From Higher Education Reform Experts South Africa (HERESA) to HERE-Africa

*Final Dissemination, Synergy, and Sustainability (DSS) Event
Outcome Report
Johannesburg
2 - 4 October 2023*

Table of Contents

Main outcomes: A quick summary

- Over the last three years, the Technological Higher Education Network South Africa (THENSA) worked with five South African Universities of Technology and six EU universities, together with OBREAL Global and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), to successfully establish a network of Higher Education Reform Experts (HEREs) in South Africa.

- HERESA has been a unique and impactful project through its creation of Communities of Practice, Technical Assistance based in EU-South African exchange, 'train and connect the change agents' approach and close cooperation with policy actors (SAQA).

- There are many important synergies between the HERESA project and the programmes of other major stakeholders like the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), Universities South Africa (USAf), the Southern African Universities Association (SARUA), Association of Technical Universities and Polytechnics in Africa (ATUPA), the Association of African Universities (AAU), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Secretariat. These must be more precisely mapped and leveraged in the next phase.

- HERESA has great potential to expand the SADC region and serve as a springboard for policy reform, peer exchange, university-industry curricula development, scholarship, and studentship. This must be done with a strategic and sustainable approach and accommodate the great diversity of countries in the SADC region and their different stakeholder landscapes.

- The participants propose the creation of a HERE network in the SADC which would function as an ecosystem for transforming Higher Education in the region, premised on a foundation notion of the 'engaged university' and universities for impact.

What is HERESA?

Higher Education Reform Experts South Africa is an Erasmus+ project, funded by the EU, which was awarded for three years to THENSA, co-coordinated in partnership with OBREAL Global, and implemented in partnership with five South African universities of technology and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). Five EU universities from Tampere, Cork, Burgundy and Italy, Sweden accompanied the South African partners in their journey of knowledge exchange. The project aimed to shape teaching in learning strategies in universities by creating a network of higher education reform experts, designated leaders and change agents, who drove strategy development, participated in communities of practice and helped to shape policy. Four key areas of intervention were chosen: Work Integrated Learning (WIL), Entrepreneurship Education (EE), Competence-Based Learning (CBL) and Curricula for the 4IR. Leadership, though originally not intended to be a focus of the project, also developed into a key area of intervention for HERESA.

The Dissemination, Synergy, and Sustainability (DSS) Event

As the final formal event for the project, this gathering was designed to serve the following purposes:

1) To disseminate the learnings from the project (new and revised approaches to teaching and learning at each institution in the pilot)
2) To communicate the interventions recommended for how to bring about reform within the University of Technology sector (packaged as policy briefs) to the broader Higher Education community, through the major South African policy bodies.
3) To identify and discuss ways to create synergies between the HERESA project and other initiatives/entities that align with HERESA's mission.
4) To develop a framework for sustaining and increasing the footprint of HERESA in the future (i.e. beyond the current grant lifespan and geographical area) based on the learnings gathered during this piloting phase.

Day 1 was primarily targeted at the policy landscape in South Africa, engaging major stakeholders and looking at the policy implications for South Africa. Day 2 opened the discussions more widely, to a SADC and Africa-level audience of practitioners and policymakers and delved deeper into possible synergies as well as mapping the priorities of the next stage of HERESA ("HERE-Africa"). The event was hybrid and welcomed 42 delegates from 22 institutions/organisations and 8 countries (physically) and 168 virtual attendees, from 31 countries across the globe, over the three days.

This report summarises the key outcomes of the discussions and outlines the recommendations for the next phase, where HERESA will take on a modified focus and composition while retaining many of the key features that have made it successful.

Successes of HERESA: Perceptions from Stakeholders and Partners

The HERESA project, while framed as a pilot, employed several tools and approaches that have proven to be effective. These were stressed in the discussions:

1) *Participatory action approach*: The project not only engaged institutions in a partnership but also empowered individuals, appointed by the leadership, as change agents. These individuals participated in training activities and strategy development exercises, ultimately in the interest of enabling them to incite change at the institutional level. The HERE were motors for needs assessment, recipients of training but also active participants in the design of the entire training programme. This was key for ownership, and ensuring the focus and actions of the project were conducive to impact and sustainability.
2) *Communities of Practice:* The CoPs that were created were the anchors of the project. They allowed for the exchange of practice among peers within the South African context, but also

with EU partners, who equally appreciated the learning opportunity. They were animated with activities such as 'HERESA Cafés' online practice sharing sessions, as well as collaborative work around policy briefs, like the one of WIL that has been developed by SAQA. The CoPs could be further nurtured and extended, and potentially articulated with other initiatives such as the new spin-off entity 'WILSA', for example.

3) *Institutional mentorship*: The notion of institutional mentorship was crucial to the project design: Institutional site visits to the EU partners, for example, allowed for a more holistic vision of how an entrepreneurship education strategy is embedded in the wider institutional mission related to employability and local economic impact, as well as innovation. Mentorship happened at the level of the organisations driving the project as well - THENSA and OBREAL Global - who transferred knowledge in grant management and in generating project policy impact.

4) *The policy-practice interface*: The HERE had a dual role: serving as change agents in their institutions but also informing and shaping policy through their experiences. Engaging SAQA as the policy partner allowed to consolidate this interaction between the HERE and the policy-making space. HERE could situate their institutional strategies and reforms in the national regulatory landscape and engage in a structured dialogue with policymakers on how to improve that landscape. The participants agreed that this could be upscaled to the SADC level in Africa, and the HERE-Africa network could become an important interface with the SADC Secretariat as it shapes higher education policies and frameworks, for example.

In terms of what HERESA later integrated into the project design, the following was also largely discussed:

- *Focus on leadership training*: The HERESA project was not designed to tackle leadership training as such but incorporated this focus due to the clear need that has emerged. All partners and stakeholders agreed that a future alliance for 'Leadership for Change' must underpin the HERE-Africa network.

Main points of agreement and issues to be further explored

The DSS event explored in depth the main themes of HERESA (Work Integrated Learning [WIL], Entrepreneurship Education [EE], Competence-based Learning and Teaching [CBLT] and Curricula for the 4IR) and identified areas of consensus amongst the participants as well as areas to be stressed in further policy development in South Africa in particular, but also in other African contexts:

- *Avoiding working in silos*: The nature of project funding and incentivization structures often leads to 'siloing' of work around key issues. HERE-Africa could synergise with a number of important initiatives at national and regional level: The USAF Strategic Groups such as the 'World of Work' and the Entrepreneurship Education Development SA platform are two examples.

- *A national learning and teaching policy or framework for SA* would help to integrate all important dimensions and developments shaping teaching and learning: South Africa has no national T&L strategy. While individual policy initiatives in WIL and EE, as well as further refinement of the NQF, are supportive to institutions, an integrative policy framework for T&L would help institutions to strategise and resource better, given that T&L faces new dynamics, pressures and challenges.
- *Importance of teaching pedagogy/ Continuous professional development*: A national policy framework cannot succeed without concerted, well-resourced, transformative and agile professional development opportunities for teaching staff.
- *Transversal skills and WIL*: One must design WIL in a way that it imparts a broader set of transversal skills, and can help students to adapt to changing labour market needs and environments. This departs from more traditional approaches and requires more complex and deeper industry partnerships.
- *The interface of WIL with service learning*: WIL can increasingly be integrated into concepts of service learning and the 'engaged university' in its environment. It must also be considered that 'industry' includes a major employer - the governmental and public sector.
- *Beyond placements to joint curricula development*: While work placements serve an important purpose, the next and more dynamic stage should be collaborative curricula development with industry, which may be conceived between consortia of universities.

As a central axis of the conference, participants also explored the questions *"Why should we synergise and what should we synergise?"* In terms of the 'what', synergies can be broken down by:

- Levels (institutional, national, regional…)
- Types (projects, initiatives, policies…)

Reasons for creating synergies (across projects, initiatives, policies, and institutions) included:
- Addressing SDGs and real-world challenges
- Preparing students for world of work, for digitalization
- International cooperation in the interest of the student being prepared for global and societal challenges
- Creating structural changes, creating community, facilitating benchmarking and referencing
- Providing an environment of co-creation (curricula, etc)
- Framing our actions for the future of HE (greening, skills for just transition…)

But a fundamental question was: Who coordinates? Who is the protagonist in this process, and more directly related to HERESA, how to synergise beyond the project funding and the project timeline?

Charting the course: Priorities for next steps

Stakeholders

As a key element of the next phase of HERESA, participants conducted a "Landscape mapping" exercise, to define different levels of stakeholders that would have different levels of involvement and influence. Major take-aways from this exercise included:

- Certain stakeholders/groups are well defined, especially in the South African (SA) regulatory and funding landscape, others less so. However, defining the South African landscape can help to understand which stakeholder categories need to be involved from other countries.
- The ability to look across borders and compare stakeholder ecosystems (ex. Namibia/SA) will be critical to the next phase.
- One can define a relative pyramid of influence: Civil society–government–regulatory bodies -HEI, students and media. The role of the private sector must not be underestimated, nor must that of other influencers like international donors and partners or university rankings.
- The Landscape created by the participants is a snapshot of the current situation but is cleary not ideal. For example, student organisations must be enabled to be active partners.
- A specific landscape mapping of funders must also be completed.

A conceptual foundation for the initiative

Participants agreed that whatever activities the networks took on going forward, these needed a conceptual foundation and a certain sense of purpose. It was felt that this could be:

"The engaged university: Relevance and impact"

The concept ties EE, WIL, teaching for Industry 5.0, etc. to a broader sense of transformative teaching and learning for impact, responsive to industry but also to societal needs.

Sub-strands/ pillars of action

It was agreed that the network needed focus going forward, and that it could not take on everything. Actions could hence be grouped into three main pillars:

- Public/private sector engagement: Curricula reform through co-creation

This would engage partners of the network in collaborative curricula design with industry partners. The example of some of the EU University Alliances and well as joint programmes was given as a reference point for designing this action.

- Scholarship/studentship

The network could pioneer a fellowship programme: Fellow for HE Reform, celebrating individuals with dedication and innovation in linking teaching and learning to policy impact.

- Communities for Reform

This would take forward the HERESA Communities of Practice (CoPs), merge them with other relevant platforms, and provide a structured space for benchmarking, strategy development and policy design with decision makers and regulators.

- Transversal area: Leadership

Transversal to these three areas and as another distinct programme of the network, "Leadership for change" training must be offered, premised on the foundation of the network. It could include methods such as coaching, shadowing and peer exchange, and collaborative online and hybrid training offerings designed by the key implementing partners.

Scope

It was agreed that there would be a clear added value in deepening participation in HERE-Africa within South Africa and expanding it into SADC in first phase and later more widely into Africa. The SADC Secretariat offered its support in raising commitment to the initiative through ministries in the region, while SARUA could offer its university membership to the network across SADC countries.

This would require, in the next phase, agreeing to an overall concept and work programme, extending invitations to further universities and concretising participation through commitment letters. A Secretariat of key implementing partners, like THENSA, OBREAL, USAF and SARUA must be consolidated to drive the next step.

Funding

The HEREA programme must be designed as a coherent initiative, with the impulse to drive forward irrespective of external funding. Nonetheless, funding may be sought at different levels for different aspects of the programme going forward. Specific funding proposals could emerge out of the CoPs, but also be tied to the different pillars of the programme, like leadership training.

Given that the HERESA project technically comes to a close in November 2023, there was a sense of agency and urgency in the participants of the DSS event, and a shared interest to immediately produce a work plan for the next phase, assess further needs of the current network on new needs of the expanded network, and tie possible funding applications to specific actions associated to the pillars of the new HERE-Africa network and programme.