



UNIVERSITIES SOUTH AFRICA

UNIVERSITIES SA STATEMENT PRIOR TO THE HIGHER EDUCATION CONVENTION CALLED BY THE NATIONAL EDUCATION CRISIS FORUM, MARCH 2017

A. INTRODUCTION

Universities South Africa welcomes this important initiative taken by the National Education Crisis Forum (NECF) in gathering together a broad spectrum of South Africans at the higher education convention on the 18th and 19th of March 2017. South Africa's 26 public universities participate in this process with strong resolve to find long lasting solutions to the challenges facing the system as it navigates the next decade in the service of national development and democracy.

Universities SA sees higher education as one of South Africa's most important and most effective social instruments to address some of our nation's most important challenges in this complex third decade following our transition from apartheid to a constitutional democracy. These challenges are increasingly well defined: the deepening of social, political and economic inequality, the sluggishness of the national and regional economies and the erosion of confidence in the national projects of, amongst others:

- nation building;
- seeing to the social, intellectual and emotional development of our young;
- eradicating corruption; and
- ensuring security of health, land, employment, food, energy and water for all.

Our 26 public universities should be at the centre of providing innovations on each of these.

B. AREAS OF BROAD CONSENSUS WITHIN UNIVERSITIES SA

1. The universities are unanimous in their view that in a democracy such as ours higher education has to be affordable to all young people who are offered places at our universities. This ought to be through a mixture of public and private funding. Whether this is achieved through a financial aid system or through some other system is something that has to be determined through the national process that is currently underway. The principle has to be that no young South African who has been admitted to a university and who performs according to standards required should be deprived of the opportunity for financial reasons. Addressing inequality is one of higher education's driving impetuses and it has to be seen as a powerful force for social mobility.
2. The participation rate of 18 to 24 year olds in post-school education must be progressively increased from its current level of approximately 30% to a figure closer to 50%. The primary framework for this has to be through a series of major changes that must be instituted to right the 'inverted pyramid' by addressing the development and delivery of quality education and training in the TVET sector. An important element of this challenge is to understand how to improve the articulation of the education and training needs of private and public sectors with the educational enterprises of the post-school sector. It would be important to see much higher levels of investment in the college sector through diverse funding sources.
3. Universities SA commits to continuing its engagement with the state, industry, civil society and international partners in determining the future of the knowledge project of our universities. The universities will work hard to ensure that there is increased articulation between higher education's knowledge project and the needs of a transforming, democratic, more equal society, an economy lacking momentum and competitiveness and the need to address all of the quality of life issues facing South Africans.
4. The universities are all committed to the project of improving the efficiency of the system in all of its operations. The system has seen distinct improvements in its throughput and graduation rates though there is still much scope for improvement.
5. The university system is committed to increasing its capacity in flexible learning, through the use of technologies and lifelong learning approaches, so as to ensure that people in workplaces and elsewhere continue to improve their skills and knowledge platforms. Increased collaboration with employers, both private and public, will be sought.

6. What the last 18 months have shown us is that while the university system has been successful thus far in maintaining the academic project, it is a system that could quite easily slip into instability if organized groups actively set out to disrupt and blockade universities with no regards to or respect for the rule of law and rights of others. This is because universities are by design and practice, at least in the post-apartheid period, open, peaceful and collegial societies which embrace and promote non-violent contestation of ideas on all aspects of human endeavour. Thus, while there is universal acceptance that student activism is an important ingredient of our developing democracy, when this activism leads to significant longstanding instability and violence it works to erode the fundamental conditions for the progress of academic learning and development. It is important therefore, that while we must protect and encourage student activism we must ensure that such activism does not undermine the academic project, and on the other hand, lead us to the significant risk of irreversibly damaging the university system.
7. Concomitantly, intimidation, threats to safety of body and limb and arson attacks have forced universities to resort to increased security; both social violence and security measures to respond to violence per definition detract from an environment for peaceful university life. We do not accept the argument that structural violence (deprivation, inequality) justifies the use of political violence, especially if our Constitution provides a whole range of instruments for redress. Unconditional respect for the Constitution must be a departure point in mediating grievances.
8. To be effective in these important roles, the higher education system has to be appropriately funded and capacitated.

The higher education system has a historic role to play in the emergence of a democratic, more equal future for South Africa buttressed by a strong, democratised economy and the construction of a strong, vital, independently-constructed national knowledge and skills development project. For this purpose, we must work towards the construction of a social compact about the place of higher education in this society, involving all social sectors. Developing a common understanding of this historic role is an essential ingredient in building a locally effective and globally competitive higher education system.

These are areas of growing convergence and consensus in the broad discussions about the future of higher education. Universities SA, in broad terms, aligns itself with these and understands the need for a broad social process to bring these to fruition.

C. IMMEDIATE STEPS TO PLACE US ON A LEVEL KEEL FOR THE 2017 ACADEMIC YEAR

South Africa's 26 public universities are committed to the project of ensuring that we have a successful academic year in 2017. This, by definition, means creating the conditions for an academic year uninterrupted by disruptions, that optimise the conditions for learning and teaching and research, actively promotes transformation and that produces a conducive environment for large scale policy discussions that address the fundamental issues that have been raised over the last 18 months. Some of these conditions reside outside of the realm and direct control of the universities.

Universities SA, in light of the above, puts forward four areas that would facilitate the effective de-escalation of tension and pressure on the university campuses and thereby create the conditions mentioned above.

1. Universities are social institutions and have responsibilities as such. It is the duty of university managements under the direction of vice- chancellors to secure life, property and the academic programme, thus we can de-escalate our protection services based on not only on agreements but on actual evidence that students (and/or staff) are engaging peacefully and are not threatening the academic programme. If students and other stakeholders commit themselves to operating within the rule of law and university policy in expressing dissent and conducting campaigns, this would not only restore peaceful conditions on campuses, but also obviate the need for deployment of non-regular university security and public order policing.
2. Disciplinary actions arise from clear cut instances of violence, intimidation, arson, etc. We have to accept that the accountability of individuals, whether students or staff, for such acts is fundamental to maintaining a properly functioning institution. These disciplinary processes are open and transparent and subject to courts being able to review their findings. Most universities have restorative justice elements in their disciplinary processes but these have to take into account the nature of the transgression.
3. The potential for insourcing will be studied at each university. One of the outcomes of the student actions in the last 18 months has brought to the fore the often exploitative form of outsourced services. This will have to be addressed carefully and with a keen sense of the viability of the set of actions. A recent study by Universities SA indicates that the annual cost of insourcing across the sector will vary between R400 million and R2 billion. It is therefore of great importance that each university assesses the viability of insourcing. Some institutions are considering models of 'viable sourcing' where the principles of

human dignity, decent living wages and the construction of service provider codes of conduct are carefully adopted and implemented. Any advocacy on insourcing has to be directed at the state because of its potential impact on the viability of the institutions concerned.

4. There is a growing understanding of the positive relationship between good student housing and academic performance. The sector, together with DHET, will consider the expansion in the numbers of students that may be accommodated at university residences by considering new publically-funded student housing developments and new public-private partnerships. This may result in the development of new models and modes of student accommodation provision. An important consideration here is that residence budgets at the institutional level are fully ring-fenced, meaning that the full cost of university accommodation has to be recouped from the student.

It is hoped that with rapid, though deliberate and careful action in each of these areas the conditions on our campuses may be more conducive to ensuring that the academic project for 2017 will be secured.

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