

10-YEAR STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK (2010 - 2020)

Background

Post 1994, higher education (HE) has been subject to far reaching legal, administrative and policy changes, including significant restructuring.

The policy changes, supported by South African universities in general, have mainly affected the following three areas of HE endeavour:

- academic and enrolment planning,
- quality assurance, and
- funding.

The largely successful development and implementation of these policies may be ascribed to the constructive relationship between the HE sector and the Department of Education (now of Higher Education and Training).

The institutional restructuring programme, launched by Government in 2002, was met with mixed reaction within HE. While Higher Education South Africa (HESA) has not yet undertaken a formal assessment of this programme, a number of the mergers and incorporations appear to have had very positive outcomes for the institutions involved. The newly established institutions require time to settle down to new identities, visions and missions.

The period has also witnessed undoubted advances in HE, particularly with regard to greater equity in access; increased enrolments for advanced post-graduate studies; and increased research outputs. Major challenges however remain, including such as high student dropout rates; low completion rates – particularly amongst African and Coloured students; and marginal increases in overall HE participation rates.

A particularly daunting challenge faced by HE, and one which seems set to continue for the foreseeable future, concerns the inadequate levels of preparedness of school leavers for HE study. This has resulted in most HE institutions entrenching school level functions within their HE mandate, with potential negative long term consequences for HE and education in South Africa in general.

Purposes of public Higher Education

The purposes of public higher education in South Africa are set out in the White Paper of 1997ⁱ, which informed the Higher Education Act of 1997ⁱⁱ. These purposes are teaching, research and community engagement. The National Plan for Higher Educationⁱⁱⁱ asserted as a priority “responsiveness to regional and national needs, for academic programmes, research, and community service”.

In explaining the purposes of higher education, Dr Saleem Badat^{iv} sums it up as follows:

“The first purpose of universities is the *production of knowledge* which advances understanding of the natural and social worlds, and enriches humanity’s accumulated scientific and cultural inheritances and heritage ... The second purpose of universities is the *dissemination of knowledge* and the formation and cultivation of the cognitive character of students. The goal is to produce graduates that ideally: ‘can think effectively and critically’; have ‘achieved depth in some field of knowledge’, and have a ‘critical appreciation of the ways in which we gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of ourselves’ ... The final, if somewhat newer but increasingly accepted, purpose of universities is to undertake *community engagement*. We must make a distinction between a

university being responsive to its political, economic and social contexts and community engagement. Being alive to context does not mean that a university is necessarily engaged with communities, however we may define these. That is to say, in much as sensitivity to economic and social conditions and challenges is a necessary condition for community engagement, it is not a sufficient condition.”

South African public higher education has a long and rich tradition of seeking higher moral and civic purposes in its endeavours. The university campus has been a central site of national debate on the issues of the day, with academic staff facilitating rigorous analysis and critical reflection by students.

In order to continue to pursue these noble purposes, to cite from Badat (2009), higher education “...must have a commitment ‘to the spirit of truth’”.

In order to remain loyal to this commitment, higher education should continuously deepen the academe, public and government’s appreciation of academic freedom and institutional autonomy as basic tenets of institutional culture. In this way, higher education will be in a position to respond to the challenge of educating the leaders of tomorrow and to connect those future leaders with the world of today.

National policy goals for the next five years

HESA is aware that Government’s national policy goals for the next few years will be pursued in arguably the most severe global financial downturn for the past 40 to 50 years.

Despite the many social, economic and political challenges brought about by this financial crisis, universities in South Africa wish to pledge their support for the development of policies and plans by which the negative effects of this crisis may be counteracted.

Government’s national policy goals form part of a renewed emphasis on socio-economic development. In this context HESA expects the notion of a developmental state to feature strongly in Government strategy and policy making. HESA supports the developmental agenda based on Government’s identified national priorities, viz:

- creation of decent work and sustainable livelihoods
- education
- health
- rural development, food security and land reform
- the fight against crime and corruption

HESA has noted the links between these priority areas and their subsidiary objectives and, HE institutions. Together with government and other critical stakeholders, universities wish to explore:

- ways to strengthen collaboration with Government to achieve these goals, within their respective mandates;
- incorporating these national aims and goals in their own prioritisation and delivery programmes, appropriate to their distinctive visions and missions;
- effective responses to the shortages in scarce skills areas as defined by government departments such as labour, trade and industry, and science and technology (National Research Foundation);
- ways in which all universities, but in particular rural based universities, may play an instrumental role in government’s rural development emphasis.

HESA makes these commitments within the following context:

First, the multiplicity of goals for HE as set out in the White Paper on HE: A Framework for the Transformation of Higher Education (1997). It sets out to:

- meet the learning needs and aspirations of individuals through the development of their intellectual abilities and aptitudes throughout their lives;
- address the development needs of society and provide the labour market, in a knowledge-driven and knowledge-dependent society, with the ever changing high-level competencies and expertise necessary for the growth and prosperity of a modern economy;
- contribute to the socialisation of enlightened, responsible and constructively critical citizens; and
- contribute to the creation, sharing and evaluation of knowledge.

Second, in respect of the above-mentioned five priority areas, universities may become involved in community service where their learning/teaching and research outputs may be applied in the socio-economic development of communities. Universities are not providers of social services. Their core mission is as knowledge providers, providing learning/teaching and research outputs.

Third, by their very nature as institutions of higher education, universities concentrate on the production of graduates who possess high and higher middle-level skills, as distinct from middle and lower level skills. HESA believes the latter to be within the domain of other education and training structures, to which it pledges its support and co-operation as is feasible.

Against this background, universities in South Africa express their readiness to play a constructive, supportive role in pursuit of the various development goals set by Government for the next five years.

HESA's 10 year vision for the HE system

Universities believe that for the next decade, our HE system should be characterised by key enabling factors for their optimal functioning. These are:

- an appropriate balance between institutional autonomy, academic freedom and public accountability; and
- adequate funding levels and satisfactory levels of financial support for students.

Based on these enabling conditions, HESA supports an HE system that expresses the following four major characteristics:

- i. high levels of quality, comparable to the best in the world;
- ii. high levels of institutional diversity based on institutional self differentiation;
- iii. significant transformation, social cohesion, non-discrimination, and freedom of speech and of association; and
- iv. high levels of responsiveness and relevance.

HESA's system and policy considerations for the next 10 years

In terms of the foregoing, HESA's system and policy considerations for the next 10 years are:

Achieving an appropriate balance: institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and public accountability

HESA is in full support of reasonable measures aimed at achieving greater levels of public accountability by universities and agrees that universities, through engagement with the public, need to account for themselves far more effectively than has been the case thus far.

Such public accountability must however be circumscribed by a policy framework that ensures satisfactory levels of institutional autonomy and academic freedom. In this regard:

- HESA commits itself anew to a wide-ranging approach of self-regulation in order to improve levels of public accountability, while appealing to Government to honour present levels of institutional autonomy and academic freedom.
- HESA is further of the view that pressing university governance issues require urgent resolution. These include the tendency by some university Councils to be operationally involved in day to day management; delays in Council approvals for crises that require quick governance responses; and the inability or unwillingness of individual Council members to function in the overall interests of the institution rather than the 'mandated' positions of their constituencies.

Arriving at an adequately funded HE system

Though cognisant of the effects of the global economic crisis on Government spending, the intended supportive role by HE in Government's development agenda will be severely constrained by the HE spending target of 1% of GDP not being reached soon, and even surpassed, to about 1,5% of GDP over the next 10 to 15 years.

HESA is pleased that the Minister of Higher Education and Training has launched a review of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) to better assist deserving students to meet the rising costs of HE. HESA pledges its full co-operation in this review.

Through its Funding Strategy Group, HESA intends a review of the funding framework's support for differentiated institutional mandates. In addition, HESA welcomes a more strategically directed management approach to earmarked funding and block grants in which short to medium term priority themes are regularly made known in advance. Of particular importance to the HE sector has been the grants for infrastructural renewal over the past four to five years. It is hoped these grants become an embedded feature in the system of earmarked funding.

Achieving quality levels comparable to the best in the world

Achieving desired levels of quality in HE institutions is influenced by a number of factors. Some of these include:

- i. Academic quality of school leavers
HESA again registers its concern with the overall preparedness of school leavers for HE study. This problem, which universities are willing to tackle to the best of their abilities, can in the long run only be resolved at origination, that is in the school system. Compatible with their goals and objectives, HE institutions commit themselves to assisting in the resolution of this problem.
- ii. Qualification and other academic policies for HE
A new HE Qualifications Framework (HEQF) is in the process of being implemented in HE. While HESA feels that it contains many positive aspects, it also contains elements that require attention to support a differentiated HE system that displays requisite levels of academic quality. Some of these issues affect Universities of Technology in particular.
- iii. Quality of institutional leadership, management and academic staff
HE institutions face a crisis in respect of attracting and retaining academic staff of calibre. Universities experience an increasing proportional demographic of aged academic staff. Given the inordinately tight financial strictures under which universities operate in South Africa, this may only be resolved by a significant increase in the block grant component of funding for HE institutions. Reductions in academic staff numbers is not viable as a measure given the already high student-staff ratios being contended with.

iv. Internationalization

South African universities face a number of challenges in the area of internationalisation, some of which result still from apartheid based HE policies. One is that the internationalization of staff and student bodies requires flexible policies and the effective management of applications for study visas, work permits and the like by the Department of Home Affairs.

HESA seeks the mediation of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DoHET) for acceptable arrangements with Home Affairs to expedite applications for study visas and work permits by students and academic staff.

The inclusion of HE in the bilateral or multilateral agreements that the Department of International Relations and Cooperation establishes with other countries would also assist in the internationalization efforts of HE institutions.

Developing institutional diversity in terms of self differentiation

Through Government's restructuring of the HE institutional landscape by means of mergers and incorporations, three main types of HE institutions have been established:

- traditional universities (11),
- comprehensive universities (6), and
- universities of technology (6).

HESA supports the principle of a differentiated HE system. It makes different development trajectories for HE institutions possible. However other less clearly delineated groupings of HE institutions exist or, are beginning to emerge.

For many years historically disadvantaged institutions have held that their developmental needs require that they be differently treated from historically advantaged institutions. Similarly, the former technikons, now universities of technology, have long argued that because of past policies and practices they have not enjoyed sufficient Government support to progress a development trajectory different from that of traditional universities.

More recently, rural based universities have argued that they face unique developmental obstacles and hindrances compared to urban-based institutions.

In the last few years an informal grouping of some six universities, sometimes referred to as "research intensive universities", have arisen to motivate for select support as the viable course to South Africa's HE system becoming "world class" and truly competitive internationally.

HESA supports a system of progressive self-differentiation based on varied institutional visions, missions, policies and practices that enable institutions to meaningfully progress a distinct development path. However differentiation should not occur to the cost of some institutions in order to advance others.

HESA has established a Task Team to draw up a set of principles and criteria governing self-differentiation. HESA would welcome interaction with the DoHET on these principles and criteria following its drafting.

Advancing transformation, social cohesion, non-discrimination and freedom of speech and freedom of association

HESA acknowledges that much work still needs to be done in this area. Insufficient progress has been made on a conceptual understanding of transformation in a knowledge-based institution; on

what policies and processes would realise an institutionally inclusive approach to such a view of transformation; and the requirements for such policies and processes to find practical efficacy in the hearts and minds of students and staff.

In addition, HESA is of the firm view that approaches to transformation should give special attention to and impact on the three core functions of universities: learning/teaching, research and community service.

Strengthening institutional responsiveness and relevance

Increased levels of responsiveness and relevance in HE institutions should be inextricably linked to their core functions: learning/teaching, research and community service.

An indication from Government of priority areas for HE over the next decade, derived from the national policy goals discussed earlier, would assist greatly. The DoHET may mediate this input from, among others, the departments of Science and Technology (DST) and Trade and Industry (dti).

HESA believes further that greater synergy within HE would be promoted if the DoHET (through earmarked funding), dti (through support for THRIP) and DST (through NRF funding) better co-ordinated their funding of such identified priority areas.

It must be emphasised that the country's dire skilled human resource needs, at the vocational, professional and academic levels, cannot be met solely by the universities. HESA believes a strengthened and expanded FET college sector would play a decisive role in the uptake of students who currently unsuccessfully seek university study.

HESA pledges its support for any initiatives aimed at providing a greater set of study opportunities for school leavers. The number of school leavers that cannot be accommodated within the present public sector HE system points to the urgent need for a co-ordinated, flexible and differentiated post-secondary education system that includes universities, teacher education colleges, FET colleges, nursing colleges, agricultural colleges and the like. Such a system would effectively configure the knowledge, expertise and values critical for nation-building.

Conclusion

In conclusion, HESA commits itself to working with Government in establishing an HE system that fulfils the goals and aims set out in the White Paper on HE (1997), the National Plan on HE (2001), and subsequent relevant HE policy documents, including as referenced by this memorandum.

End

ⁱ Republic of South Africa, "A Programme for the transformation of higher education (White Paper)". Government Gazette (18207), 1997.

ⁱⁱ Republic of South Africa, 1997: 10

ⁱⁱⁱ Republic of South Africa, National Plan for Higher Education. Pretoria, Ministry of Education, 2001.

^{iv} Saleem Badat, "The role of higher education in society: valuing higher education", Paper presented at HERS-SA Academy 2009, University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business, Cape Town, September 2009.