

Committee to monitor transformation at varsities

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JOHANNESBURG: Higher Education and Training Minister Dr Blade Nzimande has announced the establishment of an Oversight Committee on Transformation in South African Public Universities. The committee will advise the minister on policies pertaining to racism, sexism and other forms of unfair discrimination.

It will further advise the minister on policies aimed at promoting social cohesion and an institutional environment where every student and staff member can live, study, work and flourish free of any constraints resulting from unfair discrimination.

It will also advise the minister on the role played by universities in promoting the development of a free, fair and non-discriminatory society beyond the world of academia.

The establishment of the committee was in response to one of the key recommendations of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education, which was headed by Professor Crain Soudien.

This committee was appointed in 2008 by the then Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor, to investigate discrimination in public higher education institutions, with a particular focus on racism, and to make the appropriate recommendations to combat discrimination and promote social cohesion.

This followed the incident at the University of Free State.

The Soudien Report discovered that the state of transformation in higher education was painfully slow. In particular, racism and sexism were pervasive, while the pace of redress was equally slow.

"The Soudien Report noted serious disjuncture between policy and real life experiences of both students and staff, particularly in learning, teaching, curriculum, languages, residence life and governance," said Nzimande.

One of the report's recommendations was that the minister should consider establishing a permanent oversight committee to monitor the transformation of higher education.

The oversight committee will also look at the diversity of ideas in universities, determine the effectiveness and efficiency of institutional transformation frameworks/charters, policies and strategies.

It will further suggest a reporting mechanism by universities on the set institutional and national transformation targets and benchmarks, as well as identify best practices and challenges in the area of transformation policies and practices.

Nzimande said the committee should use this exercise as a basis for the development of a transformed charter and benchmarks for the entire university sector.

Although Nzimande could not reveal the poor performing universities when it comes to transformation, he said the overview committee would determine its own *modus operandi*.

He said when appointing the seven members of the overview committee, they were looking for people with knowledge and the necessary expertise for this type of brief, as opposed to appointing only "stakeholders".

"They are there because of the insight they have. They will have to consult with stakeholders, including students and various students' organisations."

The members are appointed for a period of three years and may individually be re-appointed for additional terms at the discretion of the minister.

Their appointment is effective next week.

Scientist and Vice Chancellor of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Professor Malegapuru Makgopa is the chairperson of the committee.

Other members of the committee are: Dr Muyo Tom, Vice Chancellor of the University of Fort Hare; Transformation Director at Wits University, Nazeema Mohamed; Professor Andre Keet from the University of the Free State; academic stalwart Professor Shirley Walters; Nehawu's first Vice President Joe Mpisi, and unionist Zingiswa Losi.

"Given their expertise in this area, I have full confidence in this team and their capability to carry out the task competently and within the set time frames," Nzimande said.

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