



# **The 2015 Durban Statement on Transformation in Higher Education**

**17 October 2015**

The second Higher Education (HE) summit on transformation takes place at a critical time for South African public universities, which are under intense public scrutiny. 2015 is a watershed year for the sector, marked by deepening student and staff activism on many university campuses. Students and staff are fundamentally interrogating the nature and pace of transformation at our universities.

The summit has provided an opportunity to reflect on the history of transformation over the past 21 years, with a specific focus on the last 5 years. The summit was characterized by robust engagement amongst all stakeholders on matters that are perceived to be vital, and opened up a space for greater understanding amongst university stakeholders. This space should remain open, so the robust debate can continue, and increasingly focus on actions to advance transformation in the system.

The summit recognises the gains that have been made in achieving transformation goals in the sector.

These gains include that:

- Access to university has been significantly expanded and the overall participation targets set in the 2001 National Plan for Higher Education are close to being achieved.
- Black students and women are now in the majority in the system.
- There has been a substantial increase in research outputs.
- The levels of funding for infrastructure development have been substantial.

- Overall, the goals of the National Plan for Higher Education have been attained in many areas, as a result of the successful steering of the system to achieve policy goals.
- There have been significant increases in contributions to the National Student Financial Aid Scheme.

The deeper engagement about transformation goals that is now taking place is partly a result of these achievements, as we reflect on where we have been unsuccessful and what a new vision for the university system might be.

### The summit agreed that:

- Higher Education is a public good.
- Democratic citizenship and the right to dignity critically underpin the mandate of our public universities.
- Universities have a developmental role to play in redressing inequalities in broader society.
- Curriculum change is at the core of university transformation initiatives.
- Transformation of universities is multi-dimensional and complex.
- The term transformation must continue to be interrogated and discussed at deeper levels.
- Workers are an integral part of the communities of public universities.
- The sector is currently characterized by increasing levels of frustration at the slow pace of transformation in the university sector, with respect to the following:
  - Insufficient levels of student funding.
  - Inadequate levels of funding to match the growth in the system and concerns about sustainability.
  - Institutional environments that continue to reflect the broader inequalities in society and result in experiences of alienation by many staff and students, including persistence of racism, patriarchy, homophobia, able-ism, and classism in the system.
  - University curricula and forms of knowledge production that are not sufficiently situated within African and the global South contexts, and are dominated by western worldviews.
  - Language practices at universities, which create barriers to effective teaching and learning.
  - Governance and management practices at universities that do not always effectively engage with university communities and their concerns.
  - The need for further interrogation of the balance between institutional autonomy and public accountability.

- The unacceptably low throughput rates of students, despite achievements in greater access and success.

#### The summit resolved that, in the immediate term:

- The sector should actively support current initiatives to urgently address student funding and debt problems, so that fee support for poor students who qualify for university can be sustained and improved.
- Institutions must build greater transparency and engagement relating to fee structures and increments.
- NSFAS must be strengthened to support improvements in student funding for the poor, and improve recovery and repayment rates.
- The mechanisms for holding institutions accountable for transformation goals should be strengthened. Transformation indicators should urgently be developed for the system to help steer transformation goals to support effective implementation of transformation imperatives.
- Decisions should be made about the role, purpose and effectiveness of Institutional Forums in facilitating transformation in the context of the analysis of current governance models for their effectiveness in supporting transformation.
- The ability of university governance and management structures to address transformation imperatives should be examined and where blockages exist they should be addressed.
- Efforts should be intensified at all levels to make university environments less alienating for many staff and students.

#### The summit resolved that in the medium term:

- All stakeholders in higher education, including government and the private sector, must work together to increase the funding allocated to universities in order to address the need for sustainability and current under-funding of the system.
- The work to establish more supportive and expanded student funding models must be intensified so that resources can be identified to *progressively introduce free quality education for the poor*. This should include investigating diversified and innovative funding systems for student support.

- The Department should work with the sector to explore the possibility of developing regulatory frameworks in the area of fee increments, provided that this is linked to a full understanding of the cost drivers of higher education and the subsidy system.
- The role of universities must be strengthened to ensure the development of democratic citizenship to give concrete expression to the rights and responsibilities in the South African constitution and Bill of Rights, with a particular emphasis on building institutional cultures based on the right to dignity.
- Flexible curriculum pathways and improved use of data analytics are two important vehicles for addressing student success.
- Research and dialogue on curriculum transformation must be supported, and resources allocated to enable re-curriculation and curriculum development processes. There should be an increasing focus on curriculum development initiatives, which examine new and alternative contents and pedagogies which relevant to the South African context.
- The sector should build on the nationally coordinated programme to enable accelerated capacity development, greater representation and improved retention of blacks and women in the academic workforce, professoriate, and university management and governance structures.
- We must ensure the successful and rapid implementation of the Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDI) grant programme to address the development needs of HDI's to ensure their sustainability into the future.
- Engaged scholarship aligned to the transformation agenda must be recognized as fundamental to the mission of universities.

### The summit called for:

- These resolutions to be enacted in activities and plans at institutional, organizational and national level, and through the National Plan for Post-School Education and Training.
- Indicators to be established with respect to implementing these resolutions.
- The relevant role-players to report annually on progress made with respect to each resolution that forms part of their scope of responsibility.

The summit reaffirmed that universities are places of debate and contestation which provide space for new knowledge to be created, intellectual activity and freedom of thought. Debates about transformation involve

fundamentally questioning the state of our universities, who is teaching and researching, what are they teaching and researching, and what the qualitative experiences of students in our universities are like.

Ultimately the summit has been engaged in debates about the role and nature of public universities in South Africa. The sector must harness the new energy and ideas being expressed in the HE summit to accelerate the transformation imperatives of the system. This is the start of a new process of imagining what transformed South African universities should look like in the future.

The summit recognizes the urgency of addressing the big and enduring questions of transformation raised at this summit. It also recognizes the importance of new and different ways of engaging on university campuses so that transformation debates are characterized by dignity and a recognition of diverse perspectives. Violence and destruction of public property, and intimidation or harassment on campuses by any group cannot and should not be tolerated. Equally any tendency towards criminalizing peaceful student protests is unacceptable as it undermines democratic processes within universities and the very notion of academic freedom.