



HELTASA's submission to the **Stakeholder Summit on Higher Education Transformation**

Practitioners inside the higher education sector are confronted, at various levels, with the disjuncture between potential and capacity. There is often an over-emphasis on the lack of or limited capacity in the sector, which overshadows the existing potential. This disjuncture is usually reinforced through discriminatory practices. For example, students are 'pathologised' when they operate in modes that are different from what is regarded as the norm of higher education practice (Boughey, 2005). This 'othering' downplays the potential that should be harnessed through appropriate strategies for it (potential) to translate into capacity.

However, there is another level at which this 'othering' occurs, namely, at staff level. For instance, there is an over-emphasis on the lack of capacity to conduct research which also downplays the available potential. In the process, higher education practice as a field of research is adversely affected. The argument here is that not much support is given to available potential. The supporting mechanisms, where they exist, are not adequately structured to deal with the different nuances in the sector. We, therefore, submit that there is a need to put systems in place to translate the existing potential into the much needed capacity. As posited by Scott, Yeld and Hendry (2007), the 'basis of the case is the contention that **concerted action** [emphasis inserted] is needed to change the current patterns of poor performance in the sector, in the interests of meeting national developmental needs.'

The Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA) is a professional association for educators and other significant role-players in the tertiary sector in Southern Africa. HELTASA's mission and vision are to promote quality in higher education practice through the creation of a synergistic network and the professionalisation of higher education practitioners in Southern Africa in three main areas of focus: policy matters in higher education; developmental practice and educational research. The association has Special Interest Groups (SIGs). These groups allow higher education practitioners with shared areas of interest to come together to discuss developments in the field, policy changes, personal experience, joint concerns and research.

HELTASA provides an 'inside-the-sector' platform and forum to engage with the key question of whether we have a shared understanding of transformation, as raised in the HE Summit concept paper. The concept paper further highlights a number of issues facing the sector and poses these probing questions: *What new forms of support and development need to be implemented and by whom? What tasks are institutional and what tasks are the responsibility of the Ministry, the Council on Higher Education and other bodies associated with the sector?* Our response to these questions is premised on HELTASA's mission and vision and informed by key recommendations 2 & 3 of the Soudien report (2008).

As part of a response to the question of 'new forms of support and development needed' we propose a properly developed and formalised relationship between DHET and HELTASA. This will also contribute to the concerted action that is needed to transform and improve performance in higher education. HELTASA has a long history in Academic development and has recently incorporated SAARDHE (South African Association for Research and Development in Higher Education). Another recent development is partnering with the HEQC to recognize and reward excellence in teaching and learning. As an existing national network of practitioners with already coordinated communities of practice, it compares reasonably well with bodies with similar aims internationally. These include the UK based Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) and Higher Education Academy, the American Educause, the Australian Learning and Teaching Council. A look at recent publications from these bodies offers insights on how we in South African higher education can experience a number of quantum leaps in advancing our developmental agenda. Though there is an argument about their differing contexts (that is, as developed countries) there are lessons we can learn from them. The main difference at this stage is the relationship these bodies have with and the recognition they receive from their countries' equivalents of the DHET. The manner in which such a relationship is conceptualised and operationalised provides an appropriate infrastructure for mobilising higher education practitioners. It creates an enabling environment for practitioners to make a significant contribution in solving the sector's problems and strongly positions them to be transformation agents. As pointed out, the emphasis should not be on lack of capacity in the sector, but rather on how to translate the available potential and use it to build capacity. With a sound relationship between HELTASA and DHET infrastructure can be built to enable the sector to make significant strides towards capacity building. We would like to have further discussions regarding how the relationship can be structured to facilitate the envisaged concerted action.

References

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Soudien, C et al. 2008. Report of the ministerial committee on transformation and social cohesion and the elimination of discrimination in the public higher education institutions. Pretoria. Department of Education.

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Contact details

Chair: Dr Matete Madiba, Lynwood Road, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, 0002

Tel: 012 420 3664, Fax: 012 420 3828, Email: matete.madiba@up.ac.za

Secretary: Dr Susan van Schalkwyk, University of Stellenbosch, Tel: 021 808 3751

Fax: 021 886 4142, Email: scvs@sun.ac.za