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## A Case for Embedding the Student Institutional Transformation Committee at Stellenbosch University

Held: 15 October 2020

10:00 – 14:00 via Microsoft Teams

**REPORT OF THE  
INAUGURAL STUDENT**

**TRANSFORMATION INDABA 2021**

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# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

**COVID-19** - Coronavirus Disease 2019

**CSCD** - Centre for Student Counselling and Development

**DSAF** - Division for Student Affairs

**HEMIS** - Higher Education Management Information Systems -Institutional

**ICBC** - Committee for Business Continuity in COVID-19 pandemic

**ITC** - Institutional Transformation Committee

**NSFAS** - National Student Fund Aid Scheme

**SITC** - Student Institutional Transformation Committee

**SU** - Stellenbosch University

## INTRODUCTION



image credited to Stellenbosch University Transformation Office

Babalwa Gusha, Programme Coordinator at the Stellenbosch University Transformation Office (TO) started and highlighted that the theme of the inaugural student indaba is to make a case to imbed the Student Institutional Transformation Committee (SITC) within Stellenbosch University (SU). To embed the SITC is an attempt to meaningfully recognise and foreground the student voice in transformation issues. Babalwa underlined that the SITC struggles to attain the institutional recognition and reputation it should have in a streamlined University transformation system. Students, student leaders, academics and support environments are not aware of the existence of the SITC and how the SITC can be used as a platform to influence and drive transformation at SU. As a result of this lack of awareness around the SITC, other University environments create structures that duplicate the institutional role of the SITC.

Babalwa explicated the guiding document for the SITC, which encapsulates the terms of reference and founding values.<sup>1</sup> The SITC has its inception in the need for meaningful student contributions to the Institutional Transformation Committee (ITC),<sup>2</sup> as there are not enough student leaders that serve on the ITC. The lack of representation pushes the student voice to the periphery of transformative change at SU. In addition, student leaders have expressed concerns that their contribution to transformation lacks formal channels and is insufficiently recognised by the institution. It is for these reasons that the ITC recommended the establishment of the SITC.

Babalwa signposted that the operations of the SITC will allow student leaders to contribute meaningfully to the transformation agenda at SU in a manner that is consistent with student needs and within the institutional parameters of policy and procedure.<sup>3</sup> In essence, the student ITC recognises that there needs to be a formalised agreement and understanding between SU transformation stakeholders, emphasising how their work feeds into each other in order for transformation to progress at SU. A collaborative approach will aid in creating cross-cutting solutions throughout SU, as opposed to working in silos. Therefore, the indaba served as a collaborative conceptualisation engagement to flesh out the various possibilities and difficulties with establishing the SITC as a credible institutional resource for transformation, a thinking environment and springboard for implementation.

<sup>1</sup> Guiding Document available from Babalwa Gusha on e-mail request at [bgusha@sun.ac.za](mailto:bgusha@sun.ac.za).

<sup>2</sup> The ITC advises the Rector's Management Team on matters relating to transformation at SU. The ITC terms of reference are available at <http://www.sun.ac.za/english/transformation/institutional-transformation-committee>.

<sup>3</sup> The guiding document stipulates the objectives, composition, powers and privileges, function and mode of operation of the SITC. It should be understood within the bigger frame of the the SU Vision 2040 and the Strategic Framework 2019-2024, which is available at <http://www.sun.ac.za/english/about-us/strategic-documents>. SU Vision 2040 is guided by the Stellenbosch University Transformation Plan, available at [http://www.sun.ac.za/english/transformation/Documents/Transformation%20Plan%20\(Update%20May%202019\).pdf](http://www.sun.ac.za/english/transformation/Documents/Transformation%20Plan%20(Update%20May%202019).pdf).

The indaba focused on five sub-themes that were identified as pressing transformation issues that have the potential to be addressed comprehensively through an institutionally embedded and recognised SITC. The sub-themes were facilitated by students and attended by various staff members and students. The report encapsulates the main topics of discussion under each theme, with concomitant recommendations as put forth by the participants. Prior to the sub-themes, a plenary dialogue was held between the outgoing and incoming SRC Transformation Officers to make a case from their perspectives to imbed the SITC. This was followed by five breakaway discussions repeated in two cycles, and participants had to attend a different discussion per cycle. The breakaway discussions centred on (1) the role of critical engagement at SU, (2) the problem of walk-ins and the need to institutionalise the assistance of walk-ins during registration, (3) embedding empathy in our shared environments and interactions, (4) mental health and (5) transformation lessons during COVID-19. The indaba's objectives were to raise awareness of the SITC's existence, engage on opportunities for relationship building across different University structures, whether and to what extent transformation could be streamlined, and what a move from terms of reference to a constitution can mean to the SITC.



photo from Leanne Stander

## DISCUSSIONS

### OVERARCHING THEME - A Case for Embedding the SITC at SU

*A dialogue between the outgoing SRC Transformation Officer, Jeff Ngoben, and incoming SRC Transformation Officer, Viwe Kobokana.*

The dialogue centred on diagnosing the structures and working relationships pertaining to transformation at SU. Jeff started the discussion by highlighting the challenges he faced within the University structures of transformation during his student leadership duration.

### THE FIRST CHALLENGE: ONLY SOME FORMS OF VOICING TRANSFORMATION ISSUES ARE BEING RECOGNISED BY SU

Jeff identified that antagonistic forms of dialogue, such as shouting and striking during his student experience, were a result of the inaccessibility of University structures to recognise students' concerns faithfully.

He detected that student concerns were suppressed, as there was no adequate and streamlined structure to engage with students. Furthermore, the suppression of student concerns was exacerbated by a University

culture that micro-manages critical student voices. He argued that a platform such as the SITC could have been a valuable platform where students could release their concerns, pain, confusion, anger and possible solutions.

He used the language policy as an example to show how universal and substantive ethics are interrelated but distinct within SU. He maintained that universal ethics would establish SU as an international

institution, but problems arise in substantive ethics that guide student services. His experience is that there is only a certain type of student that is being listened to. He therefore called for the recognition of every student's human dignity to participate meaningfully in issues that affect them. He used the development of isiXhosa as a language at SU to further illustrate his point. For him, the development of isiXhosa raises profound institutional ethical issues

### THE SECOND CHALLENGE: ONLY CERTAIN TYPES OF TRANSFORMATION ISSUES SIGNAL INSTITUTIONAL FOCUS

Jeff voiced the challenge of SU's inability to build relationships across various structures. His experience was that people did not want to work together, as everyone had their perceptions of transformative expectations. For example, student hunger should not only be addressed through a top-down channel, but spaces of engagement should be opened up in order for students to voice what they need.

He argued that a great inhibitor of relationship building

is the institutional belief that different divisions work with different issues. This belief results in divisions not taking any steps or responsibility toward a transformation issue. He suggested that the solution is not to isolate structures, but rather to have continued engagements on what role each division can and should play. In this way, the SITC could be a solution to ensure collaborative work across University structures that centres the student's voice.

### THE THIRD CHALLENGE: ONLY CERTAIN TYPES OF TRANSFORMATION ISSUES SIGNAL INSTITUTIONAL FOCUS

Jeff also flagged the tendency of SU to distort real issues and only give credence to populist outcries. He later explained that he understood populism as a form of propaganda, where some issues are foregrounded at the expense of other issues. For example, a real issue that students face is the spiritual development of cultures outside those familiar to or entrenched in SU culture. He mentioned that the issue of the appointment of a sangoma could greatly benefit from an approach where different structures with different knowledge sets engage on the issue in an SITC setting. Another example where the SITC could help, Jeff mentioned, would be to assist in the sustainability and maintenance of issues that require continued attention across various years. He finds it problematic that the SRC can decide, out of their own accord, when, for example, the special needs portfolio should be included and when not. For him, the SITC would be a good committee to focus on different issues where a plurality of voices can add to the knowledge and experience basis that would drive policy and implementation strategies. He mentioned the example of student walk-ins, where a plurality of voices within a SITC setting could ensure that, for example, the approach focuses on often overlooked interests, such as students from rural communities.



Source-Twitter

Outgoing SRC Transformation Officer, Jeff Ngoben

## THE FOURTH CHALLENGE: THE LACK OF AN ACCOUNTABILITY FORUM FOR TRANSFORMATION ISSUES

Jeff mentioned the problem of student leaders who charge first-year or walk-in students for assistance with the University structures. For him, this is a form of corruption that staff members are not aware of. He maintained that the SITC would be a good accountability forum to flag such an issue and where practical solutions can be tabled to the broader ITC. Moreover, the SITC is a committee where students can hold each other accountable and use their rich field of relationships with various faculties and the

registrar division to address issues of accountability. Some participants pressed the issue of student leaders exploiting vulnerable students. Babalwa flagged the issue and said she would personally look into the accusations.

Viwe, the incoming SRC transformation officer, offered three interrelated perspectives of the possibility to embed the SITC to activate meaningful transformation at SU.



## THE FIRST POSSIBILITY: UNDERSTANDING THE SITC'S ASPIRATIONS WITHIN THE INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK OF TRANSFORMATION

Viwe highlighted that the overarching Transformation Plan defines transformation as "the intentional and structured process of profound change of the university's places, people and programmes".<sup>4</sup> For her, this implies change that has no resemblance to the University's oppressive and exclusionary past. She stated that the SITC's aspirations are grounded in this institutional commitment to transformation. However, thus far the formation of task teams and forums has posed great opportunities for transformation, but the desired outcomes of transformation remain slow and an exclusionary status quo remains stubborn to change. She stated that engagements that ensue during institutionalised

forums should be reminded of their mandate to be intentional about transformative work.

Viwe emphasised that the SITC is a committee that could assist, drive or secure collaboration on intentional transformation within the SU community. She stressed that the SITC should be a proactive and responsive committee that could collectively identify areas to be addressed and redressed. However, she signalled that the identification phase should also be followed through, with practical solutions that could be posed to the ITC. Her call is that the SITC should be taken seriously by the ITC in order for issues to be tabled and addressed and redressed sufficiently at

the rectorate. She used the example of the monitors' reports during welcoming week. The monitors' reports are notorious for not being taken seriously by the respective communities. She held that the SITC could collaboratively work to consolidate years

of reports to flag and assist identified communities.

<sup>4</sup> See footnote 3 above for the link to the Transformation Plan

## THE SECOND POSSIBILITY: UNDERSTANDING OF THE FUNCTIONALITY OF THE SITC WITHIN THE INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK OF TRANSFORMATION



*Incoming SRC Transformation Officer, Viwe Kobokana.*

Viwe stated that, although the SITC is already institutionalised, its footprint and reach are not as inclusive and elaborate as desired to reckon faithfully with the many transformation issues students face. For this reason, she recommended that the current terms of reference be changed to a constitution that informs duties, responsibilities and accountability mechanisms.

Viwe proceeded to highlight the SITC's functionality in relation to other structures. She envisages the SITC not only to serve as an advisory committee to the ITC. The SITC should also be a feeding committee where student's concerns can be given appropriate weight and recognition. When the SITC is operational and functioning, the concerns and practical solutions and implementations posed by the SITC should be furthered and bolstered by the ITC and subsequently the rectorate. The make-up of the SITC is therefore critical and should entail a plurality of voices –

from societies to non-positional leaders. She indicated that societies typically tend to cluster issues and assist greatly in condensing critical issues of especially marginalised bodies.

It is disheartening for her to see how underutilised the SITC has been in the institution thus far. She used the example of the Division for Student Affairs (DSAf) Transformation Charter, which is a pledge to create a transformative, welcoming, inclusive and decolonised environment for all at SU. The Charter serves as a guideline for the DSAf Transformation Forum. Viwe used the creation of the Charter as an example of the problem of isolated work regarding transformation. She stated that, if the SITC was given a proper institutional place, there would not have been the splintering of a separate Charter. She contends that the splintering of transformation work has the effect of delegitimising structures that already exist, such as the SITC. A question was raised how the SRC Transformation Officer will ensure collaboration with the DSAf Transformation Charter and not dismiss it. Viwe stated that the duplication of structures does not work. However, she said that the DSAf Transformation Forum is a welcome initiative and that overlapping and collaborative work should ensue, but not in an isolated manner where the one structure delegitimises the work of the other structure. She also warned against the hierarchisation of structures. She said that she is representing the SITC on the DSAf Transformation Charter Sub-Committee and there is therefore a continuation and sustainability of work between the DSAf and the SITC.

## THE THIRD POSSIBILITY: A STREAMLINED APPROACH TO TRANSFORMATION WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE SITC CAN BENEFIT SU ON VARIOUS FRONTS

Viwe stated that a streamlined approach to transformation within the structure of the SITC could firstly assist the institution with the direction of transformation issues. She underscored that there is no environment where transformation issues can be aired collaboratively, where leaders and stakeholders can discuss and flesh out similar problems. The SITC can regulate issues to be directed and addressed within the appropriate structures.

Secondly, she highlighted that a streamlined approach to transformation could benefit the reach and influence of transformative change. She stated that, when the SITC is embedded within the University structures, there is a greater possibility of reaching more people. Currently, various splintered engagements tend to have the same people. This tendency causes attendance to become strained and ultimately results in worn-out students and

staff. Her dream is that, eventually, the SITC will foster a culture of integrating transformation issues at the institution.

Thirdly, a streamlined approach to transformation can strengthen authentic inclusivity within the transformative processes. She argued that a bigger and more representative committee such as the SITC

would emphasise the value of a plurality of voices. A deliberative forum such as the SITC will prioritise marginalised bodies that are ordinarily overlooked in decision-making structures. She also argued that SU's intersectional identities' diversity is more likely to be legitimatised in an institutionalised space such as the SITC.

## SUB-THEME 1 - Walk-ins: A need to institutionalise the assistance of walk-in students during registration

Facilitators: Zizo Vokwana, Manqoba Mdau and Nomzamo Buthelezi

### CONTEXT

Walk-ins are an issue that affects most South African universities. It has two interrelated dimensions. Firstly, students who are not formally accepted into a University programme or accommodation facility are deemed a "walk-in" case, necessitating acceptance into a programme or University accommodation. Secondly, walk-ins also relate to registration fees or an upfront payment required at registration. SU has done away with a registration fee, but does have an upfront fee, where the first instalment of the fees is payable before or during the registration period. Students who receive financial aid are exempt from this first instalment. There is also provision made for students who have financial difficulties but do not receive financial aid. Students with financial difficulties, but who do not qualify for NSFAS funding, may make arrangements to pay the first instalment over three months. Considering that applications at SU close at the end of a previous academic year, the University does not necessarily consider walk-in applications.



Zizo Vokwana

### MAIN POINTS OF DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Participants in the indaba identified that the walk-in issue at SU is mainly related to accommodation. Many students who get admitted into a formal degree programme and University residence cannot secure accommodation as they are unable to afford the upfront deposit for accommodation. This problem results in an administrative difficulty, where the backpacker system becomes saturated. This leaves the onus on student activists and organisations to find means to assist with accommodation. It is worth noting that many of the students with this issue usually have confirmed funding (e.g., from NSFAS), which generally confirms that the student will be funded, but the confirmation comes after the deadline to pay the deposit. Whilst many of these students get assisted with finding accommodation, many do not get assistance due to space availability in University residences.
  - Recommendations:
    - A recommendation was made that students who meet the NSFAS criteria for funding, whether they are on NSFAS or not, should be prioritised in residence placements. The recommendation is motivated by the fact that residences tend to have numerous students who can afford private accommodation or have family accommodation in Stellenbosch.

- A staff member who deals with residence placements said that students who are unable to pay the deposit after being provisionally accepted into their programme and a University residence can email their colleagues and mention that they are unable to pay the deposit and it will be waived. Other participants responded that the possibility of waiver is not well-publicised. The recommendation from other participants is that SU should do more work to communicate this possibility widely.

- Participants also highlighted how the digital divide and COVID-19 exacerbate issues surrounding walk-in students. The digital divide is characterised by people who do and do not have access or the capability to use modern information technology, such as the telephone, television or the internet. University applications and financial opportunities are mostly advertised and disseminated through digital means. Many (prospective) students do not have proper means to access information or apply to higher learning institutions. Internet cafés have been instrumental in closing the gap of the digital divide; however, with the closure of many businesses during the pandemic and with many having to stay at home, the digital divide has been on the increase and this greatly halts prospective and current students' ability to communicate with SU effectively.



Nomzamo Buthelezi

- Recommendations:

- Participants have strongly recommended that walk-ins be permitted in 2021 and beyond, subject to practicality in the context of SU's admission system. The specific recommendation is to for the administration to conceptualise a practical and inclusive approach to walk-ins. Some participants noted the extra complexity of international students at registration who should not be overlooked in a practical process.
- A lecturer also recommended that postgraduate walk-in applications should not only be reviewed by administrative staff, but also by academic staff. This is because administrative staff lack the specific knowledge of specialisation fields the supervisor can provide. Many postgraduate students are turned away as the academic staff did not review the possibility of supervising the student.

## SUB-THEME 2 - The Role of Critical Engagement in Residences Specifically and in the University as a Whole

Facilitator: Fanelesinonge Philasande Ndebele

### CONTEXT

Fanele and participants stressed the recent history of critical engagement within the Stellenbosch community as a whole. Participants indicated that, historically, critical engagement was not prioritised or popular. There is a noticeable shift since the beginning of Open Stellenbosch and the Fallist Movements nationwide that stressed the importance of critical engagement as part of meaningful socio-economic change. The main points of the discussion centred on the what, who and how of critical engagement that either enable or disable meaningful engagement. Participants stressed that these three dimensions of critical engagement are interrelated within the SU community.

### MAIN POINTS OF DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- The WHAT of critical engagement:

- The call for tough conversations within SU is still not well received, as people easily feel attacked based on identities such as race, gender or sexual orientation. When students voice systemic issues, such as white privilege, patriarchy and decolonisation, other students and staff do not want to engage as they feel attacked or fear attack. This tendency impedes the quality and depth of what can be critically engaged with.
- Participants indicated that critical engagement is a powerful transformative tool, but SU should be hesitant to expect engagement to automatically and inauthentically fix socio-economic problems. Some participants warned that critical engagement should not replace the role of student activism as a force of change. Activism has greater potential to assist in institutional cultural shifts, of which critical engagement is a mere component of the difficult process of change.
- Participants stressed that it is important to acknowledge that Stellenbosch is not a homogenous group and still reflects many fault lines of race, gender and socio-economic disadvantage that influence what we critically engage with. The recommendation is that we should be hesitant to address problems by assuming that all identities experience the same issues.

- Recommendation:

- Participants recommended that critical engagement will inevitably cause discomfort for all identities and should not result in apathy toward formulating what we critically engage with. The recommendation is that SU should embrace a culture of deep listening that will activate a process of confronting personal privileges that will help in formulating what we engage with.

- The WHAT of critical engagement:

- At SU, the prevailing pattern remains where only a small number of students and staff engage on critical issues. Participants indicated that this pattern usually aligns with who feels comfortable in conversations and isolates themselves from challenging engagements due to their privilege. Participants mentioned that it is worrying that the students who should be at critical engagements are not, and they are not willing to listen to other perspectives, with resistance to different opinions remaining..

- Recommendations:

- The recommendation is that leadership across the University should model ownership of having tough and necessary conversations to foster a culture where all voices are being heard. Some participants have indicated that SU should be wary of consistently using “all voices”, as this sentiment reflects that the privileged majority of the student corps should remain comfortable in difficult conversations. The recommendation is to continuously embrace and



Fanele Ndebele

listen to dissenting voices, without institutionally straining or stereotyping dissenting voices.

- The HOW of critical engagement:

- The discussion was dominated by the need to find innovative ways of having critical engagements that will assist in addressing the problems of what and who we critically engage with. Participants also indicated that critical engagements are not isolated events and relate to the institutional lack or embrace of empathy. They noted that a lack of empathy stops people from engaging. The invitation is for SU to find innovative ways to let students and staff care about critical issues. Various participants indicated that a culture of critical engagement is foreclosed in academic spaces, where lectures tend to shy away from critical issues.

- Recommendations:

- The recommendation is that critical engagement should be part of everyday student and University life.
- A participant indicated that SU should pay more attention to how critical issues are introduced for engagement. Practical guidance from a participant was to find indirect and informal ways to introduce critical issues. For example, some residences placed posters or quotes of contentious issues on their dining tables to invite students to have difficult conversations in their interpersonal interactions
- A recommendation is that SU should foster a culture where students and staff can learn and say the wrong thing. Others recommended that students should also be empowered to inform and educate themselves on critical issues to counter the exhaustion that some students and staff face who always have to educate and help people unlearn harmful and unhelpful behaviours and beliefs.
- Participants specified that good facilitation is a practice the University can invest in.



SU students

## SUB-THEME 3 - Embedding Empathy in How we Interact and Understand Each Other in our Shared Spaces

Facilitator: Gideon Basson

### CONTEXT

Participants indicated that SU leaders and students increasingly use the language of “empathy” and “compassion” in communications and strategic designs, especially crises or loss. Participants raised concerns that SU uses these concepts without really embracing what these tools require of us. Other times, participants indicated that SU uses empathy and compassion to disguise or conceal underlying issues that must be addressed. For example, institutionalised social ills, such as the privileging of certain identities along the axes of white heteropatriarchal norms, will not be upended when we ask students to empathise with these issues and not engage in structural interventions required to change them.



Gideo Basson

# EMBEDDING EMPATHY



stock foto pixabay - empathy

## MAIN POINTS OF DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Participants highlighted that empathy's etymology is in German, meaning to "feel with" or "into". Participants contrasted this understanding with the prevailing institutional culture at SU as one of sympathy, which means to "feel for". This can be patronising, prescriptive and expecting students to assimilate to a dominant norm or standard. A real institutional culture of empathy would also not establish a mere accommodating or tolerating environment. Empathy will activate compassion, of which the etymology is in the Latin verb that means "to suffer with". Empathy can therefore be a detecting device to understand how a system excludes, activating compassionate measures. Participants identified that empathy can be a transformative tool and a particular opportunity for the institution to perceive, listen and do things empathetically. Empathy should not be a reactive measure, but a building block of the University, and the nurturing of an empathetic culture rests on the University community as a whole. Participants voiced that empathy requires SU to engage with power, especially how individuals are being treated, advantaged or disadvantaged in relation to entrenched power structures. Empathy would require students and University leaders to find innovative ways to listen to students' and staff members' perspectives that might not necessarily be easy to hear or know. The perspective-taking process requires the suspension of judgement and taking the perspective as the truth, without any reservations.

A participant indicated that empathy suspends assimilationist tendencies of inclusivity, where we empathise with special needs students in residences and want to make them feel "included". For example, a participant shared a story where a group of first-year men lifted a student in a wheelchair over a barrier during a first-year dream launch, and the disabled student was given a loud round of applause and cheer. The student in the wheelchair responded, "please stop clapping, it is a disgrace that I must be lifted as the building is not accessible for me. It is not an achievement to be lifted."

- Recommendations:
  - Participants indicated that the institution should be aware of language when empathising with someone. Some participants indicated that SU often makes people feel weak and powerless by constantly asking to help them in patronising ways to boost SU's image and perception in the public.
  - Participants stressed that the critical challenge of empathy as a transformative tool is to get structures, policies and leaders also to have empathy. Participants discussed the possibilities of how empathy can serve as a starting point for real and meaningful

universal design, with the main tenets of equitable use, flexibility in use, simple and intuitive use, accessible information, tolerance for error, low physical effort and manageable size and space for different approaches and use. Universal design driven by empathy will not see these tenets as "add-ons", but necessary structural changes that will enable everyone in the community to flourish.

- Participants also explored on whom the onus for empathy within the institution rests. A participant mentioned that currently it is mostly minority groups that always have to exercise empathy. This leads to empathy fatigue in some staff and student members. The invitation was to people and structures with the power to lead the way and show examples of empathy. A participant also indicated that the absence of empathy is also recognised by what SU is not doing and saying.
- Participants formulated the inhibitors of a culture of empathy at SU that should be tackled: the inability to be aware of privilege and inequality, the denial of someone's truth, avoiding difficult conversations, arrogance and bad listening skills.
- Participants explored the enablers of empathy and recommended that SU work on the following: a culture of honesty, openness and accountability, taking collective responsibility for empathy, compassion as a step further than empathy, events that embrace decolonial story and truth-telling, a critical awareness of shame, and using empathy as a detecting device in opening up space where people can speak about their disadvantage.



## SUB-THEME 4 - Mental Health

Facilitator: Paul Joubert



Paul Joubert

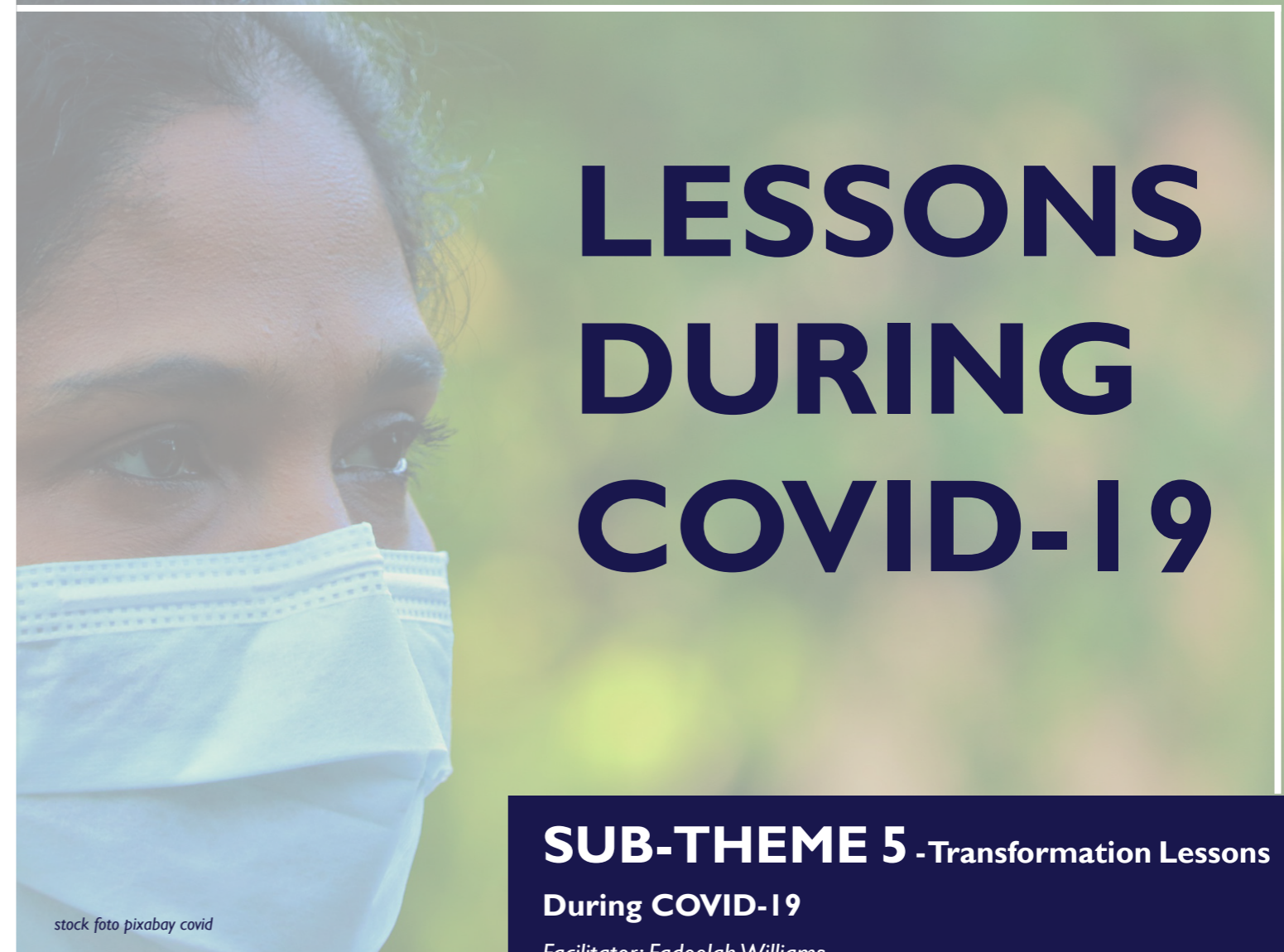
## CONTEXT

A participant confirmed that on the SU campus there had been an increase in mental health-related issues. There is a growing acknowledgement that students and staff members increasingly work and operate under severe psychosocial strain. The pandemic also exacerbated the issues of mental health, as lockdown caused intolerable isolation.

## MAIN POINTS OF DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- The facilitator opened the discussion by noting that students have seen an uptake in mental health issues during lockdown and online learning. The critical issue that was explored was whether the University structures adequately responded to prevent these issues. The participants stressed that SU currently only addressed mental health issues within a reactive framework.
  - Recommendations:
    - The recommendation is that SU should be more proactive in assisting students and staff, especially during the pandemic. A practical recommendation was tabled that a peer-to-peer programme has proven very effective. The issue was raised on how to ensure that such a programme is utilised by campus.

- A participant noted that peer-to-peer mentoring groups could assist in alleviating this problem. Participants pointed out that the mentor wellbeing system has proved to be effective during distance learning as well. Mentor groups allowed participants to share and find commonality in the anxieties they were experiencing. Participants indicated that it is important to ensure that all the leadership structures, such as mentors, are continuously performing their support duties. The recommendation is that peer-to-peer mentoring should be extended beyond newcomers and should also be available to senior students. A practical suggestion was the implementation of a safe space where seniors can share their thoughts and feelings. It is envisioned that a discussion topic is posed, and seniors can share their thoughts in a semi-structured discussion. This could be implemented immediately, both online and in person.
  - Participants also noted that, although support groups sometimes form naturally, it is necessary to establish support groups, especially for students who will not take the initiative to create those spaces. Residence and PSO student leaders expressed that they could not do much more in their communities to promote social interaction, other than scheduling online video conferences. Participants stressed the need for SU to lead innovative approaches and open up online spaces for students to interact. Examples that were tabled are to use less-formal social media platforms, like Instagram instead of MS Teams, for having critical engagements.
- Participants underscored the prevailing stigma attached to mental health issues at SU.
    - Recommendations:
      - SU can do more to urgently create a culture of openness regarding mental health and create structures to prevent and aid in treating mental health issues. A practical recommendation is to create an online platform that specifically focuses on mental health support and information in the context of higher education. Participants noted that, in most cases, SU makes resources available, but these are underutilised. The recommendation is that access to information on mental health is an inadequate approach, and students and staff should also be informed on how to utilise the resources effectively.
  - Student participants discussed whether staff members had shown empathy towards students during the national lockdown. Student participants indicated that the approaches differ from faculty to faculty. Unfortunately, it was noted that faculties' culture has an impact on the perception of mental health awareness and the approach each faculty adopts. Participants indicated that, generally, faculties are resistant toward dissenting voices that challenge current approaches to mental health concerns.
    - Recommendations:
      - Participants recommended that faculty management bodies make more students feel comfortable approaching lecturers.
      - Participants recommended that there should be an increased institutional focus on structures, policies and systemic-level solutions instead of only on individual levels. Participants also indicated that the SITC can assist in collaborative work on a campus-wide preventative and community-based peer-to-peer support approach.
  - Participants extensively discussed stressors within student life that negatively influence mental wellness. Student participants stressed that the pandemic exacerbates academic and environmental stressors.
    - Recommendations:
      - Participants indicated that the shared experiences of academic hardship are alleviated through an on-campus community. The recommendation is that SU can do more to reach out to students on their academic wellbeing.



## SUB-THEME 5 -Transformation Lessons During COVID-19

Facilitator: Fadeelah Williams

### CONTEXT

The global pandemic has highlighted the many issues SU already faces regarding meaningful transformation and has opened up new areas of concern. Participants specifically emphasised the structural inequalities that were highlighted and enlarged due to the pandemic. It is therefore important to reflect on what we learn from COVID-19. The participants highlighted that the pandemic aids SU to reflect on practices that can be abandoned when returning to a different world. Moreover, the pandemic allows SU to reflect what our apartness due to COVID-19 taught us about our community when we are together. During the discussion, several urgent themes emerged. The themes centred on what role SU performed in supporting and aiding students and staff during (1) online learning, (2) mental health, and (3) the health of students and staff.



Fadeelah Williams

### MAIN POINTS OF DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Online learning:
  - Participants acknowledged the efforts of SU in supporting student academic success through the ICBC. The ICBC ensured the issuing of laptops and data, the implementation

of a fourth assessment opportunity and the relaxation of HEMIS requirements. While these measures assisted many students, participants indicated that students living in rural areas without cellular service have not benefited from these measures. Moreover, some students waited for considerable periods to receive their learning devices and were academically disadvantaged.

- Recommendation:

- The recommendation is that SU should continue opening up channels for students to voice their online learning difficulties and that students should not be approached with an overly bureaucratic or top-down culture. Practical recommendations were the continued use of surveys to gather information and assist students

- Participants indicated that the flexibility of online learning was mostly positively perceived by students and staff. Participants observed that there was an increase in attendance and engagement for academic and social events. For example, the 2020 SRC voting recorded an impressive voter turnout. However, students who experienced severe problems with online learning included a lack of correspondence from certain lectures and confusing layout of online platforms.

- Recommendation:

- There should be better oversight, accountability and support for academic staff to consistently and fairly communicate with students. A practical example was raised to outline channels that will deal with unresponsive lecturers and improve the interface of online platforms to reduce the anxiety and fatigue often related to online learning

- Mental health:

- Participants specified that many students were forced to choose between their families and academic obligations. As a result, many students who had to stay in University accommodation were subjected to intense isolation for months that negatively affected their wellbeing. Participants indicated that the CSCD did not act proactively enough to support these students.

- Recommendation:

- The recommendation was that there should be an extensive follow-up to these students. The participants recommended that the CSCD consider webinars and interactive video-chat opportunities to increase the accessibility of support platforms.

- Health and safety of students and staff:

- Participants mentioned that the Human Resources Division and Campus Health Division are collaborating to improve working conditions for staff regarding protection from COVID-19.

- Recommendation:

- Participants recommended that this protection be better extended to Tygerberg students. It was suggested that SU does not provide medical insurance for medical students doing their practical work.



SU Students Parliament (Source - SU Transformation Office)

## CONCLUSION

This report fleshed out the many challenges and possibilities an institutionally embedded, recognised and functional SITC could pose to SU's important transformation agenda. The specific possibilities it advances are to ensure a streamlined approach where a plurality of student voices can collaboratively work on critical transformation issues. However, the success of an SITC depends on a greater University community that centres the concerns of students and embraces a culture of dissent and engagement. Moreover, an embedded SITC requires leaders and people in power to consistently model and open up spaces to have difficult transformation conversations. The SITC can also assist in implementing strategies to accelerate intentional transformation at SU. Furthermore, the SITC could nurture an integrated approach for addressing issues surrounding critical engagement, walk-ins, mental wellness, a culture of empathy and deepening inequalities and disadvantage.

