

DRAFT SOCIAL INCLUSION POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR PUBLIC POST-SCHOOL EDUCATION AND TRAINING INSTITUTIONS

RESPONSE BY HIGHER EDUCATION SOUTH AFRICA (HESA)

1. INTRODUCTION

Government Gazette No 37928 of 21 August 2014 contains the Draft Social Inclusion Policy Framework for Public Post-School Education and Training Institutions. The 30 day period for comment has not afforded HESA sufficient opportunity for broad consultation within the public higher education sector. Because of the importance of such a policy for the post-school sector, HESA wishes to place on record that universities should be afforded sufficient time to consult within their institutions, and organisations such as HESA should be afforded sufficient time to consolidate a coherent and integrated response.

HESA wishes to express its strong support for a social inclusion policy framework. Following on the Report by the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions (2008), the Green Paper for PSET (2011) and the White Paper for PSET (2014), this framework affirms the commitment of government and the post-school sector to the principles of equity, democracy and equality. There is acknowledgement that since the report of the National Commission on Higher Education, A Framework of Transformation (1996), the Education White Paper No. 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (1997), the Higher Education Act (1997) and the National Plan for Higher Education 2001 there has been an extended vacuum in terms of strategic priorities to be pursued actively by the sector. It must be asserted that HESA had through a formal resolution committed itself through individual universities' policies and structures to continue to advance the policy goals and targets set out in the preceding suite of policy documents.

HESA's comments are structured as follows:

- a) General comments;
- b) Specific proposals as set out in the proposed policy; and

- c) The role of NSFAS and general comments on staff and students with disabilities

2. GENERAL COMMENTS

The historical context focuses on the governance of education over the years. HESA acknowledges the deep structural inequities of the past and recognizes that there have been several wide-ranging measures taken by the DoE and the DHET to address these. While these are not detailed in Section 3 which provides the historical background and context, it must be acknowledged that as part of the restructuring which commenced in 2000, the higher education sector's size and shape as well as institutional histories and contexts were changed radically. While this does not signify the end to the fissures that have been a feature of SA society, the university sector has worked hard at addressing issues of social exclusion. HESA has to this end, committed itself to the principles of non-racialism, justice and fairness as espoused in our Constitution. While the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion bared starkly the individual and sectoral challenges of lived realities, there was recognition by institutions that interventions had to be more aggressive and direct as well as tailored to institutional contexts. This draft framework does not draw on the recommendations made by the Ministerial Committee and it is HESA's contention that the framework should draw on these where applicable for the higher education sector.

Areas that universities have focused on are:

- Democratic governance and representation of all groupings on structures;
- Demographic representation for both staff and students;
- Widening of access;
- Focusing on affordability;
- HIV/AIDS;
- Staff and students with disabilities;
- Residence culture.

HESA has recognized that there has been a gap in the area of career counselling for youth at the school level as well as when they make the transition to any of the options available for post-school youth. HESA has therefore established the National Information Service for Higher Education (NiSHE) Programme that provides information about careers, admission requirements and closing

dates for university applications through a variety of media. The main target group is learners in Grades 10-12. Universities have also through recruitment and marketing drives worked on provision of information to students not confined to university specific information but also on other career pathways that are available. There is consensus that this is a fault line which is evident in the poor pass rates at first year level at universities and the course swapping that inevitably occurs. While this may be a result of the under-preparedness of the NSC candidates for the transition to higher education, HESA recognizes the importance of provision of career information at the school level especially for Grades 9 – 12. While 7.28 makes provision for the DHET to ‘train a cohort of career counsellors’ it is not clear whether the DHET has the capacity to do so or will work with established units and departments within universities.

HESA recognizes the devastating impacts of HIV/AIDS in our society and has been working with the DHET, the Department of Health, SANAC and various international donors (HEAIDS programme) on ensuring that institutional practices are focused on creating an enabling environment for staff and students who require assistance. To this end, all universities have in place programmes and policies that have been developed over the last 10 year period. The role of Campus Health centres and counselling services is central to the discharge of these responsibilities and forms part of a suite of support structures that are funded by universities.

The notion of ‘substantive equality’ that is articulated in the Draft Paper on Social Inclusion is embraced by our universities. This is significant and draws from our Constitution and subsequent policy instruments that have emerged from the DoE/DHET. It is recognized that two approaches to equality are consolidated:

Equality of opportunity and equality of success are two sides of a coin. HESA recognizes that equality of opportunity in terms of access to higher education for both students and staff must be supported by a robust framework of policies and procedures within our institutions. HESA acknowledges that the equality of success requires our institutions to ensure that the required support mechanisms are in place to ensure the practical realization of rights secured through access.

HESA recognizes that experiences of disparity and disadvantage must be proactively addressed through interventions at our universities. The reference made to ‘grounding programmes’ (page 12) merits further exploration within the higher education sector. Some universities like UFH, UFS, DUT and others have introduced such programmes while other institutions rely on different approaches either through orientation or induction programmes. This suggestion is one that HESA will explore with its constituent members.

HESA notes that the draft policy framework in attempting to be exhaustive conflates a range of complex social issues, complex in their own right, and does not allow for any clear focus to emerge on any issue. Many of these issues, arguably, require their own policy frameworks or guidelines, and in fact, there are existing policy documents that address them in possibly more detail (such as the White Paper on Disability). Specific questions would need to be explored in each area while building on existing work that has taken place within the university sector in particular (years of collaborative work in the HEAIDS programme for example, focusing on HIV at every level).

From a gender equity perspective, the draft policy framework does not draw on existing legislation and policy frameworks (nor is it grounded within them) in relation to gender equity in higher education and gender equity more broadly. The employment equity legislation exists and applies to post-school institutions as it does to other employers, but the draft policy framework is silent on encouraging institutions to implement existing legislation. Discussions within the university sector around gender representation in employment are relatively complex, as gender inequities are not straightforward. Women dominate as undergraduate students, but not at postgraduate level and not in the sciences. Women academic staff are clustered in the lower ranks of academic hierarchies, but are relatively under-represented at senior levels (which incidentally is the reality in most academic institutions around the world). Any new policy documents would need to take into consideration these complex factors, and address the specific gender equity challenges of particular institutions. Advocacy campaigns will have little effect in these environments unless they are targeted and focused. In addition, race and gender issues are entwined and should be recognised as such when raised in policy documents.

Earlier policy documents have provided more detail on gender equity and it is HESA's contention that this framework must take these into account. The proposals of the Gender Equity Task Team in 1997 for example, suggested three broad areas for higher education institutions to focus on in relation to gender equity: knowledge, sexual harassment, and institutional culture. The report included practical suggestions for addressing inequity, including a focus on employment policies and how they take account of gender difference, the need for child care support for families of staff and students, and other related structural issues that impact on gender equity. Some of this made its way into the White paper, but gender equity has not received priority attention in subsequent legislation, mainly because other inequities were more pressing and these are complex issues to address. Gender-based is a clear manifestation of gender inequity as it exists not only in universities but in all areas of South African society. There are some lessons about policy here for the recent, much publicised series of dismissals at Wits University, and the university's subsequent investigation and restructuring of policy and response to sexual harassment. Any public post-school institution without a sexual harassment policy should be in violation of policy. Research has shown that the existence of a sexual harassment policy alone does not solve problems. South Africa has a progressive framework for dealing with sexual harassment and gender-based violence, yet these problems continue. In the case of universities, the fact of a policy's existence can lead to complacency (Wits SH report, Bennett et al, 2007). Indeed the policy at Wits had been in place for many years and has recently been revised. The problem reflected a lack of understanding and implementation. Very few people understood the boundaries of sexual harassment and their own responsibilities as staff members of the university. Policy responses were uneven and sometimes undermined the policy itself. The Wits report is very useful for understanding the limits of policy without clearly defined roles and obligations, and consistent institutional focus on matters that impede equity. The recommendations are detailed and complex.

National guidelines against gender-based violence may help (though they must be grounded in existing legislation that addresses gender-based violence) and clear institutional regulations and processes are a starting point. Trained staff to support gender-based violence and sexual harassment policy is an absolute necessity. However, this draft policy **MUST** build on existing work in the sector. This policy calls on all colleges, universities and adult education centres to strengthen curriculum programmes that deal with gender in education. It is not clear what is meant

by this recommendation. Very few gender studies units exist across the universities, and they have extremely limited capacity. What does it mean to establish networks and what would they do? Advocacy campaigns have a limited impact and are often considered a waste of resources.

The document raises several important equity and social justice concerns that are critical in the post-school sector. None of these is addressed in sufficient detail, with sufficient regard for past and current work in each separate (complex) area and the different contextual realities of higher education institutions and other institutions in the post-school sector. The strategies proposed have conceptual limitations and do not build on existing policy, initiatives, and thinking, even within the DHET itself.

The framework identifies the following areas that are required for action by the sector and in some cases there is reference to monitoring, reporting and evaluation of these by the DHET. It is recommended that HESA is provided with sufficient opportunity to explore these with its members and against the backdrop of the changes to the Annual Reporting Regulations.

The itemized points in the Draft Framework are summarized below with commentary:

- a) Disability frameworks are required in the PSET sector as well as ensuring that equitable access is provided;
- b) Usage of the DHET calendar of Significant Days to promote social cohesion at our universities;
- c) Provision of culturally and racially mixed residences and submission of annual reports with a category that reflects the student demographics of residences. It is not clear what is meant by provision of reasons to the DHET for ‘maintenance of ethnically or racially exclusive residence’. HESA would request the DHET to clarify this statement;
- d) The next point raised in 7.4 while focusing on TVET colleges is applicable to universities as well. Universities have a responsibility to work on building students’ experiences and ensuring that student residences are more than just a place of accommodation. This aspect has been highlighted by the Ministerial Review of Student Housing (DHET, 2011) and in the Draft Policy on Student Housing (2013).

- e) HESA welcomes the recognition by the DHET of additional funds for the Humanities and Social Sciences. It is recommended that additional funds are sourced for students in these fields as it is evident that the current NSFAS allocation to universities is insufficient to cover the needs of students. HESA would like to recommend ring-fenced new funds to provide financial support to students in the identified fields.
- f) The recognition of the financial costs for rural students is welcomed. Universities have in place measures for provision of accommodation to rural students but recognize that the costs for the rural student are significantly higher than the urban student in most cases. The recommendation for targeted funding from the NSF is welcomed.
- g) HESA acknowledges that the need for functioning Disability Units and Transformation offices should be prioritized. HESA has initiated work with a Task Team focusing on disability and recognizes that these units are under-funded to cope with the diverse range of disabilities that present at universities. The model advocated by HESA in close liaison with HEDSA (Higher and Further Education Disability Services Association), is a social model of disability which resonates with the notion of substantive equality advocated by this Draft Paper.
- h) HESA is committed to working with all partners to eliminate substance abuse on our campuses.
- i) The recommendation mooted in 7.10 promotes political and economic literacy programmes for the students. HESA would like a further elaboration from the DHET on the role of universities in advancing these. Each university offers programmes aimed at strengthening citizenship, human rights and democratic values. These are central to universities' mission statements.
- j) HESA recognizes the value of student leadership in our governance structures and has worked with the DHET, CHE and SAUS at the national level to promote the development of student leadership. Each university provides capacity building programmes to student leadership annually. The nature of the programme is determined by the universities. Given the turbulence that has dominated the higher education sector by student protest, HESA acknowledges the value of provision of support and training to student leaders.
- k) While Gender Networks at universities are present, there is need for additional dialogue within the sector on the recommendation that budgets be set aside for both advocacy and

gender studies. Equity targets are submitted by each university annually along with progress reports. This is standardly required as part of the Annual Reports submitted to DHET. HESA acknowledges that the focus on LGBTI rights is central to our universities' commitment to ensuring that social exclusionary practices are eliminated.

- l) Sexual harassment and violence is pervasive in our society and recent incidences at individual universities have brought sharply into focus the need for clear transparent policies to manage gender based violence. HESA will recommend that universities focus on the provision of training that is required for personnel dealing with identification, reporting, and management of gender violence to ensure equitable treatment of victims. While *National Guidelines against Gender Based Violence* may be useful for the sector, HESA notes that universities have different governance and institutional arrangements to manage this and that any guidelines will have to be embedded in the different laws that may be applicable.
- m) The recognition of HIV/AIDS and the support and advocacy required is acknowledged. HESA will through the structures continue to work with the sector to strengthen HIV/AIDS initiatives.
- n) The provision of funding support for Health and Wellness centres is welcomed, as these though differently configured at each university, are funded outside of the state subsidy envelopes. While it may be useful to develop national norms and standards for Health and Wellness Centres, HESA would urge that the DHET should initiate a dialogue with the sector to understand how these are configured at each institution and understand the budgetary constraints that face institutions.
- o) 7.19 refers to the initiation of dialogue on the usage of APS scores. Universities use a number of selection tools in making admission decisions for entry into degree/diploma/certificate studies. These tools are used in addition to the *Minimum Admission Requirements for Higher Certificate, Diploma and Bachelor's Degree Programmes requiring a National Senior Certificate (NSC)* and the *Minimum Admission Requirements for Higher Certificate Diploma and Degree Programmes requiring a National Certificate (Vocational) at Level 4 of the National Qualification Framework*. The various tools include for example a rating system; admission points score (APS), questionnaires, interviews, auditions or written assignments, aptitude testing or tests such

as the National Benchmark Tests. The main reason for using a point score is to guide admission decisions based on school performance. Other reasons for using a point score are that it provides an efficient way of managing applications and making direct (automatic) admission decisions and is a predictor of academic performance. It is also a transparent way of computing and publishing the score and the minimum scores needed for likely admission to a programme so that prospective applicants can calculate their own APS. It is already a common admissions practice to use a point score and learners, parents and teachers are thus familiar with the fact that school marks are converted to a score, which forms the basis of admissions decision-making for higher education programme entry. The *Higher Education Act, Act 101 of 1997* ensures that policies of higher education institutions, including admissions policy must be formulated with due regard to its relationship and influence on education and training in other sectors. Although the NSC is the primary gateway between school and higher education it does not guarantee a learner admission to any programme of study in higher education. Within the policy context of the Minimum Admission Requirements for Higher Certificate, Diploma and Bachelors Degree programmes requiring the NSC, the right of higher education institutions to determine the institutional admissions policy is confirmed in terms of section 37 of the Higher Education Act.

- p) Section 7.29 identifies certain fields like medicine, engineering, social work and public administration that must include an African language at course level 1. It also prompts institutions to adopt this recommendation as a language (academic) policy. While there is no objection to the recommendation, HESA points out that there are other fields that have not been specified that would benefit from inclusion of an African language. The capacity issues related to African language teaching remain a barrier to implementation.

3. THE ROLE OF NSFAS AND GENERAL COMMENTS ON STAFF AND STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

- a) HESA welcomes the provision of additional support through the NSF for rural students. The mechanisms to ensure ring-fenced funding are welcomed.

- b) HESA acknowledges the need for additional funds to be made available for students from the Humanities and Social Sciences from NSFAS. There is a paucity of funds for students in these disciplines and new funding would be welcomed.
- c) The reference to the monitoring of NSFAS funds to be undertaken by the DHET is critical for the sector as each year the stark reality of shortage of funds for students who deserve NSFAS funding is highlighted. The reference to student hunger in 7.18 is a reality on most campuses. HESA would welcome a concerted and integrated approach to addressing not just student hunger but other social needs of students. While individual institutions adopt different approaches, HESA recognizes that NSFAS funding falls short of provision of the full cost required for individual students.
- d) 7.25 refers to the monitoring and evaluation of compliance to the National Disability Guidelines and ensuring that the NSFAS Bursary Scheme for students with Disabilities is implemented. HESA would welcome an initiation of a national dialogue especially with regards to the sufficiency of funds and the need to provide additional support to institutions not just for the disability units but for the creation of environments and access to students and staff with disabilities at the different campuses. References to transportation of students with disabilities as well as infrastructural adjustments while necessary must be considered within the context of available funding either through the NSFAS funds for students with disabilities or through the infrastructure project of the DHET. The work initiated by HEDSA in this regard must be considered by the DHET. While reporting on disabilities and the management thereof is mentioned in 7.25, it is not clear what form the DHET monitoring and evaluation will take. HEDSA has been working with the TVET colleges without any additional funding being provided and supported to some extent by HESA.

4. CONCLUSION

HESA recognizes the importance of the DHET developing a framework for social inclusion. However, there is inherently a danger in documents that are intended to encompass a wide variety of institutions, that contextual realities and differing stages of development are missed. In addition,

there has been tremendous work undertaken in the higher education sector that are not acknowledged in this draft policy paper and that should be informing policy development.