

GOING GLOBAL: International educationists collaborate to share solutions to common problems



In last month's 'Going Global' conference, the British Council and the Department of Higher Education and Training partnered to bring together policy-makers, vice-chancellors, academics, researchers and students from across the world to explore the latest developments in international tertiary education

BLADE NZIMANDE

WE are gathered here from various entities, countries and continents with a vision for a global collective; and I would encourage our institutions and countries to engage in strong collaborations.

These can be collaborations between authors, between institutions and collaboration within different countries. This is crucial in the expansion of globalisation in education.

Being in Africa and also having some of common challenges with our neighbours, collaborations have the potential of assisting in finding common solutions to our problems and to also assist our decision and policy makers.

In the past 22 years our South African higher education landscape has gone through major changes in form, shape and size, and these all constitute the transformation and restructuring programme of our higher education system.

Enrolments in scarce skills programmes such as Science, Engineering and Technology, and Business and Commerce have improved to begin to reflect the demographics of the country. Overall student enrolments have since more than doubled and our programme offerings expanded.

In January 2014, my Department launched The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training, which provides direction towards the creation of:

A single, coordinated post-school education and training system;

Expanded access, improved quality and increased diversity of provision;

A stronger and more cooperative relationship between education and training institutions and the workplace; and,

A post-school education and

training system that is responsive to the needs of individual citizens, employers in both public and private sectors, as well as broader societal and developmental objectives.

The White Paper recognises explicitly that teaching and learning, research and innovation, and skills development are all integral parts of the work of universities, and that knowledge production must increase if South Africa's developmental goals are to be achieved.

These goals are clearly articulated in government policies that identify knowledge production as important for job creation and for making South African industries more competitive globally.

Basic, priority aims include increasing the numbers of doctoral graduates, meaningful publication outputs, and patents to enable product innovation.

These represent serious challenges, relying as they do on strong undergraduate performance in the sector, and on coherence of the policy frameworks guiding these areas across the higher education and research communities.

Earmarked grants represent one of government's steering mechanisms to bring about improvements in targeted areas of need.

A FIRST FOR AFRICA

FROM 3 to 5 May 2016, the British Council held its 'Going Global Conference' on higher education for the first time on African soil since its establishment in 2004, at the Cape Town International Conference Centre.

The conference is an international forum that brings together policy-makers, practitioners, vice-chancellors, academics, researchers and students from across the world to explore the latest developments and issues in international tertiary education.

Prior to the conference, the British Council approached the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande, and requested the

Department to be involved in determining the content issues to be discussed at the conference.

The theme for this year's event was "Building nations and connecting cultures through international education", and more than 1 000 delegates attended the conference.

The themes discussed included internationalisation of higher education, staff and student mobility, institutional partnerships and collaborations, public-private partnerships, innovation, knowledge exchange and knowledge economies, and development and the role of global citizens in an international world.

For example, the Research Development Grants aim to develop research capacity at universities among academic staff so that they can contribute to postgraduate teaching and to research output. In 2015/16, nearly R210 million was allocated for this purpose.

South Africa's rapidly increasing research output is evidence of the expanding pool of researchers in our universities.

An agreed focus of the Research Development Grants has been on increasing the number of staff with doctoral qualifications.

The low percentage of academic staff holding the doctorate illustrates the challenge: in 2014, the figure for permanent staff with a PhD as a highest qualification was at 43%.

Our universities have a big role to play in our quest as Africa to develop and to deal successfully with the challenges facing our countries.

We need our academics involved in the production of research to engage with the societies if their research is to have any impact in our societal challenges.

Our higher education sector is faced with challenges that are hindering the desired growth of research conducted at our universities.

Among these is the inadequate availability of a highly qualified human resource base needed for

national development; the production of high-quality research and innovation outputs that can enhance the country's global competitiveness.

In addition, our universities are not producing enough postgraduate students. For example, South Africa produces only about 28 PhDs per million graduates each year.

This is very little compared to other countries and compared to other developing nations. Government, private sector as well as the institutions need to deal with hindrances and ensure means are made available for students to be able to pursue postgraduate studies.

Another of the earmarked grants, the Teaching Development Grants, aim to improve success at all levels of the educational process.

The very substantial investment of over R900-million a year has brought about significant innovations and enhancements in the teaching and learning area.

Nevertheless, while the introduction of the Research and Teaching Development Grants has undoubtedly strengthened the capacity of the sector in all key roles, the higher education sector finds itself in somewhat of a crisis in relation to the size and capacity of its academic staff.

The challenge is multi-faceted, having to do with the ageing workforce, developments in higher

education worldwide that demand ever greater levels of expertise from staff, the relatively underqualified academic staff workforce, low numbers of postgraduate students representing an inadequate pipeline, and the slow pace of regeneration and change on the part of the sector itself.

To be specific: achieving the growth targets will require 3 683 more staff by 2019. If one adds to that the expected numbers of retirements over the next few years, the number of new staff that will need to be recruited to achieve the 2019 targets is 6 170, not including resignations or death.

In response to this dire situation, the Department has built on previous investigations and international experience to develop a plan:

'Staffing South Africa's Universities: A Comprehensive Approach to Building Capacity and Developing Future Generations of Academics' (SSAU).

In setting out ways in which the sector's staffing needs can be met, the SSAU initiative differentiates between several distinct groups and strategies, and provides a framework for addressing the recruitment processes and development needs relevant to each of these groups.

Where the scheme differs from previous schemes is that it is multi-pronged, nationally managed and steered, and premised from the outset on new permanent posts.

Crucially, participants will, in addition to registering and completing a higher degree (Master's or doctorate), participate in an agreed Development Programme over the first three years, with a contract monitoring progress, and will be eligible for mentoring for the first four years of the six-year induction cycle of the initiative.

Dr BE Nzimande is the Minister of Higher Education and Training. This is an edited version of his address at last month's 'Going Global' conference



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