

The PSO Office

Est. 2016

*A reflection on
the development
of the PSO Office*

Report by

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June 2021

SUMMARY

Private Student Organisations embody the future focused outlook of Stellenbosch University's vision of offering a more transformative student experience, they are premised on the idea that a world leading institution which aims to be globally recognized for its excellence, innovation and inclusivity needs to create a mechanism through which it may ensure that all of its students access this transformative and holistic university experience.

The PSO Office is the administrative centre for all PSOs it is responsible for the management and coordination of PSOs as well as providing support to PSOs and assisting them to achieve their goals and visions.

The PSO Office was established after the institution moved to end the appointment of PSO Visiting Heads in Favour of two PSO Coordinators, the Office has since grown from strength to strength, providing an invaluable service to the Stellenbosch University commuter student support system.

Core Values

Dynamic Innovation- The PSO Office is a future focused hub, with a keen interest in listening, learning and praxis. The driving ethos of the Office is based on a keen interest in identifying new opportunities, partnerships, strategies and initiatives which will further the PSO agenda and allow for a more meaningful student experience for PSO Students. This dynamic recreational ethos is fuelled by an unwavering commitment to serving students.

Collegiality – The PSO Office thrives on being people centred, it creates an environment that is conducive to increased productivity, innovative thinking, individual & Community development. The agile-work culture of the Office ensures that the values and objectives of the PSO Office are instilled in everyone who comes into contact with it.

This report explores the following themes:

- 1. The appointment of the PSO Coordinators and the establishment & role of the PSO Office.*
- 2. The development and growth of the PSO Office with a focus on the period between 2016 and 2020*
- 3. Reflection on the purpose and function of the PSO Office.*
- 4. Highlights of the future goals and upcoming initiatives of the of the PSO Office.*

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Introduction

“Times and conditions change so rapidly that we must keep our aim constantly focused on the future.” - Walt Disney

The PSO Office is a structure borne out of a series of decisive interventions and changes in mindset, the 2015 PSO Task Team report, having considered the nature and functions of PSOs made a decisive break from the stagnant bureaucratic structure of the past and recommended a new, more surgical, and functional management structure.

The PSO Office has two co-equal and invaluable defining characteristics, the first – dynamic innovation; out of which it was initiated and continues to thrive and the second – collegiality, which gallantly streams as its catalysing ethos.



THE PSO OFFICE

The PSO Office, which operates within the Centre for Student Communities, is the administrative hub of the PSO structures at Stellenbosch University. The PSO Office is responsible for both the general administration and coordination of PSOs and their activities. PSOs are one of the institution's most future-focused entities. The development of Private Student Organisations and their integration into the University ecosystem is one of the most remarkable and innovative mechanisms which the University has employed in ensuring that All Students enjoy maximum exposure to the holistic transformative university experience.

PSOs cater to the needs of students who do not make use of residence accommodation offered by the University. They ensure that private accommodation Students feel at home and that they are able to utilise University facilities which will allow them to engage with their peers socially, academically and holistically.

PSOs ensure the complete and wholesome integration of private accommodation Students with residence Students and thus ensure the mutually beneficial success of that integration



This report has been commissioned by the PSO office with the following objectives:

1. To report on the establishment and the role of the PSO Office.

2. To report on the development and growth of the PSO Office.

3. To reflect on the purpose and function of the PSO Office.

4. To report on the future goals and outlook of the PSO Office.

The PSO Office as the institutional body that is responsible for the management and oversight over; all the PSO structures, works with elected Student Leaders to ensure that PSO Students are afforded a holistic and transformative university experience.

This report accordingly recounts the initiation of the PSO Office through the lens of the PSO 2015 Task Team report which recommended a new PSO institutional-administrative support structure. It will examine the strategies and developments introduced by the PSO Coordinators since 2016, it further reflects on the values on which the PSO Office thrives, then, this report reflects on the purpose and the function of the PSO Office and how it has transformed over time.

Lastly, this report will highlight the outlook of the PSO Office and its objectives for a post-2020 university. This reporting is done by reflecting on the work done by numerous Task Teams, staff members, student leaders and researchers who have contributed to the Stellenbosch University PSO ecosystem and its continuing development.

PSO 2015 Task Team report outcomes

7 years after the creation of the Cluster Initiative, after the addition of 5 new PSOs and following the Implementation of the 2009 Task Team report, a new Task Team was established in 2015 by the Vice-Rector of Teaching and Learning, the Task Team took its instruction from the concluding words in the 2009 Task Team report:

“All campus educators should commit to identifying and integrating community-based learning experiences so commuters, adult learners, Graduate Students, and part-time Students can create a holistic experience by learning from their total environment”¹

The Vice-Rector (Learning and Teaching) requested that a proposal for the possible consolidation of some PSO wards and the concomitant adjustments in the management and leadership structures be submitted. In light of this, a Task Team was put together to reflect on the future of PSOs and their optimal integration. The following are the key recommendations of the 2015 Task Team report:

1. The posts of Visiting Heads (VHs) on the Stellenbosch campus are to be done away with and replaced by two full-time PSO Coordinators who will also be responsible for organising a ResEd educational programme, especially for PSO Students.
2. Physical areas must be established in all Clusters (including hubs) to let PSO Students feel ‘at home’ and where they can interact better with Students in the residences.
3. Retain the system of random allocation of Students to PSO wards.
4. As a point of departure, walking over between PSO wards must not be allowed. The possibility of registering electronically with the PSO ward in advance must be considered. PSO wards with fewer amenities must be assisted to counter walking over or fall-out.
5. Marketing of PSO wards among prospective Students must be improved.
6. It is important that infrastructural improvements with regard to hubs and the accessibility of hostels for PSO Students be completed purposefully so that experiences of PSO Students between Clusters can be of equal value.

¹ See quotation – page 29 in Keeling, R. P. (Editor). 2004. Learning Reconsidered. A Campus-wide Focus on the Student Experience. Published by NASPA and ACPA, Washington DC, RCA

The Task Team concluded that the development in the ecosystem of support for PSO Students through the development of the Cluster spaces and PSO wards warranted a new structure to be implemented in the management and integration plans of the University in order to bring the PSO initiative in line with the SU vision; i.e. the inclusive and transformative development of graduate attributes within Students.

These recommendations created the roadmap for the two PSO Coordinators who would be appointed.

Appointment of PSO Coordinators

As per the recommendations of the 2015 PSO Task Team report, the University ended the Visiting Head management-support style and on 01 March 2016 appointed two PSO Coordinators; Lisinda de Jager who was previously the Visiting Head of Aristeia_PSO and Jethro Georgiades who worked as a Programme Coordinator for the Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert Institute for Student Leadership and Development, they would be responsible for the 10 PSOs on Stellenbosch Campus, jointly. The PSO Coordinators were first housed within 9 Bosman Street, which prompted strategic relationships with the FVZS Institute, the Office for Multicultural Education as well as Student Governance. Both PSO Coordinators were also involved with other initiatives and activities on campus. It was the task of the PSO Coordinators in 2016 to reimagine the functioning of PSOs and recreate the environment into a more dynamic, resilient and visible space within the vast infrastructure of student support offered by Stellenbosch University. The strategies and initiatives which followed led to the gradual increase of the capacity of the PSO Office and the development of its defining Characteristics, this report is the natural fruit of those strategies and initiatives. This report will highlight the capacitation of the Office as well as the outlook for a better capacitated PSO Office.

It became immediately clear, both from the founding instructions and from the strategy adopted by the PSO Coordinators, early on, that there needed to be a decisive break not only in how the PSOs had been structurally managed but there was, in fact, an even greater need for there to be a renewal of the **mind**. The journey of this renewal permeates throughout this report within every initiative, discussion and reflection within the PSO environment, its retelling mirrors its progression – natural, unending, dynamic and unfettered.



Pre-2016 PSO space

“You knew about the other PSOs... it was a different stage for PSOs, they were on the back burner – they were not a residence, [in their perception of campus life] they weren’t a part of the ‘cool kids’, and they always tried to catch up with residences, copying what the residences had done.” – Lisinda de Jager (former PSO Coordinator)

The most important hurdle that the newly established PSO Office had to overcome was the tendency of PSO leaders, students and even management to place themselves as second-best to residences. This was the result of the fact that in the first 4 decades after the establishment of PSOs there were no purposive interventions to develop the collective identity of PSOs as communities worthy of recognition as equals to residences.

It is in fact clear from the record that university planning was always premised on a focus on residences with very little attention being granted to PSOs. A further

development that had become entrenched was that PSOs had become party destinations, with PSO student leaders being relegated to event planners rather than stimulators of holistic development within communities.

This back burner syndrome which gripped the PSO space required very dramatic and decisive intervention.

Limited interaction

A further consequence of the back burner approach to PSO development was that PSOs were managed along similar lines as the residences, with each PSO having a Visiting Head who would provide institutional support for a particular PSO. The Visiting Head system was initially designed as a mechanism of ensuring that each PSO ward would have a staff member who would ensure that the residents within that ward were properly adhering to the university's disciplinary code, as well as ensuring that the students were well integrated into the university, however, as the ward system fell away and the demographic realities of the university shifted, the system was never updated. This in turn meant that the development and programme of each PSO was dependent on the individual strategies employed by the respective Visiting Head. It further meant that PSOs often developed very different norms and standards, meaning that there was a huge disparity between the quality of experience offered by different PSOs, this in the long run led to the **walk-over** crisis which became endemic within PSOs.

“Before the PSO Coordinators it always felt like a competition between the PSOs, we didn't even want to share ideas with other PSOs because you didn't want other PSOs to do better than you...it was a numbers game, and the test for success was to see how many first-years your PSO would have.”

– Ruan du Toit (Former PSO Prim)

This isolated, competitive and unequal space created an uneven PSO environment, this meant that PSO members from different communities seldom had an opportunity to interact and commune. This was again a challenge for the PSO Coordinators, with the great question once again being; ‘how can we offer an integrated and well-structured PSO experience for all students?’



PSO Reforms

*“The overarching concern was that Stellenbosch University cannot claim to be a world-class university, yet it wasn’t offering the world-class experience to **all**. The idea, therefore, was to not create the same community experience, but to secure the same standard in whatever unique experience you are offered.”*

– Jethro Georgiades (PSO Coordinator)

After the decision was taken to end the practice of PSO Visiting Heads at the Stellenbosch Campus, the PSO Coordinator’s appointments marked the beginning of a new era for the PSO space, it was indeed the beginning of the **PSO Office**, which they have built since 2016, it began with only 2 (two) personnel and now it has 2 full-time staff, the Tygerberg Visiting Head, the Prim Committee PSO rep and 3 student assistants. The work, done in those early days, determined the foundation on which the PSO Office would be built.

“We had a conversation with all the 10 Prims, the decision lied with the PSO, they decided who they wanted as their Coordinator with the only prescription being that it must be Cluster-based.”

– Lisinda de Jager

Assigning Houses

The first task, which needed to be determined was the management style that the Coordinators needed to utilise in order to ensure that all 10 PSOs were given more than enough support.

It was determined that they would split the Houses, with each Coordinator being directly responsible for the coordination of one half of the PSOs, however, it was equally decided that the PSOs would be allowed to choose which Coordinator they wanted to be their direct PSO Coordinator, this allowed the Communities to be both included in the process of building this new partnership as well as it allowed students to determine which skills and personality were most compatible with their goals and outlook.

This required a lot of adjustment, both from the communities but also from the PSO Coordinators. This was the most comprehensive and enveloping support structure for communities besides the CSC and therefore, there were clear concerns about the ability of the Coordinators to support all the Houses comprehensively.

Universal access

“One of the most amazing things about the transition from Visiting Heads to the PSO Coordinators was that you could approach any of the two Coordinators and they would be willing to help, they always prioritised your matter even if they weren’t directly the Coordinator of your PSO” – Ruan du Toit

Soon, it became very clear that the decisive break from the previous management system meant that there should be complete coordination in the management of the PSOs, this meant that the full resources of the PSO Office would need to be distributed amongst the PSOs equally, this included support by both PSO Coordinators. This strategy was utilised because there was a need to rid the environment of the unevenness which was endemic, further, there was very limited capacity within the PSO Office and therefore all hands needed to be ‘on deck’.

Work Culture

“I was once invited into a meeting, into chaos, the mentors and HK were all speaking, non-stop – at the same time, there was no agenda, there wasn’t a Prim and they didn’t think it mattered.” – Lisinda de Jager

When the 2 PSO Coordinators were first appointed, they were Housed at 9 Bosman Street, this allowed them an opportunity to develop an independent working relationship, unique to them and different to the rest of the CSC. Fundamental to this working relationship was **collegiality**, trust and hard work. The PSO Coordinators had very complementary characteristics, which allowed them to function in a co-dependent manner where each Coordinator was able to zoom into the best elements of themselves. This role distribution allowed the PSO Office to become a dynamic yet balanced space, where ideas could be introduced, however imperfect, and they would be developed into practical and workable successes.

“Unlike in some other structures in the University, the PSO Office doesn’t spend 6 months thinking about an idea before execution, the ideas flow quickly, and the action is just as quick.” – Jethro Georgiades

The PSO Coordinators were further able to achieve this positive work culture because of the flexible working approach which they were allowed by their line Manger, who is

the Deputy Director of the Centre for Student Communities. This flexible-work approach is deemed as having flexible working hours with a greater focus on performance and results as opposed to clocking desk time. Further, the line manager gave the PSO Coordinators the space and guidance to develop the PSO space and their own roles into their full potential, this culture of allowing autonomy, dynamic growth and organic role development would be adopted by the PSO Coordinators themselves and they introduced it as part of their own working culture.

Strategy

“We had a coffee and decided – let's work with each other and for each other, that set the tone.” – Jethro Georgiades

The PSO Coordinators began working on the 1st of March 2016, as a result of their late start they inherited House Committees who had already been elected, and who had already completed most of their term. Therefore, for the first year, the PSO Coordinators determined that; as a strategic move the PSO Coordinators would concede power to the Communities and that the main focus (short term) of the PSO Coordinators would be to build relationships with the different leadership structures (HC, Mentors & Committees) within the different PSO communities. Both Coordinators made an effort to meet with their respective leaders regularly and to establish relationships with them. They also focused on building relationships with other communities and departments on campus. This allowed the Coordinators the opportunity to develop a working rhythm with the communities, one which would be based on collegiality, trust and a clear understanding of the role of friend and staff. This immersion into the PSO Communities would continue for the first two years in order to assimilate themselves into the environment and also to develop trust and understanding between the Coordinators and the communities.

A further strategic development took place during this time, it was the reorientation of the PSO Office as a dynamic space that was about listening and learning. The PSO Coordinators took a decisive step to make the PSO space more positive. These developments that characterised the PSO Coordinator's community-specific development (i.e. reviewing the practices which worked and those which were exclusionary and archaic, or re-evaluating the ethos of communities, their constitutions and language policies as well as ensuring that communities became more inclusive

and diverse spaces which break all unwelcoming practices) took up most of the time in the first two years of the development of the role, thereafter, the PSO Coordinators began shifting the focus less on building trust and relationships with the communities and more on the development of the PSO environment holistically, this meant that there needed to be a purposive change in orientation. The different roles of the PSO Coordinators continued to develop, with the workload rapidly increasing as goals were set and dynamic innovation began identifying new needs within the PSO environment, it soon became very clear that there was a shortage in staff capacity and that the task would require more people than just the 2 PSO Coordinators.



Strategic discussions

“PSOs were mostly about organising social events, there was less of a focus on the holistic development of well-rounded individuals and more focus on social interaction and fun.”

– Jethro Georgiades (PSO Coordinator)

THE REFORM

Prior to the reforms introduced within the PSO environment, there used to be a PSO **bosberaad**, which was rarely constructive, it was mostly about complaining about all the things which were wrong with the space. The PSO Coordinators decided that again, there needed to be a decisive break from this practice because it yielded very little progress for PSOs and it continued to be a wasted opportunity. In this regard, there was a move to reimagine the 'bosberaad' and convert it into a positive space where innovation and progress would thrive, this led to the establishment of the PSO Strategic Conference, which would be used as a platform where the strengths and objectives of PSOs would be explored and a tangible action plan would be developed.

New outlook

One of the biggest issues which the PSO Office identified as needing to be addressed was the manner in which PSOs functioned, their internal and external perceptions, and the manner in which these matters were to be discussed and planned. The PSOs were then encouraged to reorient themselves in terms of how they perceived themselves, this required them to create a new identity for themselves, one which was not dependent on a comparison with other communities. The StratCons became a platform for PSOs to evaluate themselves critically but also constructively, it allowed PSOs to consider a fresh outlook on their programmes, ethos and practices.



“Self insecurity – the PSOs rated themselves as second rate citizens when compared to residences, and we wanted to stop that and make PSOs independent of residences and completely get rid of the comparative environment.”

- Jethro Georgiades



A new vision

The new outlook on how PSOs would function was strengthened by the strategic planning which was done within the PSO space, this included the following aspects:

Unified approach

The practice of isolated and uneven development was a consequence of the lack of community cooperation, although the PSOs were often unified in their causes against residences, they had historically not been unified in their community development. The PSO Office began developing a series of norms and standards that would need to be adopted and adapted into each community, this ensured that communities were receiving the same type of support as well as developing the same standards in their offerings. The PSO Office was instrumental in this process with a significant portion of that community development being the result of the sharing of challenges and ideas during the strategic planning sessions in the StratCons. The opportunity to reflect on common issues and the different strategies that different communities had used in response to those issues created a platform for communities to learn from one another and thus grow together.

Walking over

“Walkovers often made us undo a lot of our earlier preparation.”

- Esona Mangcaka (Former PSO Office Admin Assistant)

The numbers competition which was endemic within the PSO environment was fuelled by the walkover process, which allowed newcomers who were unsatisfied with the PSO they had been allocated to, to transfer to another community of their choice. This competition often led to communities developing their offerings in such a manner that it would attract a high number of walkovers, this often meant that communities unevenly focused on aspects of their communities that focused on social events and entertainment as opposed to holistic development, further it meant that some PSOs developed cultures that catered to a particular type of philosophy and demographic and excluded many others, including those who had been allocated to those PSOs.

The Practice was flawed and needed changing. As PSOs began improving and reforming their spaces in a more unified approach the spaces became equal in terms

of the quality of experience they offered, even though each community retained its unique identity and experience. Once this was achieved and in order to address this issue, the PSO Office began reviewing the efficacy and necessity of the walkover process. The review examined survey data amongst other methods of review, the review process formed part of the broader strategy to revitalise the PSO environment, once the review was undertaken (the point of which was to determine to what extent the walkover process was still a useful practice within the PSO space) the review outcomes determined that PSOs and PSO members had outgrown their need for walking over.

In the result, the PSO Office began to systematically weed out the walkover process, this was done by: reducing the number of walkovers that would be accepted during Orientation Week, walking over was only allowed on a certain day; after the person had experienced the welcoming programme within their allocated community first. Further, PSOs were encouraged to ensure that students, who weren't allocated to their PSO, would be taken to the correct PSO and that poaching should not be condoned. These measures led to a drastic decrease in the number of walkovers and eventually in 2019 the walkover practice was ended.

“When PSOs are able to stop focusing on numbers and competing for that, they are better able to focus on developing their space to cater for the members which they do have.”

– Melt Laten (Former PSO Prim)





PSO Office Capacity

“The lack of a PSO Office resulted in PSOs receding into the shadow of residences.”

– Lithamsanqa Gqosha (PSO Office Administrative Assistant)

In the Pre-2016 era, PSOs were managed by Visiting Heads who provided institutional support to the different PSOs, this model functioned along the same wavelength as ResHeads. In 2016 when the PSO Coordinators were appointed, this fundamentally meant the institutional support functionaries were reduced to just two individuals. As reforms in the PSO space were introduced by the PSO Coordinators it became abundantly clear that the workload had developed to such an extent that the capacity of the PSO support infrastructure had to be expanded, this expansion was the true marker of the beginnings of the PSO Office.

**“I thrive off the
energy in the office
and I’m excited to
work there
everyday.”**

– Minette Sieberhagen

(PSO Office Research and Strategic Development Assistant)





Office Culture

Any successful organisation understands that the 'organisational culture' is a vital and integral part of it, a good culture is conducive to a healthy work lifestyle and benefits the structure in terms of retention, productivity and engagement, it further determines its ability to attract the best-skilled people as well as retain their current staff.

The PSO office has a very dynamic culture, it is best characterised as an agile-working culture that supports development, autonomy and transparency. This ensures that the working environment within the PSO office is one of overwhelming collegiality, mutual respect and trust. The PSO Office derives its energy from the vibrancy of its team members who often experiment with and who are involved in morphing the culture to make it more dynamic and vibrant.



"The PSO Office never made us feel inferior as student leaders, and this allowed us to approach them as colleagues and partners in the student development space."

*– Leone Wilkinson
(Prim Committee PSO Rep)*



"As a person who has worked in various other institutional structures, especially within DSAF, and having observed the different working cultures, I must admit; the PSO Office dynamic is unique and the collegiality is unlike anything you'll find in other institutional structure, the growth of the PSO Office is a testament to its dynamic and collegial environment."

– Yanga Keva

(PSO Content Development Assistant)

This is achieved through a transparent working style that values openness and direct communication; it ensures that any issue can be dealt with in an open and collegial manner. The PSO Office further ensures that its team members embrace its core values which in turn transcend down to the students that the PSO Office serves.

The strategies which are utilised by the PSO Office to create this dynamic culture include providing numerous opportunities for team-building activities, having a flat hierarchal approach that values autonomy, regular evaluation and engagement tracking. A dynamic meeting environment is also important, the PSO Office meetings often include quizzes, board games, mini-autobiographies and elements which encourage the team to build better relationships and a keen understanding of each other.



It is this unique and wholesome office culture that ensures that the PSO Office output is innovative, awe-provoking, dynamic and inclusive. The primacy of the work of the PSO Office is a fiery passion for selfless service to students. Indeed, serving students is the catalysing agent that ensures that the PSO Office works with agility, efficacy and innovation. The PSO Office culture also serves to ensure that team members develop as individuals; PSO Office team members, especially student assistants are provided with...and encouraged to; take up opportunities and initiate projects that will enhance their strengths and deepen their skills, this developmental aspect of the PSO Office seeks to ensure that anyone who comes into contact with the space gleans from it the Stellenbosch University graduate attributes.

The Team

The Expansion of the PSO Office included the addition of a few members to the team **(although helpful in lessening the workload, additional full-time staff members continues to be a vital and urgent necessity)** over time some of the functions of these additional members have grown to encompass many more functions than intended at their original formation, these changes in functions, therefore, require consistent re-evaluation and growth of the PSO Office capacity. **In the period 2017-2021 the following roles have been added to the PSO Office:**

1. **The PSO Office Administrative Assistant** – first introduced in 2017 the role is occupied by a student assistant who has the function of managing the administrative affairs of the PSO Office, including the preparation for meetings, StratCons as well as managing the administrative work during the welcoming period.
2. **The PSO Welcoming-period Assistant** – this role was introduced in 2017, to be a student assistant role that would operate for the sole purpose of assisting the PSO Office during the welcoming period, this role became especially important when the PSO Office began the **PSO hub** for the welcoming period. The role was later absorbed into the functions of the PSO Office Administrative assistant.
3. **The PSO Prim Committee Rep.** – either the Chairperson or Vice Chairperson of the Prim Committee becomes the PSO caretaker within the Prim Committee, this representational role is vital for the functioning of PSOs within the

university, the addition of this representative in the PSO Office space ensured that the PSO Office achieved a healthy balance between administrative personnel and student leadership representation.

4. **The PSO Office Research and Strategic Development Assistant** – this role was introduced in 2020 and is a student assistant role, it became especially important in the COVID-19 era, but also in assisting the PSOs and PSO Office in recalibrating themselves in terms of how they strategize, plan and build the PSO environment both in the interim period and in the longer term.
5. **The Osler (Tygerberg) Visiting Head** - this role was incorporated into the team in 2020, although Visiting Heads were discontinued in Stellenbosch Campus the Tygerberg PSO; Osler, retains the position, the inclusion of the Visiting Head ensures that strategic development and coordination of PSOs is inclusive of the Tygerberg Campus communities.
6. **The PSO Content Development Assistant** – this role was introduced in 2021, it is occupied by a student assistant as is primarily tasked with developing content for the PSO environment, this is done through improving the narrative around PSOs by reporting on the historic developments within the PSO space as well as reporting and broadcasting on the progress, initiatives and programmes that continue to be developed within the PSO space.

The work

The PSO Office prefers a flexible work culture, which allows each team member to develop their own work rhythm which ensures that team members take ultimate responsibility for controlling their own work output. The flexible work environment also ensures the personal development of team members as they navigate their role within the Office and mould it into a unique and dynamic role which they are capable of exploring to its most excellent superlative potential.

The expansion of the PSO Office allowed for further developments within the space, these initiatives helped to dramatically improve the PSO environment, some of the most notable recurring programmes include:

PSO welcoming hub – welcoming-week is an incredibly busy period for the entire university, the PSOs are especially encumbered with having to provide a comprehensive welcoming programme to thousands of students who come from

different areas. This necessitated the development of a dedicated location whereby PSO students, leaders and newcomers could find all the institutional support which was necessary during the welcoming period. The Hub assists students with identifying the PSO that they have been allocated to and assisting newcomers locate the venue at which they can catch up with their PSO's welcoming programme. The Hub also assists PSO students with all administrative issues related to PSO membership.

Strategic conversations – an invaluable characteristic of the PSO Office is its dynamic innovation. Ideas within the PSO office are presented, refined and executed with enthusiasm and a refreshing sense of swiftness. This process of thought-to-praxis is refined through the Office's strategic conversations which allow it to examine some of its stumbling blocks and that ensure that they are effectively dealt with. These strategic conversations permeate through Office meetings, PSO StratCons and even strategic engagements with university senior management. However uncomfortable the conversations and analysis are, the goal is clear – finding new ways to optimise the functioning of the PSO environment.

Administration – the careful management and coordination of events, programmes and messaging is often a neglected task within any organisation, yet it is fundamental to its functioning. The PSO Office being cognisant of the vitality of administrative management provides key administrative support to the communities, this includes communicating with external role players such as parents and strategic partners outside of the university.

Student Empowerment – a future-focused space such as the PSO Office is alive to the need to invest in its student leaders as a medium to achieve the goals and objectives of the PSO communities, the potential of the PSO space to ensure a transformative student experience is dependent on having sustainable student development programmes and allowing students to use the benefits of such initiatives to strengthen the PSO space. In this regard, the PSO Office creates opportunities where former PSO student leaders can form part of the PSO Office team or assist the team with planning initiatives such as training for incoming PSO leaders. This has proven beneficial, especially when former Primis are approached to provide guidance and advice to newer leaders, this ensures that knowledge and experience do not escape the space but they renourish it and allow it to grow to its potential.



Beyond 2020

“Moving into the future, one of the most important contributions which could arise from the PSO environment is in the realm of research, doing research will ensure that we validate the PSO space within a university such as ours which seeks to be research intensive. That will demonstrate the above and beyond contribution of PSOs to this institution.”

– Bryan Bergsteedt (Osler ‘Tygerberg Campus’ Visiting Head)

The brilliance and novelty behind PSOs as a concept remains the primary focus of the PSO Office, it is the foundation on which the PSO Office builds its initiatives and plans its future, with a transformative student experience being top of mind. 5 years into its existence and the PSO Office is still developing, it has grown exponentially, and its impact on the university is invaluable. Cognisant of that founding principle, the PSO Office continues to reimagine, innovate and plan dynamically for the future.

Upcoming PSO Office initiatives

As the operational centre for all PSOs at Stellenbosch University, the PSO Office is responsible for managing the PSO space, creating opportunities for growth, breaking all the stigmas and re-imagining the environment; working in partnership with PSO student leaders to create a more transformative experience. The Office seeks to continuously listen, learn and act, finding new ways to make Stellenbosch University more inclusive for students who do not live in residences, ensuring that they are granted access to the best elements of the PSO environment and working with all stakeholders to ensure that the goals and targets in the institution's vision 2040 are achieved.



"Cluster Hubs give PSOs a pathway to a meaningful campus experience."

– Lisinda de Jager

Cluster Hubs

When the University realised that PSO students required much more goal-directed interventions that would create more opportunities for interaction between the best elements of residential living and PSO students it created the Cluster initiative. This resulted in the building of Cluster Hubs which are facilities which allow students to gather, study, learn, interact and socialise, thus, providing a fertile environment for the integration of PSO students with residence students. Unfortunately, of the 7 Cluster communities, only 2 of them have Cluster Hubs. This in essence means that only a fraction of PSO students have the benefit of being fully immersed into their Cluster communities and in turn experiencing the full transformative university experience that instills the Stellenbosch University graduate attributes. Clusters help to integrate students and, at the moment, that integration is a limping endeavour. This uneven access to facilities is a major challenge for PSOs & the PSO Office and continues to be a top priority for the Office; which is continuously engaging with the relevant stakeholders and decision-makers to fast track the building of the other Cluster Hubs so as to ensure that all students benefit from the campus integration facilitated through cluster engagement.

Virtual engagement

The national lockdown brought on by the COVID-19 crisis meant that, to a large extent, a lot of community engagements that had been planned had to be abruptly cancelled. But an even greater consequence of the lockdown was that communities needed to recalibrate their thinking in order to ensure that they continue to bridge the gap between PSO students and the university experience. The PSO Office was instrumental in this regard, it coordinated the strategic recalibration of the PSO environment, in partnership with PSO student leaders. This led to **the virtual engagements** within PSO communities, these were a great success, the trends noted from those engagements indicate that there is an untapped potential in the virtual space that PSOs may utilise far beyond the crisis of the pandemic.

The PSO Office support, during this virtual period, was instrumental even in terms of ensuring leadership continuity, the PSO Office developed an **online voting system** for PSOs in order to allow PSOs to have their leadership elections virtually, this was instrumental in ensuring the continuity of the PSO space, and a further example of the invaluable contribution of a structured PSO Office which is capable of offering support to all PSO Communities.



“Aside from my sense of humour, my contribution in the PSO Office has largely been the introduction of and adaptation of technology into the space.”
– Knowledge Tyapile
(PSO Coordinator)



As PSO student leaders became more active during the lockdown and began engaging with their communities a few notable themes developed and proved to be fertile ground for community engagement, whether it was virtual talent shows, online game competitions, the creation of virtual community-specific media platforms or critical discussions; these engagements were an eyeopener as

it allowed the PSO space to realise that they were capable of improving community interaction through virtual platforms. Thus, by being able to grant their members universal access that is not inhibited by location and venues (through the use of virtual spaces) there is a potential to develop a **community in the cloud**.

African Commuter Students colloquium

In keeping with the values of listening, learning and acting, which are the pillars of the thought process within the PSO Office, it was determined that a strategic partnership with other Institutions of higher learning on the African continent may be helpful in providing new insights and strategies on how the Stellenbosch University PSO Office could possibly create new and dynamic solutions to the ever-changing challenges that PSOs encounter. This partnership initiative is aimed at providing a platform for other African Institutions to deliberate and listen to the experiences and techniques utilised by fellow institutions in order to explore how those strategies and techniques could be further developed and adapted for Stellenbosch University. The PSO Office is currently in the planning phase for an African Commuter Students Conference, where different institutions will be invited to engage on the common challenges faced by commuter students and the solutions thereof, this will provide a platform for the PSO Office to learn from these other institutions.

“This initiative will open so many doors for PSOs, not only because it will put us on the map (and the work we do deserves to be internationally recognised) but also because it will allow us to learn some of the best practices from other institutions and see how we can use those to enrich our own space.”

— Minette Sieberhagen

(PSO Office Research and Strategic Development Assistant)






Conclusion

“The purest form of love – doing something wholeheartedly without any expectation of gaining anything in return, that’s what PSO means to me.”

- Esona Mangcaka (Former PSO Prim)

Private Student Organisations embody the future-focused outlook of Stellenbosch University’s Vision 2040, as the University seeks to become a global leader in the space of higher education, as it becomes more inclusive, transformative, and impactful, PSOs are an indispensable investment. The growth of the University past its residence capacity means that PSOs are the institution’s best tool in ensuring that **all** its students enjoy a transformative and holistic university experience.



A group of students, mostly young women, are participating in an outdoor event on a university campus. They are wearing white t-shirts with 'SOLEIL NOIR' printed on them and face masks. Some are raising their hands. In the background, there is a building with a sign that says '100' and 'INGENIEURSW'. A banner with 'Soleil Noir' is also visible.

“Our greatest task is to identify PSO students’ needs and to meet them where they are.”

**Knowledge Tyapile
(PSO Coordinator)**

Final Remarks

This report was commissioned to reflect on the establishment and development of the PSO office, it has recounted the process of removing the Visiting Heads of PSOs in favour of two PSO Coordinators, it recounted the strategies and tactics of the PSO Coordinators who entered the space with a keen outlook to listen, learn and act.

The report further reflected on the expansion of the capacity of the PSO Office, which developed from being a partnership between Two PSO Coordinators to a team of 7 people; staff and students who are dedicated to serving students selflessly and wholeheartedly. The report also reflected on the Office Culture of the PSO Office which is characterised as being based on collegiality, autonomy, engagement and evaluation. This office culture is key to the productivity and dynamic innovation of the PSO Office that has managed to reform the PSOs at Stellenbosch University from being isolated, self-insecure and educationally-void structures into inclusive communities where holistic individual and community development is achieved through social interaction, educational and leadership opportunities.

When one examines the PSO environment and its developments within Stellenbosch University, one thing becomes clear, the space develops when there are decisive interventions and changes in thinking. The PSO Office not only thrives on its dynamic innovation, but its lifeblood is its ability to adapt to change, inspire change and act to introduce change. The PSO Office in partnership with student leaders and PSO members; creates a path for Stellenbosch University to become Africa's leading research-intensive university, that is globally recognised as excellent, inclusive and innovative where knowledge is advanced in service to society.

