

Internationalisation of South African Higher Education

The scope of my observations today seek to address a vexing question that continues to endure in all conversations on the role of internationalisation within higher education. To what extent can organizations like HESA – which comprises the Vice-Chancellors of our 23 public universities – influence policy on internationalisation, what strategies do we employ to shift perceptions and to generally raise the internationalisation agenda?

In the case of South Africa, these questions can only be answered by understanding how apartheid shaped and continues to shape higher education. When higher education policy was formulated in 1997, there were several mentions of the need for the system to be “internationally competitive” and for there to be a free flow of staff and students across international borders. However, internationalisation was not prioritised primarily because it palled into insignificance against the urgent need to transform and bring greater equity to the sector. The transformation agenda was, and still is, the main driving force behind our higher education policy.

Policy emanating from the Education department since the Education White Paper 3 (1997) and the National Plan for Higher Education (2001) pay homage to the interconnected world in which higher education has to operate but there is no real integration of the concept of internationalisation in higher education policy. Other departments like Science and Technology, Trade and Industry, the then department of Foreign Affairs all mention internationalisation within the context of higher education. They all note its crucial importance in the exchange of knowledge. But, in general, they leave it at that.

Even though the DHET has a fully functioning international department, it has not yet drafted guidelines or policies. Partly this is because transformation still dominates higher education policy discourse, partly because universities are seen as autonomous, and perhaps most importantly because this branch is, itself, caught between bigger departmental priorities. Trade and Industry, International Cooperation and the Presidency all have different international agendas which change periodically.

Finally, what this means is that higher education presently exists in a policy vacuum regarding internationalisation. Institutions make their own decisions not only about the extent to which they focus of international staff and students, but also their capacity to do so. That said, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) has recently brought its Strategic Plan 2010 - 2014 which clearly

indicates that “international cooperation must grow in the research and postgraduate areas of study to support South Africa’s growth plans.” The Department aims to promote internationalisation of the university education system and to support student exchanges. As a result, the proportion of international students is high at postgraduate level. It must be noted however that this prioritisation of international graduate and post-graduate numbers is not in fact a new focus but rather it leverages off an existing trend.

In fact, one of the only internationalisation policies in effect was not generated in the country at all but rather came via the SADC Protocol on Education and Training (1997) and even at the time was more of a wish list than an enforceable policy. The protocol sought to:

- Reserve space for 5% of student admissions for SADC students.
- Work towards standardisation of university admission requirements.
- Develop mechanisms for the transfer of credit within universities in the region.
- Encourage student and staff mobility.
- Ensure, within 10 years, that SADC students and home students have the same rights as far as accommodation and fees are concerned.

Some of these targets (5% of sectoral space and local fees) have already been met in South Africa, but no other SADC country has been able to comply. The standardisation and the creation of a regional qualification framework has been underway for years but is still no closer to finalisation.

The reality is that internationalisation has grown organically without national policy measures. In 1994, at the birth of democracy, there were already 12,557 international students studying in South Africa. In 1999 there was over 100% increase in international students taking the total from 17,129 in 1998 to 34,770 or 6,27% in 1999. By 2009, international numbers had grown to 60,586 or 7,26% of the total student population of 838,000. Over this period the average increase in international student participation has been 13% per annum. This means that although South Africa’s student population is comparatively small when compared to OECD countries, South Africa punches well above its weight in percentage terms and compares favourably with countries like Canada and Australia in terms of international participation.

As can be expected, the majority of students come from the SADC region and the majority of these from neighbouring countries. 69% of all international students come from the SADC region. The major country of origin is Zimbabwe, a fact that is not surprising considering the political climate in that country and the way that it has impacted on their universities. While Zimbabwe may be explained in geo-political terms, geographic proximity can explain the strong representation of our neighbours Namibia, Lesotho, Swaziland and Botswana within our universities.

Another driving factor in the preference shown by the SADC community is that these students pay local fees in line with the SADC agreement drawn up in 1997. There are also 10,663 students from the rest of Africa, and 7,011 from outside of Africa, primarily originating from the EU, North America and Asian countries. The 2010 *Open Door Report* tracks preferred study destinations of USA students. South Africa presently sits in 13th place with 4,160 US students studying in South Africa during 2008 for either full undergraduate and postgraduate degrees or semester courses.

In 2009, South Africa had 145,000 graduates of which 11,380 or nearly 8% were from outside the country and graduated from every one of our universities. Perhaps more importantly is that the majority of these students – with the obvious exception of Zimbabwe – are returning to their country of origin on completion of their studies. Between 2006 and 2009, our institutions had graduated 42,617 students who have been able to return to their country of origin and take their place within the economy. It is my sense that South African higher education is playing a crucial (and perhaps under-recognised) role in supplying higher education to Africa.

If there is a central motif that underpins this brief overview it is that South African internationalisation has been shaped by a myriad of forces which, ironically, have had very little to do with government or sector policy. The international sub-sector has grown in relation to need and the African focus has come about without any sector-wide strategy that specifically targeted the continent. If the truth be told, we didn't go into Africa, Africa came to us.

Where does that leave organizations like HESA within the shaping of policy? HESA's strategic approach is to work within the existing policy climate in order to shift the terms of reference. That means that HESA's activities have recently focussed on removing blockages to existing policy, especially in relation to the workings of Foreign Affairs while carving out a space for internationalisation within the existing priorities of the country.

For these reasons HESA operates within existing government priorities to clearly articulate the benefits of internationalisation to the public, government and policy makers. The first step for HESA has been the formation of a structure to shape and coordinate the sector effort. This has led to the establishment of a Strategy Group on Internationalisation chaired by a Vice-Chancellor to:

- monitor existing trends;
- advise the Board on strategic issues on internationalisation; and
- champion the sector advocacy engagement with policy makers and other stakeholders.

Moreover, HESA works to encourage and facilitate international partnerships and collaborations that directly respond to national priority areas for development:

- Creation of decent work and sustainable livelihoods
- Education
- Health
- Rural development, food security and land reform
- The fight against crime and corruption.

HESA also leverages on governments multilateral partnerships and agreements. It has taken a prominent role in the South Africa-Japan Universities partnership which aimed at the acquisition of scarce and critical skills and the Academic Forum under the India-Brazil-South Africa partnership that supports the mobility of academics within key areas prioritised for research collaboration.

HESA also assisted in the establishment and funding of a structure representing the professionals managing internationalisation at institutions: the International Education Association of South Africa (IESA). Its mandate is to

- facilitate the development and sharing of best practice in the management of internationalisation within higher education;
- annually publish a guide on studying in South Africa for international students; and
- organise an annual international conference that, among other things provides a platform for engagement with policy makers.

Via HESA's support of IEASA every university in South Africa has international students and all have international offices. Some institutions have small offices, manned by one or two people, who spend their time trying to deal with issues like accommodation, visas and medical aid. Others have fully staffed sub-departments that not only deal with the day-to-day issues confronting international students, but have clear marketing strategies to increase global reach. Currently there are 21,000 international students at UNISA studying either via contact or distance. The same prevalence is found at the other big internationalisation universities – Wits, North-west, Pretoria, Stellenbosch and the university of Kwa-Zulu Natal. An interesting anomaly is the University of Cape Town who has the largest contingent of European, Asian and USA students.

It is fair to say that in response to this policy vacuum most institutions have taken matters into their own hands. They have drawn up their own guidelines on internationalisation, have put in place codes of conduct and regularly share best practices at the annual conference held by IEASA. Increasingly IEASA's function is to act as central provider of services like medical aid and insurance so that international students are ensured of quality and consistency in these areas.

While some South African universities make a profit out of this 'international trade', UNISA, which has the largest international student population, is adamant that it costs that institution more than it recoups to host international students. The 'African trend' is not about profit, but about other less obvious reasons. It is my sense that internationalisation in South Africa has assumed this distinct shape and size because it evolved a response to the dual imperatives of transformation and the needs of the developmental state that cannot be based purely on profit generation but is driven by far more old-fashioned values: collegiality, hospitality and reciprocity. As students from across Africa arrive at our institutions there is a reciprocal curiosity – at the level of research, sharing of knowledge and assets and collaboration – being shown by South African academics and leadership.

If the sub-prime economic meltdown has taught us anything, if the regime change that is sweeping the North of Africa is teaching us anything – it is this: people, especially young people, are growing increasingly suspicious of traditional and entrenched forms of power and are searching for authentic alternatives including higher education choices. South Africa higher education has its challenges, but at least in the realm of internationalisation it seems to be doing something right. Simply because it seems to be doing it for the right reasons: a genuine desire to disseminate and share knowledge together with a desire to see knowledge return to the countries from which the students came.

When internationalisation policy comes, it is my hope that it will build on the resources, networks and goodwill that currently exist in South African higher education and will boost our already significant contribution to improving the lives of all Africans as well as those beyond the continent.