

NEWS FROM:



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UCT student council uses apartheid strategy to pull students together

Students and staff at the University of Cape Town were shocked in February 2010 when they found stickers declaring certain parts of the campus “Whites Only” “Asians Only” and “Blacks Only”. The apartheid-style stickers were pasted on places like benches, banking ATMs, and entrances to lecture theatres and libraries. If outraged students tore them down, they later found them replaced, sometimes on the same day.

It soon emerged that the stickers were part of a week-long campaign run by the Students’ Representative Council (SRC) to spark debate on identity and race. During that week the SRC hosted events to encourage students to examine their own thinking on these issues. They screened a documentary film comparing the past and present South Africa, and Deputy Vice-Chancellor Professor Crain Soudien spoke on transformation and diversity.

“These first few weeks of the university year are when students make friends,” said Saif Islam, the SRC member responsible for transformation. “We wanted to challenge students to talk to people outside their culture.” He said that in residences, on the steps of Jameson Square and in food courts students tend to congregate around “black tables” and “white tables”, and hang out in racial cliques. “Whether they are comfortable living like that is a different question, but certainly that does not promote reconciliation and integration. We weren’t trying to make anyone feel like a racist, but to take a creative approach that would make people think about how they relate to each other.” The SRC also printed T-shirts and posters bearing the slogan: “Some of Our Best Friends are ... [Blank]”.

Although the sticker campaign is over, the SRC plans to keep the topic fresh in students' minds. It will invite UCT student leaders to attend a diversity workshop on 22 April 2010 with international consultant Dr Stephen Schuitevoerder. "The plan is for these leaders to filter down to their constituents what they learn at the workshop," said Islam.

Racial integration is just the first topic the SRC is getting UCT students to talk about this year. The second is HIV/AIDS. On 24 February the SRC members went for voluntary counselling and testing during a Student Wellness Services drive at Jameson Hall. Sizwe Mpofu-Walsh, the SRC president, said the council members were acting as role models to encourage students who might be afraid of finding out their HIV status. It is still common for HIV-positive people to be stigmatised in South Africa, and the SRC is planning more activities later in the year to help reduce such stigma among students.

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