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WHAT WE ARE LEARNING ABOUT THE STUDENTS WHO ENTER OUR UNIVERSITIES

Students in South Africa's public universities, particularly in the wake of #FeesMustFall uprisings, might have created perceptions of arrogance, entitlement, a lack of commitment to academic obligations and being downright lazy. However, findings emerging from the Beginning University Survey of Student Engagement (BUSSE), carried out amongst students entering their first year of study at about a third of our public universities around the country, suggest otherwise.

Findings of this survey, conducted by the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) at the University of the Free State point to a much more nuanced, complex set of strengths, weaknesses, passions, perceptions and resilience that students bring with them into higher education. They point towards a need for much richer, more fertile understandings of what students bring with them into their first-year of study.

As part of its mandate to support public universities and to enable them to perform their core functions of teaching and learning, among others, Universities SA (USAf) has partnered with the CTL to communicate these findings to multiple audiences both within and outside universities. It is hoped that this will help to strengthen the way in which universities gear themselves for student success and help to sharpen student experiences in secondary school and in other processes of preparation prior to entry into higher education. This is therefore USAf's first communication, in partnership with the CTL, on important empirical findings to enhance the understanding of students that are being enrolled in the universities -- thereby helping us to design the learning environment better to match their needs and expectations.

Findings shared in this initial report emerge from a BUSSE survey administered to 14,872 first-year students from 2015 to 2017. The students were from nine institutions – three traditional universities, two comprehensive universities and four universities of technology.

The findings suggest that first-year students – like most first-year student populations around the world – have positive attitudes towards their studies and are optimistic about their potential to succeed; they have high aspirations and demonstrate an intention to work hard. The findings also suggest that the majority of students entering higher education are familiar with reading or writing assignments, have made use of some learning strategies, have learnt to include diverse perspectives in their school work, and have, to some extent, also applied evaluative skills to their own or others' perspectives. The survey indicates too that students will have engaged in some level of critical thinking in their preparation through secondary schooling.

“The question we should be asking as universities is: are we making optimal use of the attitudes, aspirations, academics skills and resilience our students enter with rather than fixating on what students are lacking,” says Professor Francois Strydom, Director and Head of the CTL at the University of the Free State.

He says he knows from research carried out across the world that two of the best predictors of student success are academic preparation and motivation. However, Prof Strydom maintains that in South Africa, where levels of academic preparation vary wildly and in most cases are directly related to socio-economic realities, selecting students purely on the basis of academic preparedness is impossible and, in fact, undesirable. He adds that research-based evidence indicates that the extent to which students engage in effective educational behaviours within their academic programmes and environment is **also** a significant predictor of success, benefiting underprepared students in particular and enhancing their chance of graduating.

First round of assessments are critical for both students and institutions

According to Professor Strydom, the first round of academic assessments at university are particularly critical for both students and institutions that seek to support their students and keep them in the system, particularly given the well-documented incidence of anxiety disorders among today's young people.

“The student's self-image can take a knock when they get the results of their first assessment. As institutions, we need to be sensitive to our students' disappointment, exploring opportunities to help them transition academically and providing the academic and non-academic support they need to stay motivated and committed,” he says.

“The BUSSE results therefore make a clarion call on our public institutions to meet the needs of our students ‘where they are’,” Professor Strydom adds. “By providing universal support to all our first-entering students -- rather than continuing on our tradition of targeting particularly struggling students, we're likely to register bigger successes than we have done to date.”

The summary report of the BUSSE results emerging from the survey of students at nine of South Africa's public institutions is attached. “It is hoped that this will allow universities, schools and parents to engage with the findings, drawn from three traditional universities, two comprehensive universities and four universities of technology,” Professor Ahmed Bawa, CEO at USAf, observes. “The architecture of our universities, the way in which they are organised and connected must be honed according to what we learn about our students. How adequate are our support systems to meet the needs of the 12% of entering students, who do not feel adequately prepared in terms of writing, speaking, using technology and working in a team? How equipped are our support systems to help students not confident with quantitative reasoning (19%) or those needing support with self-study skills? Are our institutions able to change the expectations of the 35% of students who believe that finding academic help will be difficult? These are difficult questions that are central to the project of realising the transformational aspirations of our sector, and ultimately, social justice,” Professor Bawa concludes.

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