

CAMPUS REPORT

SAFSAS Summit 2018: Looking Back, Looking Forward: Understanding Our Space In and Role In the New Normal

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The Southern African Federation for Student Affairs and Services (SAFSAS) held its bi-annual Southern African Summit in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, from 26–27 November 2018.

The SAFSAS Summit 2018 provided a platform where key role players discussed the latest developments in student support and services, student life and the student experience. The Summit provided theoretical papers, keynote address by Prof. Yunis Ballim, vice-chancellor and principal: Sol Plaatje University, and a presentation by Ms Thandi Lewin of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET).

The organising committee, which comprised Dr Saloschini Pillay, Dr Sibusiso Chalufu, Mr Doc Nhassengo, Ms Nobuntu Rabaza, Dr Matome Mashiapata, Dr Birgit Schreiber and Ms Suzanne Stokes, explored a new format for this summit where each session had a theoretical paper, a position paper and invited responses, which then were discussed and themes extracted. Overall, the importance of data and evidence-based decision making, especially around mental health, became apparent. In addition, notions of decoloniality and their implications for the entire domain of student affairs and services were debated and the need for further engagement identified in order to ensure relevance and impact.

Ms Thandi Lewin (DHET) opened the event and Prof. Yunis Ballim, vice-chancellor of Sol Plaatje University, provided the keynote address on the first day. Both reminded the audience of the enormous task ahead of higher education, not only in terms of supporting the widening base of NSFAS beneficiaries, but also in terms of offering this support in decolonialised contexts, which generate mature graduates who take responsibility for their learning and contribute towards the reconciliation within the social and cultural fabric of South Africa.

The first session was on “professionalization and decoloniality” where Mr Thabo Shingange from the South African Union of Students (SAUS) and Dr Matete Madiba (University of Pretoria) were the panellists.

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Dr Birgit Schreiber opened the next session with a detailed analysis of data that informs our approach to mental health care provision in higher education. Mr Jerome September and Ms Laetitia Permall offered responses. Overall, mental health is not a new issue, but our vocal and empowered students are putting this on the map and want to be part of the solution – indeed as vocal and empowered adults. Together as institutions, mental health care providers and student leaders we need to learn from the data (for instance the ‘Caring Universities Project’ that spans Southern African higher education institutions) and focus interventions where effective. Our students, too, have their role to play as does our South African public health care system.

The third session was opened by Mr Luthando Jack, who addressed the #hashtag era and *inter alia* posed the question of how we as student affairs and services practitioners reinvent ourselves for “post-normal” times where we have to deal with complexity, chaos and contradictions. We welcomed contributions from Mr Garth van Rooyen (University of the Western Cape) and Mr Tshogfatso Mogaladi (University of South Africa), who were the panellists for this session.

The second day was opened by Mr Lukhona Mnguni, a PhD candidate and political analyst from the Maurice Webb Race Relations Unit, who, amongst others, challenged student affairs and services practitioners on dealing constructively with disruptive forms of engagements.

The final session of the Summit, which was facilitated by Dr Sibusiso Chalufu, focused on redefining our engagement with students. Apart from engaging in critical reflection on the role of student leaders in the current higher education challenges, this session also looked at the issue of meaningful engagement with student leaders and the need for a student governance model for higher education institutions in Southern Africa. The panellists for this session were Ms Nompandolo Mkhathswa, an activist and former SRC President from the University of the Witwatersrand, Mr Lwandile Mtsolo, the Secretary-General of SAUS, and Prof. Lumkile Lalendle, the Executive Director: Student Life at the North-West University.

The Southern African Federation for Student Affairs and Services (SAFSAS) was established on 25 October 2012 in Mangaung, Bloemfontein. The formation of this body was initiated by the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) in September 2007 to establish a single higher education student services practitioners’ body and a common understanding on quality student development and support for Southern Africa.

The affiliated associations are College and University Housing Officers International-Southern African Chapter (ACUHO-I-SAC), National Association of Student Development Practitioners (NASDEV), Southern African Association for Counselling and Development in Higher Education (SAACDHE), South African Association of Campus Health Services (SAACHS), South African Association for Senior Student Affairs Professionals (SAASSAP), Financial Aid Practitioners of South Africa (FAPSA), and Higher and Further Education Disability Services Association (HEDSA).

The 2018 Summit highlighted the importance of recognising the differentiation within and across student affairs and higher education. The SAFSAS executive committed to continued collaboration across the associations and will strengthen its work with the DHET to increase reach and impact on student success.

For more information on SAFSAS, see: <http://safsas.ukzn.ac.za>

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