

# Stakeholder Summit on Higher Education Transformation

## Concept Document

### Background and Rationale

Since 1994, there have been many changes in the South African higher education system. Among the sector's notable achievements are:

- A new vision with democratic and transformative aims and objectives for the system has been developed, particularly in *Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (1997)*.
- The higher education system has been restructured through mergers and incorporations, and two new institutional types (i.e. universities of technology and comprehensive universities) have been created. Two National Institutes of Higher Education have been established in Mpumalanga and the Northern Cape.
- Higher education student enrolments (in publicly-funded universities) have increased by approximately 70% between 1994 and today.
- The racial composition of the student body at every institution has changed, making it more representative of the country's population, and ensuring that enrolments are more equitable between men and women.
- There have been internal institutional reforms with the establishment of new structures such as institutional forums.
- A national quality assurance system has been implemented.
- The Department has developed a new funding formula and allied interventions which have focused on the areas of teaching, learning and research.
- The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) has been established and has provided funding to allow university access to tens of thousands of students who would otherwise have been excluded.
- A Higher Education Qualifications Framework that provides coherence to higher education qualifications and contributes further to the realisation of a single, coordinated higher education system has been developed.

Notwithstanding these gains, the higher education system has not achieved many of its transformational goals. Some of these are: low participation rates, high drop-out rates (low retention rates) and low throughput rates, an insufficient number of postgraduate graduations; perceived lack of fit between higher education graduates and the world of work and; the inability of the system to replace its academic work force. These, and others, are outward indicators of much deeper problems which remain to be tackled. Much more needs to be done to create the university system envisaged by Education White Paper 3 for this system to discharge the expectations and aspirations of South Africa's people.

The establishment of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) in 2009 has added a new dimension to the transformative possibilities in higher education. The new Department provides an opportunity to create a single, seamless, post-school education and training system that will meet the aspirations of both the youth and adults and, simultaneously, ensure that education, training and skills development initiatives can

respond to the national requirements which include the performance of the economy, the challenge of rural development, and the development of an informed and critical citizenry. Under a single ministry, universities, colleges and the workplace-based skills development system (including the SETAs and the National Skills Fund) are now provided the opportunity to harness synergies and enhance their cooperation.

In November 2008, the Ministry of Education released the report of the Committee on *Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions* (the Soudien Report). This report points to the need to revisit transformation issues in higher education and to move from its cruder and simplistic manifestations to a far deeper understanding which straddle pedagogy and curriculum, institutional cultures, democratisation of higher education and its role in development.

A number of issues are now before the sector. Do we have a shared understanding of transformation? (Responses to the Soudien report suggest that we do not.) What areas require re-conceptualisation? How will the report's outcomes be used to propel higher education forward? What new forms of support and development need to be implemented and by whom? What tasks are institutional and what tasks are the responsibility of the Ministry, the Council on Higher Education and other bodies associated with the sector?

The foregoing provides the backdrop to the DHET's call on institutions and organizations to participate in a Summit to re-examine the direct and indirect role of higher education in development, to identify higher education priorities in relation to systemic and national transformation goals and, to decide on the most appropriate mechanisms for the sector and the Ministry to communicate on these issues.

### **Aims and Objectives of the Higher Education Stakeholder Summit**

The Summit is the initiative of the Minister of Higher Education and Training. It is the first of a number of initiatives which aim at building a common understanding of higher education and a sense of cohesion between the various stakeholders involved in the sector.

Accordingly, the Summit will seek to:

1. Revisit the notion of transformation holistically, focussing on issues of access, equity and quality in relation to the core functions of higher education;
2. Examine the role of higher education in national development;
3. Identify key objectives for the higher education and;
4. Discuss the need, feasibility and possible modalities for more systematic and structured communication between the sector and the Minister of Higher Education and Training.

### **Structure of the Summit**

The Summit will take the form of commissions. The main transformation challenges to be examined by the commissions are set out below.

#### *Commission 1: The Student Experience*

What is the fit between schooling and higher education? Who gets admitted to higher education? How do different students experience learning and living in higher education institutions? Does our higher education system adequately address the needs of students

from poor and working class backgrounds as well as those from more privileged backgrounds? What are the linkages between admission policies, admission practices, curriculum responsiveness, retention and academic success? How, if at all, have the curriculum and pedagogic approaches changed in response to the needs and circumstances of a new generation of students?

#### *Commission 2: The Academic Experience*

Academic professionals are the agents through which knowledge is produced and transmitted in higher education settings. What are the major concerns of academics at HEIs? What are the cultural, social, financial and institutional obstacles to the stabilisation and enhancement of the profession? What challenges face the higher education system with respect to developing the next generation of academics and what are the best strategies for tackling these challenges? What challenges face academics with regard to transformation of the curriculum?

#### *Commission 3: Experiences of Leadership, Management and Governance*

What are the major concerns of university managers and councils? What are the challenges in the relationship between councils and university managers? The Soudien Report highlighted many challenges associated with governance practices at many of our public universities - how effective are current governance structures, practices and processes in allowing staff, students and other stakeholders to express their views and influence major decisions? How can they be improved?

#### *Commission 4: Institutional Differentiation*

Our higher education system is highly differentiated, but this differentiation still owes as much to the legacy of apartheid than to the post-apartheid reforms. Most universities (or campuses) serving black - and especially Africa - communities under apartheid are still largely under-resourced and inadequately staffed. Have they - and the largely poor students that they serve - been neglected by the democratic state? The current funding model applies to all institutions and does not fully recognise the need for differentiation, nor does it adequately take into account the imperative to develop appropriate role for each institution based on its capacities, location and history, and funding them adequately to fulfil these roles. What role should historically disadvantaged institutions play in the education system of a democratic South Africa? What form should redress take? Should some universities be specifically identified as teaching universities with a focus on undergraduate studies?

#### *Cross cutting themes for Commissions:*

In additions to the above, the commissions should examine the following cross-cutting themes

- The implications of the Soudien Commission: what does it mean for the student experience, the academic experience and the experiences of university leadership, management and governance? (Commissions 1,2 and 3)
- The developmental role of universities (e.g. their role in overcoming poverty, rural underdevelopment, fighting crime, overcoming discrimination on the basis of class, race and gender, extending democracy, etc) (All commissions)
- The place of universities in the post school system - how universities relate to and assist the rest of the post school system. (All commissions)

## **Participation at the Summit**

The Ministry and Department of Higher Education and Training will invite representatives of all the major stakeholders in the higher education system as well as representatives of those sectors of the education and training system which link and interact with higher education (e.g. schooling, FET Colleges, SETAs and other government departments).

It is expected that the total number of participants will be approximately 350 persons, with the higher education stakeholders comprising approximately 70% of participants.

All participating organisations and other interested parties will be requested to arrange discussions within their organisations or sectors in preparation for the summit and to make submissions to the organising committee. These submissions will be analysed and a summary will be presented to the conference.

## **Organisation of the Summit**

The summit will take place over two days on 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2010 at the Bellville Campus of the Cape Peninsular University of Technology. A Summit Steering Committee (SSC), appointed by the Minister, is responsible to oversee the planning of the summit, the development of the programme, the management of the event and, the production of the report. The Centre for Education Policy and Development has appointed as a service provider to undertake all the organisational work and to manage the summit. The service provider is accountable to the SSC and the Department of Higher Education and Training and reports regularly to them. A representative of the service provider is an *ex officio* member of the SSC. The SSC is chaired by one of the Special Advisors to the Minister, John Pampallis, who acts as a representative of the Minister and keeps him informed of progress and challenges.

## **Funding**

The DHET will ask most participants to fund their own travel and accommodation, but some of the participants (e.g. some students, presenters of commissioned papers) will have their expenses covered by the conference budget. The budget will also cover all other expenses including administrative expenses, catering costs (teas and lunches), the production and distribution of the summit report, etc.

## **Summit Outputs and Outcomes**

The Stakeholders' Summit will serve a number of purposes and result in a number of outputs.

- The Summit will be a forum for all the major stakeholders in the South African higher education sector to meet, exchange views and debate some of the critical issues affecting the sector.
- The Summit will seek to adopt a Declaration elucidating a set of principles and understandings agreed to by the participants.
- A report of the summit, including all the papers presented, an account of the proceedings and debates and the Summit Declaration, will be produced and distributed to all

participants and will be made available more broadly through both hard copy (a DHET publication) and electronically through the DHET website.

All the above outcomes will act as a guide and point of reference to the continuing work of the Department of Higher Education and Training, universities, bodies such as the CHE, HESA and SAUS, academics, researchers, workers, students and other government departments.