

SPECIAL ISSUE: ON CAMPUS

## Student affairs professionalization programme launched in South Africa

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### Introduction

The professionalization of student affairs, student development and support services across the South African university sector is critical for the improved success of students and all institutions.

This was the view of those leading the inaugural Student Affairs and Student Success (SASS) capacity development programme. The first session of the SASS programme was hosted in Ekurhuleni, South Africa, from 29 to 30 May 2023. The programme was conceptualised by a consortium of higher education and student affairs experts coordinated by the Higher Education Leadership and Management (HELM) programme of Universities South Africa (USAf).

The two-day session attracted 50 participants from a range of student support services across South Africa's public universities. The attendees were mostly middle and senior managers from student affairs, student development, student services, administration, libraries, transformation and equity, health and wellness, student residences, marketing and communication departments, and more.

### A timely programme with a three-pronged approach

Welcoming the SASS participants, USAf's CEO, Dr Phethiwe Matutu, called the training programme a "milestone event". Her second-in-command and recently appointed Director: Operations and Sector Support, Mr Mahlubi Chief Mabizela, concurred that it was a much-needed intervention, considering how student success, leadership, and governance issues were two key challenges that the higher education sector is currently grappling with.

Dr Oliver Seale, director of HELM echoed the CEO's words, adding that this was a first in South Africa and on the African continent. Dr Birgit Schreiber, the programme leader, asserted that student success is underpinned by intentional and relevant support that addresses not only student and institutional success but also addresses issues in the living and learning contexts that are often less than conducive for meaningful engagement and epistemological access.

The SASS programme was initiated as a direct response to a national training needs assessment survey that HELM carried out among student support professionals working in student affairs, student development, and student support services across the 26

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public institutions in November 2021. The study found that 86% of the surveyed 362 respondents was very keen to take part in a capacity building intervention to enhance their impact on student success. The survey findings, including the expressed needs to develop competencies and skills, led to the design of the SASS programme during 2022.

According to Dr Matutu, USAf anchored its work on three theme clusters: Students, Sustainability and Engagement. In this manner, USAf sought to achieve its vision of “a higher education system that is responsive to South African and global challenges through the growth and development of engaged graduates and through high-quality knowledge production”, she said. USAf had further identified sub-themes with a bearing on student growth and development including stability, student funding, accommodation, access and success, employability, and mental wellness. “USAf’s work is spread across all these areas, with the latest product – the work of the Transformation Strategy Group – being a research study report with guidelines, titled *Reshaping universities to create a student-centred higher education system in South Africa*”, Matutu said.

### **Leadership and governance are grave concerns**

Leadership and governance in higher education were issues of great significance and concern, noted Mr Chief Mabizela. “If you were asked to tell someone who had been out of the country for the past two years what our biggest problem was, you’d be remiss if you didn’t mention leadership and governance issues,” he said. These issues were playing out everywhere in the public domain, including in the media.

Directly addressing the participants, he said, by virtue of their responsibility for student matters, “you provide leadership at your institutions. Institutional management will consult Student Affairs on matters that relate generally to the governance of students (for example, the Students Representative Council (SRC)).”

Mr Mabizela mentioned a USAf report, titled *An Engaged University for a Higher Education System in South Africa*, published in 2022 from the deliberations of the Higher Education Conference of 2021. This report addresses the kind of change that is needed in SA universities to render them engaged institutions, Mabizela said.

“Basically, what kind of graduates do we want to develop and enable? If we are to develop towards making a positive contribution to society, we have to provide leadership. An engaged university means one that is really grounded and is organically involved in issues of society. It is something that the university does or should be doing.”

Dr Oliver Seale said that universities in the world, including those in the South African system, have each carved their own excellence niche. Regrettably, however, “we tend to lose that in the ranking system. In our programme, we need to determine how successfully universities are led. It often rests on the Executive Leadership team, who need to galvanise the energies of the academics and administrators to work as a collective, towards achieving the institution’s strategic goals”, Seale said.

Seale challenged the programme attendees to use their new skills and competences: “We are confident that once you have completed this programme, engaged with your colleagues, and shared your experience over the next six months (June to November

2023), you will be better positioned to showcase your excellence, for the benefit of yourself and your institution.”

The HELM director went on to state that before Covid-19, ‘change’ was the one constant in the higher education system. This had changed, Seale said: “Nowadays, we talk about two constants, ‘change and complexity’. Leadership in universities today, is becoming increasingly complex. One thing we learned during the Covid-19 pandemic is that when we work as a collective, we all win. It is about you and your team – or even more importantly, you leading and being led by your team.”

### **Access without support is not a fair opportunity**

Dr Birgit Schreiber, the SASS programme leader, emphasized the role student affairs, support and development play in supporting students and shaping a context conducive for student success. Enabling access without support is not a fair opportunity, she argued, and this is where staff in the student affairs, support, and development services play a critical role for students and institutions.

Student success debates have grown beyond student throughput rates in recent years to involve a holistic understanding of the student life cycle, Dr Matutu said. Universities now concern themselves with “how we provide relevant services, shape the living and learning context, and how we engage students in the transformation of their tertiary experience.” This therefore underlined the critical role of student affairs, student support and student development functions. It also explained why, globally, staff in these functions are supported and capacitated via professionalization and bespoke development programmes, “which advance their contributions towards institutional objectives for success.”

The CEO congratulated all 50 participants on behalf of the USAf chairperson and board of directors for having heeded the call. “We are confident that you will use this opportunity to reflect, learn, and add greater value to our students. It will also be incumbent on you to share the lessons from SASS with your colleagues and peers at your university. Together, we will make the student-centred higher education space more enabling and empowering for ourselves and our students,” Dr Matutu concluded.

### **For more information visit:**

<https://www.usaf.ac.za/professionalising-student-affairs-development-and-support-services-is-the-key-to-enhancing-student-success-in-higher-education/>

<https://www.usaf.ac.za/rationale-for-the-inaugural-student-affairs-and-student-success-sass-capacity-development-programme/>

<https://www.usaf.ac.za/new-sass-programme-hailed-as-forerunner-in-professionalising-universities-student-affairs-and-support-services/>

<https://www.usaf.ac.za/universities-student-affairs-development-and-support-staff-urged-to-identify-as-professionals-practitioners-and-knowledge-workers/>



**First cohort of SASS 2023**

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