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We need to enhance their learning experience for nothing but success

As students arrive at various campuses to register for their first year of undergraduate study, all role players within the university system would do well to pull out all the stops and engage the new arrivals for one purpose: to **enhance their learning experience for nothing but success**. These are the words of Dr Sizwe Mabizela, Vice-Chancellor and Principal of Rhodes University, speaking in his capacity as the Chairperson of Universities South Africa's Teaching and Learning Strategy Group (TSLG).

Addressing the university system through a special interview at the beginning of the 2020 academic year, Dr Mabizela says it is important that every individual who interacts with the new arrivals remembers that "the students we have enrolled in the higher education system are the best produced by our basic education system." He adds that regardless of the student's social, economic class or cultural background or which university that student attends, "the quality of his or her educational experience should be positive, transformative, rewarding and fulfilling."

He has reminded universities of research data showing that a large majority of first-entering students in the public university system are first-generation university enrollers who leave home with not much guidance on university life. Such statistics place first-entering black students at 76%; first-entering coloured students at 71%; first-entering Asian students at 66% and first-entering white students at 45%.¹ Dr Mabizela says these data, obtained from a Centre for Teaching and Learning study completed at the University of the Free State, justify that we pay special attention to the first-year cohort of undergraduate entrants.

"We are all painfully aware of the high dropout rates in our higher education system," the Chair of USAf's Teaching and Learning Strategy Group says. "A report produced a few years ago indicated that almost half of students who enrolled in our university system dropped out or left the system without any qualification. These young people have nothing to show for the years they have spent in our university system except the heavy debt that cripples them for the rest of their lives."

It is to prevent what he calls "a colossal waste of human talent" that Dr Mabizela is urging the teaching community to understand what kind of individuals they have enrolled on their campuses. "It is only by first understanding who the students are, that we will be able to identify and remove all potential obstacles that could hinder them from successfully completing their studies in the shortest possible time," he emphasises. "We must understand our students, hopes, dreams and aspirations. We must also understand their fears and concerns," he adds.

In conclusion, Dr Mabizela says rather than chasing higher enrolments, "we should pay greater attention to pass and throughput rates. If those students who enter our university system completed in the shortest possible time, we would have served our society better."

The Teaching and Learning Strategy Group (TSLG) that Dr Mabizela chairs is one of the five strategy groups of USAf that determine and drive USAf's agenda for the advancement and sustainability of public universities. The fundamental role of the TSLG is to advise the USAf Board of Directors on key initiatives to be undertaken to uphold or improve teaching and learning, system-wide.

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¹ Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL). 2019. Understanding and engaging students for success. CTL presentation to a USAf Symposium on Understanding and Engaging Students for Success. 22 Nov. 2019. [PowerPoint presentation].

