

South Africa: Developing an Internationalization Policy

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A policy that would focus and guide the internationalization of the South African higher education system was not part of the guidance provided by the National Commission on Higher Education (NCE) in its 1996 report. What it indicated, however, was that South African higher education, emerging from a period of relative isolation, would have to produce the skills and technological innovations necessary for the country to successfully participate in the global market. Internationalizing South African higher education was left to the university sector, as the national government was focusing on other activities meant to transform the racially defined and fragmented system into a unitary system.

The International Education Association of South Africa (IEASA) conference of 2003 provided the system with the impetus to start paying attention to the need for a national policy. The rationales behind a national policy were the transformation of education as an international phenomenon; the need to address regional demands, in particular from the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), and challenges posed by the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and the African Union; and the necessity to address the country's skills development needs in the context of globalization. It was, however, not until 2012 that the national department of higher education (DHET) initiated the drafting process.

An intensive public participation process accompanied the development of the policy framework. The DHET engaged national and international experts to develop a first concept paper. Meetings were arranged with representatives of public South African universities to discuss their proposals for a structure of the planned policy framework. The views of universities and national and global experts were considered in the drafting process, and several public workshops were conducted to explain the policy as a steering mechanism.

The Policy Framework

The policy framework is grounded in the 2012 National Development Plan and other national policy documents. It gives effect to the commitments that the country made in terms of the 1997 SADC Protocol on Education and Training. It aims to provide "a national framework for internationalisation of higher education within which higher education institutions can develop and align their institutional internationalisation policies and strategies." All higher education institutions have to develop policies or strategies for internationalization and provide appropriate administration and support for internationalization. Strengthening internationalization at historically disadvantaged institutions is of particular concern.

The duty of institutions to consider national priorities is balanced with a guarantee of academic freedom enshrined in the constitution. The policy embraces mutuality, complementarity, quality, legal compliance, and ethics as structural principles. The government is not allowed to steer internationalization directly, but is rather assigned an enabling role. Higher education institutions are required to report on their progress in terms of internationalization in their annual performance plans, measured against goals that they have set for themselves.

The policy considers internationalization of research a priority. Internationalization should benefit all students, not only those who partake in mobility: Internationalization at home is prioritized, curriculum internationalization becomes mandatory. The internationalization process is viewed as an opportunity to take local and/or indigenous

Abstract

South Africa has completed a process of developing a national policy framework for internationalization. Following a transparent public participation process, the policy became legally binding in November 2020. It is expected to provide a broad agenda for internationalization and requires universities to adopt institutional internationalization strategies or policies. The policy provides the sector with clear guidance on internationalization for the post-COVID-19 pandemic period, and could become a model for the developing world.

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knowledge to the international community, thus the involvement of local communities in the higher education internationalization process is encouraged.

Adherence to strict ethical standards for international student mobility is required. A framework for cross-border and collaborative provision of higher education is provided, but only private higher education institutions are permitted to set up branch campuses abroad. In principle, cobadged, joint-, and consecutive qualifications are allowed, but double degrees remain prohibited. Financing internationalization is considered mainly an institutional responsibility, and institutions are encouraged to “design self-sustainability into their internationalisation activities.”

The publication of the draft policy in April 2017 raised the expectations of South African universities that a policy would be in place to guide them and provide a legal framework to offer international joint- and double degrees. It was also expected that the policy would assist previously disadvantaged universities in playing a more critical role in higher education internationalization, but because of its delayed implementation, institutional inequalities inherited from the apartheid system were allowed to continue.

Continuing Historical Imbalances

International student numbers, as an indicator of the level of internationalization, illustrate this clearly. The student data of universities identified as Historically White Universities (HWUs) and Historically Black or Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs) tells the following story. In 2018, HDIs accommodated 23 percent of all South African students, but only 9 percent of all international students. Compared to the total number of international students in South Africa, the number of international students at HDIs has been declining annually. In 2018, the HDIs’ student body only included 2.5 percent international students—far below the norm and system average of 7 percent. In contrast, the international student to local student ratio at HWUs was 10 percent, significantly more, and HWUs also registered more than 60 percent of all international students. This inequality is inherited from the past. It is also closely linked to leadership and the capacity of institutions to respond to international opportunities.

Higher Education Institutions Still Lead the Way

Leadership changes in government departments, diverging stakeholder views, and the COVID-19 pandemic caused delays with the finalization of the policy framework. In the absence of a formal policy, many universities still embarked on strengthening internationalization at home and internationalization of the curriculum, and aligning their institutional strategies according to the draft policy. They are strengthening institutional support structures and developing reporting structures for internationalization. Some are attempting to involve local communities in the internationalization process. Thus, the draft South African policy framework has already made a substantive contribution to strengthening the internationalization of higher education, and at least some universities are well prepared for its implementation. The publication of the policy in early November 2020 paved the way for internationalization to become one of the transformational drivers of the South African education system. The real impact of the policy will only be seen in years to come. The next challenge is now for the DHET to develop an imaginative implementation plan. If successfully implemented, the policy can contribute to overcoming historical imbalances in South African higher education internationalization and become a model for internationalization in the developing world. ▲

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