

CAMPUS DIALOGUE

Report on the establishment of the Southern African Student Affairs Federation

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The launch of the Southern African Federation for Student Affairs and Services (SAFSAS) on 25 October 2012 in Mangaung with the signing of a memorandum of understanding among a number of affiliate associations, and the hosting of its inaugural conference from 4 to 6 August 2014, were historic events for student affairs and services (SAS) in southern Africa, as it was the first time in higher education in this region that the sector brought together under one roof a collection of student affairs associations and societies.

The formation of a South African federation was proposed in September 2007 by Ms Naledi Pandor, then South African Minister of Education, with the purpose “to explore the feasibility of single higher education student affairs and services practitioner’s body and the establishment of a common understanding on quality student development and support”.

It is envisaged that SAFSAS will provide a platform for engagement on SAS issues in the developing world; a united voice in responding to critical issues impacting students and SAS; as well as an opportunity to work towards a coherent, equitable and professional student affairs and services in the region. In this way SAFSAS hopes to move away from the current fragmented response to national imperatives and challenges and hopes to become a dynamic and cohesive voice for SAS in higher education in South Africa and beyond.

SAFSAS draws on the mandate and the diversity of its affiliates to become a leading voice for student affairs and services in southern Africa, with a commitment to the holistic education of students whilst integrating student life and learning communities. Further, its mission is to provide professional development of both the staff and students and increase research on student affairs. SAFSAS hopes to strengthen collaboration between stakeholders within the higher education and training sector, so as to enhance its contribution towards student support, development and success.

The ongoing transformation of the higher education landscape in Africa brings with it a multitude of opportunities and challenges that impact on the seamless delivery of student affairs and services and ultimately impacts on the holistic support and development of students.

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The 2014 inaugural SAFSAS conference focused on the theme “Enhancing student support, development and success in a transforming Higher Education: Implications for holistic, integrated service”. It provided a forum for key role-players in the sector to discuss latest developments in student support and services, including exploring relevant case studies and sharing research and skills among its members. The conference provided the opportunity for hands-on learning, a fruitful exchange of ideas, the opportunity to network, discuss critical challenges, access new ideas and best practices and forge collaborative engagements leading to forward-looking strategies and solutions. Delegates presented papers on key areas on the SAS agenda, such as higher education transformation, models structures and strategies in SAS, knowledge production and management in SAS, student realities and the cross-cultural complexities of our current student populations, and preparing students for life beyond higher education. Panel discussions focused on key challenges currently impacting SAS, such as:

- professionalisation of student affairs and services;
- provisioning of student accommodation in higher education;
- student governance and leadership;
- the South African White Paper on Post-school Education and its implications for SAS; and
- the experiences and challenges of student funding.

The keynote address was delivered by Dr Roger Ludeman, President Emeritus of the International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS).¹ Ludeman, who is from the United States, delivered a presentation on “Professionalising Student Affairs and Services: An International Perspective”. He argued that the need to engage with the professionalisation of SAS is long overdue for South Africa.

Ludeman examined the history and evolution of student support services in the United States and cited examples of best practices in professionalising student services. He stated:

“The difference between being just a civil servant and being a professional is that you don’t accept your lot in life. You try to improve it in the interests of your students and your profession [...] Using your agreed upon principles, values, theories, skills, you continually act for everything you believe in to try and enhance the learning and development of every student who comes through your university.”

Prof. Crain Soudien, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Transformation and Student Affairs at the University of Cape Town looked at the “Transformation of Higher Education – Realities, Challenges and Opportunities”, whilst Prof. Ahmed Bawa, Vice-Chancellor of the Durban University of Technology examined the “Current Realities Impacting Students and Student Affairs and Services in Higher Education”. In her presentation, Prof. Nan Yeld, Director of University Teaching and Learning Development at the South African Department of Higher Education and Training, outlined the challenges facing student support staff. Yeld’s

1 Ludeman’s reflections on the establishment of IASAS were published in the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, Vol. 2(1).

presentation noted, that while universities recognise their core business as teaching and learning and research, the role of student affairs and services seemed to be overlooked. Further she indicated that universities should consider acknowledging the good work done servicing this crucial area by awarding student support professionals.

The establishment of the SAFSAS will certainly enhance communication, collaboration and consultation between the various SAS-related associations nationally in South Africa and in the wider region. Whilst SAFSAS will be unified by a common strategic vision and mission, it remains distinguishable from the individual associations, identities and roles. Each of the national or regional affiliate associations operates and impacts at different phases and in different spaces of a student's journey. SAFSAS will serve to enhance the holistic support to students as well as the core business of higher education, i.e. teaching and learning, research and community engagement. The federation is made up of the following associations:

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



Back row (from left to right): Ms Laetitia Permall, Ms Yanga Futshane, Dr Ian Lange, Ms Nobuntu Rabaza, Mr Andries Slinger, Sr Antionette Goosen, Mr Gugulethu Xaba
Front row (from left to right): Mr Mark Seale, Dr Roger Ludeman, Dr Saloschini Pillay (SAFSAS President), Dr Birgit Schreiber, Dr Sibusiso Chalufu.

The inaugural conference allowed SAS to strengthen collaboration both within and across institutions. SAFSAS is committed to meaningful engagement and has made great strides in understanding its role in embedding SAS in the higher education agenda. The conference deliberations helped shape the strategic objectives and deliverables for the currently elected national executive council (see picture above). The creation of SAFSAS offers the opportunity to harness the strength of a South African national and regional Southern African voice in ensuring a student-centred SAS and enhancing student engagement. In achieving its mandate SAFSAS will draw on the knowledge and experiences of SAS practitioners, academics, university leadership and it is envisaged that it will contribute to the development of a research community on SAS.

The SAFSAS website can be accessed at: <http://safsas.ukzn.ac.za>.