

SOUTH AFRICA: Monitoring university transformation

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South Africa's new Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande, has announced the creation of a monitoring group to deal with university transformation, following a **damning report** into lingering racism on campuses. At a meeting with vice-chancellors last week, Nzimande called on universities to expand opportunities for more affordable, quality higher education for poor students - especially for black students to obtain scarce and critical skills.

The vice-chancellors' organisation, Higher Education South Africa or HESA, described the meeting with the new Minister as "highly constructive" and said there was consensus on the need for a longer engagement between university leaders and the ministry.

Last year, following an outcry over a racist incident at the University of the Free State, then Education Minister Naledi Pandor set up a Committee on Progress Towards Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions, chaired by the University of Cape Town's Professor Crain Soudien.

In its report published in May, the committee said racism was still pervasive on South African campuses. While universities largely had comprehensive policies dealing with transformation and were legally compliant, their good intentions did not always translate into positive experiences for students and staff.

At a media briefing last Wednesday, Nzimande described the racism and discrimination exposed in the report as disturbing: "There is no doubt that significant policy development has indeed occurred towards transformation; the next important step is making those policies work."

He had accepted a proposal by the Soudien Committee that an oversight body be set up to help tackle the challenges of transformation it had identified. The composition, structure and work of the body would be detailed later but it would be based in the Education Department, would complement the work of the statutory Council of Higher Education and would be considered "a priority issue".

"There is a need for institutions to consider the extent to which the curriculum has been transformed to play a role in the socialisation of students in accordance with the values of the constitution and for broader participation in society," Nzimande said. "The report is not only relevant for higher education institutions but for the whole of society. What is happening at these institutions is a microcosm of South Africa."

According to *Business Day*, Nzimande outlined five key issues he expected vice-chancellors to cooperate on regarding transformation. They include:

- * Developing a transformation compact between universities and government.
- * Holding vice-chancellors responsible for transformation in performance management contracts.
- * Universities must consider the extent to which curricula have been transformed in accordance with the constitution.
- * Proposals for a four-year undergraduate degree.
- * Implementing a language policy, particularly when language is used as a means of exclusion.

"I hope this is a relationship that we can build but where there is resistance we will find ways of dealing with it. We are not going to tolerate a continuation of the conditions the report has identified, or resistance to transformation," Nzimande said, *Business Day* reported. He also warned that academic freedom and autonomy could not be used to resist transformation.

The committee report has been referred to the higher education council for advice on additional measures that could be considered to deepen transformation and social cohesion. The CHE will also advise the government on proposals relating to student learning needs, four-year degrees and the implementation of a language policy.

University councils and vice-chancellors had been urged to consider creating institutional mechanisms to monitor the state of transformation on campuses, Nzimande said. He called on councils to step up their oversight of transformation on campuses, and report back to him by April next year. "We can't leave these matters to chance," he said.

Following the meeting with vice-chancellors, HESA said in a statement that Nzimande had stressed the imperative that poor student not be denied the opportunity to obtain quality higher education, especially opportunities for scarce and critical skills for black students - "despite the well-acknowledged fact of poorly prepared first year students".

"He appealed to universities to make higher education as affordable as possible and to do everything in their power to develop the next generation of academics and researchers," HESA said.

Also, Nzimande had requested the assistance of the higher education sector in the "important quest" of reconceptualising South Africa's post-secondary education system in a ministry with a combined emphasis on higher and further education and training, and on sectoral education and training authorities.

At the media briefing, Nzimande denied reports he had advocated free tertiary education for all. Rather, he had recommended free undergraduate education for poor students.

"Free higher education at this point for everybody is out of the question. Why should children of the rich not pay? Our priority is those who cannot afford or who can only partly afford to pay," he told reporters.

Nzimande said the focus would be on genuinely poor students who could not afford any or a part of their fees, and that he was trying to find ways to get financial aid to students whose parents earned less than R7500 (US\$933) a month.

There would be a review of the National Students Financial Aid Scheme, NFSAS, which funds needy students using government grants and graduate loan repayments. The scheme needed to improve its reach as many students from working class families were excluded, even though they really could not afford high university fees.

The Young Communist League of South Africa described Nzimande's initiative to review funds given to poor students as progressive.

"We remain convinced that the NSFAS is not a blue-print in its current form or a model for the provision of free education, but can play a key central role towards achieving this noble objective in line with the Freedom Charter," said its spokesman Castro Ngobese in statement.

The league also called on the ministry to standardise the cost of degrees and diplomas across all institutions. This, said Ngobese, would help demystify public belief that qualifications obtained from historically disadvantaged institutions were "inferior and of poor quality".