

Proposal to limit foreigners at universities slammed

MPs seeking to regulate the number of foreign students and lecturers at universities, allegedly to 'protect the South African brand', have run into a wall of opposition from academics, notes [Legalbrief](#). Management at some leading institutions have slammed the MPs' comments as 'populist' and 'divisive', and say the institutions would lose their international standing if such quotas were implemented. A [Sunday Times](#) report says the outcry follows comments by the chair of Parliament's Higher Education Portfolio Committee, Mohlopi Mapulane, who wants to reduce the number of foreign students and lecturers to 'below 10%' of a university's student and staff population. At a parliamentary sitting just days before recent xenophobic attacks, Mapulane told MPs that 'the universities are institutions of learning and teaching primarily to skill (and) to make sure that you impart knowledge on the SA population'. 'They are established for that reason so we shouldn't lose sight of that. **Allow institutions to compete at an international level but protect them as South African universities so that we protect the South African brand.**' Walter Letsie, an ANC MP and member of the Higher Education Portfolio Committee, agreed with Mapulane, saying there should be a quota on the number of foreigners doing postgraduate studies 'because generally people, after graduating, they get their PhDs or master's (and) they will be biased towards developing their own country first'. 'We must make sure we produce more of our own here and we produce more PhDs so they write in journals and they create new knowledge.'

Universities, however, are having none of it, says the [Sunday Times](#) report. It quotes Wits vice-chancellor Professor Adam Habib as saying the state shouldn't interfere in the 'fundamental roles and rights of universities to determine who to enrol (and) who to employ' because they 'do not have the knowledge or skills sets required'. 'We cannot have universities that do not have a substantive layer of international students and staff,' he said, adding that were they to leave, 'it would not only jeopardise our standing in the international community but would also undermine our quality to innovate, to undertake good science and to produce cutting-edge technologies'. Veliswa Mhlope, spokesperson for Rhodes University where 17% of students are not South African, said Mapulane's statements were 'divisive' and 'inappropriate'. '**The argument that international students and staff in any way threaten the sovereignty of the state is misplaced and unjustified,**' she said. Sol Plaatje University vice-chancellor Yunus Ballim said though local students should not be displaced in favour of foreign students, 'for a university to represent the universal in the world of ideas, the presence of academics who bring a lived experience from around the world is essential'.