



Communication and Marketing Department
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso
Kommunikasie en Bemerkingsdepartement

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
Welgelegen House, Chapel Road Extension, Rosebank, Cape Town
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 5427/5428/5674 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 5628

www.uct.ac.za

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Spiritual calling impacts a quarter of UCT students' academic experience – survey



Dr Yvette Abrahams, the director of the San and Khoi Unit in the Centre for African Studies, burns *imphepho* as she performs a ritual. Photo: Robyn Walker

Preliminary results from the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Student Wellness Service (SWS) Indigenous Health Survey showed that 25% of the students sampled are undergoing an indigenous or African spiritual rite of passage that impacts their academic experience. They, and others, need appropriate support systems within a holistic UCT health and wellness framework that recognises diverse traditional medicine practices.

The survey findings were shared by the director of SWS, Dr Memory Muturiki, at UCT's first African Traditional and Spiritual Practices Indaba: The Route of Holistic Justice. The indaba's

focus was squarely on psychospiritual stress experienced by students where indigenous wellness systems were not recognised – or incorporated into the student wellness programmes.

SWS is preparing a follow-up qualitative research project that explores student experiences, barriers and facilitators to obtaining indigenous health services within the university setting. This will provide more insight into the needs of stakeholders on the ground, said Muturiki.

Conducted by Muturiki, Dr Christie “Gogo Bazamile” van Zyl, and research officer Warren Lucas, the survey provided a baseline indicator of students’ knowledge, awareness and expectations of indigenous health practices and services at UCT and the normalisation of traditional wellness services and medicines.

“Eighty percent of the world use traditional medicines, so even students who come from Canada, France, Germany, China, New Zealand or Australia arriving on our shores may be using these medicines. So, it’s important to recognise that it’s an international phenomenon,” said indaba panellist Dr Fikile Vilakazi, the director of the Gender Equity Unit at the University of the Western Cape.

“The time is right for the revival of traditional medicine in the country for millennia. We know that traditional healers around the world have healed our ancestors and oral medicine recipes handed down over the generations for centuries.”

The executive director of the Department of Student Affairs, Pura Mgolombane, said indigenous practices are integral to creating a sense of recognition and belonging at the university.

“If we are in Africa and we are Africans, we need to know who we are ... So, when we come to UCT, we come as we are; we don’t leave ourselves at the door or at the gate. We have done that for too long.”

Understanding African spirituality

According to Muturiki, those seeking the indigenous health services provided by Van Zyl at the SWS present with several main needs.

These include counselling, help for psychospiritual stress, academic concessions and leave of absence concessions (for those undergoing spiritual rites of passage, or *ukuthwasa*, and other customary rites and rituals) and guidance on safely practising cultural rites such as burning *imphepho*, a plant widely used as ritual incense. The team also assists with Fit-for-Study assessments after students have completed spiritual and customary rites, rituals or indigenous treatments.

Ukuthwasa, particularly, came under the spotlight at the indaba. Often, students struggle to manage or cope with the psychospiritual stressors that are prompted by customary and indigenous spiritual callings, rites, and rituals. And this affects their mental health, especially on campuses where these practices are not understood.

The Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Transformation, Student Affairs and Social Responsiveness Professor Elelwani Ramugondo said *ukuthwasa* often comes as a burden to students, a “situation riddled with inter-generational disparity”.

“Most young people are now struggling to decide on how to navigate having callings because their families no longer believe in indigenous wellness systems rooted in ancestral veneration.”

The support students need calls for an indigenous practitioner who can offer appropriate guidance, psychospiritual therapy, spiritual consultations, traditional medicines, and access to a register of legitimate *gobelas* (spiritual healers or initiators) on campus who can provide capable and insightful assistance.

Ramugondo said that UCT’s Student Mental Health Policy sets out UCT’s commitment towards realising a comprehensive approach to transforming student wellness. It is one that is in line with current best practice recommendations for student mental health policy while also being appropriate to the specific needs of students in the South African context.

“We also look at what other institutions are doing, learning from other institutions and learning from best practices in Africa,” said Ramugondo. “We aim to ensure that everyone on campus, especially staff who encounter students in the classroom, in the residences and in service departments, know what resources we have in place, and what strategies and approaches inform what we do when students are challenged with mental health issues.”

She added: “But ultimately, at the core of the transformational framework, is a humanising praxis. We work to humanise the human in one another. If we have not had the privilege of being seen in our wholeness, it means work to insist that we be seen and that we are not complete without our spiritual core.”

Understanding and research

Beyond policy, an institutional sensitisation process is also seen as vital. Over 81% of the surveyed students said UCT should host workshops for students to understand African spirituality.

One respondent said: “There will be more acceptance to these alternative health services, without shame and guilt.”

Story by Helen Swingler, UCT News

ENDS

Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Ridovhona Mbulaheni

Media Liaison and Monitoring Officer
Communication and Marketing Department
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch
Tel: (021) 650 2333
Cell: (064) 905 3807
Email: ridovhona.mbulaheni@uct.ac.za
Website: www.uct.ac.za