

Capacitating Higher Education Student Affairs practitioners to accelerate student success in South Africa

A National Training and Development Needs Assessment (TNA) survey conducted in November 2021 among South African Universities to investigate the need in public universities to support the capacitation of professionals working in Student Services, Student Development and Support Services and Student Affairs has generated very interesting results. The survey was conducted across all 26 public higher education institutions in South Africa found that 86% of the sample expressed keenness for the provision of a training intervention for professionals in these disciplines.

At a report-back meeting held for senior leaders in student development, support and services departments and Student Affairs Divisions at public universities on 24 February, the participants warmly received the findings of this survey. Executive and senior directors, directors, deans and DVCs of Student Affairs, Support and Services attended the online workshop and gave generous and very useful feedback.

The sector's need for support, training, and professionalisation appeared widespread, explicit and compelling. The survey responses showed a spectrum of needs from general leadership and management principles to skills-based wishes for training in digital communication and online engagement. There were also requests to accelerate the sectors' goals of transformation, access, equity and diversity, to understand and respond to university specific issues, such as financing, risks, research and labour relations in universities.

The survey context

Within HELM, the project is being coordinated by the Student Success portfolio, led by its Senior Manager, Ms Nolusindiso Kayi and the programme leader Dr Birgit Schreiber. Relevant stakeholders in the sector and key associations like SAASSAP (South African Association of Senior Student Affairs Practitioners) and SAFSAS (Southern African Federation for Student Affairs and Services) will collaborate to establish a national training and capacitation programme that services the South, Southern Africa as well as continental higher education sector.

Ms Kayi and Dr Birgit Schreiber presented the findings and underscored the higher education sector's need for building professionalisation of this important area in the university sector.

According to Dr Schreiber, this domain in higher education operates in an environment of unclear national policy framework, and while diverse and autonomous, these services are differently configured between institutions. She called this a disciplinary and discursively low-consensus field, citing Torres et al (2019), mainly because Student Affairs is wedged between students and management; and because there is low consensus over what the terrain should

look like, given that these functions operate in an unevenly developed sector given universities' historical origin, institutions-level variations and several other challenges.

The function is, nonetheless, embedded in social justice, sustainable development goals and a national development framework seeking to optimise student access to higher education, retention in study programmes and ultimately student success.

That is why the HELM programme, guided by the principles of transparency, co-creation, sustainability and inclusivity, surveyed practitioners in Student Affairs to establish a baseline of capacitation needs to contribute meaningfully to student success.

Dr Oliver Seale, HELM Director, envisages that by equipping practitioners in this field, the latter will develop the requisite leadership and management competencies that will enable them to create engaged and student-centred institutions. It is to these ends that HELM was consulting the senior leadership to exchange ideas and co-create a capacity development solution that could be piloted from the second half of 2022 in support of personal, professional and institutional development.

Survey respondents

The study was carried out and a data set of 362 practitioners representing all 26 public universities of South Africa emerged. Recognising the diverse disciplines involved in student support programmes, the participants were recruited from a range of departments, including Student Affairs, Student Support, Student Services, Transformation and Equity, Health and Wellness, Residences, Communications and Marketing, Registrars and Administration and other related areas.

All university types were represented in the study, from traditional (73,6%), comprehensive (15,3%) as well as universities of technology (11,1%). Respondents were recruited at all levels of practice, with entry level practitioners making up 19,5% of the sample; those in middle and senior management constituting 72%; and executives at 8,5%. The female-to-male ratio of the survey respondents was 69:41.

Key findings

- **The diverse domains involved**

Respondents confirmed that the personnel involved in student development and support services are scattered over a broad range of fields, with the large majority (72%) residing in Student Support (22,5%); Student Affairs (15,5%); Faculty Administration (13,5%); Student Services (12%) and Library services (10%).

- **Competencies that are deemed important**

Asked to rate, on a Likert Scale, a list of competencies applicable in student support practice by their degree of importance, the following competencies were scored 4 and above:

- Understanding the higher education policy and regulatory environment
- Understanding, applying and accelerating transformation notions, processes and imperatives
- Understanding, applying and accelerating diversity and equality
- Understanding how universities plan strategically and operationally
- Being able to use IT to communicate and perform work
- Being able to manage work and life balance effectively
- Being able to manage my own leadership/professional development
- Being able to engage and communicate with diverse internal and external groups
- Adequate administrative and resource management competency

- **Extent to which participants consider specific competencies important**

Management and leadership, as well as skills-based need such as digitalisation, risk management, labour relations and staff wellness were listed as key requirements. Understanding the theory and practice of student development and support ranked very highly, as did the need to be impactful to advance transformation, diversity and access in our sector.

- **Preferred methods of attaining the competencies**

About 50% of respondents expressed the desire to learn on the job, perhaps reflecting the paucity of professional training programmes. Less than 40% mentioned a need to complete a tertiary qualification relevant to leadership/management and over a third also cited a preference for other modes of learning, such as informal conversations with colleagues; participating in peer networks beyond their institution; site visits, tours of other universities and organisations and mentorship and coaching interventions.

Ultimately, 86 % of the respondents expressed keenness to participate in a HELM-led leadership development programme which indicates a high interest in, and support for, a national capacity building programme.

In the senior leadership webinar, the participants were asked to discuss and document the who, what, how, when, why, and where of such a national capacitation programme and it emerged that HELM is perceived as a key driver, host and facilitator of such a national programme. It is essential that key stakeholders, such as association leadership (SAASSAP, SAFSAS, SAACHDEE, HEDSA, NASDEV, ACUHO-I and others) are partners in the development of a national programme. Suggestions were made to design such a programme in a modular form, around NQF 7 or 8 and to link it meaningfully to an academic degree and higher education institution.

To deliberate on these key foundational issues, it is essential that a Peer Learning Community, much like a Community of Practice, or Think Tank is established that can deliberate and advise on these issues.

Another engagement is being planned with all the respondents of the TNA survey to reach a wider community of student development, support and services, Student Affairs and allied practitioners and professionals so that the entire community is called upon and invited to be active partners and collaborators in shaping a national capacitation programme.

Senior leaders' comments on the TNA findings

- **Dr Matete Madiba, Director: Student Affairs and Chair of the Institutional Transformation Committee at the University of Pretoria**, highlighted the variety of domains and responsibilities occupied by the participants in the demographics section of the survey. She said this was evidence that “the discipline is growing in complexity.” Dr Matete said she was impressed by the high number (86%) of the participants interested in further training and development. “This is particularly important, given the need for professionalism in the sector. This is a very diverse and complex space that requires a diverse set of skills for people to perform well in it.”
- **Mr Jerome September, Executive Director: Student Affairs at the University of the Witwatersrand**, expressed comfort in that people seemed very motivated to participate in student support, given the diversity of this portfolio and the unique configurations there are at different institutions. Mr September said “managing work-life-balance is an area that many of us need to pay attention to. I also found it interesting that labour relations, as an area, was featured among needed competencies. I am also astounded that many people practising in this field are learning on the job, perhaps suggesting that there is little else to rely on at present.”
- **From the Department of Higher Education and Training, Mr Shiba Diketane, Deputy Director: University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP)**, said he had found this survey a very interesting exercise and commended the HELM team for carrying it out. “We all know that student support, development and affairs constitute the crux of the objective of UCDP, which is mainly to enhance, drive and improve student success. Often, we struggle to understand who is involved in this field. This study shows that all layers in academia are involved in this area. I wish to see these results being used to help our sector design programmes focused on student development, which are impactful and meaningful in student success.
- **Ms Veronica Israel, Head of Student Development at the University of Pretoria**, echoed the sentiments above and added that considering that student needs had changed, over time, this field required flexible, kind, and caring people, hence the importance of providing training. “It is therefore not surprising that many people want it.”

- **Dr Saloschini Pillay, College Manager at the College of Health Sciences, of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, also responsible for Student Support Services and president of the Southern African Federation of Student Affairs and Services,** said these findings had provided a baseline understanding of “where we are right now, and the gap there is in terms of transition into higher levels of professionalism”. Dr Pillay said she had noticed greater appreciation for Student Affairs in the recent past, especially during the pandemic, as universities’ senior leadership often turned to student affairs practitioners for both strategic and operational counsel.

The leaders cited above were part of a bigger group of about 20, that attended last week’s webinar.

Who should facilitate the training?

In the discussion that ensued on who should drive this training intervention, who the training should be targeted at, what will be taught and how, when and where, there was broad consensus, in the senior leadership, that USAf, through HELM, should drive the training agenda in the South, Southern and African context through partnership and collaboration with key stakeholders.

Regarding what will be taught, senior leaders recommended that HELM determine that in consultation with practitioners. They felt that a host of professionals working in Student Affairs with sufficient expertise and experience are equipped to impart good information, sector wide. It was also agreed that expertise be broadened to bring in a range of expertise required in practice. It was further suggested that HELM assemble a focus group to work on these issues in line with the range of competencies suggested in the survey results, to focus these and distil content out of them.

On the question of who the target group will be, it was suggested that all stakeholders at all levels be exposed to professional development. Regarding timing, it was decided to proceed with further consultations without delay, to ensure meeting the targets set for 2022.

HELM’s further contribution

As the meeting wound down, Dr Seale expressed excitement over the survey response. He said issues of sustainability, co-creation and inclusivity would be critical in devising solutions for the sector, by the sector. “We typically draw expertise from the sector; further interface with practitioners will shape the model; I like the idea of information exchanges to close the disparities between institutions. If Covid has taught us one thing, it is that we need one another. We must shed the nonsense of outperforming one another. The most critical function at any university is Student Affairs. We trust that we can draw on [the participants] intellectual inputs to build a fitting response for the sector.”

He did, nonetheless, mention that being part of the global village, he would also plug into an organisation he was affiliated to, in the United States, for additional expertise. From the USAf

point of view, he said “this is an opportunity to take this intervention into the SADC, further into Africa and the rest of the continent.”

Co-written by 'Mateboho Green, Manager: Corporate Communication at Universities South Africa and Dr Birgit Schreiber, a HELM Associate published widely in Student Affairs.