South African higher education has a historic role to play, a role that has been identified and accepted by all sectors in our society and by important global institutions such as UNESCO and the World Bank. It is a powerful role that produces both public and private goods. The production of high level graduates, the production of new knowledge, the development of critical, active participants in our democracy, addressing the many legacies of apartheid, these are all examples of the public goods produced by the sector. The very high correlation between higher education and employability of graduates and their earning power and so on are examples of the private goods produced. At the heart of this project are the continuing challenges of access and success – understanding how best to address the deeply fragmented preparation of our students for higher education. Their educational, social and emotional preparedness for higher education is always at the heart of the debate when we consider that the drop-out rate of students in the system is at about the 50 per cent level for the system as a whole. This is shockingly higher than in other university systems.

Student welfare and student development have to be at the heart of any student-centred system that begins to conceptualise itself around the needs of the students in our system. It is a basic foundational requirement for student success. If we fail to provide holistic support to our students we face the danger of creating a revolving door syndrome, re-creating apartheid graduate dynamics, developing graduates who are not active, creative participants in the economy, and so on. The point to emphasise is that specialists in the areas of student services and student development are fundamental to the proper functioning of universities – to develop and nurture student growth in and beyond the classroom context so that learning takes place that prepares students for their future roles as active participants and contributors to the development of the economy and the deepening of our democracy.
It is important to understand that the inequalities that are so pervasive in South Africa re-create themselves at our universities. And so do the deep ills of our society – the devastation of HIV/AIDS, the spreading of a deepening drug culture, the deep economic inequalities and so on. It is the student services sector that is at the coalface (and cutting edge) in terms of these challenges. Experienced practitioners pick up a number of things that lecturers are often not alert to. Invariably, these reflect in a microcosmic context what individual members of the broader society are going through. Institutions of higher learning, whose mandate is partly to find solutions to societal problems, cannot step aside and watch the situation deteriorating further on the grounds that it is not of their creation but a wider societal problem. Problems manifest in different ways in each context and they also vary in degrees of severity.

The Department of Higher Education and Training began many new initiatives, all ostensibly to improve the quality of the student experience for students. The massive increase in the financial aid allocation from the treasury, the development of a process of engagement on transformation, the commissioning of a study on student accommodation are examples of the kinds of interventions that impact on the quality of student experience. These have drawn heavily on those individuals and teams that work in the student services, student development arenas.

At a time when universities such as Durban University of Technology have begun to focus much attention on the idea of student-centredness, it is a pleasure to note that this book touches on the key issues that provide for a holistic understanding of the student as a young human being. Some of the issues raised in it are contentious, some are challenging to understand, some even controversial. This is good. It gives the reader a chance to engage with these. It provides for a safe platform for debate and for wrestling with the issues that concern our students and the services we provide to them. As a body of senior student affairs/student development professionals, SAASSAP has done exactly what is expected of it, leading from the front. I trust that more of its members as well as those who report to them will follow suit.

It should be remembered that student development and student success occur as a result of deliberate, well-planned and carefully structured development programmes and support initiatives and activities on the part of those who have been entrusted with this responsibility at our higher education institutions. The nature and extent of student development and success depends largely on the measure to which student services practitioners critically reflect upon and consistently review the assumptions, content, delivery and appropriateness of student development programmes, support structures, services and initiatives. This process of critical reflection, examination and renewal needs to be rigorous,
goal-oriented and theoretically informed. It must take serious cognisance of all factors, personal, structural, social, cultural, psychological, internal and external, that impact on student ability to develop and succeed. In the final analysis, the process must produce sound knowledge and propose solutions that are practical and implementable, contributing towards student development and success.

This publication marks a very important milestone in the generation and expansion of endogenous knowledge in the field of student affairs and student services. It is the beginning of a crucial process designed to facilitate a much needed dialogue in pursuit of a common and shared vision for student development and success within the context of South Africa. The issues that are critically examined in this book are important and they affect students as they progress through our higher education system. We need to make sure that students receive the necessary development, support and guidance to succeed. This publication is an important resource for our student affairs practitioners and I am happy to support the effort to bring to fruition the formation of a shared vision for student development and success.

Prof. Ahmed Bawa
Vice-chancellor, Durban University of Technology
and past president of Higher Education South Africa (HESA)