

South Africa adopts innovative Policy Framework for Internationalisation of Higher Education

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On 6 November, the South African Policy Framework for Internationalisation of Higher Education was promulgated and became legally binding (Government Gazette no 43872). The innovative policy is a milestone for South African higher education. It becomes effective at a time when rethinking internationalisation in the wake of the outbreak of Covid-19 is a high priority. The Policy is conceptually on the cutting edge of the internationalisation discourse. It integrates the thinking of several leading experts and has the potential to elevate South Africa's higher education system to a globally leading position. Besides, it could become a blueprint for advancing higher education internationalisation in the developing world.



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The new Policy encourages higher education institutions to develop models for institutional internationalisation which ensure that every student has an international experience. Central is that curriculum internationalisation, which must be advanced in tandem with other curriculum transformation imperatives, becomes mandatory. Thus, the Policy will assist in ensuring that South African tertiary graduates will become equipped to navigate unknown spaces and empowered to be globally competent citizens.

The Policy commits South African higher education to comprehensive internationalisation, which means that internationalisation should permeate all aspects of their core business. It requires academic leaders to embrace scientific diplomacy, which is described as the 'art and skill of managing good relations with all international organisations and institutions'. This novel concept aptly reflects the role of academic leadership in advancing international external relations. Scientific diplomacy should form the foundation of scientific cooperation in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

Constitutionally entrenched academic freedom is affirmed and contextualised. Institutions are imbued with the responsibility to structure internationalisation for their context through internationalisation policies and strategies. It is required that appropriate measurable indicators of internationalisation are developed. Institutions are further required to report back on the achievement of their internationalisation targets annually. The role of government in the internationalisation process will be enabling and facilitating rather than describing a direct steer.

South African higher education stakeholders must mitigate risks associated with internationalisation, such as brain drain. They are obliged to safeguard the rights and interests of both incoming and outgoing international students. The Policy provides a space to innovate and integrate digital mobility and traditional mobility practices at all levels.

Co-creation and collaboration

Knowledge co-creation through International research collaboration is prioritised, and institutions are provided with substantive guidance on fostering it. Collaborative qualifications are regulated, and the existing practice of awarding postgraduate joint degrees at some South African higher education institutions is generally confirmed. Besides, the new regulatory framework encourages the award of co-badged and consecutive qualifications; however, double degrees remain prohibited.

The framework which the 1997 SADC Protocol on Education and Training created for higher education collaboration in the region is reiterated and affirmed, including the obligation to ‘reserve at least 5% of admissions for students coming from SADC nations other than their own’. Through the Policy, the South African government commits itself to ensure inter-governmental integration and cooperation for the benefit of internationalisation. This inter-governmental cooperation should, in the future, ensure that challenges regarding internationalisation will be avoided.

Overall, the new policy has the potential to achieve its rationales, which include the positioning of the South African higher education system to be competitive in a globalised world as well as advancing the quality of education. Other stated aims are enhancing intellectual diversity in higher education, furthering the public good and contributing to resolving global challenges.

The South African higher education sector has been actively lobbying for this Policy for a long time. In 2000, the South African Council on Higher Education posed a challenge to the system when it stated that: “An appropriate framework and infrastructure that draws in various relevant government departments should be created for this purpose and internationalisation should be promoted.” The process which now came to fruition was initiated by the Department of Higher Education and Training in 2015 and included robust stakeholder engagement.

Funding opportunities

South African higher education institutions should immediately prepare themselves for the positive challenge which the Policy sets them concerning strengthening support and creating stable management structures for internationalisation. Collaboration is vital, and it is also of critical importance that each institution develops a specific funding model as internationalisation is required to be funded internally. The policy allows for innovative funding opportunities that will enable institutions to generate additional income that should be applied in the furthering of their internationalisation activities.

Institutions, particularly those which are historically disadvantaged, need to be supported to develop capacity, to implement the policy but also to further develop their levels of internationalisation. A spirit of inter-institutional collaboration for advancing internationalisation and embedding the principles of the Policy framework is essential for success. Besides, it

will be critically important to guide institutions as to the sequence in which they should tackle the new obligations arising in terms of the Policy framework.

In conclusion, the South African system can heave a sigh of relief that the Policy is now available. It should be used to assist the university sector in mitigating the negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic through the development of clear strategies. The focus on digital mobility, enhanced by responses to the pandemic, will also allow for more inclusive participation in internationalisation activities.

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