



The South African Young Academy of Science (SAYAS) General Assembly (GA) Declaration on the Higher Education Crisis in South Africa

13th October 2016

We call on the President of South Africa to urgently address the need to improve equitable access to quality higher education for all and to lead a national response to the crisis in South African Higher Education and Training (HET).

SAYAS constitutes fifty young academics and twenty alumni from multiple disciplines, selected on academic merit from institutions of higher education and research across the country¹. We are acutely aware of the challenges that students face. We teach and supervise undergraduate and postgraduate students - future South African young academics. We financed the completion of our own higher education, with a number of us now burdened with high levels of debt that – as young academics employed in varied temporary, permanent, funded and self-funded positions – we struggle to repay.

Resulting from discussions during our 2016 GA, and as a group of young academics committed to the South African academic project, SAYAS can no longer avoid engaging with these crucial issues at this complicated moment. Should this situation remain unresolved and lead to the suspension of the 2016 academic year, the implications will be catastrophic for undergraduate and postgraduate students – including national and international students, and those on time-limited bursaries and fellowships. We will experience a shortage of medical doctors and allied professionals as internship placements will be vacant without 2016 graduates, placing further stress on an over-burdened public health system upon which the majority of the population relies. Higher education institutions will struggle to recover from the failure to graduate students in 2016 and register students in 2017. The loss of associated state subsidies will force institutions to make irreversible decisions in how to implement severe cost-saving measures that will cripple the HET sector.

We acknowledge that

- The academy has a critical role in contributing constructively to debates taking place in our society, including those relating to ideological positions and different approaches to the generation and use of evidence. As young academics, we deal with these differences within our scholarly work; conflicting opinions and respectful debate are part of our daily work.
- The call for free, quality, decolonised higher education for all by the Fees Must Fall movement and the crisis on our higher education campuses has led to conflicting opinions on an appropriate solution.
- The lack of constructive leadership at the national level and lack of effective engagement between staff and student leaders trigger escalating tensions, leading to the development of unproductive, often confrontational and personalised debates,

which run counter to the principles of scholarly engagement and hinder the possibility of finding collective solutions to this crisis.

- We need to immediately move away from forms of confrontation that reduce discussions of the complex and contested terrain of free higher education for all in South Africa and solutions to our crisis, into simplistic, polarised positions.
- We need to re-engage with constructive debate.

To this end, we

- View this crisis as a symptom of wider, historical, social and structural determinants associated with and resulting from increasing inequality within South Africa. We urge all engaging in discussions around the crisis to ensure that these social and structural concerns are considered in the development of responses.
- Recognise that improved financing is required in order to promote more equitable access to higher education and training (HET). We recognise that HET are not the only national priorities and that increased resources to support improved preparation for tertiary education – through quality basic education – are key.
- Support the call for improved financing of higher education in order to provide equitable access to quality higher education for all, including working towards a system of fee-free¹ quality higher education for poor and 'missing middle' students. We are aware that this cannot be implemented immediately and requires both short and medium-term planning. We pledge our support to the realisation of this goal.
- Recognize the call for the demographic transformation of South African universities while maintaining an environment for internationally leading scholarship and research. We also recognize that the abundance of local expertise enables curricula and pedagogies that emphasize the African context in the appropriate disciplines. We pledge our support to the development of mechanisms to enable this transformation and to contribute to further deliberations surrounding decolonisation of HET spaces.
- Call for urgent and peaceful resolutions across our campuses that will result in the removal of police and private security. We want to avoid confrontations between police and private security with students and staff. We acknowledge the presence of diverse experiences of structural and direct violence, the threat these forms of violence pose across our campuses, and acknowledge that the presence of police and security is experienced differently and results in contexts in which teaching, learning, research and innovation cannot take place.
- Call for respectful engagement that acknowledges and supports continued debate, differences of opinion, and the generation of evidence-informed financing models that consider different fee-free funding models for poor and 'missing middle' students. Our places of work, research and learning are increasingly associated with tensions between and within students, academics, administrative staff, and university administrators. This does not reflect the values that we associate with places of teaching and learning.
- Pledge our support to developing opportunities for restorative engagement with students and colleagues on issues driving the crisis.

¹ Fee-free higher education could be financed in different ways, guided through the development of evidence-informed financing models.

- Call for universities to recognise the anxiety and psychological trauma experienced by many staff and students during this period and to commit to address these to facilitating resumption of high quality teaching and learning when institutions re-open.
- Offer our members as a resource to support constructive national dialogue on this crisis and to future deliberations for productive and respectful debate.

We call on the President of South Africa to

- Urgently address the root cause and not just the symptoms of the crisis we are experiencing across South African institutes of higher education.
- Commit to increased funding streams for South African higher education in order to improve equity in access to quality higher education, including provision of fee-free quality higher education for poor and 'missing middle' students.
- Immediately convene a national dialogue - to be inclusive of student, parent and academic representatives, university administrators, the private sector, and industry - to discuss approaches and develop a consensus statement committing to realising the goal of fee-free quality higher education for poor and 'missing middle' students.
- Urgently reformulate the emergency task team to include the National Treasury in order to move away from reducing this crisis to one associated only with security concerns. The National Treasury is a key role player in realising the goal of fee-free quality higher education for poor and 'missing middle' students.
- Work with the fees commission to complete the enquiry into different financing models and to release an approved model for implementation of fee-free quality higher education for poor and 'missing middle' students.
- Engage with SAYAS expertise to support the development of sustainable solutions.

The suspension of academic programmes and closure of university campuses directly affects the capacity of South Africa to maintain and grow its internationally respected research-intensive environment. We are very concerned that this crisis will negate the gains made to date – and have dire consequences moving forward – in terms of enabling transformation and growth of the South African academy and science innovation nationally.

Declaration prepared at the 2016 SAYAS GA held in Pretoria, 12th to 13th October 2016.

Issued by Dr Karen Cloete and Dr Sahal Yacoob, Co-Chairs on behalf of the 2016 SAYAS General Assembly

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ⁱ SAYAS is the voice of young scientists and aims to contribute to solutions to national challenges facing the academy and society. It is our responsibility to speak to the current crisis in higher education. We are committed to the South African academic project and its transformation. Our membership has an average age of 36; half of our members are professors or associate professors; and 60% are young women scientists. Whilst we are proud of the transformation achievements made within SAYAS since its inception in 2011, we are aware that there is a long way still to go. Transformation of the face of young academics in South Africa is dependent on continued high quality higher education throughput in South Africa's higher education establishments.