

R900 million for university student, programme and staff development

The Department of Higher Education and Training is planning to introduce a R900 million university capacity development programme (UCDP) in January 2018, aimed at enhancing development initiatives at universities.

“The programme follows on from the successes achieved through programmes that were implemented using the Earmarked Teaching Development Grants and Research Development Grants allocated by the Department to universities, and is a consolidation and extension of the functions of these grants,” says Chief Director for Teaching and Learning Development Dr Whitfield Green.

The UCDP will be implemented in three-year phases and will assist to address transformation imperatives in student development, staff development and programme/curriculum development.

According to the Department, the grant will help fund interventions in the university system which enable:

- Increased levels of success for students
- The creation of an academic development pipeline to transform the academic workforce and provide for quality research development
- Development opportunities for other professional staff at universities including management staff
- Develop new academic programmes that are of strategic importance and are national priorities and support their introduction until they become self-sustaining
- Review and renew curricula to respond to transformation imperatives.

“The programme will address student, staff and programme development imperatives identified at the 2nd Higher Education Transformation Summit that was held in October 2015 and on a discussion paper that the Department prepared for the Summit,” explains Green.

The discussion paper showed that throughput rates were increasing and dropout rates were decreasing, but those in distance education were of concern.

Postgraduate enrolments were increasing but there was a need for more growth, specifically of the enrolment of black students.

“Academic staff increases have not kept pace with higher student numbers, and there is a reliance on temporary and foreign staff,” he says.

The number of academic staff with doctorates also needs to increase.

So while the university system has become more successful in terms of access, student success and ability to generate research, there was a “worrying picture emerging” in terms of who is gaining access, succeeding, being employed and conducting research.

“Questions are also being asked on the quality and impact of research,” he says.

DHET says there is a need for development programmes to be focused in more nuanced ways “on much more rapidly addressing transformational imperatives relating to equity and quality in the university system”, while ensuring the system is successful. It is this rationale which informs the UCDP.

Green ends by saying that “curriculum transformation is an imperative that must be supported in terms of social justice and relevance and the ability of graduates to participate meaningfully in society, including through useful work”.

Details of the final programme, which will work in synergy with other existing development grants, will be communicated through a ministerial statement towards the end of the 2016/17 financial year.