

CAMPUS REPORT

Higher Education Leadership and Management (HELM) – Advancing and supporting leadership development in South African higher education through scholarship

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Universities South Africa (USAf) has two flagship programmes which both focus on advancing student success in the South African higher education sector: Entrepreneurial Development in Higher Education (EDHE) and Higher Education Leadership and Management (HELM). HELM was launched in 2002. From 2018 the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) has supported HELM in its repositioning and revitalisation to advance governance, leadership, and management in South Africa's universities.

The HELM programme and student affairs

The USAf's creation and implementation of the Leadership and Management Strategy Group in 2023 signals USAf's ongoing investment and support for good governance and effective leadership and management development at all levels in our universities. In terms of giving effect to its core mandate, HELM programmes and initiatives have been designed to assist individuals and institutions to identify their capacitation needs within their specific contexts and align individual leadership development pathways with their organisational objectives. HELM's implementation plan and activities are directed towards the key challenges and contextual realities faced by individuals and our universities and are geared towards addressing them more effectively. To this end HELM has created two portfolios internally, one on governance, leadership, and management and the other on student success.

Notions and debates around student success have developed beyond student throughput rates and involve a holistic understanding of the student life cycle. This starts from enrolment to graduation, including how we provide relevant services, shape the living and learning context, and how we engage students in the transformation of their tertiary experience. Student affairs, student support and development are critical and vital contributors towards student and institutional success. Across the world, staff in this domain of higher education are supported and capacitated via professionalization and bespoke development programmes, which advance their contributions towards institutional objectives for success.

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SASS capacitation programme

Based on a sector-wide training needs analysis and stakeholder meetings in 2021 to 2022, under the auspices of its student success portfolio, HELM designed and implemented the Student Affairs and Student Success (SASS) programme. This is a direct response to capacitation requirements identified by professionals working in student affairs, student development and student support services across 26 public institutions. The survey drew respondents from across student affairs, student support, student services, transformation and equity, health and wellness, residences, communications and marketing, registrars and administration and other related areas. The survey found that 86% of the responding professionals (N=362) were keen to participate in a capacity building intervention to enhance their impact on student success. In terms of areas of capacitation needs, respondents to the survey overwhelmingly prioritised the following: (i) understanding, applying, and accelerating transformation, diversity, and equity; (ii) understanding how universities plan strategically and operationally; (iii) general leadership and management and (iv) understanding student support theory and practice.

Based on the training needs analysis and in collaboration with relevant stakeholders in the sector, like the South African Association of Senior Student Affairs Professionals (SAASSAP), HELM designed a capacity building programme that launched in May 2023. Through the SASS programme, HELM aims to respond to calls for the professionalization of student support.

The pilot SASS programme, with 50 participants from 24 universities, promotes and gives effect to HELM's overall mandate of promoting student success, institutional leadership, transformation, and social justice in South African higher education. Following a request for nominations to all 26 South African public universities, HELM received a significant number of excellent applications, and selected the best suited, mostly middle, and senior managers in the non-academic divisions of these institutions. Comprising of ten thematic learning units, SASS concludes its pilot on 28 November 2023 with a colloquium that marks its successful conclusion by showcasing the research projects of all the participants.

The HELM special issue of JSAA

Research and scholarship form the foundation of capacitation development and context-specific programme and project delivery for both USAf and HELM. Advancing and embedding research and scholarship is core to the development and delivery of HELM's mandate, objectives, and activities. The special guest edited issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (JSAA) is an outcome of discussions between USAf and HELM on a dedicated scholarly publication following its national conferences and summits, with a specific focus on this important area in South African higher education. Through multiple interactions between the HELM team and the editors of JSAA in the course of 2022, JSAA was requested to dedicate a special guest-edited issue to scholarship on student-centredness, student engagement, and the roles the university and the higher education

sector play in terms of student success. The JSAA Executive approved the request for a guest-edited issue of JSAA in collaboration with USAf/HELM in 2023.

The notions of engagement and student-centredness and how they intersect with the leadership and management of universities is how HELM is addressing this important conversation on student affairs in South African universities. The JSAA guest edited issue will advance and respond to the UCDP DHET target for HELM on research and scholarship in 2023. It will also provide a valuable theoretical and praxis online resource for the 50 SASS participants who will be completing the HELM SASS programme this year.

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