

# DIVISION OF STUDENT AFFAIRS

## 2023 SOCIAL SUPPORT MEN'S WELL-BEING PROJECT REPORT



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# 2023 SOCIAL SUPPORT MEN'S WELL-BEING PROJECT REPORT





# Introduction

The Social Support Office (SSO) piloted the Men's Well-being Project which was aimed at promoting well-being among male students at the University of the Free State (UFS). The project commenced in March 2023 and was concluded in October 2023.

This report gives an account of the programmes that were implemented as part of the series. All three UFS campuses were included in the project.

For the purposes of this report, it is important to note that students from the Bloemfontein and South campuses attended all the projects together at the same site.

Therefore, "Bloemfontein" is used to refer to both campuses' students collectively. The Men's Well-being programme received the participation of 1,337 male students from all three UFS campuses.



# Young Men's Imbizo

The Young Men's Imbizo was held on 11 March 2023 in QwaQwa and Bloemfontein. The Imbizo's panel discussions were divided into two sections: (1) men and health and (2) men and leadership.

A survey conducted after the Young Men's Imbizo showed that 93.07% of the participants found the sessions valuable, while 94.5% of the students requested that the imbizo be an annual event. Students also reflected on aspects of the imbizo that they enjoyed the most. **Below is a graphic presentation of these preferences:**

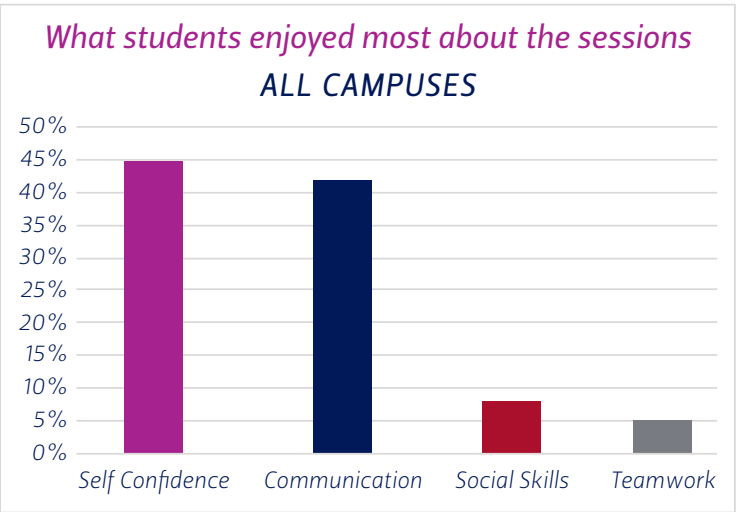


Figure 1: Table showing what students appreciated the most about the imbizo

The first panel discussed cultural barriers to seeking and accessing health facilities for men, the importance of hygiene, medical male circumcision, mental health, self-consciousness, sexuality and sexual health, and more.

The second panel, which focused on men and leadership, dealt with student governance and leadership, men as protectors, toxic masculinities, the significance of vulnerability in leadership, healthy conflict resolution practices and anger management. Students were asked an open question about leadership: "What does being a leader mean to you?"

Various respondents reacted to the question by narrating personal circumstances in their lives that validated their role as leaders. For example, some men felt like "leaders" when they solved financial problems at home, while others linked their call to leadership to serving other students with registration interventions.



The survey asked students to reflect on what they had learnt from the imbizo. The students shared the following statements:

‘That there are men who go through very similar issues and just never talk about them. Today they did and a lot of people can relate to the issues discussed.’

‘I learned a lot more, especially on the part that highlights the difference between being a boy and being a man. I also can say that the sexual part also helped me a lot as well as the knowledge about being healthy sexually.’

‘As a leader, you must learn to accommodate everyone you lead. The next thing is that you must learn to learn and unlearn new things as you’re exposed to different environments.’

Below is a chart presentation of further lessons learnt:

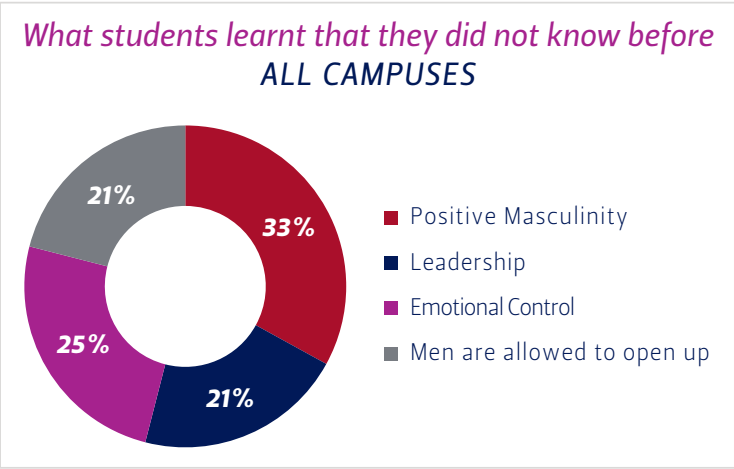


Figure 2: Pie chart showing the top lessons learnt by students at the imbizo

The citations and graphic presentation above show that the process of learning and unlearning for male students at UFS has begun.

As mentioned by students, engagements were the aspect they enjoyed the most, and these afforded students a platform to seek clarity as well as differ from speakers on certain viewpoints. In addition, as conceptualised, the imbizo served as a platform to inspire and unearth the genesis of courageous conversations amongst men.

Following the imbizo conversations, students requested a session in which to share their ‘walks of life’ experiences. In this way, the original concept of hiking (GBV) was changed to accommodate the students’ requests.



# The Hiking Pledge

*The hiking pledge was held in April 2023 on all campuses. The pledge was: "I will not suffer in silence; I will tell my story." According to a report by the World Health Organisation (WHO), South African men are four times more likely to commit suicide than women. This pledge was for all students to commit to seeking help as and when they require it, from the available services offered by the institution, to counter the challenge presented by WHO.*



*The Hiking Pledge aimed to use the physical exercise of hiking as a tool for inspiring inward-looking and interpersonal change. The exercise is underpinned by a pledge to not die in silence but rather for men to open up about their stories.*

*The hiking component of the programme exposed young men to a challenging trail that required teamwork, vulnerability, support and tenacity in order to reach the summit.*

*Students demonstrated a strong drive to see their hike through despite the low morning temperature on the way up, and the increasing heat during their descent.*

*After climbing the mountain, participants were divided into commissions to discuss symbolic lessons learnt from the hike, social issues such as gender-based violence, personal struggles like self-esteem, academic inspiration, leadership virtues, relationships and related heartbreak, mental health and more.*





The overall student experience was positive, and students requested more opportunities for events that are of this nature.

Below are statements from students, as well as a graphic presentation showing what students learnt:

‘Gave us a platform to share our stories and advise each other.’

‘We were on top of a mountain that I didn't know surrounded by familiar faces of people I didn't know by name but have struggled the way I have despite the different ethnic groups we came from, but we had so much in common in our indifferences.’

‘Nobody was ashamed to speak about their feelings.’

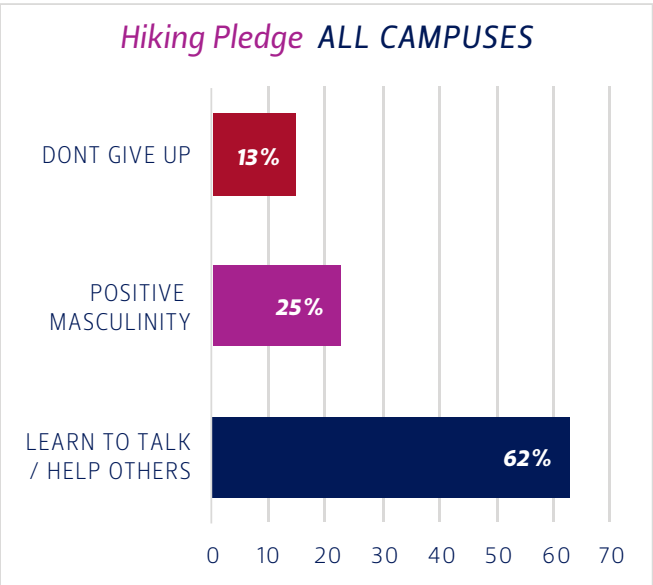


Figure 3: Table showing the highlight lessons gained by students during the hiking pledge programme

The statements and graphic presentation above show that there is a willingness by male students to be change agents in their immediate environments.

The statistics further highlight that the objective of the session was met, with 62% of the students understanding the concept of telling your story when facing any aspect of hardship. The event was able to destigmatise men speaking out.

Finally, the hiking pledge was read out: “I will not suffer in silence; I will tell my story.” Students dipped their hands in paint and placed them on a canvas as a sign that they agreed to the pledge being undertaken.

# Ukuphefumlelana

By translation, Ukuphefumlelana entails the act of breathing into one another in an empowering, strengthening and therapeutic manner. It further advocates for self-care, so that we don't pour of ourselves from an empty cup. Ukuphefumlelana is an emergent, contemplative and inclusive agile practice. It is foregrounded on the engagement of humility, with compassionate and humanising discourses that are geared toward a journey that facilitates a state of healing, wholeness and human flourishing in solo and communal spaces.



### **Ukuphefumlelana:**

Indigenous Ways of Well-being was held on 19 & 20 May 2023 on the QwaQwa and Bloemfontein campuses respectively. The session was addressed by Mr Mandla Simelane from the Afro-Soul Institute.

In Bloemfontein, the event was attended by Vice-Chancellor Professor Francis Pietersen. On the QwaQwa campus, Principal, Dr Martin Mandew, and Deputy Director: Housing and Residence Affairs, Mr. Zakhele Mdluli, attended the session.

Stakeholders from the Social Support Office, Student Counselling and Student Affairs were present. The sessions were facilitated by Mr Gcina Mtengwane (QwaQwa) and Mr Ace Moloi (Bloemfontein).



The discussions covered respect, appreciation, cultural sensitivity, humility, compassion for self and others, collaborative endeavours that facilitate positive change, advocating for humanising practices, facilitating healing, wholeness, and human flourishing.

In understanding that the concept is new, 94.4% of the students rated the concept as positive, and requested more time for the event. Attendees also stated that they would recommend it to another male friend.

**Below is a graphic representation of the students' experiences.**

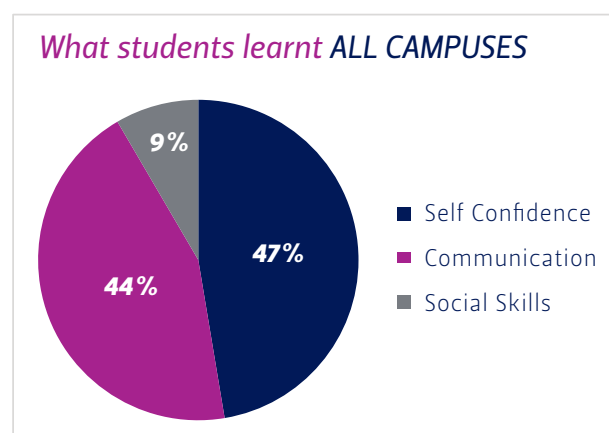


Figure 4: Pie chart showing what students learnt from Ukuphefumlelana

Mr Simelane introduced Ukuphefumlelana to students as the creation of safe spaces in which men can rely on each other socially and psychologically, using indigenous practices. Furthermore, he mentioned the importance of sharing personal narratives among other men so that they can learn from each other and prevent mistakes that have been committed by others. Mr Simelane stressed the importance of taking care of one's mental health before one aspires to take care of others, as it is important to fill your cup first before pouring yourself into others.

To drive his message of vulnerability home, he shared a personal story of loss and grief, having lost people very close to him during the COVID-19 pandemic. While encouraging men to know themselves, Mr Simelane noted that South Africa is an ethnically diverse country and, because of that, there are different meanings attached to manhood.

What matters, he explained, is each man being in tune with their soul and prioritising their well-being.

In QwaQwa, Dr Martin Mandew applauded delegates for using the opportunity presented to them by the university to develop themselves personally.

He emphasised the importance of making informed decisions that result in positive outcomes.



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## Men's Sports Festival

*On 12 August 2023, the SSO hosted a successful institutional Men's Sports Festival, intended to use physical exercise to strengthen the students' well-being, while cultivating a spirit of brotherhood and social cohesion. The sports festival was held in Bloemfontein, at South Campus. It was made up of four sporting codes: football, chess, basketball and netball.*

*These sporting codes were chosen for their ability to challenge students physically and stimulate them mentally.*

*At the end of the festival, winning teams in different sporting codes were given trophies. All participants received medals for their efforts and their role in making the day a success.*



## Inter-institutional Men's Well-being Conference

*A collaboration between the University of the Free State and the Walter Sisulu University (WSU) resulted in a historic three-day inter-institutional conference, held on the Potsdam campus of the Walter Sisulu University from 1 – 3 September 2023. Students and staff from both the QwaQwa and Bloemfontein campuses of the UFS were present. The theme for the Inter-institutional Men's Well-being Conference was "Repositioning Men".*



“If you as a man are so committed to this project,” stated Mr Hlasho, “women of tomorrow will live a safer life and the country will be governed properly because you know values and understand how to interface with other people.”

Dr Mohasoa called on students to ensure that it produced results. She added that her hope was to see students using the ideas generated in the conference to go into their communities and fix them.

The partnership between UFS and WSU was sparked by WSU’s record in creating programmes targeting male students.

One such programme is Men In Action, a programme that started in 2007 under the campus’s health services, following an observation that young men were not using the campus clinic despite experiencing health challenges.

The clinic rolled out a men’s involvement campaign to promote health and wellness among young men. As a result of the campaign, the numbers of young men going to the clinic to seek medical help increased.

All campuses of the UFS were represented at September’s Inter-institutional Men’s Well-being Conference – students and support-service staff alike. The conference enjoyed the participation of 82 male students; 75% of these were from WSU, and 25% were from UFS.

The student delegation reflected on their key takeaways from the conference, as presented below:

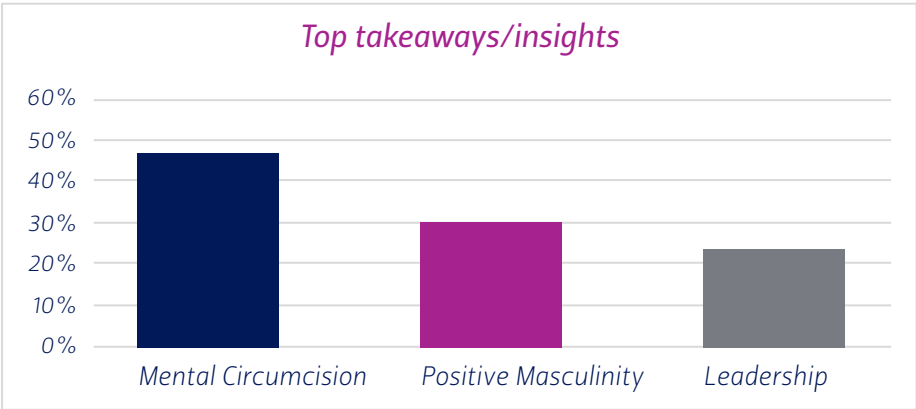


Figure 5: Table showing the key highlights from the Inter-institutional Men’s Well-being Conference.

The three top takeaways from the male delegates were: mental circumcision, positive masculinity and the role of male leadership. The mental circumcision (48%) term was introduced by the Chairperson of the Men’s Forum: Correctional Services (Eastern Cape).

The speaker reflected on his 20-year experience working at a prison, and his encounters with young men. His vast experience has convinced him that young men are fighting many battles of the mind; these battles are influenced by friends, family, male socialisation and culture.

The speaker emphasised that the road of transformation is not easy, and that change can only happen when male students decide that they want to be better males.

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*He urged students to think about this, as he does not want them to end up in a prison men's forum with regrets, and called for a circumcision of the mind that will result in changed behaviour and new perspectives.*

*Other stakeholders at the conference included the Eastern Cape AIDS Council, a local church, Correctional Services Men's Forum as well as the Afro-Soul Institute.*

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# The Overall Student Experience

The SSO ran an overall reflection survey to deepen its understanding of the student experience after the first semester.

The first question posed on the survey was for the students to reflect on their most powerful learning moment. Students mentioned that being given a platform to share their experiences was the most impactful aspect of the project.

**In addition, students made the following statements:**

*‘During the QnA of the imbizo. To hear older men tell their stories how we are an inspiration to them, and how they wish for us to go on, to feel, to heal, and to be better for ourselves. We don't get to hear that from men often and that is wonderful and inspiring to hear.’*

*‘I shared my problems with one of the group members and he gave me the most powerful words of wisdom I won't forget.’*

*‘When we were given a task to cook - I learned that cooking is not a woman's job but we also as men can embrace and take pride in cooking. We cannot expect women to be the ones cooking for us - we must learn - not only learn but take pride in it.’*

*‘Hiking that scary Golden Gate Mountain, reaching the top, and overlooking the whole of Golden Gate was victorious for me.*

*Naturally, I am afraid of heights, but I learned that fear can be conquered. One just needs to be brave enough.’*

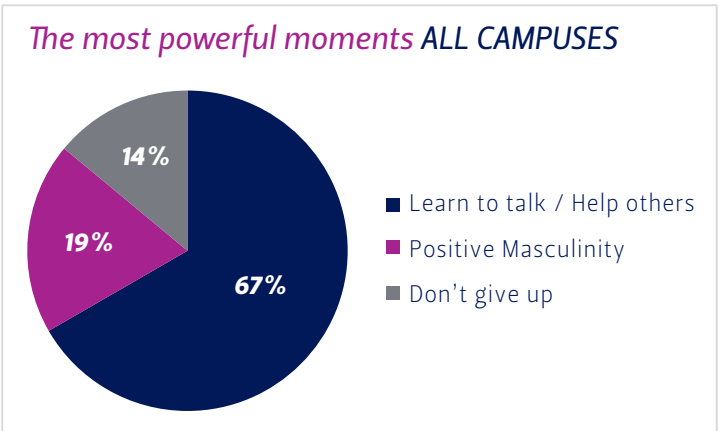


Figure 6: Pie chart reflecting the most powerful moments of the programme overall





The survey requested that students reflect on the areas of their lives that have improved since their involvement in the project. Communication, as seen below, was ranked as the biggest area of improvement by students participating in the programme.

Students mentioned that they had previously had challenges with communication relating to their self-confidence and social skills.

However, due to the delivery of the project and the students becoming co-creators, they have been more open and are able to better communicate with their peers, facilitators and project organisers.

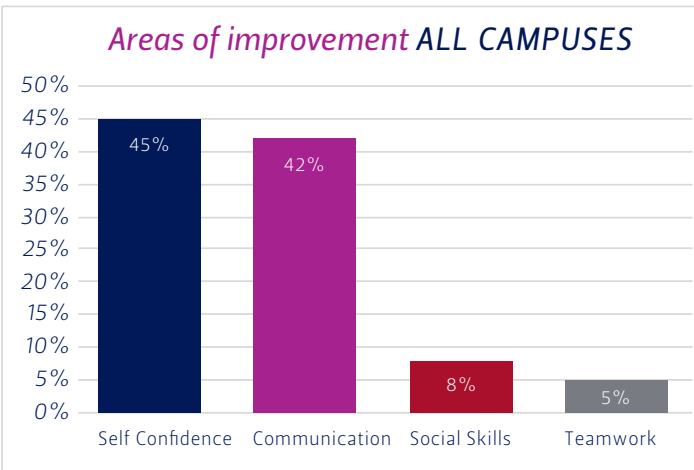


Figure 7: Bar graph showing the areas in which male students participating in the programme improved

**Furthermore, the survey posed the question:** What did you learn were your greatest strengths? The question was meant for reflection, as the project's aim is to enhance well-being and it is not built on the premise that students are coached into corrective behaviour.

Students indicated that they had discovered perseverance, communication, teamwork and improving oneself. **One student stated the following:**

*'I am stronger than I think, if I can get this far with everything I had bottled up. The future has endless possibilities with me prioritising my mental health issues and opening up about my traumas without feeling less of a man.'*

Perseverance was ranked as the most resonating strength that students discovered in themselves in the midst of the project. This aspect is crucial, given the rates of male suicide as shared by WHO.

## Conclusion

The Men's Well-being Programme has successfully created a safe space for male students at UFS to tackle their realities. The data indicates that male students who participated in the project have increased levels of perseverance and communication and grasp the concept of raising their voices to seek help. The UFS has contributed immensely to the personal development of the participating students, and to the UFS community and society at large.

