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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**CURRENT UNIVERSITY CHALLENGES EMERGE AS PRIORITIES DURING PROVINCIAL ENGAGEMENTS**

*JOHANNESBURG*: The final engagement in the round of higher education crisis provincial engagements was concluded in the Western Cape, at the end of last week.The engagements – convened by the Higher Education Crisis Forum (The Forum) and its partners -brought together student formations, parents, staff/academics (and in some provinces representatives of labour organisations), clergy and university management.

Seven Work Streams which will be considered at the Higher Education National Convention to the held on 18-19 March 2017 in Johannesburg were the key focus of every provincial engagement. Across all provinces, the Convenors and partners observed the re-surfacing of similarissues for immediate attention which relate mainly, to 2017 student registration and peace and mediation processes.Although the individual context of the respective provinces and institutions was evident in the framing of the issues, some common traits were the seriousness of impacts and the urgent need for resolution.

The Forum is a civil society initiative, convened by former Deputy Chief Justice, Dikgang Moseneke and nine Co-Convenors from various backgrounds, who have been involved with education in South Africa at various levels, and who have been specifically engaged with the current crisis unfolding at universities. The Forum aims to provide stakeholders in the current higher education crisis with a platform for dialogue,to facilitatecivil society engagementand to create conditions conducive to the establishment and maintenance of peace, and the creation of the sustainable policy outcomes.

“The crisis in higher education, and in education, as a whole for that matter,constitutes asocial justice failure. Everyone has a right to further education, which the state must make progressively available and accessible. This is a right enshrined in our Constitution - for many less privileged South Africans, it remains unrealized. The Forum therefore, seeks to create the space for South African society to participate in engagements and deepen understanding of the structural and systemic arrangements that impede progressive realisation of this constitutional right for all, and develop lasting solutions,” chairperson of Forum, Justice Dikgang Moseneke said.

As the challenges of the National Students Financial Aid Scheme(NSFAS) continue to find prominence in the analysis of the crisis by various stakeholders, it is clear that resolution of the crisis will require more than the allocation of funds to a system that is fundamentally flawed in significant ways. “In our provincial visits, stakeholders spoke about significant adverse impacts of NSFAS’ inability to meet the registration and accommodation needs of students,“ he said. Recent reports have indicated that at least 53 000 applicants for funding have been turned down and in the assessment ofvarious stakeholders this challenging situation is further compounded by ineffective administration of the centralised NFSAS system.

Beyond the issue of funding, the provincial engagements have revealed that thereare still many students who cannot register for this year based on unresolved internal disciplinary processes and legal proceedings relating to their arrests, expulsions or suspensions in 2016.

Convenorsemphasized the importance of upholding principles that promote meaningful engagement. “The basic principles that guide the Forum’s work, include: Peaceful mediation and resolution of disputes with all parties refraining from the use of violence; Zero tolerance of racism and gender discrimination;Sufficient representation based on constituencies;Sufficient consensus building through democratic engagement and respect for divergent perspectives; Disciplined collective action through democratic deliberation and mandated leadership; and Dialogue with state, universities, students and concerned parties. We consistently encourage all stakeholders participating in engagements on the education crisis to align themselves with and uphold these principles, at all times,” he said.

The Forum and partners will endeavor to respond to stakeholder requests for additional engagements at provincial and more localized levels. The Forum realizes however that it will not be possible to respond to all these requests before the Higher Education National Convention to be held on 18-19 March 2017 in Johannesburg.

Applications for participation in the National Convention, can be completed on the webpage of the Forum, at [www.necform.org](http://www.necform.org)

**ENDS**

***Editors’ Notes***

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