

STATEMENT ON THE CURRENT CRISIS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA

In recent months, an unprecedented crisis has engulfed the campuses of most of South Africa's higher education institutions (HEIs), giving rise to the most sustained and widespread 'youth action' in the country since 1976. It threatens the academic enterprise and will have potentially far-reaching impacts on both the economy and future development of our country.

As the body that has amongst its Membership a majority of the foremost scholars of the country, commonly referred to as the 'brains trust' of the nation, the authoritative and respected voice of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) must be heard. This statement by ASSAf is issued jointly with the South African Young Academy of Science (SAYAS), which has a membership of distinguished young scientists. We speak as authentic representatives of the knowledge community, embracing a full spectrum of scholarly disciplines.

There is no time in a crisis such as the current one to present a definitive evidence-based review of the background issues, yet the disciplined collective and multi-perspective 'mind' of South Africa's national senior and young academies, embracing multiple perspectives, can readily identify the main drivers of the current crisis; such an identification is a fundamental requirement in order to frame the solutions that we need.

DRIVERS OF THE CURRENT CRISIS

Inadequate investment in transforming higher education in a country beset by severe inequality

The first driver is the chronic underfunding of the higher education sector over the last decade or so, while enrolments massively increased in parallel with the demands on staff and resources. As government subsidies to HEIs have fallen as a percentage of their operating costs, the burden on students, their families and funders has increased to a point where the level of loan debts is intolerable and we find ourselves at a crisis point.

Leaders of the academy, as much as government and business, must accept responsibility for this failure. For too long, we have witnessed gross underfunding and rising student: staff ratios, yet have failed to make a compelling case to government, to the private sector, and to civil society as a whole, for higher education as a public good and a high national priority.

'Low-throughput' cost multiplier

The second driver is the 'low-throughput' cost multiplier – students who take 5-6 years to complete a three-year degree have to incur larger debts, while simultaneously having lower employment chances. While the root cause is inadequate preparedness for higher education, the problem is broader and urgently requires attention and resolute action.

Spectre of wastefulness

The third driver is the spectre of wastefulness in all its forms, particularly in government, which links to the first driver of inadequate higher education investment. In most of the positions taken by the current 'fees-must-fall' protestors, wastage of resources by government is prominent and credible.

Failure to shape an appropriate landscape of post-basic institutions

The fourth driver is the failure to shape an appropriate landscape of post-basic institutions in post-apartheid South Africa. It is to the credit of the Minister of Higher Education and Training that he has striven vigorously to expand and improve the technical and vocational sector. The artificial dominance of HEIs in the aspirational spectrum of school-leavers has brought with it the massification that has underpinned the failure of the higher education funding model and its important component, fee structure. The cost of higher education to students is compounded by its concentration in large urban centres, with expensive accommodation and transport issues. Decentralised community and technical colleges, their qualifications well-articulated with those of HEIs, would provide options for low-cost, vocationally useful studies that offer meaningful opportunities and address directly drastic skills shortages in a range of sectors in industry.

Continuing lack of inclusive social cohesion in a diverse society

The fifth driver underlies much of the energy that has fuelled the protests. Black students are searching for an academic environment in which the historical legacy of 'white superiority' has been erased, not so much to 'feel more comfortable' (although that is a legitimate aspiration) but to shape something new to which they, and our own black intellectuals in general, have contributed significantly.

Continued failure of public basic education to prepare students for higher education

The last and most potent of the identified drivers of the current HEI crisis (and it pains the Academy to have to state the obvious one more time) is the continued failure of public basic education to prepare students for all of their possible post-basic destinations, including higher education. Of all the ways to reduce inequality, the most effective and affordable is a basic education system that ensures the upliftment of the young in every corner of the land. The continuing mis-match between school and higher education standards remains a potent cause of student desperation and agitation – incurring huge debts because of this massive policy failure is unjust indeed.

RESOLUTION OF THE CRISIS

The Academy recognises that the resolution of the current crisis lies beyond the campuses. We call for a high-level summit based on carefully prepared position papers and well-mediated debate, that brings together government, business, and civil society (including the faith community), as well as university and student leadership. The above-mentioned drivers (and others) must be carefully considered and proposals developed for appropriate policy development and priority resourcing.

The need is urgent or else we face the prospect of permanent and irreversible damage to a fragile higher education system, a critical instrument for creating over time a more just, equitable and prosperous society.

The Academy is willing, on its own, or in partnership with others, to convene such a summit. As the respected and independent voice of science we declare our interest.

CONDEMN VIOLENCE

We condemn both the violence of some of the protests and the consequent violent responses of certain police and security personnel. We acknowledge the right to peaceful protest as it is enshrined in our Constitution but it is not peaceful to incite violence, damage property, or to impede the access of others to their academic programmes.

PROTECT THE ACADEMIC ENTERPRISE

An effective higher education system is a vital requirement for building South Africa's future. Our HEIs represent decades of cumulative investment and they are looked up to throughout Africa and the rest of the world. Nevertheless, like HEIs worldwide, they are very fragile. If they are profoundly destabilised and weakened, the future damage to our socio-political system and economy could readily lead to the failure of the national developmental project.

We emphasise the need to protect and maintain the South African academic enterprise, which means allowing the HEIs to complete the 2016 academic year and in so doing to avoid lasting damage to the lives and futures of hundreds of thousands of students, to research, and to South African society as a whole.



Academy of Science of South Africa

The Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) was inaugurated in May 1996. It was formed in response to the need for an Academy consonant with the dawn of democracy in South Africa, with a mandate encompassing all scholarly disciplines. ASSAf adopted in its name the term 'science' in the singular as reflecting a common way of enquiring rather than an aggregation of different disciplines. Its Members are elected on the basis of a combination of two principal criteria, academic excellence and significant contributions to society.

The Academy of Science of South Africa Act (Act 67 of 2001) makes ASSAf the official national science academy, representing the country internationally. ASSAf has a Membership of approximately 500 Members.



South African Young Academy of Science

The South African Young Academy of Science (SAYAS) was launched in 2011. Its membership comprises 50 leading young scientists in South Africa. SAYAS was borne out of the need for young scientists to contribute towards solutions to national and global challenges facing society. It represents the voice of young scientists in South Africa and provides a platform for young scientists to influence policy decisions.