

Extract from Summary Report: Siyaphumelela 2

30 September 2024



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Reflections on Siyaphumelela Network 2.0

Overview

John Butler-Adam, an external evaluator, was commissioned to conduct an in-depth project evaluation of the Siyaphumelela Student Success Initiative. His report provides a balanced and objective perspective, detailing both the successes and the challenges faced by the initiative.

Key successes

The Siyaphumelela 2.0 Student Success Initiative has achieved key milestones that reflect a comprehensive and integrated approach to student success in the context of South African higher education. These successes include:

Institutional prioritisation of student success: Members of the Siyaphumelela Network 2.0 have made significant strides in embedding student success as a core objective within their institutional strategic plans. This demonstrates a top-down commitment to improving outcomes for students, ensuring that it is not just a peripheral goal but a central aspect of university planning and operations.

Holistic approach to student success: Siyaphumelela institutions have shifted towards a holistic conceptualisation of student success. This involves breaking down organisational siloes to foster greater collaboration across departments and units, from academic support to counselling services, in order to provide a seamless and integrated student support experience. The focus on holistic support recognises that student success is influenced by academic, social, and emotional factors, and requires coordinated interventions.

Identification of high-impact modules: Institutions have actively identified high-impact modules—courses that are often critical to student progression but tend to have high failure or dropout rates. By focusing on these modules, universities can remove key barriers to student progression. This may involve redesigning curricula, offering targeted academic support, or enhancing teaching practices to improve student outcomes in these critical courses.

Data-driven, evidence-based strategies: A hallmark of the Siyaphumelela initiative is the use of data analytics to drive decision-making. Institutions are leveraging data to implement evidence-based student support strategies, allowing them to pinpoint at-risk students, predict challenges, and intervene early with targeted support. Data has become a powerful tool in tracking student performance and evaluating the effectiveness of various interventions.

Regional and national collaboration: Siyaphumelela has fostered collaboration through regional and national service workshops, which bring together stakeholders to share best practices, discuss challenges, and co-create solutions. These workshops enable institutions to learn from one another, spread successful interventions, and cultivate a culture of continuous improvement.

Overall impact

It can be concluded that the Siyaphumelela 2.0 Initiative has had a transformative effect on how participating institutions approach student success. By integrating student success into strategic planning, addressing key barriers to progression, and using data to guide interventions, Siyaphumelela institutions have made significant headway in improving student retention, progression, and graduation rates. The initiative has also encouraged a systemic shift towards equity in higher education, ensuring that more students, particularly those from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, are given the support they need to succeed.



Challenges

The challenges faced by the Partner institutions in Siyaphumelela 2.0, as summarised in Butler-Adam's report, remain relevant as the initiative progresses into its next phase. These challenges (except COVID-19) remain likely to apply to both current members and newer institutions joining the Siyaphumelela network as they work to embed student success into their institutions.

Key areas identified include:

Institutional leadership and executive support: The crucial role of institutional leaders in supporting and recognising Siyaphumelela's potential to enhance students' experiences and success cannot be overstated. Consistent backing and support of the institutional leadership team, including the Vice-Chancellor (VC) and Deputy Vice-Chancellors (DVCs), on both academic and financial priorities for student success are essential to translate Siyaphumelela reforms into long-term, sustainable institutional practices.

"Projects" versus institutional integration: Siyaphumelela interventions within institutions should be viewed as ongoing processes and practices that necessitate institutional integration rather than being treated as finite "projects" with distinct start and end points.

COVID-19 realities and consequences: The impact of COVID-19 on the initiative has been significant, presenting both challenges and, in the long term, opportunities. The shift to remote learning during lockdown highlighted the importance of real-time learning analytics data, which became highly valuable. Drawing on their experiences with Siyaphumelela, institutions implemented measures to mitigate the potential negative effects of COVID-19 on student success.

Student unrest: Student unrest in higher education institutions remained a challenge, in particular at the start of the academic year. Key issues included outstanding student fees, academic exclusion, and delays in the disbursement of funds from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS).

The pivotal role of data in improving student success: Siyaphumelela identified data specialists who:

- Rigorously measure and analyse raw student performance data.
- Transform primary data into comprehensible information for both internal and external stakeholders.
- Make data easily interpretable for all involved parties to identify appropriate actions to strengthen institutional student success.

Every institution's student success committee, along with its managers and council, should have access to this primary set of clear indicators. Limited staff in the data domain has been a common challenge for all partner institutions to date.

Siyaphumelela 3.0 will prioritise data management and capacity building, focusing on analysing and converting data into actionable reforms and interventions to enhance student success.

Review of partner institutions

The seven Partner institutions submit a yearly report to the Kresge Foundation and *Saide*. The purpose of the reports is to collect and analyse institutional data and align institutional reporting with the Siyaphumelela Network 2.0 objectives, which seek to:

- Establish a more student-centred culture in South Africa's higher education system to improve student completion rates and reduce race and gender equity differences
- Improve institutional capacity to collect and use student data to improve student success across the higher education system



- Expand evidence-based student success efforts on a national scale, using a networked approach that builds on existing strengths, shares capacity throughout the system, and serves institutions based on their current needs and abilities.

Partner annual reports include narrative descriptions and the following progress ratings:

1. Implementation is to be undertaken in another funding cycle.
2. Initial action taken: Concept work completed and action underway; 25% of implementation of agreed intervention/s completed.
3. Steady progress is being made: 50% of the implementation is completed.
4. Substantial elements of a project nearly or fully completed: 75% of implementation completed.
5. All planned student success interventions, fully deployed: 100% of implementation completed. Student success interventions embedded in practice across the institution.

For analysis of partner ratings from the 2023 progress reports see Figure4, below.

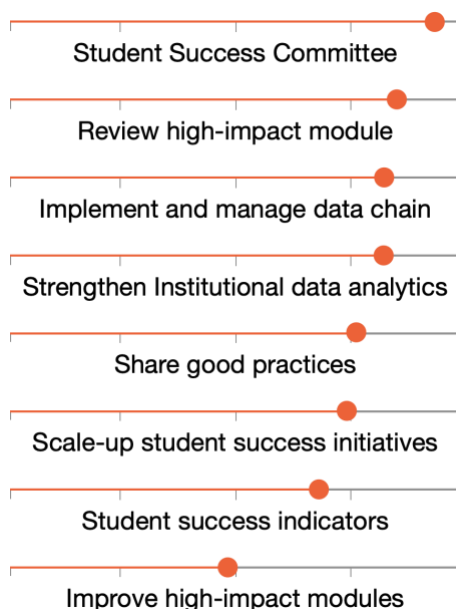


Figure 4. Analyses of Siyaphumelela Partner progress from the 2022-2023 reports.

Items with high ratings included: the establishment and management of the institutional Student Success Committee; review of high-impact modules¹; implementation and management of the data chain; strengthening data analytics; and sharing of good practices. While institutions were able to identify high-impact modules or courses, they presented little evidence of having identified and corrected issues related to these modules.

Lessons learnt

At the Siyaphumelela Network 2.0 Partner Convening in April 2024, Partners were asked to reflect on and share lessons learned during Siyaphumelela 2.0. Following the meeting, these lessons were clustered according to common themes. Below is a summary of key findings:

¹ High Impact Modules (HIMs) are thus named because of their potential to impact institutional performance indicators such as throughput and pass rates.

People

Leadership: Consistent support from top-level management is vital for success. Partners have realised that student success shouldn't be treated as a standalone project but rather as an ongoing programme. Even as personnel change, the programme should remain stable. To address this, *Saide* has incorporated measures like requiring the Vice-Chancellor or Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Teaching and Learning to attend the annual Siyaphumelela conference. Regular engagement with Siyaphumelela Coaches is also encouraged. Some partners from Siyaphumelela 1.0 have sought coaches to help secure executive buy-in for Siyaphumelela.

Staff turnover: A number of institutions have experienced a high rates of staff turnover, making collaboration challenging, especially across regional networks. To maintain continuity and foster collaboration, each institution should have at least two representatives included in all communications. Additionally, two representatives from each Partner institution should be invited to the Partner Convening meetings, ensuring that even with staff changes, collaboration can continue smoothly.

Tools and resources

Tools and resources developed in the USA (e.g., the ICAT and the Carnegie Pathways) are very valuable, but do require contextualisation.

Process

Student success as a programme: As highlighted above, Partner institutions emphasised that student success should be viewed as a continuous programme rather than a project. They highlighted the importance of having an institutional student success framework and an integrated institutional plan to guide practices across the institution.

Actionable analytics: Analytics should lead to actionable insights. One of the Partners highlighted the value of implementing the ICAT process, noting that it fostered conversations, highlighted strengths, and pinpointed areas needing improvement.

Stakeholder involvement: Institutionalising student success requires sustained participation from all stakeholders, including staff, students, and executive management. Achieving a shared understanding of student success involves securing buy-in not only from executive leadership but also from various units and departments within the institution.

The power of partnerships: Partner institutions recognised the significance of partnerships and acknowledged that collaboration, although challenging, is essential. They believe that collaboration is rewarding - "when institutions collaborate, students win."

Integrated student success committees: The importance of integrating the institutional student success committee cannot be overstated. This committee serves as a vital mechanism for breaking down silos and fostering collaboration within institutions. Coaches will assist new partners in establishing these committees, ensuring they have appropriate reporting structures, such as reporting to the Senate.

Student centred approach

Placing students at the centre: Students should be at the heart of any design or initiative. This involves critically examining how universities might inadvertently hinder student success and working to address these challenges. It's crucial to develop student agency, empowering them to take an active role in their education and success.

Building student capacity: Partners recognised the importance of equipping students with the necessary skills to actively contribute to co-creation and collaboration efforts. The Design Thinking methodology was identified as a valuable tool for this purpose.



Understanding students: Maintaining a deep understanding of students is essential. This requires a data-driven approach to gain insights into their needs, preferences, and challenges.

Enhancing student experience of e-learning: In the context of teaching and learning, students' attitudes play a pivotal role in improving the e-learning experience. Understanding and addressing students' perspectives can significantly enhance the effectiveness of online education.

Piloting and scaling

Driving impact: Partner institutions are beginning to focus on driving impact by scaling successful interventions across the university. They've learned to assess the balance between expenditure and reach, realising that costly projects with limited impact may require redesign or alternative funding sources outside of Siyaphumelela.

Sustainability in piloting: Partners institutions have learnt the value of adopting a strategy of piloting initiatives before scaling them. Also, that it is essential to incorporate considerations of sustainability when designing the piloting phase, as projects often demand human resources that may not be sustainable in the long run. Partners emphasised the importance of making continuous data-driven adjustments during the piloting phase. Additionally, they highlighted the need to use grants like the Kresge grant as seed funding, avoiding reliance on external funding for critical student success interventions.

Focused scaling: Scaling initiatives requires a focused approach, guided by data, institutional needs, and long-term benefits. Partners have found that projects driven by research and focus yield better results. They've learned that intentional planning is essential for successful scaling, and there's always room for improvement in scaling efforts.

Consolidating lessons

Saide is committed to consolidating the lessons learned from scaling initiatives within Siyaphumelela. To further enhance these efforts, *Saide* has initiated collaboration with ATD to integrate insights from scaling practices in the USA. This collaboration aims to share valuable lessons across the Siyaphumelela network.

Siyaphumelela 2.0 outcomes

The Siyaphumelela Network 2.0 Initiative successfully achieved most of its initial outcomes. It has continued to foster a more student-centred culture to improve student completion rates, reduce race and gender equity differences, enhance institutional capacity to collect and use student data and expand evidence-based student success efforts on a national scale.

First, outcomes related to a student-centred culture, improving institutional capacity to collect and use student data and, expanding evidence-based student success efforts are presented. Following that, high-level outcomes, organised similarly to the previous funding proposal, are presented.

Student-centred culture

- Since its inception in 2014, the Siyaphumelela Network has grown from five partner institutions in Siyaphumelela 1.0 to 17 institutions in Siyaphumelela 2.0. This growth includes five historically disadvantaged universities, three universities of technology and two post-apartheid universities. The participating universities are categorised into seven Partners, nine Participants and 1 Associate university.
- Participation in the Siyaphumelela Network was integrated as an aligned partnership initiative, in the Department of Higher Education and Training's (DHETs) University Capacity Development Plan (UCDP) 2020-2023. This recognition was based on the alignment between the objectives of the Siyaphumelela Network, focused on promoting student success in the South African



university system, and the student success focus of the UCDP. The DHET has maintained a long-standing relationship with the Siyaphumelela Network and its participants, evident through their representation on the Advisory Committee. The integration allowed institutions to cover their annual membership fee and additional costs associated with Siyaphumelela's capacity development activities. This support has continued into the UCDP for 2024-2026.

- All seven Partner institutions, as well as several Participant institutions, have incorporated student success into their institutional strategic plans.
- All seven Partner institutions, along with most Participant institutions, have established student success committees.
- DREAM 2024 marks the 10th year of Siyaphumelela's participation at the Achieving the Dream's annual conference. In 2023, 34 South African delegates were sponsored to attend DREAM, and in 2024, 23 South African delegates were also sponsored to attend DREAM, with a spotlight session highlighting "Siyaphumelela's journey towards equity in South African Universities: moving from access to success".

Improving institutional capacity to collect and use student data

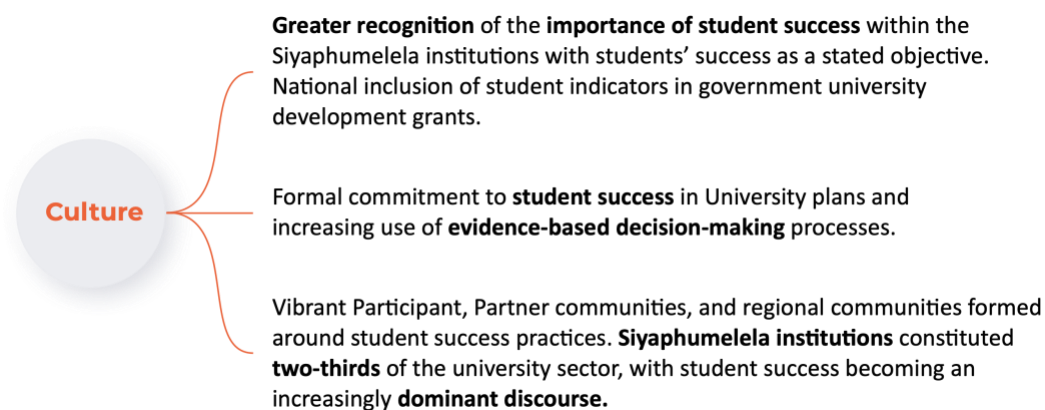
- The highly skilled and experienced coaches have been instrumental in driving the project's success. Coaches define their roles as critical friends, connectors, co-creators, developers, facilitators and motivators. The conceptual framework developed by the coaches focuses on a human-centric, generative, transformative design process aimed at strengthening student success at universities through data analysis. The concept of Community of Practice (CoP) has emerged as the primary enabler for building capacity towards transformative design.
- Partner institutions report on Siyaphumelela Key Performance Indicators, disaggregated based on race, gender and NSFAs (Socio-economic proxy) status, are not reported elsewhere by institutions.
- The use of data to identify high-impact modules with high failure rates is common practice in institutions.
- *Saide* along with Elizabeth Booi (University of the Western Cape) and Charles Sheppard (Nelson Mandela University), explored student success as a key national priority, fostering collaboration among universities. They discussed innovative ways to integrate data during the annual Know-Your-Data workshops. Participants are introduced to leading and lagging indicators and demonstrate the use of data on high-impact modules. In the second workshop, participants learn about data visualisation, communication principles, and design principles for visualisation. Additionally, participants are introduced to the Siyaphumelela Key Performance Indicators. In the third session, participants present a 15-minute visualisation-focused presentation to the wider student success team, showcasing one of their institutional student success indicators, including and using visualisation to interpret data and tell a compelling story.
- Service workshops on the use of data for student success are conducted by Partner institutions to build institutional capacity and utilise student data. Some of the service workshops focusing on data include: Predictive Analytics for Student Success; Biographical Questionnaire Design and Implementation to support Student Success Initiatives; South African Survey on Student Engagement (SASSE) webinars; Improving Data Analytics Capacity using PowerBI: Beginner and Intermediate; A data-informed approach to module reviews; At risk identification: a multiscale perspective; Data Analytics for Student Success using Non-Programming Tools.

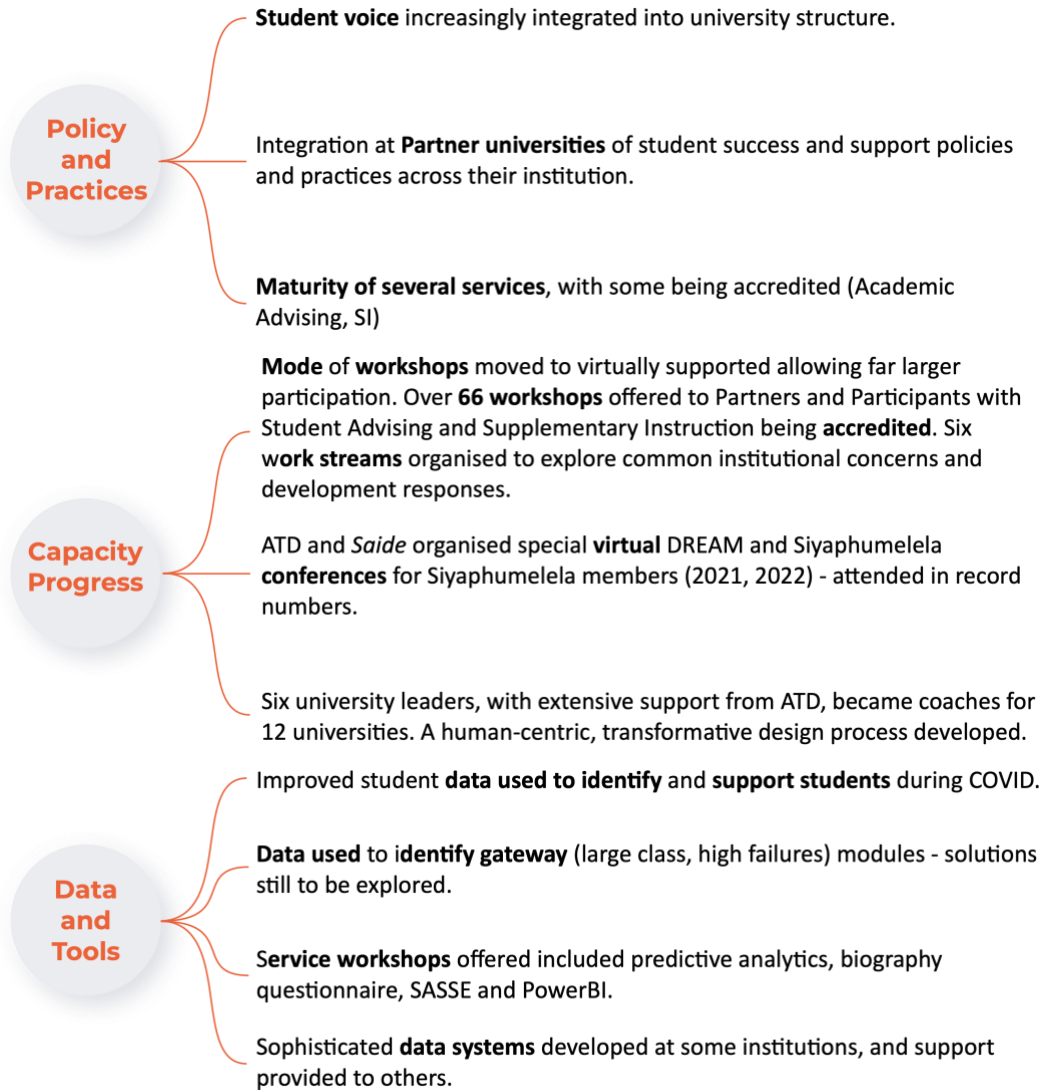
Expanding evidence-based student success efforts

- During Siyaphumelela 2.0, a culture of using evidence-based student success interventions started emerging in the network universities.
- From 2021 to the end May 2024, *Saide* organised over 60 service workshops, including the Know Your Data service workshop which comprises three components, with a significant increase in monthly average participation. In 2022 the average participation was 26, whereas in 2023 it was around 40 participants. Just under 1,500 attendees joined the Siyaphumelela service workshops in Siyaphumelela 2.0, including the certified Academic Advising Professional Development and Supplemental Instruction supervisor training courses.
- Regional networks provided a platform for sharing ideas and learning new techniques and skills from one another. The five regional networks (Gauteng, Central, KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape and Western Cape) are each coordinated by one of the partner institutions. Institutions that are not formally part of the Siyaphumelela Network are invited to attend these regional workshops, fostering collaboration and knowledge exchange across a broader network. TVET colleges have also attended the most recent Central and KwaZulu-Natal regional network meetings.
- Bi-yearly convening meetings for Partners and Participants provide an opportunity for sharing evidence-based student success interventions.
- The annual Siyaphumelela Conference in 2024 boasted excellent presentations by partner universities on their evidence-based practices, as well as four workshops and 60 parallel session reflecting on such practices. There was a marked improvement in the quality of these presentations.

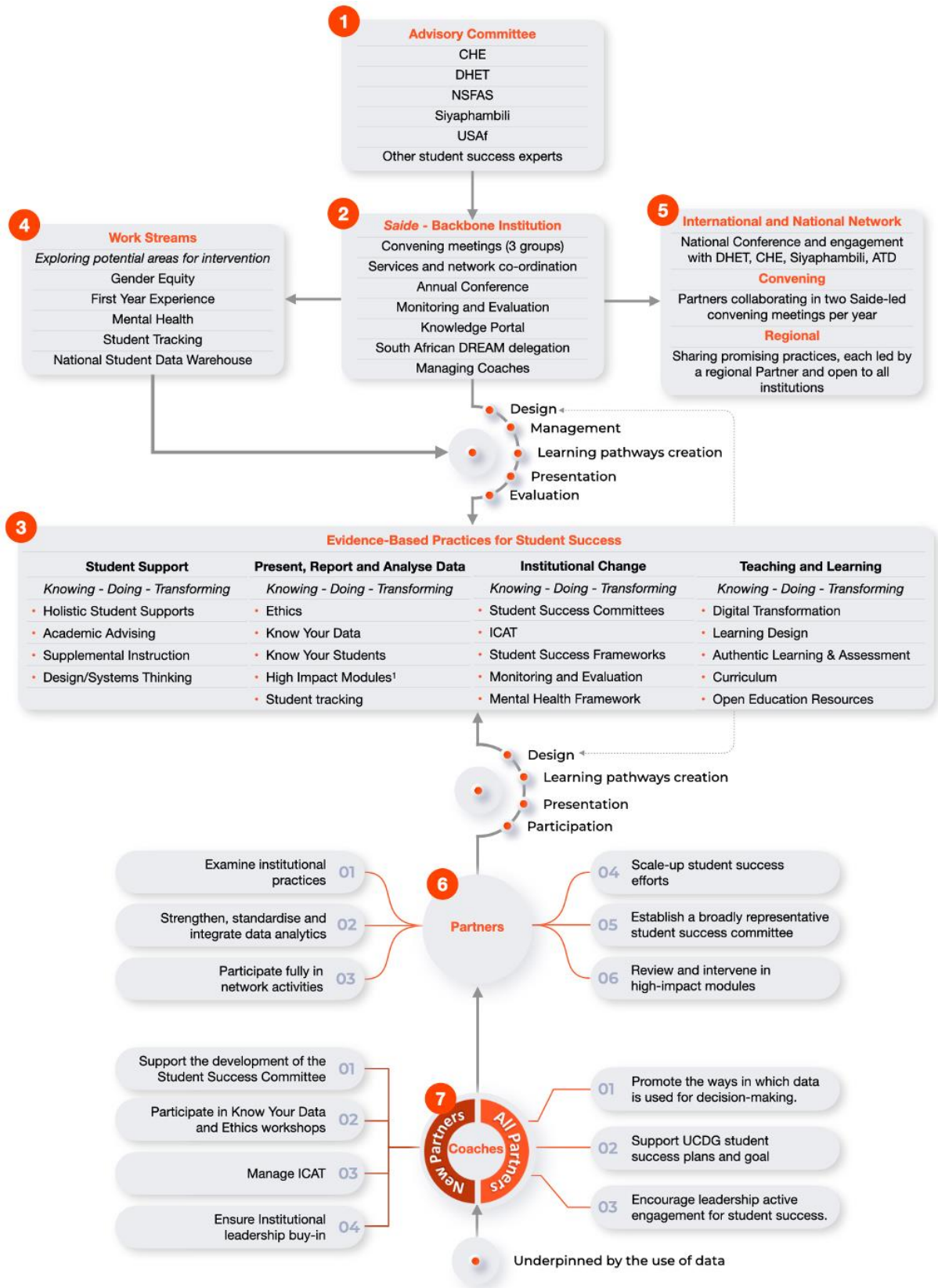
Summary of Siyaphumelela 2.0 outcomes

High-level outcomes of Siyaphumelela 2.0 include culture, policy and practices, capacity progress and data and tools.





Design of Siyaphumelela Network 3.0



¹ High-impact modules are defined as those with high enrolments and high failure rates.

