



**Advice to the Minister of Higher Education and  
Training on the Establishment of a new Public Higher  
Education Institution and the Incorporation of the  
Medunsa Campus of the University of Limpopo into  
the new Public Higher Education Institution**

**August 2011**

## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The Minister of Higher Education and Training has requested the Council to advise on his intention to establish a new public higher education institution and to incorporate the Medunsa campus of the University of Limpopo into the new public higher education institution.
- 1.2 The Minister's intention, which was announced in his speech on the Department of Higher Education and Training's budget vote on 26 May 2011, was informed by the findings and recommendations of the report of the Ad-Hoc Task Team appointed jointly by the Minister of Higher Education and Training and the Minister of Health to review the impact of the merger in January 2005 of the Medical University of Southern Africa (Medunsa) and the University North, which resulted in the establishment of the University of Limpopo.
- 1.3 The Council has considered the Task Team's report, Review Report of the University of Limpopo Merger (March 2011). The Council's advice to the Minister of Higher Education and Training is outlined below.

## **2. Council's Response to the Findings of the Task Team**

- 2.1 The Council accepts that the merger of Medunsa and the University of the North that led to the establishment of the University of Limpopo "has not been successful and should be undone".
  - 2.1.1 The Council has noted the factors identified in the report that adversely impacted on the merger and ultimately led to its "failure". These can be distilled in the Council's view to two underlying issues (i) a lack of leadership in creating a new and inclusive institutional identity and a shared vision and mission (as the institutional audit of the University of Limpopo, which was undertaken by the HEQC in 2010, found) and (ii) resistance on the part of the Medunsa campus, which pre-dated the merger and continued post-merger. This suggests that the merger was not successful not because the decision to merge was flawed but because of the inability of institutional constituencies to transcend their narrow interests in the fulfilment of the broader national policy goals and objectives that underpinned the decision to merge, which was the need to provide access to tertiary healthcare in Limpopo. This is cause for concern as the defence of narrow institutional interests is likely in the Council's view to impede attempts to find a solution to the long-term future of Medunsa, which is reflected in the fact that the Task Team's preferred option for Medunsa, that is, its incorporation into the University of Pretoria has not found favour.
  - 2.1.2 The Council accepts that Medunsa cannot be closed down. The Council agrees with the Task Team that "Medunsa has played and will continue to play a critical role in the training of health professionals,

particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those raised in rural areas”.

- 2.1.3 The Council agrees that Medunsa is “neither viable nor sustainable as a stand-alone” and single-focus institution. As the report notes, the Medunsa campus is currently cross-subsidised by the Polokwane campus to the tune of about R50m. Although the report does not provide any figures, it can be safely assumed that as a stand-alone institution in its current configuration in terms of student numbers, it would require more than R50m to be financially sustainable. This would require Medunsa to be funded outside of the funding formula, which would raise a similar demand from other universities, as the Task Team notes, in particular, from the historically black universities, which could make a case based on their historical disadvantage. It is worth noting that the fact that Medunsa was not financially sustainable was one of the reasons that informed the decision to merge Medunsa with the University of the North.
- 2.1.4 And more importantly, the Council agrees with the Task Team that establishing Medunsa as a single-focus and single-faculty institution is not academically desirable as “it will always be a second-tier institution, lacking vibrant post-graduate studies, thin on research, struggling to attract serious academics, and lacking cross-faculty, cross-disciplinary vibrancy for staff and students of a normal university”. Indeed, it could be argued that the latter is precisely what characterised Medunsa pre-merger.
- 2.1.5 The Council agrees that establishing Medunsa as a “fully-fledged” university with the traditional range of faculties that is a precondition for its expansion and sustainability is not desirable nor feasible in the current context given that Gauteng is well endowed with universities.

### **3. Council’s Response to the Recommendations of the Task Team**

- 3.1 The Council agrees with the Task Team that the incorporation of Medunsa into the University of Pretoria would be the “best guarantee of success” and ensure the continued viability and sustainability of the Medunsa campus. The advantages of incorporation, as outlined in the report, on balance outweigh the disadvantages. However, the Council accepts that the lack of support for this option both within the University of Pretoria and Medunsa and, in particular, active resistance within the latter, would probably lead to its failure. In fact, it seems that the opposition to the idea of incorporation is such that the Task Team is not confident that its proposal for exploratory talks to assess the potential of incorporation between Medunsa and the University of Pretoria are likely to succeed. Hence the Council’s concern that narrow institutional interests continue to supersede the national interest irrespective of the implications of this for the training of healthcare professionals, which all agree needs to be expanded. Although resistance linked to issues of identity are real and have to be dealt with

sensitively, what is of particular concern is the suggestion in the report that the opposition to incorporation is in part fuelled by concerns on the part of the Medunsa staff that the “expectations on them will increase – both for daily workloads and working hours” and that the potential for promotion may be limited as “some who are currently heads of department may find they are junior to an HOD from Pretoria and lose their HOD status”. This suggests that Medunsa is happy to remain at best a second-tier institution with no aspiration to enhancing the standards and quality of the education and training offered. The latter, in the Council’s view, is non-negotiable and the sine qua non for the continued viability and sustainability of Medunsa, irrespective of whether it is established as a stand-alone institution or incorporated and or merged into another higher education institution.

- 3.2 The Council recognises, however, and notwithstanding the merits on national interest grounds, that in the context of a failed merger and irrespective of the reasons for this, initiating a new incorporation and/or merger process is neither practical nor desirable. However, the Council is not convinced that the only alternative to incorporation is to establish Medunsa as stand-alone university. On the contrary, as argued earlier, the Council is of the view that Medunsa cannot be sustained as a stand-alone single-focus and single-faculty institution and that establishing it as a multi-focus stand-alone institution cannot be warranted given the fact that Gauteng already has such a large number of universities. It is against this context that the Council has developed an alternative proposal, which is outlined below.

#### **4. Council’s Recommendation**

- 4.1 The Council’s point of departure is the recognition that, irrespective of the governance model adopted, the precondition for Medunsa to continue to successfully contribute to the training of health-care professionals is the need to enhance the quality of the education and training on offer at Medunsa and to strengthen its management and governance systems. Poor management and governance and low quality characterised Medunsa in the early to mid-1990s, i.e. pre-merger, as the historical record, including interventions by the then Department of Education, would illustrate. Indeed, it could be argued that while the merger may have added impetus, the haemorrhaging of high-quality staff pre-dated the merger as a result of management and governance instability.
- 4.2 In the Council’s view enhancing quality and strengthening management and governance systems is a long-term project, which would have to be addressed within a five to ten year time-frame. The Council is convinced that given its past history, as well as the fact that post-merger there has been a further weakening of management and governance systems and in the quality of programmes, that a stand-alone Medunsa should not be burdened with and would not have the wherewithal and capacity to address these issues alone.

- 4.3 The Council therefore proposes that in the short-to-medium term, Medunsa should be established as a university college, which for governance and quality management purposes is affiliated to another higher education institution. This would enable Medunsa to focus on enhancing the quality of the programmes offered and put in place the necessary management and administrative systems required to support the academic enterprise without the ultimate burden of governance and management, which would be the final responsibility of the higher education institution to which it is affiliated.
- 4.4 There should be clear time-frames attached to the establishment of Medunsa as a university college. In the Council's view this should be not less than five years and not more than 10 years. At the end of this period, and on the basis of an assessment of the progress made, a final decision should be taken on the status of Medunsa.
- 4.5 The establishment of Medunsa as a university college would require special funding to ensure its sustainability. The institution to which it is affiliated cannot be expected to cross-subsidise Medunsa. Indeed, any suggestion of cross-subsidisation would render the proposed university college model redundant. The Council recognises that the special funding would have to be provided outside of the normal parameters of the funding framework. This is unavoidable and should be limited to the time-frame linked to Medunsa's status as a university college.
- 4.6 The main advantage of the university college model is that it avoids all of the negative connotations associated with the notion of incorporation, while allowing the necessary governance and quality management support to be provided to Medunsa. It should 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.
- 4.6 The Council recognises that the traditional university college model may require adaptation given the historical context of the development of Medunsa, in particular, the fact that Medunsa previously was accredited to confer degrees, which it would not be able to do in university college model, as in this model the degree is conferred by the affiliate higher education institution. However, it should be possible to find a solution that would enable Medunsa's identity to be reflected in the degree certificate. Similarly, in relation to governance, it would be necessary to ensure that Medunsa was allowed a measure of autonomy while formal responsibility and accountability would reside with the affiliate higher education institution. This is normally achieved

through providing for membership of the affiliated university college on the council of the affiliate university and vice versa through establishing a separate governance board for the university college, which resorts under the council of the affiliate university and on which the council of the affiliated university is represented.

- 4.7 The Council also recognises that the Higher Education Act does not provide for the establishment of a university college model and that it may not be possible to accommodate the university college model within the institutional governance models provided for in the Act. An amendment of the Higher Education Act may therefore be necessary.
- 4.8 The decision as to the higher education institution to which Medunsa should be affiliated should be determined through exploratory discussions facilitated by the Department of Higher Education and Training with the four universities in the Gauteng region, namely the Universities of Johannesburg, Pretoria, South Africa and the Witwatersrand. The exploratory discussions should also address the degree conferring and governance issues highlighted above. To this end a small task team under the auspices of the Department should be constituted.
- 4.9 The clinical training platform of Medunsa should be expanded to include access to the clinical training facilities of the Universities of Pretoria and the Witwatersrand outside of their main academic teaching hospitals. This would enable Medunsa students to have access to clinical training, which in the short-to-medium term may not be available at the George Mukhari Hospital. In addition, it would also enable Registrars at Medunsa to have access to the necessary supervision, which currently is not the case as the Task Team report indicates.
- 4.10 Furthermore, and where appropriate, the non-Gauteng based Health Sciences faculties could also provide support in building the quality of academic programmes and training at Medunsa through collaboration in teaching and research through staff exchanges and the development and utilisation of e-learning technologies.
- 4.11 In the interim, and parallel to the exploratory discussions regarding the establishment of Medunsa as a university college, and given that irrespective of the model adopted, the unbundling of Medunsa from the University of Limpopo would take at least a minimum of a year, the Minister should in agreement with the Council of the University of the Limpopo appoint an administrator to manage the day-to-day operations of Medunsa. The administrator, while accountable to the Council of the University of Limpopo, should have the necessary authority to run the Medunsa campus as an autonomous campus with special funds allocated by the Department of Higher Education. This is imperative to enable the necessary confidence-building steps to be put in place to ensure a measure of stability on the Medunsa campus and the

development of an appropriate turn-around strategy without pre-empting and rushing the exploratory discussions.

## **5. Conclusion**

- 5.1 The Council recognises the critical role of Medunsa in the training of health-care professionals, in particular, given the need to increase the number of health-care professionals in line with national policy goals and objectives relating to the delivery of health services. It is precisely for this reason that the Council accepts that Medunsa cannot be closed down and nor can it in the short-to-medium term be re-established as a stand-alone institution. Given the history of weak governance and management which characterised Medunsa prior to the merger, and which has been further weakened post-merger, the Council is not convinced that a return to the status quo-ante would strengthen Medunsa's role in continuing to contribute to the development of health-care professionals. There is no guarantee, in fact all the evidence points to the contrary, that Medunsa as a stand-alone would be sustainable.
- 5.2 The Council is of the view that the university college model that it proposes provides the best guarantee of establishing Medunsa on a stable footing. The university college model will provide Medunsa with the necessary breathing space to develop the quality of its programmes and the building and strengthening of its management and administrative systems. This is essential, as without it, in all likelihood Medunsa will decline further and its continued role in the training of health-care professional would be endangered. The need for caution cannot be over-emphasised, especially in the context of the perennial governance and management instability that continues to characterise a range of the historically black institutions.
- 5.3 The Council recognises that the success of the university college model is dependent on support for the model from both within Medunsa and from the higher education institutions that have been identified as potential partners as the affiliate institution. The concerns of both sides need to be taken into account and addressed. However, in the Council's view it is imperative to ensure that narrow institutional interests do not hold the proposed model hostage. In this regard, the leadership role of the Minister of Higher Education and Training is vital.