

HIGHER EDUCATION SOUTH AFRICA

Address to the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Education, 24 June 2008

Chairperson and Members of the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Education: HESA, representing a unified body of public higher education institutions in South Africa, appreciates the opportunity to interact with the Committee on issues related to student access and performance in higher education.

HESA represents a proactive energetic higher education sector committed to promoting national transformation and development imperatives. We regard HESA as instrumental in the momentous task of building a new South African society that is well-positioned to respond to national needs by producing graduates with appropriate high level skills to meet the needs of a transforming society and a growing economy.

At the outset it must be made clear what is at stake here. Higher education has a responsibility above and beyond its core mandate of teaching, research and community outreach. Higher education is fundamental in creating the leaders and the citizens of tomorrow. In studies¹ duplicated by both mature and emerging economies, the role of the university is paramount in producing graduates who can think critically and who can solve the problems that face that country. The ability of the university graduate to earn up to 60% more than a high school leaver means that he or she is a greater contributor to the tax burden; but the studies also show a greater propensity to vote, to volunteer and to be less dependent on the state's health and pension systems. In other words, higher education has a key role in reproducing democracy and a healthy citizenry and it is this that we need to foreground during our discussions today.

The sector has embraced the national policy goals, outlined in the White Paper (1997), the Higher Education Act (1997), and the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE, 2001)² which provide the framework for the national higher education transformation agenda. The transformation agenda sets out to create enabling and transformative institutional cultures and benchmarks for improved efficiency and productivity.

With regard to the policy goals pertaining to student access, governance arrangements, enabling institutional cultures, throughput and graduation rates, and equity, the sector has made significant gains since 1996, including the following:

- **Access**

- Opportunities for entry into higher education have significantly improved. The total headcount enrolments has increased from 590 000 in 1996 to 741 000 in 2006, accompanied by increases in terms of Full-time Equivalent (FTE) enrolments for all racial group categories, as well as for both genders.
- The student participation rate has increased from 14% to 18% of the 18 to 24 age cohort. The participation rates of African and Coloured students, however, are still very low, about 11% and 7 % respectively, with the latter having actually decreased as a percentage in the period 1996 -2006.
- Notwithstanding this, African and Coloured postgraduate student enrolment increased by 268% in the period 1996-2006.

¹ See, for example, *Education Pays 2006*, available on www.collegeboard.com

² See Appendix

- **Success**

- There has been improved equity in student success rates with 72% Black African, 76% Coloured, 79% Indian and 85% White undergraduate success rates in 2006. 7.1% of those enrolled are at MA and PhD level.
- All institutions have put in place arrangements for student support, with foundation academic development initiatives (including bridging, foundation or extended curriculum programmes) that can support the widening of access and ensure equity of opportunity for under-prepared students.

- **Quality**

- A national quality assurance framework, making provision for programme accreditation and institutional audit processes, which is in place since 2002, has made an impact on improving the quality of curriculum development, teaching and learning, research and community engagement.
- A significant milestone in the transformation of student governance has been achieved through the formation in 2006 of the national student association, the South African Union of Students (SAUS). Its success and independence will, however, still have to be proven.
- A national framework for student governance in higher education is in place. It provides guidelines for capacity development in the areas of student leadership and infrastructure support for effective functioning of student governance.

Government Support and Funding

These achievements have been accompanied by greater government support and additional funding for higher education, mainly allocated for foundation programmes, increased graduate outputs, the improvement of infrastructure, and the recapitalisation of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). Since 2004, this additional funding and the increased funding for NSFAS came to R6,294 billion and R2,125 billion respectively. In the period 1996-2008, government funding for public higher education has increased from R5.2 billion to R14.8 billion.

Constraints

Major constraints to the sector's response to the transformation goals include:

- the increasing cost of higher education and the pressure being put on NSFAS, which for many institutions is the primary source of student funding;
- the inability of our schooling system to produce sufficient numbers of academically prepared entrants into higher education;
- the inefficiencies in the system in terms of low throughput and graduation rates;
- the academic capabilities of staff which need to be transformed in terms of qualifications and capacity to manage diversity challenges;
- the insufficiently transformed and still alienating institutional cultures at some of our institutions; and
- the sometimes destructive behaviour of students during their expression of unhappiness regarding institutional matters specifically and higher education generally.

Some of these factors are intricately linked to the legacy of our apartheid past, but we must also acknowledge our own responsibility in overcoming this legacy.

Challenges

The sector is indeed still challenged in many areas, with the following being among the significant issues in need of urgent attention:

- The poor feeder pipeline from schools and the current inadequate infrastructure are major constraints to the achievement of the targeted 20% participation rate by 2016.
- The increasing level of financial burden that is carried by students, especially those from lower socio-economic background who largely depend on their meagre family incomes to pay for their fees and living expenses. This is being worsened by the low level of public support for higher education, which has translated into higher fees. Financial need is still one of the major causes of the high drop-out rate in the sector.
- Academic performance levels within the sector are still below the NPHE benchmark. DoE analysis indicates that, excluding distance education institutions, well under one-third of intake complete in regulation time and one in three graduates within four years; only 7 out of 23 institutions meet the success rate norm of 80% in terms of students who pass their course; and there are huge disparities between Black and White student performance, with Black students making under 25% of all graduations in regulation time.
- There is a strong need for more support in teaching, especially for disadvantaged students. The insufficiently differentiated funding mechanism limits some of our institutions in responding to student challenges in the area of teaching and learning and favours the well-resourced institutions, especially those that have access to additional third stream funding. Although there has been on average an annual increase of 8.5% in total funding for higher education in the period 1996-2006, annual funding per FTE student has been falling on average by 1.9% in real terms.
- The targets set through the enrolment planning exercise demand that the average sector success rate for all undergraduate and postgraduate courses in the system has to improve from the 2005 average of 71% to at least 77% by 2010, and that the total graduates produced by the system must increase from the 2005 total of 120 000 to 150 000 by 2010, implying that dropout rates must fall and graduation rates must improve substantially.³
- The achievement of equity in terms of outcomes still very much eludes the sector. The sector is considering the introduction of a four-year first degree which will systematically incorporate academic support into the curriculum and enhance the prospects of more students completing their studies and more progressing to postgraduate studies. This should improve equity of outcomes, without sacrificing quality education. Though the implementation of the basic four-year degree is likely to generate significant additional cost, it would partially offset the current high costs associated with the high drop out rate.
- Institutional cultures in most of our institutions are still alienating to the majority of students, with a detrimental effect on student retention and performance. The well publicized outrage at the events in the Reitz Hostel of the University of the Free State has prompted a deep and necessary self examination by the higher education sector with regard to racism and other forms of discrimination and acts of intolerance. HESA has committed itself to protecting human rights and promoting respect and an appreciation of diversity and pluralism, eradicating all forms of intolerance and discriminatory behaviour in higher education. A task team has been established to assist the sector with strategies and monitoring arrangements.
- The framework for the establishment of student governance in higher education makes provision for the development of a “student charter” through which we hope that, on the one hand, our higher education institutions may commit to strive towards ensuring that “every student is given the opportunity to enjoy a fulfilling and rewarding learning experience which promotes their academic, social and personal growth”, in an

³ DoE Presentation at the South African Technology Network (SATN) Conference, Durban, 22 May 2008

environment that is free of racial, sexual, religious, cultural and other forms of discrimination, while, on the other hand, students in turn may commit to certain responsibilities, for example, in their studies, the life of the institutions and the life of the communities they come from.

- The HIV/AIDS pandemic constitutes one of the biggest challenges for the sector. The European Union funding for the HEAIDS programme has provided the sector with much needed support to put in place the basic infrastructure for coping with the challenges posed by the pandemic. With regard to students, the focus is to provide prevention interventions and treatment, care and support services at all institutions and to ensure that we produce graduates who are able to deal with HIV/AIDS. The sector is grappling with the challenge of ensuring the long-term sustainability of this intervention beyond 2009 when the EU support comes to an end.

Chairperson, we wish, in conclusion, to state that the transformation challenge within higher education mirrors society in general; it is daunting and the needs are clearly more than what the sector can hope to achieve by itself. There is therefore a need for strong partnership with government, business, and other organisations in civil society in creating a public environment that is supportive and proud of its universities, as institutions committed to the public good.

The diversification of income sources is still a challenge for most of our institutions, with income from state subsidies and student fees still the most significant streams for most universities. Strong partnerships are needed to resource the sector adequately, in order to compete at international level and to respond to national priorities. Consider the example of the University of Venda (Univen), whose students will for the first time ever, this year be able to surf the internet. PetroSA has provided the university with a computer laboratory and media centre worth R500 000. It is indeed very disturbing that, in 2008, a higher learning institution such as Univen has never had a computer laboratory. This is a reality that demonstrates the extent of the challenges facing the higher education sector.

HESA would greatly welcome Parliament's support to secure government's commitment in ensuring that the fundraising efforts of our institutions are well incentivised, for example, through appropriate changes in the South African tax laws to promote the spirit of philanthropy. This is likely to increase third stream income into the sector, thus creating space for the setting of tuition fee levels that enhance increased access into higher education.

Finally, HESA is committed to working with all spheres of government not only to create a vibrant economy through our research and innovation, but is also driven to ensuring that our graduates will strengthen our citizenry in the pursuit of a robust and participative democracy.

END.

APPENDIX: NATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY GOALS

- **Education White Paper 3, A Programme for Higher Education Transformation (1997):** 12 goals.
- **National Plan for Higher Education (2001):** 6 goals.
- **Size and shape of the higher education system**
 - Goal 1: Opportunities for entry into higher education must improve.
 - Goal 2: Career oriented programme enrolment must increase.
 - Goal 3: Enrolments in the fields of (a) science and technology and (b) business and management should grow.
 - Goal 4: Master's and doctoral enrolments must grow.
- **Student equity**
 - Goal 5: The participation of disadvantaged students in higher education must increase.
 - Goal 6: The participation of female students in higher education must increase.
 - Goal 7: Imbalances in postgraduate enrolments must be redressed.
 - Goal 8: Imbalances in student success rates must be redressed.
- **Staff equity**
 - Goal 9: The participation of disadvantaged groups in the professional staff complement of the system must improve.
 - Goal 10: The participation of women in the system's professional staff must improve.
- **Academic staff inputs**
 - Goal 11: Academic staff must be well-qualified.
 - Goal 12: Educational processes must be supported by appropriate numbers of academic staff.
- **Teaching outputs**
 - Goal 13: Student success rates must improve.
 - Goal 14: The output of graduates must improve.
 - Goal 15: Graduate totals in the fields of (a) science and technology and (b) business and management must grow.
- **Research outputs**
 - Goal 16: The output of master's and doctoral graduates must improve.
 - Goal 17: Research outputs totals must improve.
- **Financial sustainability**
 - Goal 18: Growth of student enrolments must be financially sustainable.

END.