

FREE EDUCATION WORKING GROUP: GUIDING UCT'S INVESTIGATION INTO THE PRINCIPLE AND IMPLEMENTATION POSSIBILITIES OF FEE-FREE HIGHER EDUCATION:

How did the Planning Group form?

The agreement signed between the Executive and the SRC Candidates on 7 November 2016 includes a section on the funding of higher education (HE).

http://www.uct.ac.za/usr/downloads/2016-11-07_UCT_resolution.pdf

In particular, it expresses "support for investigating the principle and implementation possibilities of fee-free higher education (recognising that there may be competing views and solutions and that the university may not settle on a single consensus position)". The message contains a commitment to "engaging in debates and establishing a research programme into the economic policy framework for higher education".

An open invitation was sent to the university community inviting anyone interested to meet on 7 December. The meeting was attended by about forty people, most of whom were academics, but there were a few students, PASS staff, alumni and a couple of parents. The meeting identified a number of principles to guide the work of the Planning Group:

- Collaborative planning involving staff and students
- Allowing different student voices and experiences to be expressed
- Not divorcing research from experience
- Tapping into many disciplines
- Openness to exploring new ways of doing things and thinking about the role of universities
- Recognising interconnectedness with other processes under way within the University e.g. the Institutional Reconciliation and Transformation Commission (IRTC), the implementation of the new Strategic Planning Framework and the activities of the Curriculum Change Working Group.

At the end of the meeting people were invited to volunteer to be part of the Planning Group. 13 people volunteered to be part of the Planning Group. Since then several other people have joined the Planning Group. Currently the Group is comprised of about 20 staff and students who have volunteered to be part of the process, plus 3 members of the wider community, two of whom are also parents of children at UCT. Ihsaan Bassier, a student representative nominated by the Shackville TRC group, acts as the student chair, and the staff chair is Charmaine January.

What does the Planning Group hope to achieve?

- a) To facilitate engagement between students, staff and the wider community around the principle and implementation of fee-free higher education in a manner that builds deeper understanding,

- b) To draw on insights from different disciplines, universities and lived experiences to contribute to this deeper understanding of the drivers of the call and the solutions that have been proposed,
- c) To identify research that needs to be undertaken and provide opportunities for collaborative research in addressing these questions on a national level and at UCT.
- d) To influence national policy on higher education funding

What sub-committees have been formed and what are they doing?

The Engagement Group

The engagement group, is charged with providing spaces for soliciting the views, experiences and insights of as many people as possible - be they academics with peer-reviewed research or parents with important anecdotes - around the debates about the call for fee-free higher education.

The engagement group is planning a bumper workshop series from 13 to 27 March, when it has pencilled in 27 workshops, both inside and outside UCT. Four students were selected from the applicants who responded to the open call for applications and have been appointed to facilitate the engagement process.

The Research Group

The Research Group has released a summary of the literature and models, a process led by a group of students in consultation with academics and reviewed by over a dozen academics, students and community members. The research also included qualitative interviews, giving primacy to lived experiences and allowing policy-setting to be a dialogical ground-up process.

This first round of research was primarily a review of the current literature, with emphasis on transforming it into formats that are easily digestible by a variety of audiences.

Is it too late to join the discussion?

Definitely not. We believe that the process exemplifies how a university can mobilise its intellectual resources to engage around a major social issue impacting on our country and provide opportunities for students and members of the wider community to participate in, and help shape the debates and future policies. Hence we encourage people to offer to contribute to the goals of the projects through getting involved in the Planning Group, or the task teams, or to suggest other ways of contributing.

Anyone interested in becoming involved in the Research Group should contact Ihsaan Bassier at Ihsaanbassier1@gmail.com and anyone interested in becoming involved in the Engagement Group should contact Simon Rakei at simonrakei.sr@gmail.com.