

**A truly transformative student experience requires personal courage and reflexivity from university staff: Take away(s) from the First Student Indaba at SU and some insight on Modelling a transformative student experience.**

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A truly transformative student experience requires personal courage and reflexivity from university staff.

In October 2020 Stellenbosch University hosted its first-ever Student Indaba, a collaboration between the Transformation Office and the Student Institutional Transformation Committee (SITC). The indaba's main objectives were; to raise awareness about the SITC's existence to the greater university community, Relationship Building to begin an institutional conversation on the efficiency and streamlining of students participation in SU transformation matters to increase student awareness of the university's transformation stance, and infrastructure. A move from a Terms of Reference of the SITC, to the Constitution of the SITC, as the structure moves to be operational.

The SITC Student Indaba made a case for SU to move from a Silo approach to a more streamlined approach where we work across responsibility centres, towards common transformation-related institutional goals through collaboration, pooling of resources and streamlined coordination. Essentially, the Student Indaba was a diagnosis of the ground and structures we navigate as transforming functionaries of the university. The student-lead Indaba spoke to the perceived structural barriers to the transformation from the student's perspective, where students offered us some insight and recommendations on how to tackle these issues going forward, from a user-end experience. For students to tell SU how they are experiencing our systems, our Institutional Culture, SU's support services, SU's shared spaces among other things.

At the Indaba Student leaders facilitated conversations geared to soliciting recommendations for practical and helpful improvements to our practices, and set the tone for the conversations in breakaway sessions on the themes of 'The role of Critical engagement in Higher Education', 'lessons learnt from Covid 19', 'mental health support at SU', 'embedding Empathy', and 'SU's plan with regards to Walk-ins'.

The Covid 19 Pandemic inspired our institution to 'get our home in order', to stock take, a sentiment shared by the greater Institutional Transformation Committee (ITC) at their Indaba the week following the Student Indaba. Throughout the Indaba, student and staff participants were collectively thinking about how their communities, responsibility centres, student societies or organizations, and leadership structures can benefit from having a working relationship and connection to the Student ITC, within the scope of the Student ITC as a perspective-taking and collective thinking space for students in service of the greater Institutional Transformation Committee.

One major and positive take away from the Student Indaba is the fact that SU has an amazing resource base from which to pull. SU has an insightful co-curriculum space; we have the programmes and the leadership courses, frameworks, policies and structures in place. We as an institution have made great strides in creating a shared environment that is actively transforming to be inclusive and welcoming for all, and for that, our colleagues in their respective roles must be commended.

With that said, we are still working in Silos. There is no formalised understanding between departments on how their work feeds into each other, how it is similar, and how

departments can leverage and rely on each other to ensure an efficient and impactful transformative student experience.

Another strong take away from the Student Indaba is the need to involve students in the conceptualisation and co-creating of solutions to our institutional challenges. As functionaries directly concerned with the quality of Student Life on our campuses, it cannot be stressed enough how students and student leaders need to be an integral part of devising solutions, the top-down approach we are currently using results in unsatisfactory outcomes for all. Learn from students, collaborate and consult students when coming up with possible solutions to new challenges. Students have insight and perspective we do not. Their set of material and socio-cultural conditions differ from the spaces and ways in which staff navigate the university. They live with their peers, consume the same types of information as their peers and are tuned into conversations that staff can never take part in as equals. Having close contact with student leaders and involving the greater university community through awareness-raising and other participation processes as well as coordinating our transformation enabling initiatives and programmes across the university will improve our impactfulness and reach. There are conversations already taking place between responsibility centres following recommendations made at the Student Indaba and positive shifts promise to materialise in 2021.

The stocktaking at SU occurred and was informed by the global context of higher education and a global pandemic. 3 months into Covid Lockdown here in South Africa, Higher Education globally was plunged into conversation over the decision made by Oxford College in June 2020 to remove the statue of Cecil John Rhodes who is “one of the most committed imperialists of the 19th century”. This decision was as expected, met with mixed reactions, but at the core of the controversy is the tension between how do groups that wish to remember the past do so while minimizing conflict with other groups that do not wish to recollect its shameful aspects and the resulting material legacy? Some groups look fondly on the past, while others are reminded of violent preclusion. Oxford's decision to remove the iconic Rhodes' statue provided the perfect opportunity for Higher Education Institutions across the world and in our contexts, in particular, to revisit the conversations on Visual Redress and Institutional Cultures that were highlighted in our country's Fallist movements, and at SU in particular, the conversation around the Wilcocks name change.

A subject that is deeply emotive at our university, the Wilcocks name change highlighted from a transformative standpoint, that our staff is not on the same page regarding their understanding of transformation key principles, values, and concepts and as a result, buy into the university's transformation agenda and the reasoning behind it is lacking in a significant portion of our staff.

Institutions are products of their times, they mirror the goals of the society in which they exist and our institutions proxy in the visual redress conversation through the Wilcocks name change is evidence of this. Throughout History Innovation goes in the direction of what the society thinks it needs at that time and the general sentiment on the ground currently is that **#BLACKLIVESMATTER #ENDRAPECULTURE and #DECOLONISE EDUCATION NOW.**

A truly impactful transformative student experience requires that practitioners understand their role in moulding a well-rounded student who will not only leave the university an expert in their field but will leave a well-rounded individual, who can thrive in a diverse world that embraces and celebrates difference. A graduate who is diversity literate, culturally aware, and appreciates nuance and embraces opportunities to grapple with complexity. A university cannot effectively mould these graduate attributes into its students if the people doing the moulding do not possess these attributes.

Working towards a transformative student experience is doing personal work. It requires that you avail yourself, and allow your understanding and perspectives to be interrogated. At the core of transformative work is a deep understanding that we are products of our society. That we are socialized according to our cultural, religious, racial and interest groups to believe certain things about others. Our realities are punctuated with shallow interactions with those who are unlike us. We don't know each other but we work together, share common spaces and are affected by the same social issues, be it at varying degrees. Our lack of understanding for each other creates distrust, working environments that have underlying tensions, sexism, racism and related microaggressions. We live in a deeply wounded society, our backgrounds and diverse cultures make us interpret certain messages in particular ways. Our countries history, the families we were born into, the socioeconomic circumstances of our birth, the geographical locations where we grew up and the social conditions we grew up under influence our perspectives and how we navigate the world. Collective historical traumas, how we imagine ourselves as agents in our own lives and how we interact with various institutions, services, even certain animals i.e. South African Black Population and the 'Police Dog' (The German Shepard) are a result of this social construct we all find ourselves in. University personnel need to be equipped with this knowledge so that they understand how what they do for a living serves the greater good of society. How understanding one's positionality and acquiring empathy for others could result in a welcoming space for all.

The university is a microcosm of society, yes, but as a space for knowledge production and disciplined curiosity, the university should not add to the youth's disillusionment and cognitive dissonance. However, it should be a space where inquisitive minds come to seek and find clarity and guidance on how to use their unique sets of talents and questions to advance knowledge production for the greater good of society. The university through its staff must model what an ethical, inclusive and diverse world should be like, to equip our graduates with an idea of what it is they should be working towards when they go out into the world. How can they know what they are aspiring to if the institutions that shape their thinking and value systems do not model or at least attempt to model this ideal?

University personnel need to model critical citizenship in aid of creating a truly impactful transformative student experience. Our students look to us for guidance and social cues; we cannot be a space that teaches students to do as we say, and not as we do.

Transformation happens at four levels. These are; at the Personal level, Interpersonal level, Institutional level, and at a Cultural level.

The personal level of transformation requires that individuals unpack their own positionality and identities within a socially constructed world. What makes them who they are, what beliefs do they hold? What are their biases and what informs their perspective? To what extent have they been exposed to people who are different from them? People who love differently, celebrate differently, mourn differently, and how one reconciles these with their rights and responsibilities. All the other levels at which transformation occurs depend on how intentionally one delves into their level of transformation. Relationships with others are influenced by how evolved and in tune a person is with themselves. Leaders of institutions are better leaders when they understand themselves, and institutions with self-aware personnel can produce work that is impactful, agile and relevant. Moreover, when organizations institutionalise empathy, cultural norms shift, diversity is embraced and celebrated.

The takeaway Verbs at the Transformation Indaba this year were: Introspection, Complexity, Nuance, and Reflexivity. These words are a perfect diagnosis of where we are as a university in our transformation journey. Each individual needs to introspect and honestly grapple with their positionality in this society, and reflect on what their role will be

in our shared future. We are in the business of shaping tomorrow's leaders, we cannot be shaping them to be ignorant bureaucrats and hypocrites, the world needs less of these kinds of people. Our university is currently producing a polarised set of graduates. One group that enjoys their time at SU and goes into the industry to be perpetual victims of critical engagement and individuals having the audacity to be themselves around them. The other group that leaves SU having to heal in ways they are unable to articulate, resentful of this space and the lessons Stellenbosch has taught them about other human beings.

The blessing of the Pandemic is that our leaders were allowed to say that they do not have the answers. No one has lived through a Pandemic before and everyone is just winging it trying to do the best they can with the insight they have at their disposal. It has allowed communities to practice transparency and privilege community participation in institutional decision making and the co-creation of strategies for an effective, agile, relevant and impactful student experience. This was evident in our context in the manner in which management organised and put together working groups and subcommittees to plan and execute contingency plans to save the academic project of 2020 here at SU.

Covid 19 and resulting circumstances have shown that SU can "adapt as we move". We shouldn't be afraid of failing as we go, none of us has the answers. When we know better, we will, and should do better, together.