

Leaders meet to tackle crisis in higher education

University vice-chancellors, philanthropists and business leaders from across South Africa are currently meeting in Cape Town to discuss how they can strengthen our universities and produce the graduates and research needed to drive the country's development.



Hosted by Inyathelo: The South African Institute for Advancement, the leadership conference is the first time such a group will gather in a structured forum in an attempt to find solutions to the current challenges facing higher education.

According to the 2012/13 Global Competitiveness Report, South Africa is ranked a dismal 140 out of 144 countries in terms of the quality of its education system. Only 13% of young people gain access to university, and less than half of those who do enrol ever graduate. The graduation rates of black students remain substantially lower than those of white students, with only 10% gaining access to university and less than 5% succeeding in getting a degree.

Inyathelo's executive director, Shelagh Gastrow, said that it is in everyone's interests to strengthen the pathways to and through universities and ensure the institutions have sufficient resources to thrive.

"Investment in higher education pays off. It not only benefits the individual in the form of improved job prospects and income, but it also has significant benefits for our society as a whole in the form of higher economic growth and employment rates, lower levels of corruption, as well as improvements in the general health and wellbeing of the population. Our universities need the support of private money if they are going to continue to function as the engines that fuel research, innovation and economic growth," insisted Gastrow.

Combined annual grant-making spend of over R1 billion

Discussions at the conference are being facilitated by social and political commentator Eusebius McKaiser and key speakers include vice-chancellors Professor Jonathan Jansen, Professor Adam Habib and Dr Max Price, as well as business leaders, such as the CEO of FirstRand, Sizwe Nxasana and Anthony Farr, CEO of the Allan Gray Orbis Foundation. Members of the Private Philanthropy Circle, which has a combined annual grant-making spend of over R1 billion will also be in attendance.

Inyathelo's advancement training and support manager, Nazli Abrahams, said that the conference is part of the institute's efforts to bolster private fundraising in higher education and improve student access and graduation rates. "We are working closely with the US-based Kresge Foundation to help ensure the long-term financial sustainability of higher education institutions in South Africa. We believe university-level education is crucial to the health of our economy and our democracy.

Sadly, declining government support and increased competition over ever-shrinking traditional sources of income is making it hard for them to succeed. We hope that by bringing together leaders in business, philanthropy and higher education, we can collectively find a way to ensure that our universities remain at the cutting edge, produce world-class graduates and undertake the essential research needed to advance our society," explained Abrahams.

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