

CAMPUS REPORT

## SANRC FYE Conference 2018: An Important Space for South Africa's FYE Community is Now Taking Shape

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The SANRC's annual First-Year Experience Conference is rapidly becoming established as a focal point on South Africa's higher education calendar. The 2018 conference was held at the Garden Court Marine Parade in Durban on 23–25 May 2018. The conference was attended by a wide spectrum of delegates from South Africa's universities. From the large number of 130+ delegates who were present, it was possible to see that this young conference has grown impressively since the inception of the new Centre only a short time ago in 2015.

The conference theme, "Toward the pursuit of excellence in national support to South Africa's first-year students: critically examining all aspects of the FYE", embraced a number of different themes:

- (a) Teaching for first-year success;
- (b) Measurement and accountability in first-year support services;
- (c) Innovative first-year support initiatives;
- (d) Engaging the student voice; and
- (e) Orientation programmes as a key element of student support.

The programme reflected the diverse body of work of FYE scholars and practitioners along the lines of the various themes. Seventy-three papers were presented in total, in addition to the workshop sessions.

The keynote addresses delivered at the conference were intended to provide important 'framing' reference points for the national conversations to be taking place over the three-day conference period. The opening keynote address was given by Prof. Sandile Songca, who is Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Teaching and Learning at University of Zululand (UniZulu). Prof. Songca reflected critically on the historical background of the FYE concept and how it is expressed and practised in different contexts, including that of his institution of UniZulu.

The second keynote address of the conference on 24 May 2018 was delivered by Prof. Emmanuel Mgqwashu, Dean of Education at Rhodes University. Prof. Mgqwashu spoke about the research project, "The influence of rurality on students transitions to higher education", on which he is currently working with two other partner universities, i.e. the

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Universities of Johannesburg and Fort Hare. The project also has international links with the Universities of Bristol and Brighton in the United Kingdom. This keynote address was particularly well received by many conference delegates, who found that the project's framing themes of social justice and decolonisation in higher education resonated deeply with them and their work.

Dr Laura Dison, senior lecturer in the Wits School of Education, delivered the final keynote address on the last day of the conference, 25 May 2018. Dr Dison is the co-coordinator of the Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education at University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). She brought her specialist knowledge of managing the Wits Postgraduate Diploma to her critical reflections on the benefits of professional development for all higher education staff (not only academics). She also spoke to the issue of how reflective practice in teaching and learning may ultimately provide the enabling conditions for student success.

The conference is intentionally designed to offer professional development opportunities to FYE scholars and practitioners in ways that would continually upskill them and build their capacity for the FYE work they are undertaking. The professional development workshops were very well attended. Three workshops were held concurrently on the first day of the conference:

- (a) a HELTASA Tutoring and Mentoring SIG workshop led by Dr Subethra Pather from University of the Western Cape (UWC) with HELTASA colleagues Dr Xena Cupido from Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), Dr Nelia Frade from University of Johannesburg and Ms Thairie Govender from Durban University of Technology (DUT);
- (b) a workshop on good orientation practices as part of an SANRC national campaign on orientation, led by Dr Danny Fontaine from University of Cape Town; and
- (c) a workshop addressing how academic libraries contribute to student success led by Dr Shirlene Neerpath from University of Western Cape (UWC) and Ms Ingrid Thomson from University of Cape Town (UCT).

The conference has quickly gained a strong national constituency, linking to one of the key goals of the SANRC, i.e. the facilitation of national networking and collaboration among South Africa's universities. The annual conference serves as testimony to the national links being forged through the unique platform that this particular space offers universities to learn more about what each institution is doing and how collaborative work can be done. It is toward this end that the conference strives to provide relevant spaces for such national conversations to take place, not only in the conference rooms but also after hours where national and international networking can take place.

For those who wish to enquire about the next annual SANRC FYE Conference, details about SANRC FYE Conference 2019 can be found in due course on the SANRC website: <http://www.sanrc.co.za>.

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