

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Building Capabilities and Leadership for Youth Development: Nelson Mandela University's Approach

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Introduction

The South African Association of Senior Student Affairs Professionals (SAASSAP) hosted a three-day conference on “Ramping up engaged scholarship, gender equity, and enhancing leadership in student affairs practice” at Nelson Mandela University, Port Elizabeth (Gqeberha), from 2 to 4 December 2021. The meeting, which was attended by student affairs leaders from South African higher education institutions, was a first of its kind, hybrid-level interaction for SAASSAP and affiliated stakeholders since the global outbreak of the coronavirus and the disease it causes, COVID-19, in 2020. The conference's programme, which sought to address current challenges and social injustices affecting students in South Africa, provided student affairs professionals with an opportunity to consider and guide the processes of change required to enrich student growth and development nationally and further afield.

The conference took place at a time when the higher education landscape had been greatly affected by the uncertainties produced in the advent of COVID-19. The pandemic and the lockdown measures that were implemented in response to it exacerbated several pre-existing student stressors, including the financial burden of higher education; impaired mental wellness; social concerns; and loss of identity. The pandemic also had a direct impact in terms of illness and death among the student cohort, their families, and communities, as well as an indirect impact in terms of the adoption of new learning and teaching strategies under lockdown. The resulting challenges led to a close-up critique and redesign of existing policies and strategies in the field of student affairs, including in relation to leadership and scholarship.

Against this background, the SAASSAP conference hosted scholars sharing innovative papers and keynote speakers who addressed the audience on patterns of best practice. The meeting also enabled participants to engage in thought-provoking conversations as part of a student-centric learning experience. The speakers included Professor Cheryl Foxcroft, deputy vice-chancellor of Learning and Teaching at Nelson Mandela University (NMU), who talked about the importance of the notion

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of engaged scholarship as a crucial element of learning and teaching. She cited Boyer's (1990) theory on what is meant by engaged scholarship, saying: "Engaged scholarship is described as teaching and research that connects the rich resources of the university to our most pressing civic and ethical problems." She further emphasised the relevance of the conference's theme insofar as it was linked to how institutions of higher learning produce value by giving back to societies and communities. Foxcroft further argued for an expanded notion of what is meant by scholarship, opposing the idea that something should be considered "scholarly" only if "it is published in a journal". Instead, she said, student affairs professionals need to search for other innovative ideas that could be considered scholarly which may take a range of forms beyond journal articles, such as videos in which the researcher expands on a topic, or new programmes which seek to realize approaches to student affairs promoted in the literature.

NMU Panel on Student Development

On the second day of the conference, an NMU panel reflected on the approach used by Nelson Mandela University in building capabilities and leadership for youth development. The panel referenced the complexity of universities as microcosms of society. Douglas (2005, p. 1) argues that the complexity of these institutions is informed by the market; government interventions; changes in learning and teaching; and the type of students who enrol. Douglas is of the view that the challenges arising from these factors must be perceived as positive since, in addressing them, universities increase their relevance to society. In other words, the nature of the institutional culture and posture at universities should be informed by the constant changes that occur within society. This can then lead these institutions to reflect on whether the current education and environment that they are providing for their students are adequate for fostering the democratisation and transformation of society. In this context, one of the speakers on the panel, Ayanda Mlatsha, a student development practitioner and YouthLab coordinator at NMU, noted that it was only through intense observation, research, and constant engagements with students on the ground that the Nelson Mandela University was able to understand the calibre and characteristics of the current generation of students.

Rather than being intimidated by the awareness that a constantly changing society requires a constantly changing university, the student affairs professionals on the panel said that their university had taken a conscious decision to embrace these changes and, accordingly, had encouraged the development of relevant, unique communities within the institution. Communities that embraced each student's background through their ethos and activities and upheld African values in the university's various structures.

In support of this approach, NMU has adopted a humanizing pedagogy, arguing that, as part of its public-good mission, higher education should practise humanizing ethics that promote fairness and opportunities for students about "what students are able to do and to be in and through higher education" (Walker, 2018, pp. 556-557). The approach is one that is centred on producing solutions to the challenges that face society and transforming the thinking of those within society and the world accordingly. Locatelli (2018,

p. 10) argues that, in service to society and as a public good, education must be relevant to people's lived realities and should embrace inclusivity, empowerment, innovation and the need to improve living conditions in society. One of the panellists, Buntu Mnyaka, an assistant researcher and YouthLab coordinator at NMU, noted that while the adoption of this approach at NMU had not been smooth sailing, there had been constant progress.

According to Ayanda Mlatsha, a key aspect of seeking to promote this approach has been the university's drive to transform leadership, including student leadership, at the institution. She emphasised the importance of guiding and mentoring young leaders in the context of a world facing economic strain in which there is inadequate leadership and a lack of appropriate role models. In this context, and as part of higher education's engagement with local communities, student affairs professionals should seek to empower student leaders who can help to transform their communities and societies, as well as their universities. Accordingly, the Student Governance and Development department at NMU seeks to establish platforms and an overarching environment that foster critical thinking and tolerance for all and promote citizenship, academic success, and engagement among the students (Nelson Mandela University, 2021a).

The university offers student leaders the opportunity to become involved in university decision-making, thus enabling them to acquire transactional and transformational leadership skills and knowledge and fostering their dynamism. In this way, the students can develop as individuals, while becoming effective leaders and agents of broader change. In this context, the students can benefit from programmes such as the *Ndingumntu Nam* ("I am human too") mental health awareness campaign which allows them to acknowledge their backgrounds and foster the realization that they are human beings first before they are graduates or scholars. Such programmes enable all students, including student leaders, to embrace their own identities and encourage openness towards other student identities and cultures. In this way, an inclusive environment is created in which students not only develop their academic skills but also become productive members of society. In addition, such self-acknowledgement produces a sense of belonging and makes it easier for student leaders to reach out to others, enacting the concept of *ubuntu*, "I am because you are", which is the basis of many communities in Africa. The concept of humanizing pedagogy espoused by the university also enables it to perceive its academics holistically, producing the understanding that, like the students, they are members of society before they are members of the institution, said Ayanda Mlatsha.

Another noteworthy practice established at NMU is that of regular "neighbour checks", which encourages students to check up on one another's well-being. This practice proved particularly effective under COVID-19 lockdown when student isolation led to an increase in mental illness. More broadly, the neighbour checks operate as a channel for mutual caring, fostering selflessness and a spirit of *ubuntu* among the students. Ayanda Mlatsha said that this practice, which is based on the values of the university, had cultivated a culture of *ubuntu* among students suffering from mental illnesses, post-trauma as a result of the pandemic, and social injustices.

During the pandemic, it became clear that the support offered by NMU's leadership to student affairs professionals in their efforts to mentor and guide the students was made possible as part of a larger institutional commitment to practising *ubuntu* and a humanizing pedagogy. In this context, Luthando Jack, the dean of students at Nelson Mandela University said:

Part of our efforts in truly becoming an African university that is rooted in its local community entails being able to harness and underpin the canon of our education with the philosophy of *ubuntu*. The new kind of graduate the university will send to society ought to be imbued with the intrinsic value of placing the community above the self. (Jack, 2019)

The panellists at the conference also mentioned NMU's Madibaz YouthLab initiative. The platform seeks to establish spaces in which students come together to address the complex social challenges and injustices that confront the youth of South Africa and beyond (Nelson Mandela University, 2021b). This initiative seeks to promote a humanistic solution-orientated approach to addressing the challenges that face society, including by transforming people's thinking.

Nelson Mandela University's embrace of this ethos is demonstrated by its motto: "Change the world". In this regard, former NMU vice-chancellor, Professor Derrick Swartz, speaking at the launch of the university's name change in 2017, said that being named after Nelson Mandela:

... means of course our students must be activists, not necessarily in a party-political sense, but must advocate for change, must work towards freeing up society so that we have a better world as well ... We have to teach a curriculum that can equip our students with the best of tools and the knowledge to change the world. It has to be a radical transformation, and a call to that is the curriculum, what happens in the classroom, what knowledge comes through your mind. If you are not challenged with new skills and knowledge, you didn't even know alternatives to the world that has been handed by history to our society. But the power of education is to change the world. (Swartz, 2017)

Professor Sibongile Muthwa expressed similar sentiments at her inauguration as incoming vice-chancellor of Nelson Mandela University in 2018:

Student life at Mandela University will centre the student. It will thoughtfully involve and connect our students into the full life and promise of the university and its inter-connection with wider society. Fashioned in an integrative way, student life should stimulate not only student development, social solidarity, multi-culturalism and diversity – through the execution of excellent and vibrant intellectual, social, cultural, sport, recreational and other value-adding programmes on campus ... it will promote active student engagement in communities aimed at solving the challenges of poverty, inequality and unemployment. (Muthwa, 2018)

The point being made by both Swartz and Muthwa is that the institutional culture of the university is student-centric with the aim of producing an institution that is a

public good and serves society. In addition, there is an emphasis on the university's role in local communities. The vision is of an institution that fosters transformative and transformational capabilities and leadership – attributes which may also characterise its graduates. In this regard, the university prides itself on instilling its graduates with a capacity for inter- and trans-disciplinary thinking which can contribute to solving complex problems and challenges (Nelson Mandela University, 2021c, pp. 46–47).

In summary, Nelson Mandela University seeks to promote the philosophical concept of *ubuntu*, “I am because you are”, as a core value and embed this in a humanizing pedagogical approach. The narrative of higher education institutions which promotes the separateness of learner and lecturer persists. However, under *ubuntu* the two are considered symbiotic. Furthermore, Wilkinson (1994, p. 327) argues that higher education institutions have always been forces of progress since their inception, including by fostering major developments in science, and by influencing culture and the development of ideologies and concepts. Moreover, Moscardini and Strachan (2020, pp. 10–11) state that, as society has changed, so must universities if they are to remain relevant to societal development. Accordingly, universities should seek to meet the needs of local communities and contribute to national development. Such is the thinking that provides the frame of reference for NMU's efforts to operate as a public good; be of service to society; and function as a space of transformation in developing community-orientated graduates.

Other Presentations at the Conference

There were a number of other presentations at the conference, including an address by Dr Neo Pule, Yeki Mosomothane and Dr Grey Magaiza from the University of the Free State (UFS) on “Student leadership engagement in institutional transformation: A model for leadership building and engaged scholarship”. Dr Bernard Sebake of the National Association of Student Development Professionals, presented under the theme “Rethinking capabilities of student affairs professional practice: Reflecting on constantly emerging paradigms”. Bonolo Makhalemele and Ester Mahlatsi presented a reflection on “Finding engaged scholarship in everyday living”.

Professor Thierry Luescher from the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) delivered an address on “The photovoice project: Violence and student wellbeing”. Dr Ramneek Ahluwalia from Higher Health presented on the state of health worldwide and how this impacts African higher education institutions. Tshegofatso Mogaladi from the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) addressed the audience on “The efficiency of student affairs departments in South African higher education: A conceptual analysis”. The second day ended with a productive annual general meeting (AGM) of SAASSAP members.

The third day of the SAASSAP conference opened with a reflective session offering attendees an opportunity to connect with and assimilate some of the key points made during the proceedings. Then, Dr Thandi Lewin, Acting Deputy Director General: University Education in the Department of Higher Education and Training, considered

the work of the department. Lubabalo Ndzoyiya, president of the South African Union of Students (SAUS), considered the work of the union. Dr Birgit Schreiber and Sindi Kayi spoke about the work of the Higher Education Leadership and Management (HELM) programme being implemented by Universities South Africa (USAf) as part of the Department of Higher Education and Training's University Capacity Development Programme. Dr Neo Pule from the Department of Psychology at UFS presented on the "Advantages of engaged scholarship: A systemic and multi-level co-curriculum toward collective impact". Dr Matete Madiba, research and development officer at SAASSAP, talked about scholarship opportunities offered by the association.

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