



## **TSF HIGHER EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (HEDP)**

***Promoting equitable access and the development of thriving, successful students, practitioners and higher education institutions”.***

### **RATIONALE**

As societal and civic pressures escalate everywhere, there is a critical need to provide pathways that enhance socio-economic inclusion through increasing equitable access and success in tertiary institutions.

Excitingly, arising out of almost two decades of lived/actual experiences, deep reflection and open-minded analysis within the higher education sector, The Saville Foundation (TSF) has progressed into an agile entity which has gained the experience, perspective and capacity to support initiatives or institutions that globally advance positive change through cultivating a balance of the inner and outer worlds to create programs that enable productive self-driven learning.

As a result, we are now actively pursuing the vision of a world of higher education where in every country, more people from previously excluded populations can benefit from meaningful participation in higher education. This involves work that will promote equity of success at both a student and systemic level. Strategies may vary, but an intentional focus on broad student development and students’ self-belief lies at the core.

### **CRITICAL ISSUES**

For most nations to comply with their constitutional and international human rights obligations with respect to education, major change is needed. The deliverables must include a higher education sector of compassion and care, a place in which we genuinely end inequality of opportunity and improve the lives of the poorest of the poor. The pursuit of such a struggle has the potential to establish a new basis for our spiritual, economic, political, and social lives, as well as a morally virtuous framework that could and should unleash a suitable wave of real change and a reprioritisation of the needs of our diverse communities (Archbishop Thabo Makgoba).

This vision is not just confined to Africa as ‘developed’ countries are now facing relative versions of the turmoil and challenges that Africa has been dealing with for decades.

What might this mean for higher education? There is an undeniable and compelling need to give intentional focus to policies and practices in higher education that will ensure that students flourish and are successful. This is a particular imperative for those students who, for multiple reasons, have been excluded from higher education or have had minimal value in their learning experience at university.

The data surrounding young people in South Africa and globally are alarming regarding levels of unemployment or those not actively seeking work. Those who do attend higher education are increasingly not attending lectures. This raises questions about the efficacy of learning, teaching pedagogies, motivation for learning and how to support a sense of real purposefulness in Higher Education.

Many existing higher education programmes focus on accommodating or assimilating vulnerable students into dominant higher education ways of being and engaging. Identity is central to learning and as such, these approaches often have the effect of rendering students passive as they feel that their voices, experiences, and identity are not valued and are irrelevant. In addition, many students experience ‘support fatigue’ because of being overwhelmed with multiple, generic workshops and ad hoc courses. For many students, the combination of feeling inadequate, unable to cope, unseen and unheard, results in a huge constraint on the belief that they can engage successfully in the university domain. This can exacerbate feelings of low self-esteem, and a helplessness.

Patterns of hopelessness can persist even when support and nurturing is part of a student’s learning environment and offers the potential to thrive, to flourish and be successful. This means that whatever support is part of a student development programme, it needs to foster hope and be accompanied by a real sense of what is possible; an elevated consciousness of students’ agency; the power of being interconnected; and being part of a learning community. As part of an unfolding sense of self, students must be helped to believe in their capacity to contribute, engage and effect positive change in the world.

While important, the focus on student material needs, additional workshops to catch up on core conceptual and epistemological understandings along with other competencies, do not address the ‘heart’ of the underlying psychosocial and environmental issues that inhibit students’ ability to flourish, maximise their learning environment and succeed.

## **THE EXCITING RESPONSE**

From 2004 to 2016, TSF provided support for A/Professor June Pym in her capacity as Director of the Education Development Unit (Commerce) at the University of Cape Town (UCT) from 2004 to 2016. Joining TSF directly in 2017, June was seconded as the Education Advisor to the Programme Managers for the national the Ikusasa Student Financial Aid Programme (ISFAP) at 11 South African universities until, and now heads up TSF higher education work in several universities.

The core of the journey began at UCT when June, with a belief in the need for deep support and little prototype, created the Education Development Unit (EDU) in the Commerce Faculty which focused on addressing students' material, learning and psycho-social needs. It actively cultivated students' sense of agency and belonging to a community throughout the degree. Simultaneously, it focussed on systemic change and transformation of mainstream Faculty practices and thinking. Crucially, this shift to focus on both students' needs and the development of an inclusive faculty culture, resulted in an exponential increase in vulnerable students' participation and in their success in higher education.

Over the years, a vibrant, flourishing, and large graduate community has been created where past students who succeed in their degrees move into various very senior positions in the corporate world and remain interconnected and working in multiple ways alongside their peers from the Education Development Unit.

This sustained and meaningful experience has meant the development of an invaluable, fully contextualised understanding of the key principles that make the areas of student development transformational and sustainable - not just for students but also for the university system.

Our involvement at both a policy and practice level has meant a continual grounded reality in students' learning experiences, feedback, issues, and success. June's senior leadership position in the university has also positioned her to facilitate a shift in a range of policies, culture, practices and thinking at either a faculty or various university levels throughout the country. The journey has led to an absolute belief that student development work needs intentional focus, graciousness, humility, agility, and the ability to continually listen. Creating meaningful access and success requires a focus on practitioners, students and the system.

## **THE WAY FORWARD**

### **The leaders**

There are many successful examples historically and globally that prove that we must focus on the support and nurturing of key leaders who are capable, authentic champions of civil society; leaders who can create a student development programme that is embedded in a deep understanding of ensuring that capable students are included in the higher education. This involves including their cultural, social, and linguistic capital, their ideas, insights and solutions.

To enable this transformative work, a key strategy would be to identify committed, reflective individuals involved in student development in Higher Education. It will involve developing close, trusting supportive relationships with these practitioners who are cognisant of and engaged with various aspects of students' voices and university life and are passionate about making a difference to students' experience and growth while in the higher education system. They would need to be positioned in leadership where they have the platform, authority, and legitimacy to impact the major systemic barriers that hinder students' ability to flourish.

Leaders with an informed experiential basis would need to be nurtured and supported to expand their theoretical framework, so that they can impact meaningfully and transform policy and practice, within Higher Education, as well as hold the goal of developing a cohort of socially responsive graduates who can exert societal influence and transformation in the future.

The key motivation for working with selected higher education leaders in key positions, is the belief in the power of the huge ripple effect and impact by focusing on developing work that actively promotes thriving, flourishing, well-rounded and successful students and a system that is agile, reflective and pro-active to support this.

This group of leaders lends itself to being a “community of practitioners” who can engage, critically reflect and support each other in their various roles and institutions.

### **The students**

TSF’s student-focused work has always “listened to understand rather than listened to respond,” and the consistent practice and embodiment of this ethos has resulted in a deeper understanding of the layers of vulnerability students encounter during their university journey.

To supplement this, alongside the academic programme, we must 1) build strong student communities that transcend online and offline platforms and foreground the power of learning communities, 2) nurture learning potential and belief during and beyond the traditional schooling years and spaces, and 3) empower students with a voice, level of reflection and consciousness of their own, as well as a platform to express that voice and consciousness.

We must also equip graduates with all the relevant tools, skills, experiences, and support structures to enable holistic student development, and ensure that students leave their institutions with a wide array of tools and skills rather than just a degree to set them up for success post university.

### **TO CLOSE**

TSF HEDP focuses on supporting, guiding, inspiring, critically reflecting and giving perspective to both students, practitioners and institutional ways-of-being to impact on thriving and flourishing individuals and a system that focuses on excellence, success, agility and an overall ethos of care, kindness, compassion and ethics.