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To the HEDSA Family

Well, too much time has elapsed since we last shared with you what HEDSA had been up to. I am about to rectify that, so herewith a bumper edition of our newsletter.

In drafting the newsletter I envisage covering three broad themes:

- Reporting in some detail on the very successful symposium
- Summarising HEDSA's achievements since the last newsletter
- And looking forward to plans for the term of the current Executive Committee.

I was proud to be elected to steer the organisation for the next two years when I was elected as HEDSA's chairperson during the biennial symposium which took place at Stellenbosch University from 2-3 October 2014. Also elected to serve on the Executive for the next two-year period are:

Dr. Nina du Toit- Vice-Chair (CPUT)

Ms Roshanthni Subrayen – Secretary (UKZN)

Dr. Diane Bell –Treasurer (USB-ED)

Mr Duncan Yates - Publicity and Communications (WITS)

Ms Maria Ramaahlo – Publicity and Communications (UJ)

Mrs Marcia Lyner-Cleophas- Past-Chairperson (SU)

We had intended having the strategic planning meeting late in November, but to my great disappointment we had to postpone this meeting as I had to have surgery in mid-November. We settled on 15-16 January as the new date for this meeting and at least part of this newsletter will serve to share with members of HEDSA and those interested in our work the main outcomes of a very full agenda.

But let us pause for a moment to look back on HEDSA's achievements over the last two years before we turn our faces to the future.

We are living through a time abuzz with conversations at the highest level concerning the rights of people with disabilities to access post school education. We have taken note of the Ministerial Committee appointed by the Minister of Higher Education to enquire into every

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aspect of education of people with disabilities, and have submitted a document to the Chair of that Committee offering HEDSA's considerable experience and expertise in several of the tasks included in their terms of reference. Likewise we will follow closely the three-year Teaching and Learning Disability Development research project of a committee spearheaded by UNISA with great interest. But we do not intend to be observers only in either of these ambitious projects. We believe that HEDSA has a pivotal input to make into the work of both of these committees. Some of us have been doing this work for more than 25 years. We've been there, done that and proudly wear the T-shirt. The individuals who make up HEDSA work at the coal face of disability support provision at Higher Education Institutions, and we are persuaded that we have an important contribution to make and this is a convenient way of segueing into the work HEDSA has been involved in the last two years.

NSFAS Guidelines

Much water has flown under the bridge since the bursaries administered by the Department of Labour for students with disabilities was transferred to the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). In 2013-14 HEDSA was in intensive dialogue with NSFAS which had a twofold purpose:

- a) To clarify the terms and conditions around which these bursaries would be allocated to students with disabilities and
- b) To persuade NSFAS to expand the list of support needs for which students would be eligible to apply for funding.

The latter required some serious horse trading and in fact, just when we thought we had nailed down the guidelines and reached agreement on them, we were disappointed to receive documentation from NSFAS officials in which it seemed they hadn't been paying attention when the guidelines were finalised, or wanting at any rate to go back on some of what was agreed. So it turns out we have a bit more work to do on this. Ms Nafisa Mayat from UCT and Ms Marsha Lyner-Cleophas from SU deserve the bulk of credit for this work, and we will give them all the support they need as they reopen the conversation in the course of this year to tidy up some worrying loose ends.

Standardising Disability Codes

The other important achievement of the outgoing executive was to finalise a document containing proposals for the standardisation of the coding with which to classify the range of disabilities of students requiring specific support needs. It is our fervent hope that the recommendations contained in this document will be adopted by the Department of Higher Education and Training.

Report-back on Sign Language Interpreter Symposium

Held at UCT from 27-29 October 2014.

During this three-day workshop South African Sign language interpreters from several Higher Education Institutions, members of Deaf Federation of South Africa (DEAFSA), and the

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National Institute for the Deaf got together over a three-day period to come up with Guidelines on the employment of South African Sign Language Interpreters at Higher Education Institutions Their discussions included minimum qualifications, working hours, a code of ethics and rates of remuneration. There is a comprehensive draft policy document dealing with all these matters, and we will distribute it as soon as we get the go-ahead from the participants. I know that this area of support provision is one in which there is much uncertainty and confusion, and the guidelines will be invaluable as institutions move forward to putting in place the support Deaf students require .

Looking back on HEDSA symposium

96 delegates from 25 Higher Education Institutions and 11 stakeholder organisations attended the symposium

The symposium program was divided between parallel sessions on best practice in several aspects of disability support provision on the one hand, and two plenary sessions. We were honoured to welcome Deputy Minister Mduduzi Manana from the Department of Higher Education and Training who delivered the keynote address on the first day.

The keynote address on the 2nd day was delivered by Mr Fanie du Toit, a passionate advocate for better communication and information services for people with hearing loss. The bulk of the remaining time was divided into breakaway discussion groups in which colleagues shared methods and processes of facilitating optimum service delivery.

We have tried to capture recommendations from as many of these breakaway sessions as possible, and we will be taking many of them forward.

Some of the recommendations are:

- Developing standardised impairment specific computer training for students with disabilities
- Standardising a template for inclusion in application documentation in which students will be invited to disclose their disability and advised to contact their Disability Unit as early as possible to discuss reasonable accommodation requirements
- Creating a discussion forum for colleagues who are involved in creating accessible text; possible training to improve the quality of braille material provided to students and training in using DAISY formats
- Discussion regarding the support for students with learning disabilities
- And much else.

Where to from here?

The HEDSA Exco met at UCT on 15-16 January to plot the course that the organisation will be following for the next two years and beyond. Out of a lengthy agenda and intensive discussions emerged three main focus areas, which are closely inter-related.

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- a) Professionalising Disability Support personnel across the higher education sector
- b) Improving our financial situation
- c) Raising HEDSA's profile by improving the website and making use of social media

Once final agreement with NSFAS is reached around eligibility and types of accommodations which will be funded, HEDSA will embark on road shows to ensure that both the Student Funding Offices and the relevant personnel in the Disability Units understand these guidelines and adhere to them, to ensure optimal access to funding and prevent abuse of the system.

A sub-committee of the Exco are about to embark rather ambitiously on the design of a curriculum towards the ultimate goal of professionalising the sector.

In conclusion I want to encourage colleagues to share news, challenges and achievements with us, in order that more voices than mine will be heard in subsequent newsletters.

Already late as it is in the year, we take this opportunity in wishing you a happy and successful year of service provision to students with disabilities.

Warm regards

Reinette Popplestone
Chairperson: HEDSA

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