

63^{of} 100
Cara-Jean
Petersen



Here
to be
Empathetic

Opening Doors:
Cara-Jean Petersen is on
a mission to make higher
education possible for all.

Cara-Jean Petersen has spent her career turning access to education from a privilege into a possibility for thousands of South African students, and she's only getting started. Appointed Chief Executive Officer of The Feenix Trust in 2022 at just 32 years old, Cara is the first woman of colour to lead the organisation.

She holds a B.Psych from the University of the Western Cape and is a trained psychological counsellor registered with the HPCSA, a background that shapes the empathy-driven approach she brings to Feenix's work expanding access to tertiary education through crowdfunding, bursary management and holistic student support.

Cara's journey at Feenix began as Student Advancement Manager, a role she held for four

years before being groomed for the top job. Since taking the helm, she has steered the organisation through significant change: maintaining stability despite 45% staff turnover in 2023-2024, doubling donation income in 2024 and reaching an ambitious fundraising target three months early in 2025. Under her leadership, Feenix has raised over R378 million and supported more than 6 500 students since its founding in 2017.

Cara's influence reaches well beyond Feenix. She has collaborated with the World Health Organization on the Global Early Childhood Development Study, and served on the Employment and Education Taskforce for B20 ahead of the G20 Summit in 2025 – work that has deepened her expertise in global development. In 2025, she was selected for the UK-based Elischer Foundation Mentorship Programme, and she addressed the International Fundraising Congress in the Netherlands in both 2024 and 2025.

Her contribution to community impact has not gone unnoticed: Cara was honoured by the University of Cape Town's Graduate Business School Women in Business Awards, and was recently named by the Mail & Guardian as one of the Top 200 Young South Africans making a positive impact in the education sector.

With 16 years of experience in youth development, Cara continues to connect students with the resources and support they need to thrive beyond academics, and to contribute meaningfully to the country's future. Her leadership, grounded in empathy, precision and a strong instinct to pay it forward, inspires others to create change in their own communities.

Asked about the leadership philosophy that drives her, Cara often returns to a line from Nelson Mandela, spoken at the launch of the Make Poverty History Campaign in Trafalgar Square in 2005: "Sometimes it falls upon a generation to be great. You can be that great generation."