

RESHAPING POLICY

FOR INCLUSIVE INTERNATIONALISATION

How can institutions shape their internationalisation policies to advance an egalitarian and inclusive approach to internationalisation, while taking society's needs into account? As South Africa's new national policy framework paves the way for how future internationalisation strategies develop, institutions must consider this important question. ▶

In South Africa's highly unequal and differentiated higher education system, a transformation agenda is under way, focused on issues of redress, equity, diversity and inclusion. In this context, what are the implications of 'internationalisation for all' and how can it feed into the transformation process?

Prior to 1994, the South African higher education landscape was shaped by colonialism and apartheid, which engendered sociopolitical and economic inequalities related to class, race, language and gender. This led to the systemic exclusion and marginalisation of particular levels of society.¹ In addition, during apartheid, the South African higher education system was closed to public scrutiny and international influences.²

In post-apartheid South Africa, two key policy documents were instrumental in engendering the transformation project within higher education: the *Education White Paper 3* and the *National Plan for Higher Education*. Internationalisation, however, was not one of the key priorities of higher education redress. It was treated as a marginal, *ad hoc* process for institutions that were dealing with growing demands to internationalise. Meanwhile, the South African higher education system was confronted with the challenge of responding to the demands of an economically competitive 'global society'.³

POLICY PROGRESS

In 1997, the International Education Association of South Africa, a non-profit member organisation, was established to drive the process of internationalisation across the sector. The association identified

the need for a national policy on internationalisation in the early 2000s, but it was not until 2012 that any real progress was made towards the drafting of this policy. After much consultation and strategic engagement, the *Policy Framework for Internationalisation of Higher Education* was published in November 2020.

The policy framework is intended to provide a concise roadmap for the internationalisation of higher education institutions, whilst simultaneously positioning internationalisation as a 'transformational driver' in higher

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education. The policy is informative and paves the way for 'how' institutions can internationalise.

However, each university is required to interrogate the policy and develop its own internationalisation strategy that embraces the broad principles of the framework. The policy provides guiding principles on student mobility; international partnerships; international research collaborations that enhance teaching, learning, research and community engagement; and joint online programmes and degrees. It also emphasises the need to engage in internationalisation of the curriculum to enhance the scope of Internationalisation at Home, but it stresses that this should not impede other curriculum transformation efforts.

How, then, do the contents of the policy framework align with the concept of internationalisation for all within the paradigm of comprehensive internationalisation?

DEEP INEQUALITIES

In the international literature, the concept of comprehensive internationalisation is defined as a "commitment, confirmed through action, to infuse international and comparative perspectives throughout the teaching, research and service missions of higher education".⁴ The national policy framework

pays heed to this definition, encouraging institutions to adopt an approach to internationalisation that underpins and supports research, teaching, learning and community engagement.

The concept of internationalisation for all, however, exists within a discourse of equality, inclusion and social justice. It is based on the idea of equal opportunities and advantages to internationalise across the sector – but in a differentiated context such as South Africa, deep inequalities undergird the process of internationalisation, as historically white universities are still better able to internationalise than historically black universities. These realities are complex, starkly visible and pervasive across the national landscape.

So what are the key elements of the national policy that institutions need to focus on to create an inclusive approach to internationalisation for the benefit of the majority?

AN INCLUSIVE APPROACH

In the past, student exchange programmes were celebrated as the gold standard for internationalisation. However, with the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education institutions have had to rethink their international activities creatively and with reference to the broader and more significant goals of internationalisation.

The South African national policy is therefore timely, but what remains critical is the manner in which institutions interpret and shape their internationalisation policies to advance an egalitarian and inclusive approach to internationalisation, whilst remaining relevant to the needs of society and the continent.

Key to this process is making internationalisation a core driver of the transformation agenda. This approach requires university leaders to think critically about how institutional international policy can intersect with national policy to address some of the transformation imperatives of higher education, such as those related to diversity, inclusion, globally relevant graduates and intercultural competences. Some of the elements that institutions can embrace from the national policy include:

- Creatively expanding on Internationalisation at Home to extend opportunities to students who would not reap the benefits of traditional mobility

due to their socio-economic, cultural and material circumstances.

- Internationalising the curriculum in a way that speaks to the realities of our context whilst remaining globally relevant and deploying divergent pedagogical approaches.
- Engaging in international collaborative programmes and joint degrees in Africa and beyond as a way to diversify and create multicultural learning environments that can produce globally relevant scholars who are able to confront universal challenges.
- Creating strategic, multidisciplinary partnerships focusing on the exchange of research with transformational benefits for society.

As we work our way through the pandemic, this is a perfect time for us to reshape our institutional policies to embrace elements of diversity, inclusion and equality as we align the concept of internationalisation for all with the goals of transformation. This is not an easy process, but with creative and critical thinking on the part of university leaders, we can make it happen.

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2. Le Grange, L. (2009). A survey of educational research in the second decade of South Africa's democracy: A focus on higher education. *South African Journal of Education*, 23(6), 1115–1125.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Hudzik, J. K. (2011). *Comprehensive internationalization: From concept to action*. NAESA, the Association of International Educators. Washington, D.C.