020 was the **Campus / Residence Life and Culture Review**. This initiative will be part of the handover to the new Senior Director Student Affairs, to make sure that the transformative student experience is realized and felt by all students in their diversity.

I am very excited by the milestones made by the DSAf Transformation Forum. I believe that the Forum will have the strength and conviction to keep doing the crucial work, for the benefit of all within the Division Student Affairs.

Thank you.