



**Advice to the Minister of Higher Education and  
Training on the Establishment of New  
Universities in Mpumalanga and the Northern  
Cape**

**December 2011**

## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The Minister of Higher Education and Training has requested the Council to advise on his intention to establish new universities in Mpumalanga and the Northern Cape.
- 1.2 The Minister first announced his intention to establish universities in Mpumalanga and the Northern Cape in his budget speech on 25 March 2010 in which he indicated the establishment of two task teams to investigate the development of appropriate models for the proposed universities. Subsequently, in his budget speech on 31 May 2011, the Minister indicated that the Task Team's reports were due in 2011 and, furthermore, announced that R300 million had been allocated to support the establishment of the new universities in the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) for 2011/12 – 2013/14.
- 1.3 The reports of the two task teams, which were chaired by Prof Thandwa Mthembu (Mpumalanga) and Prof Cheryl de la Rey (Northern Cape), were consolidated into a single report by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET).
- 1.4 The Council has considered the consolidated report, Final Report on the Establishment of new Universities in the Northern Cape and Mpumalanga Provinces (DHET: August 2011). The Council's advice to the Minister of Higher Education and Training is outlined below.

## **2. Council's Response to the Consolidated Report: Background Comments**

- 2.1 The Council accepts that there is a need to expand the higher education system to rectify the imbalances and inequities of the past and to address high-level skills and knowledge needs, which is a pre-requisite for social and economic development. The Council notes:
  - (i) The participation rate in higher education, which remains low, and that on current projections the 20% target set in the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) will not be realised in 2014 as anticipated.
  - (ii) The increase in the number of students passing the National Senior Certificate with university exemption and the resultant pressure for access to higher education, which has led to an unplanned growth in student enrolments
- 2.2 The Council is concerned with the impact on quality of the unplanned growth and the increased pressure for access to higher education in the context of resource constraints. This is illustrated by the fact that between 2005 and 2009, the increase in headcount enrolments was more than double the increase in the academic staff complement - 14% and 7% respectively. And more importantly, student success rates increased by only 2%. This suggests that increased access is not being matched by increase success. In addition,

as the consolidated report confirms, the increase in enrolments is putting severe pressure on the infrastructure and facilities at higher education institutions.

- 2.3 The impact of the unplanned growth in student enrolments points to two key issues that need to be addressed in the context of any proposals for the expansion of the higher education system through the establishment of new institutions.
- (i) The expansion of the higher education system must be adequately financed, that is, expansion must not lead to unfunded student places in higher education. In this regard, the establishment of new higher education institutions cannot be at the expense of the funding needs of the existing institutions. In short, new institutions should not be established if there are shortfalls in the funding of existing institutions. It is equally important to ensure that if new institutions are established adequate start-up and operational funding must be provided to enable the institutions to be sustainable in the medium-to-long-term.
  - (ii) The access pressure in higher education is in large part the result of the fact that there are limited post-school alternatives to higher education. There is thus an urgent need to restructure the “inverted pyramid” of enrolments through increasing access opportunities in further education and training, in particular, in colleges, as the consolidated report recognises. This requires, as the Minister has indicated, a new vision and policy framework for an integrated post-school system. It is anticipated that the long-awaited Green Paper on Post-School Education and Training System will provide policy clarity in this regard.
- 2.4 The Council recognises the critical role of higher education in contributing to social and economic development. However, the Council would like to caution against the suggestion in the consolidated report that the establishment of higher education institutions will enable the two provinces to overcome the “restricted economic development opportunities and poverty” through alleviating skills shortages. Although addressing skills shortages is necessary, it is not a sufficient condition to address the lack of economic development opportunities, which are in addition, dependent on investment in productive activities.
- 2.5 The Council notes that the proposals for the establishment of the new universities in the consolidated report have taken into account the role of the National Institutes for Higher Education (NIHE), which were established, as indicated in the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE), to address the claims for higher education provision in Mpumalanga and the Northern Cape in a context where “current conditions”, in particular, in terms of “efficiency and sustainability” did not justify the establishment of a “fully-fledged autonomous” higher education institution in the two provinces. The main objective of the NIHE was to provide an “administrative and governance hub” to ensure the coherent provision of higher education programmes that were offered in Mpumalanga and the Northern Cape by a range of public higher

education institutions with little or no regulation, and which were “uncoordinated, characterised by unhealthy competition, including overlap and duplication, and often with little relevance to provincial needs” (NPHE 2001: 85).

- 2.6 The Council would like to reinforce the fact, as noted in the consolidated report, that in terms of the Constitution, higher education is a national competence. This is important to underscore to ensure that the establishment of new public higher education institutions, their form and focus, including geographical location, is determined by national needs as part of the development of a single national co-ordinated higher education system, rather than narrow and parochial provincial interests. As the consolidated report indicates, this means that “any new public higher education institution, whether in Mpumalanga or the Northern Cape, would have to be seen as part of a diverse higher education system and not be an exclusive institution for the province in which it is located. It therefore cannot be designed to deal only with what is important for the province, but needs to be part of the national system serving national human resources and knowledge production needs” (DHET 2011: 17).
- 2.7 The Council is of the view that the establishment of new higher education institutions provides a unique opportunity in the context of the need for a diverse and differentiated higher education system to create higher education institutions that are locally relevant but globally excellent. The Council strongly believes that the focus of any new higher education institution must be on the development and provision of high-quality undergraduate programmes, thus contributing to addressing a key national policy goal, that is, to ensure that equity of access in the context of redressing past inequalities leads to equity of outcomes.

### **3. Council’s Response to the Consolidated Report’s Findings and Recommendations with regard to the Establishment of a University in Mpumalanga**

- 3.1 The Council accepts the case for the establishment of a university in Mpumalanga based on the analysis in the report of the potential inflow of students from the school system into higher education in Mpumalanga, which suggests that in the medium-to-long term the proposed university could have a stable enrolment of around 15 000 students.
- 3.2 In the Council’s view, the case for the establishment of a university in Mpumalanga is strengthened by the growth of the NIHE in Mpumalanga, which in 2009 had just over 5 500 students, which in effect is equivalent to a small university.
- 3.2.1 The NIHE provides an efficient and effective model for the small-scale provision of a limited number and range of higher education programmes. Its further growth and expansion is likely to be constrained both by the fact that the benefits from growth in terms of economies of scale are unlikely to accrue in a multi-institutional model and expansion is likely to make more

complex the administrative and governance arrangements linked to multi-institutional provision.

3.2.2 The establishment of the NIHE was a first step in addressing the claims for higher education in Mpumalanga. The fact that the NIHE in Mpumalanga seems to be effectively administered and governed and, more importantly, is sustainable in terms of its current size and potential for growth suggests that the conditions now exist for establishing an autonomous higher education institution in Mpumalanga.

3.3 In the Council's view the next step in the evolution of higher education provision in Mpumalanga must be the transformation of the NIHE into a university college, which for governance and quality assurance purposes is under the trusteeship of an existing higher education institution. This would enable the development of the necessary administrative, management, academic and quality assurance systems, which are critical to the successful establishment of an autonomous higher education institution, with the support and under the guidance of the institution to which the university college is affiliated.

3.3.1 The Council strongly believes that a solid administrative, management, academic and governance foundation must be laid before a fully autonomous higher education institution is established in Mpumalanga. This is necessary to avoid the governance and management instability and the resultant impact on the quality of programmes offered, that continues to bedevil a number of the (historically) black higher education institutions, which were established on weak administrative and management foundations given their origins in support of the apartheid ideology of "separate but equal development".

3.3.2 It should also be noted that the university college model historically served as the basis for the development of universities in South Africa through the University of the Cape of Good Hope (and later the University of South Africa), which was the affiliate university for the conferring of degrees. In addition the university college or affiliate college model is fairly common in many parts of the world. If the university college model is adopted it would be possible to access 'good practice' patterns from similar models in other parts of the world.

3.3.3 The university college model would address and provide an alternative solution to the implicit concern identified in the consolidated report regarding quality assurance and the development of quality programmes. The consolidated report suggests that to ensure quality assurance the new university should in its initial stages "phase in traditional university programmes in partnership with established local and international universities" (DHET: 49). In a sense, this is precisely what the NIHE currently does and to continue with such an arrangement into the future is likely to impact on the ability of the new institution to develop as an autonomous institution with its own identity. The main advantage of the university college model is that it ensures and supports the building of the management of quality and quality assurance capacity in parallel with the development of the policies and systems necessary for the establishment of an autonomous

institution and, at the same time, enabling the new institution to establish its own identity.

- 3.3.4 The Council recommends that the university college should be affiliated to the University of South Africa (UNISA). The main reason for proposing UNISA is that aside from its historical role in this regard, as a distance education institution it has a national footprint and, importantly, is a major player in higher education provision in Mpumalanga, as the consolidated report indicates.
- 3.3.5 The development of the necessary administrative, management and governance systems is a medium-to-long-term project and clear timelines linked to an implementation plan should be developed to enable the transition of the proposed university college into a fully-fledged and autonomous higher education institution. The Council recommends that at a minimum this should be not less than five years, and at a maximum, not more than ten years.
- 3.4 The Council agrees with the recommendation in the consolidated report that the university should be a multi-campus institution with its seat in Mbombela and that it should be established through the incorporation of the existing campuses of the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) in Mbombela and eMalahleni and the Secunda campus of the Vaal University of Technology (VUT). In this regard, it is important to distinguish between the incorporation of existing campuses and existing programmes. TUT has custom-built campuses in Mbombela and eMalahleni, which should be incorporated, together with the programmes and the staff into the university. VUT on the other hand does not have a custom-built campus in Secunda but instead uses rented facilities to deliver its programmes. In the case of VUT therefore incorporation should be limited to the programmes offered and the staff involved.
- 3.4.1 The Council further agrees that there should be a limited number of campuses to enable the development of a strong institutional identity and culture and to ensure sustainability. The Council recommends that the number of campuses should be limited to two – the main campus in Mbombela and the second campus in eMalahleni. The programmes in Secunda, which are offered to employees of SASOL at the invitation of the latter, should continue. However, given the duplication and overlap in the programmes currently offered by TUT in eMalahleni and VUT in Secunda, the university should in conjunction with SASOL investigate the feasibility of consolidating the offering of the programmes on the eMalahleni campus. If this is not feasible than Secunda should be treated as a satellite delivery site and the university should negotiate with SASOL for the latter to provide facilities.
- 3.4.2 The Council also agrees that the current College of Agriculture and the Nursing College in Mbombela should be incorporated into the university. The incorporation of the two colleges is essential to enable the university to offer a full range of programmes linked to provincial needs. This should not, however, preclude the university from offering non-higher education

programmes that the colleges currently offer should this be needed.

- 3.4.3 The Council, in line with its view that the number of campuses should be limited to two, does not support the recommendation in the consolidated report that the Ndebele College of Education with its facilities should be incorporated into the university. The Council recommends that the programmes and staff of the Ndebele College of Education should be transferred to the main campus in Mbombela.
- 3.4.4 In relation to the seat of the new university, the Council agrees with the proposal in the consolidated report that the Mbombela campus of TUT should form the nucleus of the university. The Council further strongly agrees that the development of a new and separate campus “green-fields” campus is not the “best option in the light of existing infrastructure in the province that could be expanded incrementally and in the light of the associated capital outlay that could only be huge” (DHET 2011:45). The fact that provincial interests are arguing for a green-fields development on the grounds that this is the first university to be established in democratic South Africa, as the consolidated report indicates, should not be entertained. The identity of the new university as the product of democracy is not determined by its physical infrastructure but by its vision, mission and values and, more importantly, by its responsiveness in academic terms to contributing to the knowledge and skills needs of South Africa.
- 3.5 The Council agrees with the recommendation in the consolidated report that the university should be established as comprehensive institution offering both diploma and degree programmes. Its primary focus, building on the current strengths of the NIHE and in line with the social and economic needs and context of Mpumalanga, should be on offering career-oriented and vocational programmes at the diploma level, which would contribute to addressing the development of scarce technical skills. This should be complemented by the development of a limited number of professional and general formative programmes at degree level in line with identified provincial needs.
- 3.5.1 The Council further recommends that the university should in the medium-to-long-term - at least the next ten years, be restricted to primarily offering undergraduate programmes with a limited number of postgraduate programmes - either postgraduate diploma’s and/or professional master’s programmes. The Council is of the view that the establishment of the university provides a unique opportunity in the context of the need for a diverse and differentiated higher education system to create a higher education institution, which focuses on the development and provision of high-quality undergraduate programmes. The focus on excellence in undergraduate teaching will contribute to enhancing throughput and graduation rates, thus ensuring that equity of access in the context of redressing past inequalities leads to equity of outcomes.
- 3.5.2 In relation to research, the Council recommends that in the short-to-medium term, the research agenda of the university should primarily focus on issues of teaching and learning, including curriculum development.

The latter would enable the university to contribute to the broader debate and policy development on teaching and learning, which is critical to improving throughput and graduation rates in higher education. In addition, and depending on the research capacity and qualifications of the academic staff, a limited set of research projects linked to the needs of industry in the province should be developed. This should be done in close collaboration with industry and universities and universities of technology with the requisite research capacity nationally.

3.5.3 The Council has noted the proposals in the consolidated report relating to the architecture and programme and qualification mix (PQM) for the university. The Council is not in a position to comment on these proposals, as in its view this should be determined as part of the detailed planning process for the establishment of the university.

3.6 The Council agrees with the proposal in the consolidated report that once the formal decision has been made to establish the university, the DHET should establish a technical team to develop an implementation plan, including an institutional operating plan, with particular emphasis on assessing the start up and operational costs required to ensure sustainability. The Council would like to emphasise that the provision of adequate funding is a *sine qua non* and that the university should not be established if this cannot be guaranteed.

#### **4. Council's Response to the Consolidated Report's Findings and Recommendations with regard to the Establishment of a University in the Northern Cape**

4.1 The Council does not accept the case for the establishment of a university in the Northern Cape based on the analysis in the consolidated report of the current and potential inflow of students from the school system into higher education in the Northern Cape, which suggests that a university is not sustainable.

4.1.1 The consolidated report projects that on average the potential inflow of first-time entering students from the school system is about 1 400 per annum with a projected total of 5 000 students for the new institution. This is not sufficient to sustain a small university offering a broad range of programmes. The means in effect, and as the report recognises, that a large number of the potential entrants from the school system will "enroll at other universities in the country because their specific choice of programme might not be offered at the planned higher education institution" (Ibid: 57). Thus, it is unlikely that projected total of 5 000 enrolments is likely to materialise.

4.1.2 The total number of students enrolled in the NIHE in the Northern Cape in 2010 was 1 647. This includes 197 students who were enrolled at UNISA through the NIHE. In addition, just under 4 000 students were registered with UNISA directly. The distance education nature of UNISA, as the report indicates is well-suited to cater to the needs of the province given its size and population distribution.



- 4.1.3 The enrolment figures in the NIHE suggest a limited demand for higher education study in the Northern Cape. This is not surprising, as the consolidated report based on an analysis of economic sectors suggests that in the Northern Cape the “required skills sets are highly practical in nature” and, in particular, requires “artisan-level skills”.
- 4.1.4 The Council has considered the case for the establishment of a higher education institution given the geography of the Northern Cape and the resultant competitive edge in astronomy and biodiversity, including the potential hosting of the Square Kilometre Array (SKA) and the establishment of a Solar Park Authority (SPA) in the Northern Cape. However, given the highly specialised research and training capacity that would be required to support these initiatives, the proposed university given its limited potential both in terms of size and the breadth and depth of programmes it could offer, would not be in a position to provide the necessary support other than in the potential training of middle level skills.
- 4.2 In the Council’s view the fact that the NIHE remains small suggests that the current conditions in the Northern Cape do not justify the establishment of a university and that underlying reasons for the establishment of the NIHE in the Northern Cape, as outlined in 2.5 above, remain valid. The NIHE provides an efficient and effective model for the small-scale provision of a limited number and range of higher education programmes linked to provincial labour market needs. It is thus well-suited to the skills and knowledge needs of the Northern Cape.
- 4.2.1 The Council therefore recommends that the NIHE should remain as the focal point for the provision of access to higher education study in the Northern Cape.
- 4.2.2 The Council further recommends that the NIHE should establish linkages with the Further Education and Training Colleges in the Northern Cape with a view both to supporting the development of quality programmes at the FET level but also, and more importantly, developing articulation pathways between FET and higher education programmes. This provides a unique opportunity to contribute to the development of a model for an integrated post-school system, which enhances access to education and training opportunities at both the further and higher education levels.
- 4.2.3 The consolidation and further development of the NIHE, in particular, strengthening the linkages with FET colleges, could lead in the medium-to-long term to expanding the demand for higher education, thus laying the foundations and creating the conditions for the establishment of a university in the Northern Cape.
- 4.3 The Council recognises, however, that the current structure of the NIHE, in terms of the number of providers involved, may not be best suited to ensuring the co-ordination and provision of a coherent range of programmes, including the potential for introducing new programmes linked to provincial needs.

- 4.4 The Council recommends that to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of the NIHE, the number of providers should be reduced. The Council proposes that given that just under 50% of the students enrolled in the NIHE (excluding Unisa) are enrolled in programmes offered by the Central University of Technology (CUT) and the University of the Free State (UFS), the two institutions should be invited to form a consortium to be the main and only providers of higher education programmes through the NIHE.

## **5. Conclusion**

- 5.1 The Council accepts that there is a need to expand the higher education system to rectify the imbalances and inequities of the past and to address high-level skills and knowledge needs, which is a pre-requisite for social and economic development. However, in the Council's view the expansion of the higher education system must be planned to ensure that the necessary resources – human, financial and infrastructural are in place, to enable the provision of high quality programmes and the sustainability of higher education institutions.
- 5.2 The Council supports the establishment of a university in Mpumalanga with three provisos'; (i) it should be established, in the first instance, as a university college under the trusteeship of Unisa to enable the development of the necessary administrative, management, academic and quality assurance systems, which are critical to the successful establishment of an autonomous higher education; (ii) it should focus on the development and provision of high-quality undergraduate programmes. (iii) it must be adequately funded to ensure its sustainability in the medium-to-long-term.
- 5.3 The Council does not support the establishment of a university in the Northern Cape as the evidence suggests that it would not be sustainable. The Council is of the view that the need for access to higher education programmes in the Northern Cape should continue to be provided through the NIHE, which is well-suited to providing a limited number and range of higher education programmes linked to labour market needs given provincial population dynamics. However, to enhance co-ordination and the coherence of the programmes offered, the Council recommends that the NIHE should be limited to a consortium of two providers, namely, CUT and UFS.