

Press statement

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USAf launches sector-wide position paper on internationalisation in South African universities.

Universities South Africa (USAf) has launched a landmark position paper titled “Developing an Approach to Internationalisation in South African Universities: Employment Equity and the Appointment of International Staff”, signalling a decisive step towards an enabling sector-wide environment that reconciles internationalisation with transformation, Africanisation and employment equity in public universities.

The paper was unveiled during a HELM Engage Webinar on 3 August, convened under the theme of developing a principled and evidence-based approach to the employment of foreign academics in South African universities.

The webinar brought together senior university leaders, policymakers, human resources executives, transformation practitioners and higher education scholars to interrogate the paper’s findings and implications for institutional practice and national policy.

Opening the webinar, Programme Director Mahlubi Mabizela, USAf’s Director: Operations and Sector Support, positioned the discussion within the complex demands facing universities in a globalised yet deeply unequal world.

“Universities are expected to respond simultaneously to local imperatives and global realities,” he noted, emphasising that in South Africa this challenge is “particularly nuanced as we seek to deepen transformation, advance employment equity, support Africanisation and decolonisation, while ensuring that universities remain globally connected, internationally competitive and able to attract and retain the talent required to fulfil their academic missions.”

A long-term sector project

In her opening remarks, USAf CEO Dr Phethiwe Matutu traced the genesis of the position paper to

2021, when impending changes to the Employment Equity Amendment Bill and regulations prompted intensive consultations amongst the Department of Employment and Labour, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and the university sector.

These engagements were conducted through USAf's Human Resources Directors Forum, Transformation Managers Forum and Employment Equity Managers Forum. Given that the universities were affected differently by the employment of international staff, it was decided that USAf would work with the DHET on a position paper in this regard to get some level of consensus within the sector. Initially envisaged as a brief two-page statement, it has evolved through extensive consultation and rigorous analysis into a substantive 40-page document authored by eminent sociologist and higher education scholar Prof Crain Soudien.

Dr Matutu acknowledged the contribution of sector stakeholders and experts, including USAf's Transformation Strategy Group, project lead Prof Andre Keet, the Employment Equity Forum, DHET officials, institutional HR and transformation structures, and data specialists who compiled system-wide statistics on foreign nationals in academia. She noted that the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation has expressed support for the work and has committed to establishing a team to consider implementing its recommendations.

Reframing internationalisation

Presenting the paper's key findings, Prof Soudien emphasised that it is designed to move the sector beyond polarised and often populist debates about "foreigners taking jobs" towards a nuanced, evidence-based understanding of internationalisation as a structural feature of contemporary higher education systems.

Drawing on the 1997 White Paper on Higher Education and the 2019 DHET Policy Framework for Internationalisation of Higher Education in South Africa, Prof Soudien reminded participants that South Africa's policy architecture explicitly positions internationalisation as integral to building a competitive, high-quality and socially responsive university system.

The White Paper, he noted, frames internationalisation as a means to "advance the quality of our education, enhance intellectual diversity nationally and regionally, and contribute towards building the global commons of academia". At the same time, the DHET policy defines it as an intentional process to incorporate "intercultural, international, and global dimensions into higher education to advance the goals, functions, and delivery of higher education."

At the same time, the paper foregrounds the inherent tension in global debates on

internationalisation between a cosmopolitan, knowledge-sharing ethos and a competitive, rankings-driven logic that can exacerbate inequalities and fuel brain drain.

Prof Soudien highlighted how much of the international literature has focused on student mobility and revenue generation, with far less attention paid to the complex dynamics of staff mobility, academic labour markets and the circulation of expertise.

In the South African context, the position paper shows that universities have mainly embraced internationalisation within a framework that reconciles global engagement with Africanisation and decolonisation. Institutional policies from universities such as Cape Peninsula University of Technology, the University of the Free State, Stellenbosch University and North-West University articulate “Africa-imbued internationalisation” and commit to integrating international and intercultural dimensions in ways that advance transformation, address colonial legacies and foreground the global South.

Employment equity and foreign staff

A central focus of the position paper is the intersection of internationalisation and employment equity, particularly regarding the appointment of foreign academics. The paper analyses emerging sectoral targets under the Employment Equity Amendment Act, institutional staffing patterns, and the distribution of foreign nationals across disciplines, ranks and contract types.

It underscores that, contrary to popular claims, foreign academics constitute a modest proportion of the academic workforce and make significant contributions to knowledge production and postgraduate supervision.

The paper also surfaces systemic constraints that shape universities' ability to recruit and retain international staff responsibly. Prof Soudien drew attention to the “extreme difficulties” institutions experience in securing work permits and visa approvals from the Department of Home Affairs, noting that this issue was repeatedly raised during stakeholder engagements and has direct implications for institutional planning, programme continuity and research capacity.

USAf's earlier submission to DHET on the internationalisation policy framework flagged concerns that Home Affairs was “not acting in keeping with DHET's expectations of a Department of Home Affairs facilitating student and staff mobility,” and the position paper reinforces the need for a coherent interdepartmental approach to academic mobility that aligns immigration processes with higher education objectives.

Towards a principled sector legal and policy framework

The position paper culminates in recommendations aimed at guiding universities, USAf and government in developing a principled sector-wide framework for employing international staff.

These include:

- Affirming internationalisation as a non-negotiable component of a high-performing, globally engaged university system, while rejecting narrow nationalism, xenophobia and anti-intellectualism.
- Embedding Africanisation and decolonisation within internationalisation strategies, ensuring that global engagement strengthens rather than dilutes local epistemologies, languages and intellectual traditions.
- Aligning employment equity targets with the realities of academic labour markets and the need for scarce and critical skills, particularly in STEM fields and areas central to national development.
- Establishing clearer protocols and collaborative mechanisms between USAf, DHET and Home Affairs to support efficient, transparent and predictable processes for appointing foreign academics.
- Enhancing data collection and research on staff mobility, foreign academic representation and its impact on research, teaching and postgraduate training, to inform ongoing policy refinement.

Closing the webinar, Prof Keet described the launch as a “milestone” in the sector's ongoing work to think critically about internationalisation, transformation and justice in higher education.

Dr Matutu concluded by expressing USAf's commitment to using the position paper as a living document to guide ongoing dialogue and action.

"The position paper would serve as a basis for USAf to formulate a position on the matter," she said, adding that the organisation is receiving a lot of support from DHET and will work closely with the Minister and sector stakeholders to take the work forward.

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For media enquiries, please contact the USAf Communications Office.

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