

CAMPUS DIALOGUE

Global Summit on Student Affairs: Africa joins the global conversations

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Close to a hundred selected international delegates from student affairs divisions at universities and colleges met in Rome at the 2nd Global Summit for Student Affairs on employability, soft skills and leadership development. The first summit organised by the International Association for Student Affairs and Services (IASAS) and the US Association for Student Affairs Professionals in Higher Education (NASPA) was held in Washington DC in 2012. The 2nd Global Summit in Rome in 2014 was hosted by the European University College Association (EUCA, www.euca.eu) in collaboration with both IASAS and NASPA.

Focus and organisation of summit

The issue of soft skills and civic engagement for employability was the main topic of ‘Rethinking Education’, the initiative launched by the European Commission in 2012 to encourage student affairs and higher education to take measures to ensure that young people’s development is articulated according to their civil lives and labour markets.

The four main topics of the summit were the following:

1. Integrating soft skills in the university educational path: The role of student affairs and services;
2. Soft skills development for better employability: Student affairs and services as a facilitator for the dialogue with the labour market;
3. Fostering an entrepreneurship mind-set and creative thinking on university campuses; and
4. Enhancing civic participation, a global approach, and social inclusion.

Selected senior student services and affairs staff, rectors, vice-rectors, university presidents and senior university executives from 37 countries across the developed and developing world on six continents came together to share ideas and best practices on how student

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services and student affairs professionals can create and develop programmes on soft skills/ leadership development to assist in closing the employability gap.

The aim of the Global Summit was to initiate high-profile debate on how student affairs and services can promote access, inclusion and integration, support and development, and employability. Special focus was on issues that arise from massification of higher education and the role of education in social justice, such as employability, entrepreneurial thinking, civic engagement and student mobility within a context of disciplinary and theoretical development of the student affairs divisions within higher education.

The event was opened by the president of the International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS), Prof. Dr Rob Shea, who was followed by the president of the US Association of Student Affairs Professionals in Higher Education (NASPA), Prof. Dr Kevin Kruger. Jigar Patel, Principal of McKinsey & Co, UK, then presented the EU report *Education to Employment, Getting Europe's Youth Into Work*.

The McKinsey report is one of the most important cross-national studies on the relationship of higher education with employment: it is based on rigorous research that involved more than 8 000 participants (students, student affairs, university executives and the corporate sector) in eight countries (France, Spain, Germany, Greece, Portugal, Sweden, the United Kingdom and Italy). The report highlights the articulation gap between higher education and the labour market and makes suggestions for closing the gap. The research is premised on the notion of the university within the instrumentalist framework of higher education, and of higher education as a key role player in the construction of the national and regional economic and social fabric.

'The years at university', says Prof. Gian Luca Giovannucci, president of the EUCA, 'are fundamental for academic engagement, but are also the time when young people can best develop all the complementary competencies needed to meet the challenges of living an active civil life and making contributions to the national and global economy'. (Personal communication, 23 October 2014)

Silvia Costa, chair of the Culture Committee of the European Parliament, reminded delegates that student affairs divisions at universities are poised to play a key role in shifting the university's gaze towards developing responsible and responsive global citizens who take on the mantle agency to ensure sustainable conditions for a globalised world.

Dr Saloshni Pillay (South Africa, University of KwaZulu-Natal), Dr Birgit Schreiber (South Africa, University of the Western Cape) and Gugulethu Xaba (South Africa, Tshwane University of Technology) were invited to join the Global Summit. Dr Pillay is the president of the Southern African Federation of Student Affairs and Services (SAFSAS) and Dr Schreiber is the Africa chair of IASAS and NEC member of the South African Association for Senior Student Affairs Practitioners (SAASSAP). Gugulethu Xaba is the president of NASDEV, the South African Association of Student Development Practitioners.

Dr Lisa Bardill Moscaritolo, General Secretary of the IASAS, was on the Planning Committee for the summit. She indicates that the summit was a unique opportunity for universities from across the globe and from across dissimilar educational spaces to share lessons and to build solidarity with core issues facing students and institutions.

The Global Summit participants were asked to reflect on the framework of the summit and how the overall summit impacted their work, university or institution and/or region in the world. Participants noted that they had gained a better understanding of the employability gap as noted in the McKinsey report, and appreciated the opportunity to engage with others on how student services and student affairs staff can lessen on this gap. Staff shared how they are creating opportunities for students to develop their soft/leadership skills. Some noted that this is happening through networking with companies, offering internships, working with community organisations in order to engage students in their surrounding communities, and encouraging student mobility/study abroad.

There were many examples of how staff are introducing events and education in halls of residence to develop the skills necessary for students to be strong leaders. Lastly, other peer programmes and co-curricular and curricular programs on soft/leadership skills assist in students gaining the skills they need to be competitive in today's marketplace and be successful in their personal life. Some institutions are developing leadership programmes targeting women.

Participants commented on how meeting others from different parts of the world helped them to see commonalities in their work and brought a needed level of understanding, as many in the field outside of the US feel isolated. Additionally, those who attended appreciated the opportunity to collaborate and borrow ideas. Lastly, apart from the main concepts of the summit, participants appreciated networking and finding a shared understanding around student issues such as equity and lack of academic preparation.

Birgit Schreiber notes that the summit allowed her to share and to learn from others regarding the similar issues facing her and those who work in South Africa. Africa's role in global conversations has unique potential to influence global events and to assist in shaping global conversations. The lessons learnt within the African context, which is clearly not a homogenous higher education environment, are invaluable to other regions.

In South Africa, the concerns relate to socio-economic challenges, and other regions in the world are dealing with the same kind of issues. This can, at times, make our student affairs work different from that in Westernised countries. For the developing world, the gap between the skills needed for college graduates to do well in the world of work (a topic discussed in the McKinsey report) is much larger than in the Western world, as can be seen in some of the high unemployment statistics. However, through our work in student affairs, we do need to equip and educate students in the soft skills they need to be successful, and hearing from other developing countries and how they are doing this work was helpful.

The written proceedings of the 2014 summit are available on the website and will provide more specific feedback from participants from certain regions of the world, as well as background on the summit and the topics covered. These proceedings are shared with Global Summit participants and with IASAS members. You are encouraged to join IASAS at iasas.global (membership is free) to learn more.

2016 Global Summit

Applications to host the 2016 summit will be shared, in mid-2015, with professional associations around the world and with key leaders. This information will also be shared with IASAS members and everyone is encouraged to apply to host this prestigious event.

The Planning Committee feels strongly that dialogue with as many student affairs and student services professionals around the world as possible will assist us in serving our students better and in understanding our work in different regions of the world.