

DEVELOPING AN APPROACH TO INTERNATIONALISATION
IN SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES:

EMPLOYMENT EQUITY AND THE APPOINTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL STAFF



UNIVERSITIES
SOUTH AFRICA

Position Paper



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June 2026



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Developed for Universities South Africa (USAf)

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Final version: June 2026

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1. BACKGROUND

The context against which this Position Paper is produced is the intention of the Department of Employment and Labour (DoEL) to give effect to the provision of the *Employment Equity Amendment Bill* (EEAB) and *Regulations* for setting sectoral targets for the employment of foreign nationals and particularly academics in South Africa's universities. In response and to contribute to the process and the necessary content of the two documents, Universities South Africa (USAf) came to the view that the proposed legislation had important implications for the sector. USAf therefore requested its Transformation Strategy Group (TSG) to oversee the development of a Position Paper that would provide evidence-based foundation for the organisation to take an informed position on the EEAB.

To guide this work, the TSG established a multidisciplinary Working Group comprising Professor Andre Keet, Professor Pam Dube, and Mr Mahlubi Mabizela, and representatives from the Research and Innovation Strategy Group (RISG), the Transformation Management Forum (TMF), the Human Resources Directors (HRD), and the Employment Equity Management Forum (EEMF). The Working Group was tasked with developing a position upon which the letter and spirit of the policies on internationalisation would be brought to bear.

The study is premised on the broad objectives of Africanisation, decolonisation, employment equity, and human resource development, and is intended to inform the TSG's position on the employment of foreign academics. It seeks to integrate several dimensions: an understanding of internationalisation in relation to academic faculty; institutional policies on internationalisation, employment equity, and human resource development; as well as considerations of gender equity, scarce and critical skills, and disability. Drawing on these insights, the aim is to support the higher education sector in setting clear targets for the employment of foreign nationals.

To achieve this, the TSG invited Professor Crain Soudien, Emeritus Professor at the University of Cape Town (UCT), to lead the drafting of the paper, with support from Ms Lucina Reddy of Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) and Ms Felicity Kokose of USAf.

The paper is structured into five components. The **first** part describes the framing propositions of USAf with respect to internationalisation and Africanisation. The paper then moves on to recapitulate the global internationalisation and higher education discussion, particularly as it pertains to international faculty. From these framing points of departure, the **second** part examines how South African universities conceptualise and operationalise internationalisation through institutional policies and stakeholder perspectives. This section of the paper draws on institutional policies, to the extent that these are available, and the feedback the writer received from engagements with key stakeholders in the sector. The **third** part analyses the emerging policy embodied in the proposed Employment Equity policy. The **fourth** looks at the demography of the sector with a focus on the representation of international faculty. The **final** part synthesises the findings of the enquiry and considers their implications for the process for setting sectoral targets under the proposed legislation.

2. METHODOLOGY

This Position Paper adopts a mixed-methods approach, employing complementary research methods to address the key questions underpinning the study. To understand the dominant thinking in the global higher education landscape about internationalisation, a desktop literature review was considered appropriate. To determine the prevailing consensus in the South African system with respect to internationalisation, the Working Group concluded that the exercise would draw on the corpus of policies that were available in the system, supplemented with focus-group discussions and interviews with selected groups and institutions. This would help to juxtapose the approaches being taken by institutions with respect to the employment of international academics with the legislation which is under consideration. It was also decided to analyse data from the Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS) database to provide a description of the existing situation in the universities with respect to the employment of international academics.



3. PART ONE: FRAMING PROPOSITIONS

Important in developing potential guidelines for a USAf position with respect to the employment of foreign nationals is working with the existing policy of the Department of Higher Education and Technology (DHET, 2019), *'The Policy Framework for the Internationalisation of Higher Education in South Africa'*, which is discussed below, and emergent positions in USAf itself. Amongst the latter are i) a submission USAf developed in 2017 for the process the Department had initiated for the drafting of its Policy Framework (USAf, 2017) and ii) a report developed by USAf (2021) to its Board in 2021 on proposed employment equity targets for the higher education sector. In the latter document, were responses from USAf to employment targets for Black employees proposed by the Department of Employment and Labour (DoEL) for the higher education sector. The thrust of the USAf document was that its Human Resources Directors (HRD) Forum Task team should initiate a process of engagement with the DoEL to address the challenges that the sector would experience in meeting its targets.

Significant about USAf's 2017 submission was its explicit reference to Internationalisation and Africanisation. It acknowledged that there was an inherent tension between the two ideas but committed itself to reconciling the tension, explaining that Africanisation was embedded in the idea of internationalisation. To be noted, is that neither concept was significantly elaborated in the submission. Noteworthy, however, was the implicit incorporation of the concept of internationalisation in the submission's definition of globalisation:

Globalisation is understood as 'gradual expansion of the scope of social processes and social action from the local or the regional scale to the global level' (Bayly 2007:84), as 'increasing integration on a global scale' (Cooper 2007:139), or as the 'expansion, concentration, and acceleration of worldwide relations' (Osterhammel and Petersson 2005: 5). The impact of globalisation on the internationalisation of higher education includes 'the unprecedented developments in information technology and social media, the pervasive impact of economic liberalization and trade agreements, the increased flow of people, ideas, capital, values, services, goods and technology across borders'. (Sehoole & Knight, 2013: 5) While the USAf submission expressed reservations about some of the reasons for the development of policy on internationalisation, it supported the broad orientation of the DHET's draft policy:

"USAf associates itself with the purpose of, rationale and goals for, and the principles governing, internationalisation as set out in Chapter 3" (USAf, 2017: 2).

It indicated that the policy proposals set out in the proposed policy Green Paper "will facilitate international mobility and the internationalisation project in HEIs" (USAf, 2017: 3). It pointed out, however, that the experience of its member institutions with the process of securing the appropriate work permits for the employment of foreign nationals was not satisfactory. The submission said that the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) "has not been acting in keeping with the DHET's expectations of a DHA facilitating student and staff mobility as envisaged in sections 5.1 and 5.4.2 of the draft" (ibid).

The critical insights to take away from this submission are USAf's (2017:5) broad support for increased internationalisation for both financial and educational reasons:

The draft policy framework refers at several points to internationalisation as a source of additional revenue. USAf believes that collaborative programmes should at least pay their way.... And notes that some form of internationalisation (e.g., semester abroad programmes) can generate additional revenue. However, many international collaborative programmes will not do more than cover their costs, *but bring significant non-monetary benefits and should be pursued for these benefits*. (Author's emphasis)

i. Prevailing Thinking on Internationalisation in Higher Education

Keeping these Framing Propositions in mind, what does the broader higher education sector discussion say about internationalisation? There is, it needs to be noted, a strong and extensive literature on the subject. It, unfortunately, has little to say about the place and situation of academic staff (see, *inter alia*, Knight, 2003a and 2003b, 2009; Brandenburg & De Wit, 2011; and Altbach, 2003 and 2013). Much of the discussion is about students and student mobility.

While the general discussion around internationalisation has risen in prominence amongst scholars of higher education and policy makers in several parts of the world, it is still relatively new. That it is still in its early stages calls for caution in how it is taken up. Part of this caution relates to the dominant way in which the term *internationalisation* has come to be used, i.e. the association of internationalisation with neo-liberalism and globalisation. Cheung (2012: 95), for example, describes Internationalisation as 'a natural outcome of the new globalized era.' The term is, in many senses, located inside the politics and dynamics of globalisation. It takes some of globalisation's meaning, namely,

the breakdown of national/local barriers to trade and the free movement of people, information and capital as communication and knowledge travels afar across oceans and mountains with the click of a mouse and new technology narrows distances more and more each day.... The underlying logic is that globalization is inevitable and brings about greater integration and convergence on a global scale of human activities, as part of an ultimate paradigm for human modernization, progress and civilization. (Cheung, 2012: 95-96)

The sense carried in Cheung's explanation clearly has great significance for this discussion and is engaged below. It is important, however, also to recall older references, associations and allusions of the term which invoke the idea of *cosmopolitanness*. This sense of what the university is – often the explanation for its durability as an institution – goes right back to the early academies of the 2nd and 3rd centuries before the common era. Ismail Serageldin (2002:ix), founding director of the new Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Egypt, said of the ancient Library of Alexandria that it represented an attempt to "collect all the known texts of the world." It did so not in a spirit of nationalism, cultural chauvinism or imperial ambition, but "to build a meeting place for the cultures of the world, to emphasize rationality, civility, and dialogue and to promote understanding and the pursuit of knowledge." Hospitality and generosity were hallmarks of The Mouseion as Serageldin described it: "a community of scholars, which transcended earlier libraries in Egypt or Greece by having an international multicultural outlook and a vocation to reach out for universal knowledge" (ibid). Significantly, this idea of a community of people from far and wide is implicit in the



Humboldtian model and explicit in Cardinal John Newman's description of the ideal university. Newman said of the university:

If I were asked to describe as briefly and popularly as I could what a University was, I should draw my answer from its ancient designation of a *Studium Generale*, or "School of Universal Learning." This description implies the assemblage of strangers from all parts in one spot; - from all parts; else, how will you find professors and students for every department of knowledge? And in one spot; else, how can there be any school at all? Accordingly, in its simple and rudimental form, it is a school of knowledge of every kind, consisting of teachers and learners from every quarter. (Newman, n.d)

'How (else) will you find professors?' asked Newman (ibid).

What recalling Humboldt and Newman does is to posit the idea of Internationalisation in a wider arc and so to bring forward another way in which the term might be used. In the Humboldt, Newman, and Serageldian approach invoked is not the idea of free trade and competition but that of mutuality and co-operation - the university offers itself in service of the good of all humanity. Yielded here then is an understanding of Internationalisation which emphasises co-operation, engagement and mutuality. In contrast to competitive Internationalisation, it can be described as *shared Internationalisation*.

The Humboldt and Newman approach, essentially, for the purposes of this paper, the *shared internationalisation* position, carries a great deal of weight in discussions of the modern university. This view, however, as indicated earlier, has been elaborated, reformulated and even redirected in the last thirty years. Hans de Wit (2019: 10) explains that "the international orientation of universities has changed dramatically.... What is now called 'Internationalisation of higher education' as a concept and strategy is a recent phenomenon that has emerged over the last 30 years, driven by a dynamic combination of political, economic, socio-cultural and academic rationales and stakeholders." Counterposed to the *shared internationalisation* view, in substance, here is the *competitive internationalisation* position. While there is not one single model that captures what it is, most discussions and engagements of the concept have focused on the experience of the Western world and, within that, the dominance of the English-speaking higher education countries of the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada. What is this experience?

Central to the experience of the Western world but manifest also in the contexts of developing economies such as China, India, Brazil, Mexico and, notably, South Africa, have been three related factors: the *massification* of higher education, the *centering* of the modern university as a site for the production of new knowledge and human capital, and the rise of higher education *competition* with the centrality of rankings.

Massification came to countries such as the USA in the 1980s but is now a feature of important emerging economies such as China, India and critically in South Africa, where the participation rate has exceeded the 20% mark. De Wit (2019: 11) says that there is a 'saturation' in demand for higher education places in countries such as the USA, the UK, continental Europe, Canada, Australia, South Korea and Japan where enrolment of eligible sections of the population 'have moved far beyond 50%.' Driving the Internationalisation process in these countries is the fact that the supply of tertiary spaces in particular fields is greater than the demand: "International students and scholars are needed to fill the demand for

graduates in these fields. Such students are mainly coming from the developing and emerging economies, where there is still an ongoing demand for quality higher education, resulting in brain drain and related decrease in research and top talent capacity in these countries” (De Wit, 2019: 11).

As a site for the production of new knowledge and a producer of human capital, universities have been critical for driving the global knowledge economy. As De Wit (2019: 12) explains, research-intensive universities not only educate top talent but they ‘are also the main producers of basic research in most countries.’ This has driven the demand for the world’s most-high performing students and its leading scholars.

Allied to the above point, driving its organisational form and logic, has been the dynamic of competition. Introduced into higher education as a defining feature by neo-liberalism is the paradigm of rankings and its application at both national and international levels. Peculiar to the discourse of rankings is its use of marketized metrics of excellence, namely, reputation in terms such as global recognition of fields, disciplines and professors, citation rates, admission rates, and fundraising levels. Marginson (2017:7) argues that rankings have remade global higher education in three ways: i) constituted it as a competitive market; ii) imposed, as a consequence of competition, the methodology of ranking as a way of marking excellence and in the process imposed a hierarchy on the world’s universities; and iii) instituted performativity driven by the metrics of excellence as the key accountability mechanism for institutions and academics. While both competitive and shared Internationalisation are evident in the literature, it is the former which has come to dominate. A founding premise of competitive Internationalisation is that of contestation for dominance and supremacy as the animating driver for human progress, development and civilisation. The competitive condition sits ontologically at the centre of human becoming. It provides the modern university with its zeitgeist and its *raison d’être*. As a modality for the university, it is both inevitable and unavoidable. Cheung (2012: 96) says that four consequences flow from competitive Internationalisation:

- i. *Follow the fashion or perish...* whether one likes it or not, one has to ‘follow’ the trend in order not to lag behind or become sidelined.
- ii. Competition and survival - national boundaries can no longer deter the flow of people, expertise and capital. Education – in particular, higher education – is seen as crucial to nurturing the human capital necessary for international competition.
- iii. *Quality assurance and relevance* - National education systems are thus driven towards greater international involvement. Internationalisation in terms of benchmarking against some ‘world’ standards is seen as the key to the quality of education and relevance to global needs.
- iv. *Education sells* – The advent of the new knowledge society and knowledge-based economy has spurred greater investment by national and global capital ... in knowledge industries, including higher education. Internationalisation has become a business opportunity as higher education is turned into a foreign exchange earning export.

The impact of the dynamic of competition all over the world has been to place pressure on universities to achieve what are deemed to be the desirable competencies of a good university. Knight (1994: 8), a leading



scholar of Internationalisation, describes this development as ‘the process of integrating an international... dimension into teaching, research and service of the institution.’ It has involved the recruitment of quality students from a wide diversity of countries, the attraction of globally recognised scholars, and the rise in international standing of the institution. The process, Knight (2008) has argued, has not unfolded without serious contradictions. Key amongst these have been the question of institutions succumbing to the ranking game, forfeiting their distinctiveness for global legibility. This legibility, invariably, takes form in mimicry – the desire to ‘westernise’ and to become like the world’s leading research institutions. Most damaging, argues Cheung (2012: 102), is their susceptibility to the discourse of neo-liberalism and marketisation.

The effects of these developments have been to prioritise competition for international students and scholars. “(to) drive national governments and institutions to invest in more global research, to use English as language of research and education, and to focus on international recruitment strategies” (De Wit, 2019: 12). While the rhetoric of many institutions, says De Wit (ibid) has been on “exchange and co-operation and there continues to be a rhetoric around the need to understand different cultures and their languages. Nevertheless, a gradual but increasingly visible shift has been apparent since the second half of the 1990’s towards a more competitive internationalisation.” This has been particularly so with respect to the recruitment of international students. In 1992 UNESCO estimated that the ‘world market’ for international students was slightly in excess of 1,2 million students (Lenn, 1997:1). Lenn (1997:1), drawing on official United States of America trade and Australian Department of Employment, Education and Training figures says that “(in) 1994, the United States earned about \$7 billion (US) for educational services... while Australia earned about \$1 billion (US) in the year prior.” Moving into the new millennium, Hirtt (c2000) estimates that cross-border education has become a \$1000 billion industry employing 50 million people and serving a billion potential customers in the form of students. The scale of the phenomenon is extremely large. Countries like the United States of America, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Australia, and South Africa have become large receivers of students from around the globe.

But what does this discussion tell us about the place and role of academic faculty?

As indicated earlier, the literature on the role and place of academic faculty is not extensive. Stohl (2007) Bedenlier, Zawacki-Richter (2015) and Romani-Dias and Carneiro (2019) provide interested readers with points of entry into the discussion from a range of perspectives. Surfaced here are two: a positive view of Internationalisation, which focuses on the benefits of the internationalisation of the academic faculty, and, counterposed to this, a negative view that looks at the challenges of Internationalisation.

Stohl (2007) represents the positive perspective, and proceeds from the premise that although higher education internationalisation has successfully provided mechanisms for student mobility, institutions themselves have struggled to engage their faculty and consequently, have not been able to realise the immense benefits that Internationalisation could yield in terms of enhanced learning opportunities, discovery of new knowledge and, implicitly in his discussion, the development of cross-border scholarly relationships. Stohl (2007:367) emphasises that “[I]f we want to internationalize the university we have to internationalize the faculty.”

How are the strengths of having an internationalised faculty projected in the literature? Evident are elements of both the shared and the competitive Internationalisation discourses:

- i. The desirability of international mobility to promote a borderless world. In this framing, international faculty form a critical component of what Brandenburg and de Wit (2011: 16) describe as ‘the white knights of higher education’. Their role is to help to define and uphold the ‘moral ground’ of justice and equity, and they serve as defenders of Internationalisation’s commitment to peace and mutual understanding, and
- ii. The necessity for engaged and internationally collaborative faculty to support and enhance the quest for global scientific excellence (Altbach, 2013: 11). International faculty, Contreras (2011: 9) explains, supply the “brain power” for innovation and research in the countries in which they find themselves.

In terms of the question of competition, the view has arisen that it is the presence of international faculty which contributes to an institution’s international ranking. Postiglione and Altbach (2013: 12), to illustrate, give the example of the Hong Kong university system, which, uniquely in the world, has close to half of its complement of academic staff, 43%, drawn from academics who come from countries outside the country. This, they suggest, has led to Hong Kong having the highest concentration of globally ranked universities in one city.

The literature also highlights distinct risks associated with the internationalisation of the faculty. Central amongst these are the following:

- i. The brain drain for economically developing countries. Altbach (2013: 2), for example, says that “80% or more of Chinese and Indians who have obtained their advanced degrees in the United States over almost half a century have remained in the country.” He also says that a “recent analysis of data from the National Science Foundation’s survey of Earned Doctorates shows that the large majority of doctoral recipients from developing countries plan to remain in the United States, contributing to the labor force, particularly in the STEM fields. While data are seldom available, other European countries and Australia show similar trends. The effect of this brain drain is that poorer countries are contributing significantly to the academic systems and economies of the wealthier countries. The contribution of India to the American academic system, Altbach (ibid) estimates, is in the order of US\$1.5 billion annually. The losses for economically developing countries are large, for the academy in particular, but also for their economies.
- ii. The homogenisation of institutions. Jane Knight (2009: 10) makes the point that there are critics of Internationalisation who view the loosening of boundaries between countries with alarm. Their contention is that Internationalisation is “eroding national cultural identities and that, instead of the creation of new hybrid cultures, native cultures are being homogenized – usually interpreted as Westernized.” These concerns have to do, principally, with the emergence of English as the universal medium of instruction around the world, the irrelevance of curricular content, the standardization of degree programmes and accreditation regimes.



While, as Altbach (2013: 3) points out, many countries around the world are putting in place initiatives to bring ‘home’ their academics from abroad, there is “wide agreement in Europe and North America that new initiatives to entice ‘the best and brightest’ of professionals from other countries, whom they educate, to stay and join the local labor force are a good idea.” In giving effect to this agreement, they have been able to attract sizeable numbers of international faculty. As indicated earlier, international faculty make up 43% of the Hong Kong system, 19% in the UK, Canada and Australia, both 12% and 9% in the USA (Postiglione & Altbach, 2013: 12).

In bringing this phase of the discussion to a close, it is important to summarise the positives and negatives of internationalisation. These, as forces, are becoming clearer all the time, will neither abate, in either positive or negative ways, nor concentrate their flows in a single direction. Institutions will, for the foreseeable future, be confronted with the multiple impulses that come with Internationalisation. They will find themselves, as Simon Marginson (2006:4) argues, in networked environments where they are all visible to one another and where the weight of operating in internationalising environments will be permanently increasing. He argues that it is not possible for individual institutions to seal themselves off from global effects. Those that attempt to cut themselves off from the process will pay a price in diminished effectiveness. This diminished effectiveness, he implies, is their ability to tap into systems of communications, information, knowledge and culture. While he acknowledges how susceptible these networks are to marketised modes of operation, they offer institutions opportunities for leveraging the major distinguishing feature of Internationalisation – the reality of what Guy Neave (2002: 332) calls ‘quicken exchange’. Through this ‘quicken exchange’ flow multiple currencies, cutting edge knowledge, innovation, technology and cultural exchange with the potential for, as he argues, “the formation of intellectual communities across every border.”

What might this Position Paper take away from this discussion? De Wit (2019: 14) argues that it is important to recover the broader sense of Internationalisation. He references the idea of what Rumbley describes as ‘intelligent internationalisation’ (De Wit, 2019: 14). ‘

Intelligent internationalisation’ in Rumbley’s terms demands the development of a thoughtful alliance between the research, practitioner, and policy communities. Those participating in the elaboration of internationalisation activities and agendas [must] have access to the information, ideas, and professional skill-building opportunities that will enhance their ability to navigate the complex and volatile higher education environment of the next 20 years.

This perspective is reinforced by Romani-Dias, Carneiro, and Barbosa (2019: 301). who argue strongly that a critical understanding of the benefits of Internationalisation will contribute to a better approach to the discourse on Internationalisation of higher education. This better approach is, in effect, the *shared internationalisation* perspective.

In light of this discussion of the international setting, the next section examines how South African universities conceptualise and operationalise internationalisation.

4. **PART TWO: SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION VIEW ON INTERNATIONALISATION**

The South African discussion on internationalisation has had the benefit of the policy development process on internationalisation initiated by the DHET in 2017. This culminated in the Draft Policy Framework for the Internationalisation of Higher Education (DHET, 2019), which defines internationalisation in the following way: “‘internationalisation of higher education’ means an intentional or steered process to incorporate intercultural, international and/or global dimensions into higher education in order to advance the goals, functions and delivery of higher education and thus to enhance the quality of education and research” (DHET, 2019: 9).

Importantly, the policy bears the bifurcated character of the internationalisation discussion. It acknowledges the strengths and weaknesses of internationalisation. It references the historic contribution of South Africa’s higher education policy archive, such as the 1997 *White Paper* on Higher Education, in advancing the cause of internationalisation and particularly its promotion of global dialogue and peace, in contributing to knowledge production and in strengthening institutions, particularly the historically disadvantaged sector. It also, however, defers to the discourse of *competitive internationalisation* and explains that the rationale for the development of the policy is “to position the higher education system to be competitive in a globalised world” (DHET, 2017: 19) and indicates that there are risks involved. The benefits and risks are spelt out. Positively, the policy argues that the ‘overarching rationale for internationalisation of higher education in South Africa’ is

- 3.3.2.1 to position the higher education system to be competitive in a globalised world;
- 3.3.2.2 to advance the quality of higher education;
- 3.3.2.3. to enhance intellectual diversity – nationally and regionally – in teaching and learning, research, and community engagement aspects of higher education;
- 3.3.2.4 to benefit society and enhance opportunities for higher education to contribute to the public good;

But it implicitly draws attention to the risks:

- 3.3.2.5. to contribute towards the development of scholars and scholarship capable of addressing global challenges. There are many benefits associated with internationalisation of higher education (see paragraphs 2.2.13 and 6.1.5), but there are also risks (see paragraph 6.9). It is broadly acknowledged across the world that internationalisation bolsters the quality of higher education and boosts the quality and productivity of higher education institutions. **The combination of risks and benefits calls for a national policy framework that, as far as possible, ensures that the South African higher education system reaps the benefits with minimum risks.** (DHET, 2019: 20-21).



In articulating this view the policy clarifies the following goals as they pertain to the employment of foreign nationals:

- 3.4.2.3. To contribute towards building global commons of academia where scholarship is not defined or barred by national boundaries.
- 3.4.2.4. To better equip South African students and staff members of higher education institutions with the knowledge, skills and attitudes – including the intercultural skills – required to contribute to the country’s socio-economic development and well-being.
- 3.4.2.5. To attract talented and highly qualified people, the best and brightest, to South African higher education institutions in order to enhance the country’s human capital. (DHET, 2019: 21)

Important in distilling these points in this policy, as indicated in section 3.4.2.5 indicated above, is the clear signal of the system to welcome foreign academics: ‘(our) intention is to attract talented and highly qualified people. This signalling is also evident in a range of recent policy statements issued by various government entities. A Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO)(n.d: 22) on National Interest, for example, warns of the rise of the danger of appeasing ‘populism and narrow nationalism’ in many countries around the world:

“This is causing tremendous harm to the gains made through global institutions to curb nationalist and trade protectionist policies. The reversal is likely to derail cooperation among states while promoting competition, much to the disadvantage of the developing countries due to their structural economic constraints.”

The Department of Home Affairs’ (DHA) revised White Paper (2026) similarly adopts a balanced approach to internationalisation, Africanisation and the protection of the rights of South Africans. It is deeply cognisant of South Africa’s commitment to redress for its own citizens but also of the place of South Africa in a globalising world. It puts emphasis on the development of skills in areas of need and the challenge of the country’s existing processes to hold on to immigrants with skills. Significant in giving effect to this emphasis is its intention to put in place a Points-Based System to expedite the processing of applications for residency and citizenship of individuals’ who demonstrate commitment to South Africa’s economic and social development’ (DHA, 2026: 18). Significantly, as is seen immediately below, these official documents, particularly the DHET policy, have influenced the policies of individual institutions.

To develop a sense of how individual institutions were approaching the question of internationalisation, a consultation process was initiated. It involved the distribution of a survey, interviews with the international office directors of selected institutions and a focus group discussion with the HR Forum of the TSG. The survey sought to determine whether institutions had Internationalisation policies and what the policies’ focal objectives were. The engagements with the directors were about the institutions’ approaches to Internationalisation. The focus group discussion sought to establish institutions’ experiences with the employment of international staff.

¹ See Annexure A for a report on the writer’s engagement with the HR Forum.

Eight universities responded to the survey, representing approximately one-third of South Africa's public universities. Their responses are summarised in Table 1. **Table 1: Survey Responses**

	University	Policy	Comments
1.	NWU	No	References in the Annual Plan. Allows for the appointment of scholars abroad who are not geographically based in South Africa.
2.	UP	No	No policy but the vision of the University's Strategic Plan outlines the need for an international portfolio.
3.	UJ	No	Recruitment of international staff is a GSG project.
4.	SU	Yes	There has been an institutional audit of the Internationalisation strategy. Scarce skills is not encompassing of the list of the roles needed at the universities.
5.	WSU	No	While there is no policy, there is a process for the appointment of foreign nationals.
6.	CPUT	Yes	Have a policy and a process for the appointment of foreign nationals. It specifies a proportion of 6% for the appointment of foreign nationals.
7.	VUT	No	The development of a policy is a matter which is being given consideration.
8.	TUT	No	

Of the institutions which indicated that they had a policy for internationalisation, six shared their latest documents: Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), North West University (NWU), Pretoria University (UP), Stellenbosch University (SU), the Universities of Cape Town (UCT) and Witwatersrand (UW) and Walter Sisulu University (WSU).¹ Analysis of the institutional policies reveals the imprint of DHET's (2019) policy, which featured strongly in the documents of some institutions. Most of the institutions used the DHET 2019 definition for internationalisation. Illustrating this, UCT used the following definition: Internationalisation is "*the process of integrating international and intercultural dimensions into the teaching, research and service functions of an institution of higher learning*" (Jane Knight 1994). Those of Stellenbosch University (SU, 2019) and UFS (2023) were similar. Stellenbosch (2019: 8) stated that

Given these global, national and institutional contexts, we define internationalisation as: An institutional commitment to intentionally and comprehensively integrate an international, intercultural and global dimension into the purpose, functions and programmes for all SU students and staff in order to advance the quality and impact of learning and teaching, research and innovation, in meaningful service of society.

¹ See Annexure A for a report on the writer's engagement with the HR Forum.



The University of the Free State in its 2023 (p.5) policy defined internationalisation as

an intentional or steered process to integrate or infuse intercultural, international and global dimensions in higher education; to advance the goals, functions and delivery of higher education and thus to enhance the quality of education and research” (DHET, 2020 p. 9). The UFS agrees with the general understanding of internationalisation and will, through an inclusive process, strengthen its own institutional understanding of internationalisation.

Relevant for the purposes of this Position Paper is how the institutional policies spoke to the question of foreign academics. In speaking of foreign nationals in this contribution, it is assumed that a foreign national is someone who has permanent resident status. In terms of the Immigration Act 13 of 2002 “permanent residence is a status granted to a foreign national authorising them to reside in the Republic indefinitely, without restriction and to engage in any employment, business, or professional activity, subject to the terms and conditions of the grant” (DHA, 2026: 6).

Most policies addressed the question of the desirability of foreign academics in positive terms. The UFS (2023: 5), for example committed itself to:

endeavour to attract excellent international researchers and research students to its university community (p.3). Dedicated support structures will be strengthened to ensure that international researchers and research students have a positive experience at the UFS.... (p. 8). The UFS strives to attract international staff with expertise not otherwise available to the institution (p. 13). It strives to attract the brightest minds to the university and encourages the national diversity of its academics... (p.2). The UFS supports its international staff members with excellent advice and administrative support for immigration processes. Dedicated support is rendered by the Department of Human Resources, and relevant strategic matters are considered together with the OIA (p. 13).

SU (2019: 3), similarly, indicated that it would:

“Increase the number of international researchers (including postdocs) visiting SU to contribute towards research and capacity development initiatives (and) establish and enhance support structures for international staff and postdoctoral fellows in collaboration with the relevant PASS divisions.”

Support for internationalisation was, however, not unqualified. Significant for most institutions was a focus on Africanisation. The CPUT (2023) Policy, most clearly of all, stated that

while this (presumably the DHET policy) is a universal generic definition revised over the recent years, there needs to be a regional and continental relevance. South Africa is part of a broader ideological construct beyond its geographical location on the continent to include notions of the global south, south-south, and global peripheries and address ideas of race, class, identities, gender, urban and rural bias, and colonial legacies.

A multiplicity of drivers informs these perspectives to reclaim histories, identities, economies and nation-states after the Enlightenment and colonial project and its legacies and centuries of imperial domination by Western Europe. While there is a commonality in understanding the core functions of int'l, the construct is complicated in understanding the politics of nation-states; who are global citizens?

Moreover, what is the responsibility of the nation-state towards driving an Africanised and decolonial agenda, recruitment of foreign international students and staff, asylum seekers and refugees?

The underpinning values of the national policy address the decolonial and Africanisation agenda and the internationalisation of HE, that is, to increase and prioritise the mobility of staff, students, and researchers on the African continent. Therefore, incorporating the values and theories of decolonisation and Africanisation of HE in Human Relations/Centred policies will support the strategic impetus to balance systemic and epistemic racial imbalances in HE. The impetus is to reposition Africa to the centre, as envisioned in the notion of the African Renaissance, to reclaim a formidable historical past and identity. (Notes provided by Professor Judy Peter, CPUT, 2023)

A similar emphasis was evident in the UFS (2023) and SU (2019) policies. The UFS (2023: 2) policy went as follows:

The UFS adopts a vision of comprehensive internationalisation, with a specific focus on research and innovation. The university strives for an Africa-imbued internationalisation process, which advances Africanisation and decolonisation. The university integrates international and intercultural dimensions in all aspects of its core business and service functions. It specifically focuses on the international visibility, impact, and connectedness of research and innovation. It strives for excellence in all aspects of its internationalisation process, including support for international students and staff. Interdivisional cooperation is seminal to the success of internationalisation, and a particular focus is placed on advancing transdisciplinary international research.

The UFS explained that it considered Internationalisation, Africanisation, and decolonisation as complementary processes and, while it would continue to strengthen and expand its relations and partnerships with the Global North and to attract bright minds from across the globe to join its university community, it would seek in the implementation of its policy a focus on the Southern African Development Community (SADC), Africa, BRICS, and the Global South.

Similar emphases were evident in the UCT (n.d: 1) policy. It explained that the university's mission was *"to be an outstanding teaching and research university, educating for life and addressing the challenges facing our society"*, and that central to the mission was the recognition of its *"location in Africa, while acknowledging that a characteristic of excellent higher education anywhere in the world is its global relevance. Globalisation has profoundly affected the way in which countries and businesses operate."*

Important about these emphases was the embedding of Africanisation in the idea of Internationalisation. Africanisation was not taking a position in opposition to internationalisation. Important also was the explicit commitment to employment equity.

Most policies, following the *Draft Policy*, indicated clearly that priority should be given to South Africa's interests in the first instance, and thereafter, where possible and relevant: the interests of SADC member states; then the rest of the African continent; then the global South and emerging economies; and thereafter the world beyond. Giving expression to this, the WSU (2018: 3) policy reiterated the DHET Framework that the employment of foreign nationals 'must not be to the detriment of job opportunities for equally qualified and experienced South African citizens.'



5. PART THREE: EMPLOYMENT EQUITY - EMERGENT LEGISLATION

In 2003, Portnoi raised the question of the applicability of South Africa's employment equity legislation to the higher education sector. Emphasising that the university was not a traditional business and that it depended intensely on the supply of skills, he argued that universities would face challenges in complying with the new legislation. Important for his argument was the question of the long-term effects of apartheid which he said had damaged the education system and ensured that black people were systematically disadvantaged.

In February 2024, the government published Draft Regulations on Proposed Sectoral Numerical targets (Department of Employment and Labour, 2024). The purpose of the exercise, the Draft explained, was to ensure "the equitable representation of suitably qualified people from designated groups at all occupational levels in the workforce, set numerical targets for any national sector identified" (DEL, 2024: 4).

The process of setting targets, the Draft explained, had to take several factors into account. Pertinent for this exercise were the following:

- 3.1.4. The unique sector dynamics (e.g. Skills availability, economic and market forces, ownership, etc.) raised by Sector Stakeholders in their written submissions during the consultation process.
- 3.2. The proposed 5-year sectoral numerical targets are minimum targets and are key milestones towards achieving the equitable representation of the different designated groups within each occupational level in that employer's workforce in relation to the demographics of their applicable EAP (Economically Active Population).
- 3.3. The proposed 5-year sectoral numerical targets are not intended to add up to 100% like the EAP and the total workforce of each occupational level. For example, the proposed sectoral numerical target excludes the foreign nationals as part of the workforce profile. (DEL, 2024: 5)

The table below presents the proposed targets for the broader education sector.

Table 2: Sectoral targets for Education

		17. Education	18. Administrative and Support Activities
Description	Gender	(Designated Groups)	(Designated Groups)
Top Management	Male	33.0%	30.0%
	Female	25.0%	20.0%
	Total	58.0%	50.0%
Senior Management	Male	31.5%	38.0%
	Female	29.5%	27.0%
	Total	61.0%	65.0%

		17. Education	18. Administrative and Support Activities
Description	Gender	(Designated Groups)	(Designated Groups)
Professionally Qualified & Middle Management	Male	35,0%	44,2%
	Female	35,5%	40,8%
	Total	70,5%	85,0%
Skilled Technical	Male	42,0%	50,4%
	Female	42,5%	40,8%
	Total	84,5%	91,2%
Disability only	All	2% of total workforce	2% of total workforce

From: DEL, 2024: 12.



6. PART FOUR: NUMBER OF INTERNATIONAL STAFF

In developing this Position Paper, it is necessary to understand the presence and role of foreign academics in the South African higher education system. The tables below present the demographic profile of foreign academics at South Africa's 26 public universities between the periods 2016 and 2024.

Table 3: Academic Staff: Number of headcounts and percentage of foreign staff, in public higher education institutions, by institution and appointment type, in 2016.

Institution	Total: Perm + Temp	% Foreign	% Female	Total: Perm	% Foreign	% Female	Total: Temp	% Foreign	% Female
SPU	70	21,4	45,7	58	25,9	41,4	12	0,0	66,7
UMP	74	13,5	35,1	70	12,9	34,3	4	25,0	50,0
MUT	254	12,6	36,6	201	12,4	38,8	53	13,2	28,3
CUT	622	8,2	46,6	297	10,8	45,5	325	5,8	47,7
UNIZULU	406	11,3	42,6	306	9,8	42,5	100	16,0	43,0
RU	494	15,2	44,7	318	14,5	41,8	176	16,5	50,0
UFH	423	23,2	39,7	371	24,0	38,5	52	17,3	48,1
VUT	871	16,8	40,2	387	15,0	44,4	484	18,2	36,8
UNIVEN	543	19,2	36,6	434	19,6	37,1	109	17,4	34,9
SMU	1 262	3,2	55,5	551	2,7	53,4	711	3,7	57,1
UL	662	10,0	37,5	563	10,3	36,9	99	8,1	40,4
WSU	780	10,4	44,5	571	6,7	44,5	209	20,6	44,5
DUT	1 495	7,8	46,4	583	5,5	47,5	912	9,3	45,6
NMU	1 020	5,4	45,6	623	2,7	48,5	397	9,6	41,1
UWC	1 027	12,1	50,4	678	13,3	50,7	349	9,7	49,9
UFS	1 653	5,6	55,1	841	4,6	53,5	812	6,5	56,7
CPUT	1 396	11,2	42,3	842	8,8	42,9	554	14,8	41,3
TUT	1 995	9,8	42,9	961	6,9	43,6	1 034	12,6	42,2
SU	4 298	7,8	51,0	1 122	10,2	46,1	3 176	6,9	52,8
UJ	3 180	21,0	44,4	1 166	15,3	47,2	2 014	24,4	42,8
WITS	4 873	20,8	53,6	1 192	25,8	48,5	3 681	19,2	55,3
UCT	4 971	22,7	50,3	1 202	25,0	46,3	3 769	22,0	51,6
UP	2 397	13,4	48,3	1 271	11,6	50,8	1 126	15,3	45,4
UKZN	1 934	13,3	46,1	1 341	14,2	47,2	593	11,3	43,5
NWU	3 298	3,9	54,1	1 470	4,1	48,1	1 828	3,8	59,0
UNISA	10 899	12,1	53,1	1 794	8,1	50,9	9 105	12,9	53,6
Total	50 897	13,1	49,6	19 213	11,8	46,9	31 684	13,9	51,2

Source: DHET, HEMIS data.

Table 4: Academic Staff: Headcount number and percentage of foreign staff, in public higher education institutions, by institution and appointment type, in 2020

Institution	Total: Perm + Temp	% Foreign	% Female	Total: PERM	% Foreign	% Female	Total: TEMP	% Foreign	% Female
UMP	154	20,8	41,6	140	20,0	39,3	14	28,6	64,3
SPU	157	30,6	40,8	134	32,8	41,0	23	17,4	39,1
MUT	289	11,4	36,0	224	11,6	38,4	65	10,8	27,7
UFH	395	23,5	41,3	347	21,9	42,4	48	35,4	33,3
UNIZULU	423	9,9	40,4	319	6,6	41,1	104	20,2	38,5
CUT	499	8,4	47,5	314	10,5	45,5	185	4,9	50,8
RU	515	8,2	48,5	358	6,4	45,3	157	12,1	56,1
UNIVEN	553	18,1	37,8	433	19,6	37,6	120	12,5	38,3
UL	751	5,6	39,5	613	6,0	39,0	138	3,6	42,0
WSU	897	9,8	44,7	848	9,7	44,1	49	12,2	55,1
VUT	901	19,3	41,2	382	13,6	45,8	519	23,5	37,8
UWC	1 040	13,0	50,1	695	13,2	52,1	345	12,5	46,1
NMU	1 111	10,7	49,0	683	6,3	51,1	428	17,8	45,6
SMU	1 170	3,2	54,4	637	2,7	52,6	533	3,8	56,5
CPUT	1 295	17,9	45,9	767	14,2	46,3	528	23,3	45,5
UKZN	1 601	14,2	46,8	1 257	13,9	48,3	344	15,1	41,3
DUT	1 632	8,2	47,5	672	6,8	48,8	960	9,2	46,7
UFS	1 984	8,5	53,8	905	8,4	51,8	1 079	8,5	55,5
NWU	2 005	4,4	49,6	1 632	3,2	48,7	373	9,9	53,6
TUT	2 082	9,2	42,4	909	7,0	44,1	1 173	10,8	41,0
UP	3 008	12,3	54,4	1 241	14,6	55,4	1 767	10,8	53,7
SU	3 308	7,6	51,3	1 263	8,8	47,7	2 045	6,9	53,4
UJ	4 530	28,5	47,2	1 309	17,7	48,3	3 221	32,9	46,7
UCT	4 642	22,0	52,0	1 176	23,1	50,7	3 466	21,6	52,5
WITS	5 554	20,8	53,2	1 220	24,3	50,4	4 334	19,9	53,9
UNISA	9 789	10,0	56,7	1 830	7,2	52,7	7 959	10,6	57,7
Total	50 285	14,2	50,7	20 308	11,8	48,4	29 977	15,8	52,2

Source: DHET, HEMIS data.



Table 5: Academic Staff: Headcount number and percentage of foreign staff, in public higher education institutions, by institution and appointment type, in 2024

Institution	Total: Perm + Temp	% Foreign	% Female	Total: PERM	% Foreign	% Female	Total: TEMP	% Foreign	% Female
SPU	195	26,2	38,5	157	27,4	35,7	38	21,1	50,0
UMP	232	15,9	40,5	209	14,8	41,6	23	26,1	30,4
MUT	299	11,0	39,5	239	9,6	39,3	60	16,7	40,0
UNIZULU	500	11,2	40,4	340	5,3	42,1	160	23,8	36,9
RU	505	5,0	51,1	359	3,3	48,7	146	8,9	56,8
UNIVEN	552	13,6	42,2	510	13,3	43,5	42	16,7	26,2
UFH	598	21,4	47,3	298	16,8	46,3	300	26,0	48,3
CUT	640	8,4	48,6	327	8,0	45,9	313	8,9	51,4
VUT	850	21,5	42,1	319	17,2	49,5	531	24,1	37,7
UL	868	5,1	40,4	728	5,4	38,5	140	3,6	50,7
SMU	979	5,3	58,0	569	4,0	55,4	410	7,1	61,7
UWC	992	17,8	54,7	702	18,4	54,3	290	16,6	55,9
WSU	1 060	9,2	44,6	910	9,7	44,7	150	6,0	44,0
DUT	1 189	8,9	49,7	689	6,1	51,2	500	12,8	47,6
CPUT	1 380	16,7	48,8	813	12,9	47,6	567	22,2	50,4
TUT	1 839	6,3	44,7	849	6,1	44,9	990	6,4	44,5
UFS	2 030	13,8	55,3	909	14,1	52,8	1 121	13,6	57,4
NMU	2 463	11,7	49,1	726	7,4	51,4	1 737	13,4	48,1
UP	3 158	13,7	56,3	1 200	17,6	55,8	1 958	11,4	56,6
UKZN	3 184	9,7	50,3	1 178	13,4	49,9	2 006	7,6	50,5
SU	3 430	7,6	52,4	1 298	10,2	52,4	2 132	6,0	52,3
NWU	3 587	8,2	49,1	1 696	4,6	49,5	1 891	11,4	48,7
UNISA	3 841	6,7	54,3	1 942	6,2	50,6	1 899	7,3	58,1
UCT	5 041	19,5	53,9	1 204	20,3	52,4	3 837	19,2	54,3
UJ	5 311	26,8	48,1	1 384	17,7	50,9	3 927	30,0	47,2
WITS	5 629	18,8	55,7	1 332	24,7	51,0	4 297	17,0	57,2
Total	50 352	14,0	51,1	20 887	12,0	49,6	29 465	15,4	52,1

Source: DHET, HEMIS data.

The most significant finding emerging from the HEMIS data is the relative stability in the proportion of foreign nationals employed across the public university sector. Foreign nationals constituted 13.1% of academic staff in 2016, 14.2% in 2020, and 14.0% in 2024. These figures indicate that foreign national appointments have remained consistently modest rather than expanding rapidly.

The comparative work of Shin and Lee (2022) is helpful in providing a sense of the proportions of foreign nationals in the major higher education systems. In developing this comparison, they drew attention to the different definitions used to determine a foreign academic staff member. Their analysis, nonetheless, noted the high proportions of foreign nationals in Australia (38.1%), Canada (40.8%), Hong Kong (58.6), the Netherlands (34.0%), and the UK (32.1%). Countries with relatively high proportions include the USA (15.8), Norway (18.0%). At the low end are Brazil (1.5%), China (2.3%), Italy (2.0%), and Portugal (4.2). The proportion they have for South Africa is 8.9%.

The institutions with the highest proportion of foreign nationals amongst their instructional staff in South Africa in 2024 were the University of Johannesburg with 26.8%, followed by Sol Plaatje University with 26.2% and the Vaal University of Technology 21.5%.

Amongst the universities with the lowest proportion of foreign nationals were Rhodes University, with 5.0% of its 505 instructional members of staff classified as foreign nationals; Sefako Mokgatho University, with 5.3% of its 979; and the University of Limpopo, with 5.1% of its 868 staff members being foreign nationals.

Strikingly, as Table 6 below shows, the countries of origin of the international academics in the South African system are predominantly African. Of the top five feeder sources for South African universities, four are African countries.

Table 6: Academic Staff: Number and percentage of foreign staff, in public higher education institutions, by ten most nationalities, in 2016, 2020 and 2024.

Nationality	Number				Percentage		
	2016	2020	2024		2016	2020	2024
Zimbabwe	1572	1757	1935		3,1	3,5	3,8
Nigeria	711	939	1010		1,4	1,9	2,0
United Kingdom	372	361	300		0,7	0,7	0,6
Kenya	252	274	253		0,5	0,5	0,5
Cameroon	236	258	253		0,5	0,5	0,5
India	217	237	251		0,4	0,5	0,5
Lesotho	132	159	188		0,3	0,3	0,4
United States of America	301	266	185		0,6	0,5	0,4
Democratic Republic of the Congo	179	230	172		0,4	0,5	0,3
Germany	220	200	162		0,4	0,4	0,3
Ghana	111	138	152		0,2	0,3	0,3
Zambia	146	146	149		0,3	0,3	0,3
No Information	281	207	136		0,6	0,4	0,3
Uganda	94	116	112		0,2	0,2	0,2

Source: DHET, HEMIS data.

A clear feature with which to work for this position paper is that most of the country's highest-ranking universities, according to a range of different ranking systems, namely UCT, Wits, UP, UKZN and UJ have had over the last almost 20 years high proportions of foreign nationals among their instructional staff. A

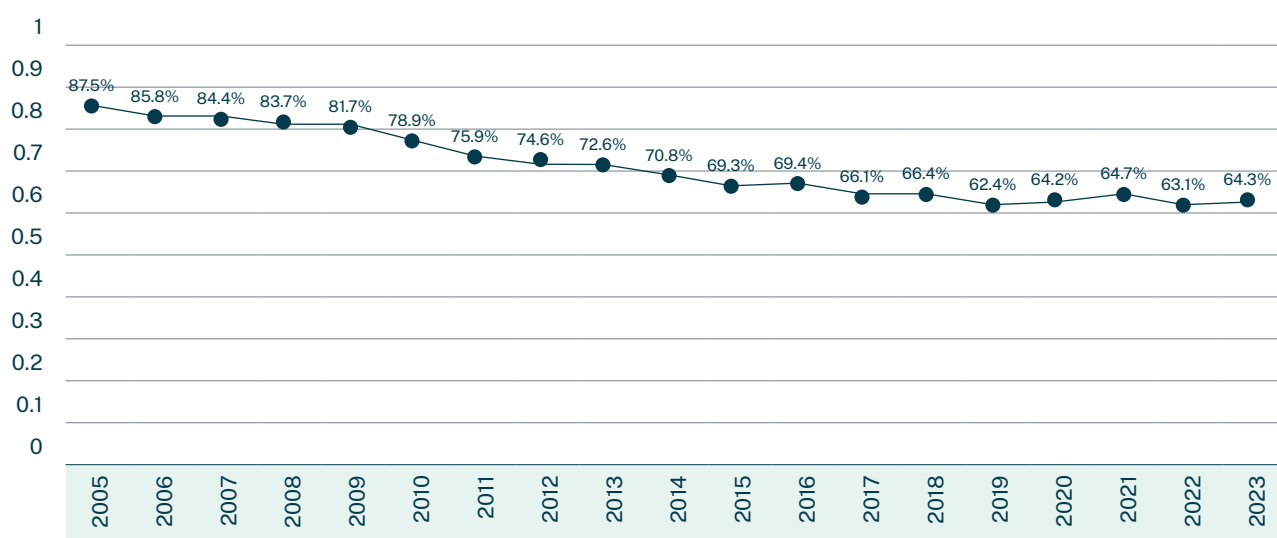


clear feature to work with for this Position Paper is that most of the country's highest-ranking universities, according to a range of ranking systems, namely UCT, Wits, UP, UKZN and UJ, have had, over the last almost 20 years, high proportions of foreign nationals among their instructional staff. These proportions are not as high as those in some of the world's leading universities. While causality cannot be inferred from these data alone, the evidence suggests a positive association between the presence of international academics and the research performance of several leading South African universities. Somewhat of an exception to this is Stellenbosch, with a quotient of 7.6% of its instructional staff being foreign nationals in 2024.

A closing comment regarding the number of foreign academics in the South African system is that the figure is somewhat in the middle compared with proportions elsewhere in the world. It is nowhere near the highs of Hong Kong or the lows of Brazil.

How the contribution of foreign academics is assessed is not a straightforward question. The best available data, shown in Graph 1 below, is of publication outputs registered according to the country of birth of the author. The graph represents the percentage of authorships produced by South African nationals. What it indicates is that since 2005, there has been a significant drop in the proportion of publications produced by South Africans and a rise in the proportion of those by foreign born authors. In 2005, South Africa accounted for 87.5% of all publications. This dropped to 62.4% in 2019. That number has stabilised between 2019 and 2023 at approximately 64%. It is important to note that there has been an incremental increase in research publications by foreign born academics since 2005. Their contribution to an increase in their institutions' profile has been significant. Significantly too, as Maphalla and Malan (2014:1) have argued, is their contribution to solving societal problems and contributing to improving South Africa's economy.

Figure 1: Percentage of Publication Outputs, 2005-2019



What this graph makes evident is the general trend towards increased levels of output by foreign academics and researchers. That they are making a positive contribution to the productivity and standing of the South African university is clear.

7. **PART FIVE: CHALLENGES IN THE APPOINTMENTS OF INTERNATIONAL STAFF**

Anecdotal reports and the official literature of the sector indicate that universities generally manage their internal recruitment and appointment processes efficiently. However, significant challenges arise in relation to immigration administration.

Capacity constraints within the Department of Home Affairs continue to pose operational challenges for universities in finalising internal processes for the recruitment, appointment, and retention of foreign staff on time. As a result, on 30 March 2026, the Department issued Immigration Directive No. 7 of 2026, amending Immigration Directive No. 22 of 2025 issued on 30 September 2025, and further extending concessions for visa holders in possession of valid VFS receipts awaiting the outcomes of long-term visa, waiver and appeal applications.

In its 2024 Annual Report, USAf reported that it continued its engagement with the Department of Home Affairs to advocate for a more efficient and responsive system to expedite visa and permit applications for international staff and students in the higher education sector. (USAf, 2024: 37). In the interim, Universities South Africa (USAf) continues to consolidate and submit lists of pending applications received from universities. Since the beginning of the year, USAf has submitted almost 90 pending work, critical skills, relative and postdoctoral visa and permit applications to the Department, including applications dating back to 2024. The Department continues to process and issue outcomes on submitted cases, while USAf awaits consolidated feedback. In addition, the Department has been assisting in fast-tracking applications lodged at South African foreign missions. USAf is also engaging with the Department regarding the development of collaborative Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) between the Department, USAf and universities, aimed at strengthening cooperation, enhancing communication and facilitating more efficient management of immigration-related processes affecting the higher education sector.

Despite these interventions, significant operational challenges remain. Current processes for securing visas and work permits remain inefficient, delaying appointments and the retention of international academics. The work of Sehoole et al (2019:221) gives a sense of the difficulties foreign academics experience in having their appointments facilitated at the South African Department of Home Affairs:

The process of getting permits is a nightmare. The amount of documents needed by the Home Affairs Department is numerous.... With regard to the work permit, I got a job offer letter from the University after being interviewed for the job. The interview process was fine, but Home Affairs wanted additional motivation for offering the job opportunity to a non-South African, which the University was able to give.

These administrative challenges also raise broader strategic questions regarding the capacity of South Africa's higher education system to meet its future academic staffing through domestic talent alone. This



does raise the question of levels of capacity in the higher education sector. Is there a problem with the available pool of academics within the country? While it is not possible to make the unequivocal statement that there is a crisis, as the Director of BDO does in a recent brief (see Mohammed, 2025), there is no question that the education sector as a whole is struggling to produce the required number of students at the national senior certificate level in gateway subjects such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics (see Department of Basic Education 2024: 2)) with knock-on effects in the number of students advancing into the university and so preparing themselves for academic jobs in these areas.

8. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

As the broad literature, including South Africa's Draft Policy, suggests, there is a well-established recognition that the presence of foreign academics in higher education institutions is beneficial for students' educational experience and for raising standards of excellence. Critical in the South African discussion of employment equity is working with this acknowledgement. While it is not necessary to elevate this idea to a dogmatic principle, it is important that it is worked within a realistic and pragmatic way. What this suggests is that while the prevailing dominant thinking in the country to give priority to South African academics and thereafter the interests of the African continent is absolutely correct, deliberate attention must be paid to *how* the discourse of foreign nationals in the national system is managed. The ease with which it slips into a xenophobic register, particularly with respect to fellow Africans, is a real danger. The subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle racisms that lie behind what present themselves as nationalist approaches to who should be employed in our universities and who should not, should be guarded against. In terms of this, it may be required for both the *Draft Policy* and the ancillary policies of institutions to project more strongly the undesirable, namely the xenophobia that lies latently behind expressions of hostility to foreign academics, and the desirable, the value that comes with having academics from outside the country in our universities.

Practically, two courses of action flow from this:

- i. USAf to suggest the inclusion in the Employment Equity targets for higher education institutions proportions of foreign academics that are in line with what are deemed to be high performing education systems. This is a figure that the institutions themselves could work out.
- ii. It may also be desirable for the Department of Home Affairs and USAf to establish a joint task team to develop a set of guidelines and protocols to manage the processes for securing work permits for foreign academics.



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ANNEXURE A: HR FORUM ENGAGEMENT 7 NOVEMBER 2023.

The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the implications of the Employment Equity Amendment Bill for the higher education sector, particularly concerning the appointment of international scholars

Prof Soudien provided the background and noted that the Employment Equity Amendment Bill has raised concerns within universities about its potential impact on their ability to recruit and retain international scholars. This talent pool is crucial for enhancing research capabilities, fostering international collaboration, and enriching the academic environment. To address these concerns, this meeting was convened to explore the current landscape and identify solutions.

The meeting discussed challenges in balancing employment equity and internationalisation targets in South African higher education institutions. They highlighted the need for a sector-wide approach to address backlogs in the Department of Home Affairs and align employment equity plans with relevant laws. They also discussed difficulties in appointing international staff due to tensions between EAP and sector targets, and the need for a dedicated account manager for universities. Finally, they shared experiences with limited dedicated policies, tension between employment equity and international recruitment, and challenges in appointing international scholars due to visa application processes and time constraints.

Prof Soudien requested HRD Forum members:

- i. To share input on the employment equity Bill's impact on appointing international scholars.
- ii. To share policies on International appointments, and to share experiences with difficulties in making appointments, particularly with the Department of Home Affairs.

During discussions, it was noted that:

Policy Landscape

From the **University of Zululand**, it was mentioned that they follow the Department of Labour route for international appointments. It was noted that recruiting an international candidate can take a long time, sometimes up to a year. They mentioned that positions might need to be re-advertised multiple times before considering an international scholar if no South African candidates are found.

From **North-West University**, it was mentioned that they don't have a specific policy on internationalisation, but there are tenets within their annual performance plan that drive their actions. They expressed a desire for more freedom in the recruitment process, especially in the categories of occupations in high demand, scarce skills, and exceptional skills.

- NWU has an intention to internationalise and establish international partnerships, which is reflected in their annual performance plan under the Research and Innovation section.
- The recruitment of international scholars faces certain limitations, particularly in the categories of occupations in high demand, scarce skills, and exceptional skills. NWU hopes that a Position Paper will help address these limitations.



- The Employment Equity Act requires a due diligence search for South African scholars before international appointments can be made. This process, combined with visa application procedures, can delay the arrival of an international scholar by up to a year to 18 months.
- NWU has not defined specific targets for the recruitment of international scholars, unlike some other universities. However, the university is considering the implications of remote work, as geography becomes less important in the wake of COVID-19. This could potentially bypass visa requirements, which are a significant obstacle in the recruitment process.
- Currently, international staff make up 2.3% of the university's workforce. While there are no specific targets; this percentage is expected to increase.
- NWU is awaiting feedback on initiatives to make representations through the Department of Employment and Labour on two issues: the sector targets set for higher education and the specific need within the higher education sector to recruit international staff for the cross-pollination of ideas and international partnerships. These needs are distinct from those of the broader education sector, with which higher education is currently grouped in terms of sector targets.

At **Tshwane University of Technology**, there is no specific policy for internationalisation. However, the university does have a talent acquisition policy that guides the recruitment of international employees. This policy is fully compliant with the relevant legislation. Beyond this, there are no additional provisions or policies specifically addressing internationalisation.

The **University of Johannesburg** doesn't have a specific international policy, but it actively recruits international staff. This is particularly evident in the field of engineering, where demand is high due to a nationwide skills shortage. The university also runs a project under Research and Internationalisation. While there isn't a specific international policy document, the university's resourcing policy includes some information about the process of recruiting international staff. All recruitment of international staff is conducted in accordance with the regulations set by the Department of Home Affairs (DHA).

The **University of Pretoria** does not have a specific policy regarding the appointment of foreign nationals. However, they have a clear vision to be a leader in research-intensive universities locally and globally. One of their strategic goals is to strengthen the university's research and international profile, which is supported by guiding principles around co-creative initiatives, collaboration, and trans-disciplinarity. Currently, about 5.5% of their staff are international appointees. They have recently approved a policy that provides guidelines and standard operating procedures for handling work visas and permanent residency applications. This was due to challenges faced with the Department of Employment and Labour. To facilitate this process, they have employed an immigration officer to act as an intermediary between the university and the relevant department. This ensures a smoother process for obtaining the necessary visas for international appointees.

Walter Sisulu University (WSU) does not have a specific internationalisation policy, but it does have a policy that regulates the appointment of foreign nationals. This policy includes standard regulatory mechanisms of Home Affairs and issues of skills transfer. Currently, about 8% of WSU's full-time staff

are international scholars, with 96% of these working in the academic part of the business. The process of bringing someone from outside the Republic is lengthy and can take up to a year due to paperwork, submissions to foreign embassies, and the Department of Labour's own interrogation of the process. WSU faces the same struggles and difficulties as their colleagues in dealing with Home Affairs.

Vaal University of Technology (VUT) is reviewing its university strategy, referred to as the Strategic Plan 2030. One of the key strategic goals of this plan is the internationalisation of the university. This is evident in the recent advertisement for the position of Deputy Vice Chancellor for Research, Innovation, Commercialisation, and Internationalisation.

The internationalisation strategy is still under development and has not yet been approved by senior management. However, one of the key objectives outlined in the strategy is the attraction of international scholars. The university believes that fostering an international exchange of knowledge will increase research output, improve university rankings, and globalise the university's brand.

While the university does not have a specific policy on the employment of international scholars, it adheres to immigration regulations, including obtaining the appropriate work visas for South Africa. There have been challenges related to sending international scholars abroad for employment, with issues arising within HR and faculties.

At **Mangosuthu University of Technology**, the university currently does not have a specific policy on internationalisation. They do have a recruitment and selection policy with SOPs that include a clause about the appointment parameters for foreign nationals. There is a dilemma between the Employment Equity Plan (EAP) or sector targets and the appointment of foreign nationals due to the impact on the internalisation of wealth. The need for an internationalisation policy is emphasized, particularly because the Faculty of Engineering is oversubscribed with foreign nationals who possess critical skills. The university is considering appointing these foreign nationals on a contract basis, with a focus on skills transfer to South African academics. This approach is seen as a way to balance the need for these critical skills with the university's other obligations and goals.

The **Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT)** has recently approved an internationalisation strategy and policy, along with a policy on the appointment of foreign nationals. The university is currently reviewing these policies, particularly in terms of the balance between Employment Equity (EE) and internationalisation. The current statistics on foreign national appointments suggest that the balance may be skewed towards EE.

It's important to note that the Draft Migration Bill, a government legislation, also addresses the appointment of foreign nationals. This bill could potentially introduce quotas and other implications for the appointment of foreign nationals. Therefore, it's crucial to consider this legislation when discussing the university's policies.

Miriam Hoosain mentioned that she joined **Stellenbosch University** in May this year and is not fully aware of all the policies and strategies. The university has an internationalisation strategy documented in 2019, and this year, there is an institutional audit of that strategy. The audit also celebrates 30 years of internationalisation at the university, indicating its priority. The office dealing with visa issues is separate



from HR, under a specific internationalisation portfolio. HR works in an integrated manner with this office.

Challenges have been encountered around visa requirements for roles and scarce skills, with the list of scarce skills not being fully encompassing. There is tension between internationalisation and employment equity. The user doesn't have the percentage of international staff, but notes that the university is driving the employment equity strategy harder to create balance, as it currently seems to lean more towards internationalisation. Work on the employment equity front is ongoing to address the tension between the two.

CHALLENGES AND TENSIONS

A common thread emerged concerning the lengthy and bureaucratic visa application process, causing delays in filling positions and hindering universities' competitiveness in attracting international talent. Representatives highlighted the inherent tension between employment equity targets and the need for international expertise, especially in scarce skill areas. The ambiguity surrounding the definition of "scarce skills" further complicates the appointment process, creating uncertainty for universities. The potential introduction of quotas for foreign nationals, as suggested in the draft Migration Policy Bill, was identified as another cause for concern.

Miriam Hoosain discussed the **tension between internationalisation targets and other targets** in an academic setting. She noted that this is a long-standing issue, and it often comes down to whether one target is prioritised over the other. This can create a sense of tension or even polarisation within the institution, with different parties advocating for different priorities.

For instance, there might be a debate about whether an international staff member is needed for a specific discipline. This tension exists not only at the strategic or ideological level but also at the practical implementation level.

Hoosain emphasised the need for clarity within the organisation on how to manage this tension. Without clear guidelines, it's left up to the individuals involved to argue their case, leading to a situation where the most persuasive argument wins the day. Therefore, she believed that organisations need to be clear about the tension and how to navigate it, rather than leaving it up to individuals to handle from an implementation perspective.

This highlights the importance of clear communication and strategic planning in managing organisational tensions and ensuring that all parties are working towards the same goals. It's a reminder that in any organisation, clear guidelines and strategies are crucial for effective decision-making and conflict resolution.

Prof Mala Singh discussed **two levels of tension** in the university's ambition to attract more international scholars.

The first tension is between the university's ambition and the provisions of the Employment Equity Act, which limit that ambition. The Act allows employment only within certain categories of skills, such as exceptional skills or scarce skills. This is not a blanket increase in numbers, but rather a targeted approach. There are also issues around skills transfer and capacity building in areas of scarce and rare skills.

The second tension surfaced during a review of the recruitment and selection policy at Northwest University. The debate was about whether an international scholar or a non-designated South African national should be given precedence. The Employment Equity Act pressures universities to align as closely as possible with the economically active population. This creates a tension when an international staff member and a non-designated staff member are



Proposed solutions:

- **Sector-wide approach:** All universities are trying to attract international talent, so a joint solution might be better.
- **Faster appointments:** The long process for hiring international scholars, especially for critical skills, hinders progress.
- **Partnerships:** Working with immigration authorities to streamline the appointment process, especially for Zimbabwean nationals (facing specific delays). However, resolving these delays might take until 2026.
- Lengthy visa processing times (24-36 months) discourage international talents from coming to South Africa.
- Once recruited, international scholars can be poached by other institutions, leading to another lengthy visa processing for a change of employer.
- Another member proposed exploring regulations for appointing international staff who work remotely. This could potentially alleviate some of the visa-related issues if people could be hired in their home countries and work remotely for South African institutions.
- Another member questioned the lack of clear guidelines on how the EEA and international hiring can work together. They need to know how to balance legal compliance with the need for international expertise.
- Another member found the IEASA helpful, especially for issues with international students' visas. They suggested that the Forum consider adopting the IEASA's approach to obtain faster solutions to visa and immigration problems, as the IEASA has a direct line to high-level Department of Home Affairs officials.
- Another member suggested that the Department of Home Affairs should have a dedicated account manager for each university to deal with directly. This is due to the challenges of contacting the department via their helpline, which is often unanswered. A dedicated account manager would help alleviate these challenges. However, given the growing backlog, the department could assign more dedicated account managers to specific institutions, rather than just one. This is due to the large volume of queries, which seems to have been accumulating since 2018.

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Developed for Universities South Africa (USAf)

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Final version: June 2026



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