

Universities and Re-Construction of Cities: the Role of Research and Education

Report of the World Café Sessions

Table 7: Student Perspectives on Engaging with Society and Reconstruction

Host: Mandla Makhanya, MCO Ambassador, Former Principal and VC, Unisa and Emeritus Professor of Sociology at Unisa

Rapporteur: Caroline Parker; MCO Ambassador

The aim of the discussion at this table was to share examples, thoughts and ideas on how Universities can embed their values: the strategies, action plans, resource allocation processes, measurements and rewards that have been put in place for this purpose.

The following is a summary of the discussion points over the three sessions (in no specific order):

There is sometimes a gap between having values and living them everyday.

There can be a border between promise and delivery with values, having but not always living them, claiming to but not always doing it.

Values can be aspirational; we may not always have a good day but we should be trying.

Ask yourself did declaring your values change anything? What difference has it made?

The fact we are living our values may not always be obvious

We may already be operating in line with our values but it's not something we shout about.

Our values may be reflecting practices that are already embedded.

It is important to define values and phrases may be of more use than single words to make the meaning clear

Values and their definitions should be kept current

Students and staff leave and the organisation changes. The world changes and we reach new understanding about things. It is important to consider values in the light of the current situation/environment.

Complexities of society weren't there in past years.

Responsibility is not a single issue and strongly linked to society/culture. There is a new Swiss medical value – responsibility for your own health - because it is now seen to be important.

Embedding values means talking about things and raising awareness.

e.g. Gender inequality has long been an issue but discussion raised it to the surface and made it possible to address it

Having the discussion is more valuable than putting your values on the website. Values are defined and agreed through discussion.

Don't worry about disagreement, it is part of debate.

Unless you talk about values then things like the Charta are just pieces of paper that sit in a cupboard, by talking you make your definitions explicit.

Continuous dialog is important.

Values can be used to support decisions

e.g. the law may not have moved fast enough to fit the circumstances but values can be used as guiding when making decisions between two conflicting scenarios

A strong value system helps to make decisions rather than be buffeted by external pressures.

It can be very hard to get everyone involved in defining and embedding values

People can be aroused when there is a crisis but hard to get attention when there is not.

They will be more involved if they feel what they're doing will have some impact, link to something that means something. E.g. ask students how to improve the university environment- acting on their (sensible) suggestions will demonstrate the impact they have made.

People engage in discussion when there is something at stake. Give people a reason to engage e.g. which of these 3 options would be the best?

Connect to why decisions are being made. Discuss in light of values. This stimulates thinking particularly in grey areas.

Don't ask for an opinion at 5pm!

Surveys can measure how well values are embedded

e.g. Justice/equality: use a survey to check how things are working in terms of racial and gender equality, work-life balance etc, find out what they think/feel about it, work life balance etc and then make changes based on this

Training can be developed that helps to embed values

e.g. disability awareness training for student facing staff, raising awareness of types and support measures.

Values can be embedded into the physical structure of the university

e.g. If equality is a value then ensure that the architecture facilitates access

Values are led by new generations, we need to involve and listen to them

e.g. this current generation wants to treat everyone equally, this means that they expect you to act as an equal not someone with greater privilege

It is important to build on pre-existing values

To embed values, it is important that they are seen as core to the community

In Thailand the term pillars is used rather than values, pillars on which the university is based e.g. equality

Extend values to policy

E.g. university cleaning products do you buy green but more expensive or cheap and polluting

e.g. in UK climate action work has slipped down agenda because of financial pressures.

The value of Freedom is a difficult one

e.g. Covid (or other) vaccinations have been compulsory in some places for the common good and now are not

Freedom of choice up to the point at which would impact others

Perhaps we need set of values that can't be compromised and some that can when circumstances demand?

The success of values when they are embedded is that everyone sees the world through that lens, and values-based behaviour is seen as the norm