

Designing the South African Higher Education System for Student Success

By Prof Ian Scott

UCT

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List of Acronyms

CHE:	Council on Higher Education
CHED:	Centre for Higher Education Development
DHET:	Department of Higher Education and Training
DoE:	Department of Education
ECP:	Extended Curriculum Programme
FYE:	First-Year Experience
ISFAP:	Ikusasa Student Financial Aid Programme
JSAA:	Journal of Student Affairs in Africa
NDP:	National Development Plan
SANRC:	South African National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition
UCDP:	University Capacity Development Programme
USAF:	Universities of South Africa

Designing the South African Higher Education System for Student Success

South Africa's higher education system is falling far short of producing the mix of competent graduates required to meet the country's need for social and economic development. The problem of poor patterns of student success is longstanding, and is persisting despite the policy changes and many educationally-sound interventions that have taken place in recent decades. This points to entrenched underlying obstacles, including but going beyond the legacy of apartheid, and indicates that they will not yield to supplementary or ad hoc improvement initiatives, however well-conceived individually. This paper is thus based on the proposition that there is a pressing need to design the South African university education system to focus unequivocally on student success and equity of outcomes. This implies, intentionally, that the current system is not designed around any clear commitment to student success.

Correcting this must involve a re-prioritisation of goals in the higher education sector, aimed at ensuring that student success is accepted as the end goal of the educational mission of higher education. The paper argues that, if this is to be achieved, what is required is a sophisticated, realistic, coherent and comprehensive strategy for positive change. Given the nature of the higher education system, such a strategy must involve not only a clear vision of the scope of the changes and interventions needed to make a real difference to the performance patterns – in terms of equity as well as overall outcomes – but also an in-depth understanding of the underlying obstacles that have to be addressed and the responsibilities that must be taken by the key stakeholders in addressing them.

Introduction

Putting Student Success at the Heart of the Higher Education Agenda

Despite recent official assertions of acceptable progress in performance (DHET, 2015 & 2017a), it is widely recognised that South Africa's higher education system is falling far short of producing the mix of competent graduates¹ required to meet the country's needs, in terms of advanced expertise for all forms of development as well as meeting individual educational aspirations and 'equity of outcomes'. As Statistician-General Pali Lehohla puts it:

... we have a crisis of producing [graduates with advanced] knowledge for the country. ... There is a need to rethink [the inadequate prioritisation of education] as a process by which a discourse takes place to highlight the importance of education. This poses interesting questions for leaders at all levels of government. (Times Live, 2017-09-27)

However, there are few signs of decisive steps being taken by national and institutional leadership to give unequivocal priority to student success, as opposed to access alone (Scott, 2017b). In South Africa ‘just under half of the young people who enter undergraduate degrees (in either contact or distance mode of tuition) never graduate. This is a major challenge for the system...’ (DHET, 2017a: 20). Especially in contexts like South Africa where life-chances are strongly dependent on educational attainment (Spaull, 2015: 37-38; BusinessTech, 2017-01-09), access without success is a hollow achievement. Yet student success remains in the back seat when it comes to state funding and institutional practice.

In these circumstances, it seems essential that groupings concerned about the effectiveness of university education – including academic and student associations and interested civil society bodies – should take a leading role in pursuing the reprioritisation of goals within higher education. Thus, the theme of the 2017 conference of the South African National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience – ‘Imagining a vision of student success in the 21st century’ – pointed to a central challenge for higher education. This paper originated in a keynote address at that conference, responding to an invitation to address a critical question: What would it take to place student success at the heart of South Africa’s higher education agenda?

The conference theme encouraged big-picture thinking but, since any plans are only as good as their implementability, this must be tempered by realistic appreciation of the obstacles. With this in mind, the central question can be broken down into five key constituent ones that need to be decisively addressed:

1. What does student success mean, especially in view of South Africa’s transformation imperatives?
2. Why should it be at the heart of the higher education agenda?
3. What will it take to put it there, at system and institutional level?
4. What kinds of changes and developmental interventions are required to make substantial improvement in performance actually happen?
5. What authorities and educational bodies must be expected to take responsibility for the prioritisation of student success?

It is necessary to acknowledge here that higher education is not only about education: its other core functions are knowledge generation and community engagement (DoE, 1997: section 1.3). However, the educational mission of higher education – producing individuals with advanced knowledge and

skills – has special importance in developing countries where there are severe shortages of high-level capabilities (Escarré & Boldrini, 2017: 3). It is this educational mission – particularly in the public universities – that is the focus of this paper.

The Central Proposition

A fundamental judgement that has to be made about the higher education system is whether its educational outcomes can be substantially improved – to the level the country requires – by supplementation of the existing mainstream teaching-and-learning system or whether more fundamental, systemic changes are needed. This paper is based on the latter view: that there needs to be a decisive break with the current, longstanding teaching-and-learning system that has persistently delivered the racially-skewed and unsuccessful patterns of student performance that still prevail today.

Ensuing from this, the central proposition of this paper is that *there is a pressing need to design the South African university education system to focus unequivocally on student success and equity of outcomes*. The goal is to ensure that higher education makes its full contribution to social and economic advancement and to achieving social cohesion (Pandor, 2005). An intentional implication of this proposition is that the higher education teaching-and-learning system is currently not designed for this unequivocal focus.

Considerations that are inherent in the proposition include the following:

- Determining priorities in higher education is complicated by the fact that universities have three major functions: teaching, research and social engagement. Argument about the relative importance of these functions is almost certainly fruitless (though understanding their interdependence is critical), so it must be emphasised that the prioritisation argued for in this paper relates to higher education's formal educational role.
- The apparently conflicting pair of higher education goals that Wolpe et al. (1993) termed 'equality' (now more commonly thought of as equity) and 'development' (in the sense of sophisticated scientific, technological and economic development) has historically been seen as a dichotomy. In South Africa, however, this dichotomising has become counter-productive and largely false; both these crucial goals depend on developing the talent in all our communities, and neither can be achieved without the other (CHE 2013:52).

- Effective prioritisation of higher education goals depends on distinguishing between means and ends, as outlined below.

Distinguishing Between Means and Ends

Clearly identifying the end goal, and distinguishing it from whatever sub-goals are needed for achieving it, is essential for setting and prioritising any developmental agenda. It is the basis for identifying effective strategies and directing them where they are most needed, hence making the best use of available resources.

A key element of the argument in this paper is that *the end goal of all formal education is to facilitate good-quality student learning and thereby the fulfilment of the students' educational aspirations, and hence their contributions to society*. It follows from this that, notwithstanding the complex debate about the purposes of higher education, student success must be at the heart of the educational agenda.

It also follows that all educational provision, developmental initiatives and resources need to be understood and used as means to the end goal of student success in quality programmes. Sub-goals – whether they concern, for example, staff development, educational research or student financial aid – are crucial to achieving the end goal but their value and priority must be determined in accordance with their contribution to meeting the end goal. They must not be reified as ends in themselves, lest sight of the end goal should be obscured.

What Does Student Success Mean?

The Importance of an Unequivocal Focus on Outcomes

There is a long history of debate about the complexity of the purposes of higher education and what should be most valued. However, for the great majority of the key stakeholders – viz. the students individually and the country at large – student success in higher education carries the essential meaning of mastering a field of learning sufficiently to earn a sound tertiary qualification.

There are differences between the main stakeholders' interests, for example:

- For students individually, success can be regarded as gaining the knowledge, skills, attributes and formal qualifications required to enable them to realise their intellectual, career and personal

aspirations. There will of course be individual differences in aspirations and thus in understandings of the purpose of higher education.

- For the country at large, the goal of student success entails ensuring that graduate output and outcomes – in terms of numbers, quality of learning, equity, mix of fields, and attributes that are valuable in the contemporary world – are adequate for providing the advanced knowledge and skills needed for the well-being and sustainability of the country and for its social, economic and cultural advancement.

Despite the differences, the common ground in these key stakeholder interests is that it is the outcomes of higher education that count, with student success as the end goal. It further indicates that the end goal is best manifested in *successful completion of the programmes the students embark on, provided always that the programmes are of appropriate quality.*

A definition of student success used by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) captures this succinctly: the goal is ‘enhanced student learning with a view to increasing the number of graduates with attributes that are personally, professionally and socially valuable’ (CHE, 2014:1). It is this meaning of student success, with its clear focus on outcomes, on which the argument in this paper is based.

It may seem anomalous to have to emphasise the importance of an unequivocal focus on outcomes in higher education. However, this is necessitated by the persistence of a disproportionate concentration on ‘inputs’ in higher education planning, funding and evaluation, as discussed in section 6.2 below.

Completion and Quality

As argued above, the two main dimensions of student success are completion and quality.

Particularly in contexts like South Africa, access to higher education has minimal value without successful completion (CHE, 2013:32-34). Various studies have demonstrated that completion of a tertiary qualification has a major positive effect on material life-conditions, as evidenced in increased lifetime earnings; in fact, in South Africa the return on attainment of tertiary qualifications is among the highest in the world (Spaull, 2015: 37-38; van der Berg 2016: 175; BusinessTech, 2017-01-09). Critically, the figures indicate that the earnings premium correlates not only with the type of qualification but also with full completion of the qualification, rather than obtaining only some credits towards it (BusinessTech, 2017-01-09; CHE, 2013: 34). The benefits of completion of a tertiary

qualification also extend to probability of employment (CHE, 2013: 34; Pepper, 2018: 1-3; Fin24, 2018-02-13; BusinessTech, 2018-05-20).

Completion is thus an essential condition for student success, and the key quantitative unit of measure must be graduates.

However, completion is not sufficient in itself: the other key element of student success is the quality, particularly the fitness for purpose, of the qualification attained. The significance of this has been accentuated in recent years by growth in graduate unemployment (Oluwajodu 2015: 1-2; Jacobs, 2017). The co-existence of graduate unemployment and shortages of advanced skills – underlined by substantial numbers of vacancies – appears anomalous except insofar as it shows that a proportion of the graduates produced in South Africa do not have the competencies and attributes needed by the economy and the society at large. It is concerning that this problem is primarily affecting younger graduates: those under 25 are six times more likely to be unemployed than those aged 35 or older (Statistics South Africa, 2018).

The quality of a programme is a complex concept and difficult to define. Fundamentally, however, it must be manifested in the nature and quality of the student learning that the programme fosters, and the fitness of this learning for the purpose of the programme. In most programmes, the desired learning will involve a blending of discipline- or profession-specific knowledge and competencies with broader intellectual capacities that equip one for a responsible and fulfilling life. The effectiveness of the quality dimension of higher education is critical to its wider purpose, which goes beyond the material advantages of a well-remunerated occupation and opens doors to personal, social and cultural growth.

It is against the full scope of the quality dimension that the significance of the current movement towards decolonising curricula should be assessed. In addition to addressing the epistemological and cultural issues raised by decoloniality, the envisaged curriculum reform (and any other kind) should be designed to deepen and widen student learning, fostering conceptual development and understanding of diverse histories and approaches to the world.

As is the case with completion, in the quality dimension it is the outcomes that count. However, some key learning outcomes are difficult to measure. Academic knowledge and some skills can be satisfactorily assessed institutionally (if the system is rigorous), and the programme accreditation and review criteria used by the CHE address some outcomes as well as inputs. However, other desired

outcomes (such as some advanced cognitive skills and personal graduate attributes) can only be effectively assessed by performance in the world of work. Even so, it is incumbent on the institutions to focus on developing and evaluating the qualitative outcomes of their teaching-and-learning process by established and innovative means, with the aim of improving the quality and relevance of student learning as a key element of student success.

In summary, the two dimensions of completion and quality are essential to ensuring that student success has real meaning, so that higher education can play its full transformative role for individuals and the country as a whole.

Student Success as the End Goal

This section aims to substantiate why student success should be regarded as the end goal of the universities' educational function, thus warranting its being placed at the heart of the higher education agenda.

The State of Student Success: Current Realities

Student success in South Africa is currently a scarce resource. In quantitative terms, higher education statistics have for decades pointed to severe under-performance, racially skewed outcomes, and waste of talent and material resources across the sector (CHE, 2013: 39-53; Scott et al., 2007: 9-18). This is particularly damaging because, as shown in participation rates, the student body is a small, selected group that should be expected to do well (CHE, 2013: 41-42; CHE, 2017: 5).

The country as a whole, and particularly the responsible higher education bodies, need to face up to these realities. For example, current figures for contact university students (DHET, 2017a; CHE, 2017) show that:

- under 30% graduate in regulation time
- under two-thirds graduate within 6 years
- one-third have not graduated after 10 years
- significant racial inequalities persist.

If distance education students are included, the patterns become worse.

Moreover, comparing contact cohort performance since the institutional mergers, in relation to the biggest two qualification types, indicates virtually no improvement, overall or by population group,

over the period since the institutional mergers stabilised; and racial disparities persist, as shown in this table:

*Comparison of **contact** completion rates of the 2006 cohort (from CHE) and the 2010/2011 cohort (from DHET) by qualification type and population group²*

	3-year diplomas:		3-year degrees:	
	graduated within 5 years (%)		graduated within 5 years (%)	
	2006 cohort: CHE	2011 cohort: DHET	2006 cohort: CHE	2011 cohort: DHET
All students	42	41	53	49
African	39	40	47	44
White	55	49	64	62

Sources: CHE, 2013: 45,49; DHET, 2017b: 26-27

The Overarching Importance of Equity of Outcomes

As these figures indicate, the motivation for prioritising student success is not only to improve performance overall but also to achieve ‘equity of outcomes’. This term was introduced in the first higher education White Paper of the democratic era as a critical complement to ‘equity of access’ (DoE, 1997: section 2.29).

Transformation – in the sense of fair distribution of the benefits of higher education – depends on achieving both equity of access and equity of outcomes, within a context of strong overall completion rates and quality of outcomes. This is still far from being achieved. Despite major change in enrolment demographics, participation rates are still heavily skewed racially (CHE, 2017: 4-5). To compound this, completion rates remain racially skewed, neutralising much of the improvement in access (DHET, 2017a; Scott, 2017a: 18-22). The resulting failure of equity of outcomes is encapsulated in the fact that only about 7% of African and coloured youth are succeeding in higher education.

The extent and persistence of lack of equity of outcomes has a negative effect not only on social justice – particularly in respect of individuals’ life-chances – but also on all forms of development. Graduation figures clearly show that unless the system can realise the intellectual potential within all communities, there is no prospect of producing the quantum of advanced knowledge and capabilities that the country needs (CHE, 2013: 52). This has major negative consequences for social and

economic issues such as unemployment, skills shortages, the overall level of education in the population, and shortcomings in many areas of development. Moreover, as recent protest movements have indicated, continuing maldistribution of educational opportunity undermines social cohesion and can be a powerful destabilising force. The persistence of socio-economic and educational inequalities in students' backgrounds means that the intellectual potential of the diverse student body will not be realised without substantially improving the effectiveness of the universities' teaching-and-learning process.

This situation provides a strong argument that transformation of the performance patterns should be an imperative for the higher education system, being essential to the overall success of its educational mission. Yet the fact that the performance data 'still demonstrate apartheid-era patterns of inequality' (DHET, 2015: 56) indicates inadequate prioritisation of this imperative. It must be asked why equity of outcomes, as a fundamental element of student success, is not also unequivocally at the heart of the higher education agenda.

The Importance of Student Success: Implications for the Higher Education Sector

It is clear that the higher education system's current shortcomings in meeting South Africa's overall graduate output and quality needs are severely hindering progress towards a range of key societal and economic goals. In addition to those outlined earlier, the shortcomings are a cause as well as a consequence of the failures of basic education in South Africa. This is because breaking the vicious circle of poor performance and dysfunction in the education system as a whole requires substantial growth in the pool of graduates from which competent educational professionals can be recruited for the school and post-school sectors. Moreover, the much-needed expansion of postgraduate education, particularly among South African black students, cannot be accomplished without significant improvement in the outcomes of undergraduate education as a key section of the educational 'pipeline' (CHE, 2013: 32-33).

While the universities depend on co-operation and assistance from the state, business and civil society, in the final analysis responsibility for producing graduates lies squarely with the higher education sector. It is consequently the obligation of the sector as a whole, including the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and national higher education bodies, to play its full role in societal advancement by ensuring the requisite graduate output and outcomes. This calls for the sector to do whatever it can to improve the effectiveness of its own teaching-and-learning processes in spite of the constraints emanating from basic education.

Given the importance of this matter, it is necessary to examine to what extent the sector – the institutions as well as the national bodies – has accepted this obligation, and to consider the effectiveness of the monitorable commitments and measures that are in place to indicate such acceptance.

It seems clear that the higher education sector cannot fulfil its obligation – which is its educational *raison d'être* – without an unequivocal prioritisation of student success. The strategic and social justice motivation for this has existed for many years, so the question must be asked: What is standing in the way?

A Broad Approach to Prioritising Student Success

If the argument that student success is the end goal is accepted as valid, then the emphasis must shift to the means required to achieve that end. This section outlines key elements of a broad strategic approach to establishing student success as a top priority for the higher education sector and the government, with the purpose of ensuring that means of achieving a decisive improvement in student performance can be designed, committed to, and brought to fruition in practice.

The Need for a Comprehensive Strategy for Change

Systemic underperformance has been endemic in South African higher education for a long time. While quantitative historical data are scarce, as far back as 1968 the terms of reference of the Van Wyk De Vries Commission of Inquiry into 'White universities' included investigating 'the high failure rate among undergraduate students' (Nupen 1973: 2), which was a national concern even though the focus was on the most privileged and well-resourced group. The major expansion and diversification of higher education enrolment that has occurred since 1990 has taken place without the sector-wide innovation and per capita resources needed for adapting to changing conditions, and has consequently put increasing pressure on the universities and constrained improvement in student success (CHE 2013: 56). The long duration of this problem is indicative of how deeply embedded its underlying causes are, and of the futility of relying on peripheral mechanisms to deal with it.

It is argued here that the complexity of the higher education environment, the distributed nature of its decision-making network, and the relative autonomy of its key constituents, all point to the need for a comprehensive approach to bringing about and sustaining any substantial and wide-ranging change. While more narrowly-focused but well-planned initiatives can be influential in specific areas (take,

for example, the adoption of a primary health care orientation in undergraduate Health Sciences education), developmental initiatives that require systemic change, entailing shifts in entrenched practices and priorities, call for approaches that take realistic account of the interests, as well as the capacities, of all key decision-makers and stakeholders in their planning, motivation and reward system. The prioritisation of student success is clearly an initiative of the latter kind.

In the first instance, the level of comprehensiveness required must inform understanding of the scope of the work to be done. Thus it needs to be accepted that the following steps are essential for designing a sustainable approach to prioritising student success:

- making a convincing case for the centrality of student success, based on analysis of the current inadequacy of graduate output and the national importance of improving it (as outlined above);
- determining what body should lead the development of a new approach to advancing student success;
- gaining in-depth understanding, and sufficient acceptance, of the nature and scope of the systemic changes and interventions that are necessary for optimising student success;
- specifically identifying the authorities and bodies that must take responsibility for devising appropriate policy and for designing and implementing the necessary developments at different levels of the system;
- determining what kind of environment and enabling conditions must be put in place to effect and sustain the prioritisation of student success, and, obversely, determining the key obstacles to be addressed.

There is fortunately a great deal of knowledge and experience of higher education development to build on in facilitating student success. A range of innovative and educationally sound interventions have been applied to improving access and success over the last four decades, primarily through academic development and student support initiatives such as personal counselling, tutorial support, fostering academic literacies, and offering foundational provision within extended curricula. Tens of thousands of students have benefited from these, and there can be little doubt that they have played a strong role in the improvements that have occurred (see for example CHE, 2013:70-90).

As the performance figures show, however, these interventions have not had the collective impact needed for a decisive break from ‘apartheid-era patterns of inequality’ (DHET, 2015: 56). Historically, their impact and sustainability have been very limited for several reasons: because they have been fragmented, peripheral or supplementary; because their planning and implementation have been truncated, often as a result of shortcomings in vision or political will at institutional or sector

level; or because they have not taken realistic account of contrary interests (see section 6.2 below). The central challenge remains: to establish effective developmental approaches that can be applied in the *mainstream* teaching-and-learning process across the sector, to benefit all students who need them.

In short, the complexity, scale and persistence of educational under-performance in higher education strongly indicate that achieving a national commitment to student success will require a coherent, sophisticated, realistic and above all comprehensive *strategy for change*. The national significance of prioritising student success means that such an approach should be recognised as fully warranted.

Critical Elements of a Strategy for Educational Change

Successes and failures in educational development in South Africa suggest that the effectiveness of large-scale interventions depends much on a set of key requirements, including the following:

- intentionality and political will in focusing on the end goal, without which there is no genuine commitment;
- systemic rather than peripheral or ‘add-on’ approaches, to match the scale of the need (CHE, 2013: 67-69);
- comprehensiveness in scope: identifying all the key areas of the teaching-and-learning process that require developmental work, and delineating the linkages between them;
- clear determination of accountability and responsibility: identifying and agreeing on the different parts of the higher education system that should and are realistically able to take responsibility for the developmental work required;
- realism, not pursuing naïve solutions: taking full account of the obstacles to student success and the extent to which they can be overcome in practice;
- rigour in considering what constitutes valid evidence for educational policies and the selection of interventions.

The concept and practice of *design thinking* is emerging as a valuable basis for bringing about complex developments such as the prioritisation of student success. Its relevance to planning and policy in this area is outlined below.

The Significance of Design Thinking

The value of the concept of design is being recognised in educational development. It incorporates key meanings such as clear purpose, planning, bringing multiple elements together into a coherent

whole, employing different means towards a specific end, and creativity. All of these are central to effective educational development, especially at institutional and national level.

In particular, ‘design for learning’ has special relevance for the process of prioritising student success. For example:

- ‘... design is probably most powerful when conceived as the intelligent centre of the whole teaching-learning lifecycle.’ (Goodyear, 2015: 32)
- The design process can overcome the danger that ‘being submerged in the taken-for-granted assumptions of both a disciplinary tradition and a teaching tradition can make solutions look deceptively self-evident.’ (op.cit. 31)
- ‘A common design tactic is to reframe the problem as presented, to see whether a more radical approach .. might actually be better.’ (op.cit. 38)
- ‘Design usually entails resolving tensions between competing objectives.’ (op.cit. 35)

The potential of ‘design for learning’ to refresh teaching-and-learning approaches, in order to better match contemporary conditions, is the basis for the case that commitment to coherent design should underpin higher education development. In particular, design expertise should be recognised as a valuable element of educational ‘expertise’ (after Kreber, 2002), and thus as a key attribute of academics in their role as professional educators.

Analysis as a Basis for Strategy Development

An effective strategy for prioritising student success depends on rigorous analysis of the full range of systemic changes and interventions required, what enabling conditions must be put in place, and how responsibilities need to be distributed. Detailed analysis of what needs to go into a comprehensive improvement strategy is beyond the compass of this paper. However, the sections below offer examples of analysis in two key areas of the strategy, viz. the nature and scope of the developments needed for optimising student performance (Section 5), and the roles and responsibilities that different bodies need to take on in order to bring about an unequivocal focus on student success (Section 6).

The Nature and Scope of Educational Development Needed to Optimise Student Success: Three Critical Dimensions

As emphasised earlier, in order to design the higher education sector for student success an essential initial step is to determine the nature and scope of the developmental work to be undertaken, i.e. the range of systemic changes and interventions needed to foster substantial improvement, breaking away

from the patterns of the past. This step is critical for effectiveness and also as a basis for shaping the initiative as a whole, including accurately identifying the roles and responsibilities required from different bodies and levels of the sector.

It is fully recognised that student performance in higher education is affected by a range of external factors, especially schooling and socio-economic conditions. However, these factors are beyond the control of the higher education sector and often intractable (Scott, 2017c). Student financial aid, crucial as it is to student success, is primarily a responsibility of national government. The change strategy discussed in this paper therefore focuses on factors internal to higher education, particularly the teaching-and-learning process itself, which is fully within the control of the sector.

In order to provide a view of the scope of a comprehensive educational approach, this section identifies and analyses the role of three major dimensions of the teaching-and-learning process which critically affect student success and in which educational development must be undertaken if student performance is to be substantially improved. (See also Scott, 2017a: 5-7.)

Curriculum Content and Orientation

While curriculum content and orientation have always been fundamental to the educational process, it is increasingly recognised that expanding the scope of research and development work in this dimension is called for. Content and canon have been subject to ideology and dispute for centuries, but overt contestation over what is being taught, and for what purpose, is increasingly coming to the fore internationally, not least within the current student protest movement in South Africa (Shay & Peseta, eds, 2016).

While content concerns what is taught, orientation here refers to aspects of a curriculum such as ethos and primary areas of reference (for example, professionally-orientated, or regionally- or internationally-focused) or dominant pedagogical approach (for example, problem-based learning) (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2012). Content and orientation together constitute the intellectual heart of a curriculum, and have strong effects on learning. In particular, the extent to which students are able and willing to engage constructively with what they are learning can impact on which of them thrive and which are alienated (Shay & Peseta, 2016: 361-363).

For such reasons, especially in a historically divided society, decisions on curriculum orientation and content need to be taken with care and insight, based not only on what suits the discipline or the world

of work but also, critically, on what will facilitate sound learning and realise academic potential within a culturally, linguistically and socio-economically diverse student body. The significance of this complex responsibility is illustrated by the passions on both sides of the current curriculum decolonisation debate in South Africa. Taken together with the other major dimensions of educational development, this aspect of curriculum design must have a key place in any strategy for student success, and expertise in it needs to be built and valued.

Delivery of the Curriculum

Delivery comprises all the ways in which a given curriculum is communicated and made accessible to students. This dimension consequently covers a wide range of activities, encompassing ‘teaching, learning support, advice and guidance, coaching, mentorship, peer and collaborative learning, feedback and assessment, personal development planning and tutoring, skills development and practice, and access to resources’ (JISC, n.d.). In the South African context, psychosocial student support and academic staff development are also key elements related to delivery.

These core teaching-and-learning activities constitute the intensive day-to-day business of the educational process, and their effectiveness or otherwise clearly has a major bearing on student success. They have to be in place irrespective of the nature of the curriculum, but need to take forms that are appropriate for each curriculum as well as the learning needs of the particular profile of the students’ involved.

In the South African context, particular attention needs to be given to the expectations and use of what is known as ‘concurrent’ student support. This refers to forms of academic support (such as tutorials, workshops, online resources and mentorship) that are made available to students while they are engaged in particular courses in the curriculum. Concurrent support is beneficial in many ways but is bound to take the existing curriculum content and structure as a given. This means that if the overall design of the curriculum is not well-matched with the profile and needs of the students, the effectiveness of concurrent support is greatly limited.

Structural Design: The Curriculum Framework

Structural design refers primarily to the ‘curriculum framework’, which means the key structural parameters that frame the curriculum as a whole, including the entry and exit levels, the formal duration (which influences the entry and/or exit level), the extent of flexibility in pathways through the curriculum (which influences the accommodation of diversity) , and modularity (which can influence curriculum flexibility and the relationship between depth and breadth).

This is the dimension of the teaching-and-learning process where key systemic obstacles to success and equity are located, including:

- discontinuity between the outcomes of schooling and the demands of higher education, commonly known as the ‘articulation gap’ (CHE, 2013: 60);
- failure to develop language-related and other academic literacies;
- failure to provide support for major transitions in knowledge domain within curricula.

The curriculum framework therefore has a major effect on both access and success. It influences the categories of students that can responsibly be admitted, and impacts critically on ‘epistemic access’ and quality of learning, and hence on which students succeed and fail. There is evidence that in the South African context of extreme inequalities in educational background, it is not possible for a single set of curriculum parameters to provide the full range of the student body with a fair degree of equality of opportunity to succeed (CHE, 2013: 35; 97).

Despite this, the curriculum framework is still widely but incorrectly regarded as effectively immutable. Until it is recognised as a key variable in the design of the mainstream teaching-and-learning system in higher education – and an essential element of catering for diversity – it will continue to constitute a major constraint on student success.

The Consequences of Misunderstanding Where the Roots of Obstacles to Learning Lie

The three key dimensions of the teaching-and-learning system discussed above must clearly work together, as an organic whole, to successfully facilitate learning. Faults or shortcomings in any of them will inevitably impair the outcomes of the educational process. While the dimensions must function in full alignment, each nevertheless has its own unique and essential role. Therefore, when endemic obstacles to learning are discerned, it is essential that their origins in one or more of the key dimensions are analysed and traced, so that faults can be effectively addressed at source.

At the risk of over-simplification, an example of misidentification of where root causes lie may serve to illustrate this point.

A topical case is that of approaches to addressing the problem of the secondary-higher education articulation gap (for a detailed account, see Scott, 2017a: 37-39). This systemic fault arises from South Africa’s major educational inequalities and is manifested in a serious mismatch between the assumptions about academic preparedness made by the universities and the actual knowledge and skills that students bring with them from their schooling. Its existence has been officially recognised

since the 1997 higher education White Paper (DoE, 1997: section 2.34). The main systemic response, funded by the state since 2004, has been Extended Curriculum Programmes, which are designed to provide foundational learning and alternative pathways through the curriculum, based on realistic assumptions about students' prior learning. A major shortcoming, however, has been that resource allocation has thus far restricted the reach of extended programmes to under 15% of the student intake, with only modest growth in prospect over the next decade. This leaves students in 'mainstream' curricula without access to foundational and extended provision, even though analysis has indicated that a substantial proportion of these have a high probability of failing because of the articulation gap (DHET, 2012: 1; CHE, 2013: 98-99). How should this be addressed?

In recent years, while continuing its limited support for extended programmes, the DHET has invested the bulk of its mainstream educational development resources in funding a range of concurrent support interventions (via the Teaching Development Grant and now the University Capacity Development Programme). This means that the DHET has decided that concurrent support is the only academic intervention needed to deal with obstacles to learning faced by mainstream students, including structural ones arising from the curriculum framework (Fees Commission, 2017). This flies in the face of longstanding experience and analysis pointing to the ineffectiveness of concurrent support as the primary means of addressing systemic faults such as articulation failure and under-development of academic literacies (CHE, 2013: 68). The ineffectiveness comes from the anomaly – possibly futility – of expecting students to master preparatory knowledge during a course which assumes that knowledge to be already in place. Concurrent support must therefore be used as a complement to, but not a substitute for, effective structural design – or, for that matter, for appropriate curriculum orientation and content.

The DHET's decision can be seen as an example of assuming that intervention in one dimension (in this case Delivery) can overcome major faults in another (Structure). Such an incorrect assumption is likely to be costly, in that the resources directed into concurrent support will not be optimally used, and more importantly the articulation problems experienced by mainstream students will not be resolved, so the current poor performance patterns will persist.

In contrast, seeking solutions in the dimension where the articulation problems really lie, i.e. in the curriculum framework, yields good examples of the value of innovative design (CHE, 2013: 70-90 & Appendix 2). 'Reframing the problem, for example by seeing the problem as a symptom of some larger problem, is a classic design move' (Goodyear, 2015:35).

A Note on What Constitutes Valid Evidence for Educational Development

The interlinked concepts of evidence-based policymaking and evidence-based practice (originally used in Health Sciences) have been taken up by education authorities and institutions in various countries and settings, including South Africa. Aspects of these approaches have been critiqued and problematised (Botterill, 2017). However, in the South African context of urgent need for addressing gross inequalities, there is a *prima facie* case for bringing relevant systematic knowledge and research to bear on choices about policy and interventions, to try to ensure optimum effectiveness and use of scarce resources.

In this context, however, even where government or institutional authorities espouse evidence-based approaches, the evidence adduced is often not rigorous. As Head (2013: 397) puts it, ‘In some cases, the evidence that is actually utilised might be that which confirms the currently preferred position of decision-makers rather than alternative evidence which explores new options or questions business-as-usual.’ Similarly, Weiss (1979, referenced in Head, 2013: 397) identifies a type of evidence as ‘that which is used selectively to legitimate a policy position’ in contrast with ‘research-based ideas which gradually influence the way in which problems and issues are understood and eventually addressed’. Whatever the motivation, such flawed evidence serves to support policies and actions that may well be addressing the wrong problem, or the right problem in an ineffective way, resulting in costly loss of opportunity, time and resources.

The critique of evidence-based approaches has shown that ‘the relationship between knowledge, research and policy’ can be complicated (Botterill, 2017). In view of this, ‘A number of professionals have preferred the term “evidence-informed” policy-making, on the basis that decision-making is typically not derived from objective science but rather is based on reasoned argumentation’ (Head, 2013: 397). This underlines the necessity that, wherever evidence – especially quantitative data – is relied on to justify policy or substantial interventions, its validity must be thoroughly established, with sound background knowledge and with data analysed and interpreted in a rigorous and nuanced way, as objectively as possible. Moreover, given the risks of over-reliance on quantitative data, it is critical that the case for policy and the selection of strategic interventions should be supported by cogent ‘reasoned argumentation’ (op. cit.). An example of critique of the way data have been used as evidence for the choice of recent major interventions in South African higher education can be found in Scott, 2017a (13-30).

Inadequate or flawed justification for policy and interventions carries a clear risk that the interests of the sector and its stakeholders will not be well served. Given the importance of student success,

improving the outcomes of higher education should not be left to chance, unexamined predilections on the part of the authorities, ‘commonsense’ initiatives, or political expediency.

The Importance of the Inter-Relationship between the Key Dimensions of the Teaching-and-Learning Process in Designing for Student Success: An Overview

Section 5 has argued that the distinctive roles of the different dimensions of the teaching-and-learning process in facilitating good-quality learning need to be recognised, strengthened and aligned. The following is an overview of the key points of this argument.

- Interventions in one dimension of the teaching-and-learning process cannot compensate for significant shortcomings in another. If not addressed, shortcomings in any dimension put a counter-productive burden on work in the other dimensions, in efforts to compensate that are usually unsuccessful. For example, effective delivery is difficult enough in diverse classes but almost impossible in the absence of an inclusive curriculum framework or orientation.
- The different dimensions each have their own unique and essential purposes and functions, which must be brought to bear on meeting the needs of each particular context. There must thus be fit-for-purpose educational design and development in every dimension.
- At the same time, the different dimensions are necessarily complementary. For example, ‘Curriculum delivery is part of [a] dynamic interrelationship with curriculum design... Within this process “delivery” is defined as the point at which learners interact with the designed curriculum’ (JISC, n.d.). Effective design and ongoing educational development are needed to ensure that content, orientation, structure and delivery are brought into mutually-reinforcing alignment. The underlying principles of Biggs’s theory of ‘constructive alignment’ (Biggs & Tang, 2011) are valuable to apply here, albeit in a broader framework. This is a fundamental design challenge.
- The outcome of this alignment must ensure that the teaching-and-learning process as a whole serves the interests of the full range of the student body, effectively accommodating diversity.
- Each dimension must be recognised as a key site of ongoing educational development, to utilise advances in knowledge of teaching and learning, and to adjust to changes in the student body as well as in the wider context of higher education, including schooling, technology and the world of work.
- Misdiagnosis of the origins of obstacles leads to ineffective interventions, unproductive utilisation of resources and persistence of poor outcomes, because it results in treating symptoms rather than the underlying cause.

- In the South African context, it is necessary for educational policy and strategy to be based on or informed by strong evidence, with due regard to the limitations of various kinds of data and analysis. In particular, it is critical to ensure that evidence used to justify or inform higher education policy and interventions is valid, as well as transparent. Accurate and rigorously analysed data (quantitative and qualitative), combined with well-reasoned argument, can collectively provide a valid evidential basis for strategic educational change, policy development, and the selection and design of effective interventions.
- It is essential that responsibility for educational development in the different key dimensions is taken at the levels that have the requisite authority and capacity to bring the development to fruition. The DHET and institutional leadership have essential roles to play, but they have often not accepted these responsibilities adequately, or have delegated them to levels that do not have the wherewithal to carry them through, which undermines the cohesive effort needed for success. This matter is discussed further in section 6 below.

In Summary

The analysis in section 5 has identified the need to recognise and align the three dimensions of the curriculum, highlighting the importance of comprehensiveness and coherence in designing an effective teaching-and-learning process. However, this is currently not reflected in DHET priorities or most mainstream practice.

The present imbalance in attention to the three dimensions, with an undue focus on concurrent support, is an impediment to achieving substantial improvement in student success and equity of outcomes. As indicated by the persistence of negative performance patterns, the current design of the mainstream teaching-and-learning process is perpetuating the status quo, and the questions must be asked: ‘Who is benefiting from this?’ and ‘What will it take for the need for fresh thinking and more fundamental change to be recognised?’

Placing Student Success at the Heart of the Higher Education Agenda: Responsibilities, Obstacles and Enabling Conditions

This paper has argued that a comprehensive improvement strategy must be founded on a full understanding of the scope of the challenge – that is, the broad categories of *what* needs to be done. If sufficient agreement can be reached on this understanding, it opens the way for addressing, in a fully informed way, the core question: ‘What will it take to put student success at the heart of the higher education agenda, at system and institutional level?’ The answer to this question will be the

basis for the second major part of the strategy for change, involving the issues of *how* and *by whom* the goal must be achieved.

To date, various performance improvement approaches – ranging in focus from student engagement to structural curriculum reform – have been researched and implemented on a limited scale. None of these have been adequately tested in mainstream practice, primarily because the end goal has not been sufficiently prioritised by the decision-makers. This has resulted in a lack of essential conditions for progress, including decisive national debate on the issue, critical engagement by stakeholders, agreed common ground, and leadership. Consequently, interventions have been ad hoc or constrained in scope, and have hence had limited impact in relation to the magnitude of the challenge. A major shift in priorities is needed.

Giving effect to this calls for political will and concrete action. Once the initiative has been scoped and leadership agreed, moving student success to the heart of the higher education agenda requires the following key steps:

- gaining ‘sufficient consensus’ on the nature and scope of the development required, particularly across the higher education institutions;
- identifying the bodies, actors and decision-makers whose assent, active co-operation, expertise, authority and resources are essential for pursuing the end goal; and clarifying the roles and responsibilities to be expected of each;
- taking realistic account of the obstacles to the prioritisation of student success at the different levels of the system, and thereby coming to an understanding of what conditions, motivation and mindsets need to be engendered;
- developing the change strategy in detail and implementing it through realistic operational planning.

This is clearly a complex task. As in the scoping of the initiative, comprehensiveness and coherence are key, but here the need for realism and sophistication in strategy come to the fore. This is particularly because the field of higher education is characterised by multiple interests and semi-autonomous bodies and individuals.

Offering detail on the implementation of the strategy is beyond the scope of this paper. However, sections 6 and 7 aim to highlight key considerations about the issues of responsibilities, obstacles, enabling conditions, and leadership.

The Key Decision-Makers and What Should Be Expected of Them

A comprehensive change strategy must take account of all the significant higher education stakeholders, with their often-competing interests. However, this section is confined to the two most influential decision-making parties: the state and the higher education institutions.

Essentially, the state, through the DHET, has the following interlinked responsibilities in respect of prioritising student success:

- providing enabling policies, with clear goals and priorities;
- ensuring that state funding for higher education is not only sufficient to achieve quality but also directed at facilitating and rewarding student success and equity;
- actively steering the system towards the core goal by all relevant means, including planning and quality assurance as well as funding.

Its biggest challenge is to use these mechanisms to firmly guide the sector in the right strategic direction without undue prescription of approaches. The effectiveness of this role is critical for progress.

Given the distributed nature of power and autonomy in higher education, the institutions have a pivotal role in shaping how, and with what real effects, national policy is translated into practice. It is only in the institutions that teaching-and-learning approaches can be tailored to specific student bodies and conditions.

If student success is to be prioritised, the universities must be committed to:

- ensuring that their educational mission is recognised and valued as a central obligation to the public good;
- reflecting this priority in all core strategies and operations, including policy, reward systems, and staff recruitment and development;
- accepting accountability for the *outcomes* of their educational role, including graduation rates.

The status quo is far from meeting these conditions.

Obstacles to an Unequivocal Focus on Student Success

There are ample indications, outlined below, that the South African public university system is not designed around student success as its central goal. This may be attributable to the multiple functions of higher education. However, it is evident that not even the educational dimension of the universities' operation is primarily geared to – or evaluated on – the outcomes of its educational process, i.e. student success, as manifested in the quality and efficiency of its graduate production. This has major implications for the universities' view of themselves and for their value to the country.

The indicators of this situation are evident in the substantial obstacles to the prioritisation of student success that prevail in the two centres of authority: the universities and the state.

Overarching Obstacle in the Universities

In the universities, arguably the most influential underlying obstacle lies in key priorities and reward systems that collectively amount to lack of ‘parity of esteem’ for the main functions of higher education, particularly the research and educational missions (McAleese, M. et al., 2013). This imbalance characterises many academic communities around the world. As Leibowitz (2017) sums it up: in universities of all kinds and orientations, the dominant perception is that ‘research [is] valued – and rewarded – more highly than teaching’.

The lack of parity of esteem is reflected in, inter alia:

- institutional academic culture and values: what is most respected by academics individually and collectively, and what is seen as being most likely to foster career advancement;
- institutional aspirations: what the university sees as enhancing its reputation and advancement;
- criteria for academic staff recruitment, performance management, and promotions;
- the distribution of disposable revenue and resources, including the reward system;
- the reification of international university rankings, most of which privilege research over the educational mission;
- comforting myths about the responsibility for student success lying outside the higher education sector (Scott 2017c).

If the educational mission is not at least equally valued, it is likely that the majority of the academic community will not willingly prioritise it, and may resist formal accountability for the outcomes of their work as educators. In these circumstances, achieving prioritisation of student success in the universities is no light undertaking.

Obstacles at the Level of the State

The national system of university education management and support, developed and operated by the DHET, is not designed to focus clearly on student success as the end goal. While the DHET has increasingly emphasised improvement in student performance in its policy documents and in the stated purposes of educational interventions (DHET, 2017b: 3), there is unfortunately a considerable gulf between the expression of this goal and its realisation in practice, as illustrated in the following entrenched aspects of the system:

- An overarching issue is that, in practice, the system remains strongly geared to enrolment rather than improving student success and completion. For example, state funding through the university

subsidy system is generated far more by enrolled student numbers than by student success – that is, by ‘inputs’ rather than ‘outputs’ – so the incentive to improve graduate production, in the form of the DHET’s ‘teaching output grant’, is weak.

- The emphasis on inputs is reflected in high-level policy – such as the higher education and post-school education white papers and the National Development Plan – which focus more on access than graduate production. It is significant that the targets discussed in the sector (and the press) are predominantly those for enrolment growth.
- State-funded systemic interventions designed expressly to improve student success are very limited, especially in relation to equity of outcomes in mainstream provision; and funding for such interventions is tiny in comparison with that for financial aid. The Extended Curriculum Programme initiative, which is the only sector-wide intervention that addresses curriculum structure and has equity of outcomes as its central goal, is restricted to serving a small minority of the student body. Yet the state tolerates major wastage of resources arising from lack of effectiveness in the teaching-and-learning process; the quantum of subsidy that does not result in graduates amounts to billions of rands annually (CHE, 2013: 136-137).
- Pressure to massify student financial aid, however justified, is effectively preventing the much-needed reversal of the chronic under-funding of the universities’ operating and student support budgets, which are crucial to facilitating student success. In fact, in the recent contestation over financial access, the issue of student success was effectively absent (Scott 2017b). This is a telling indicator of its status.

The Need to Establish Enabling Conditions

The examples given above indicate the low priority that is accorded to student success in practice. This constitutes a primary impediment to change. A realistic strategy for prioritising student success will hinge on understanding and confronting the obstacles to it, and establishing conditions that will persuade the higher education sector – particularly the universities’ leaders and the academic community – that a central focus on fostering student success will be in their own interests as well as those of the society at large.

Detailed examination of such enabling conditions is not within the scope of this paper, but the obstacles outlined earlier indicate that they need to include a blend of incentivisation and accountability, which must be put in place at national and institutional level.

At national level, there is at present little or nothing for universities to gain materially from the effort needed for a decisive improvement in student performance, insofar as this would require shifting

energy and resources away from what may be seen as more income-generating (as well as reputation-enhancing) activities in the research domain. This constitutes a serious disincentive to prioritising student success. A key condition for improvement is thus to ensure that the funding system is amended to enable positive outcomes of a university's educational mission to be rewarded at a much higher level than at present – higher enough to stimulate significant institutional behaviour change.

This idea has been raised at various times over decades but has not been acted on because of some challenging difficulties involved. These include the risk that institutions may lower quality and standards in order to boost completion rates artificially, and the fact that historically disadvantaged universities cannot be expected to deliver the same levels of student performance as historically advantaged ones. However, difficulties like these have been addressed in other countries – for example by strengthening quality assurance, and utilising a value-added approach to measuring student performance for funding purposes. Developing such solutions in South Africa, enabling the introduction of a fair and credible system for recognising and rewarding real educational achievement, would make an exceptional contribution to fostering success across all sections of the student body. It would also provide a solid basis for directing development interventions and grants towards the same end goal.

Incentivisation of this kind is powerful, but accountability is a necessary complementary means of steering the higher education sector towards focusing on student success. At present, a university carries remarkably little formal accountability for the outcomes of its teaching-and-learning work and utilisation of educational resources. Given the many variables affecting student performance, accountability of this kind cannot justifiably hinge on simple graduation-rate targets, and must take full account of the institution's mission, student profile and resources. Nevertheless, to be effective it must be based firmly on the institution's core educational outcomes: that is, student success in its two dimensions of quantity and quality, which constitutes the institution's vital contribution to the country. It is necessary that the state's key steering mechanisms – funding, planning and quality assurance – should be geared to achieving this form of accountability.

At institutional level, establishing enabling conditions by means of incentivisation and accountability is more complex than at national level. This is primarily because academic staff – who carry most responsibility for facilitating student success – are relatively autonomous, strongly influenced by traditional academic priorities and culture, often intrinsically motivated by academic values and commitment to their discipline, and independently minded; and for practical reasons such as that it is generally not possible to quantify any individual academic's contribution to undergraduate student success. In these circumstances, it is neither feasible nor desirable to use formulaic measures to

reward individual academics for facilitating student success or to hold them to account for this; such measures are more likely, in fact, to be demotivating and counter-productive (Muller, 2017).

Nevertheless, the present position – where there is very little incentive or accountability that motivates academics to purposefully develop their expertise as professional educators – is anomalous in relation to the country's need for good-quality graduates. According to Altbach (2014):

Productivity for most of any academic system should be the measurement of effective teaching and a careful understanding of what students learn, as well as ensuring that students who enter higher education complete their studies.

Yet such measures – appropriately nuanced for academic work – are scarcely if at all used in most South African universities, whether it be for purposes of advancement or accountability (as in regular performance appraisal). Thus academics in the standard disciplines who put major effort into their educational role are in most cases doing this out of personal conviction, in spite of the disincentives involved. Moreover, academics who choose one or other higher education specialisation as their core discipline are commonly disadvantaged by the low status of the educational mission of universities. This situation conflicts fundamentally with the need to establish enabling conditions for a focus on student success.

As argued earlier, the central underlying obstacle to creating such enabling conditions in the universities is the lack of parity of esteem between their educational and research missions. This underlines the need to create such parity, not only in operational forms like criteria for promotion or other forms of advancement but most importantly in the status of 'teaching' (in its widest interpretation) and educational expertise. Given the values of the academic community, the academic status of educational expertise will emanate as much from its perceived intellectual significance and credibility as from its contribution to the institution's success.

The reasons for the generally low regard for systematic, research-based educational knowledge and capability are seldom if ever formally articulated in universities. It is time for these views to be surfaced and challenged on academic, economic and social-justice grounds. National moves to raise the profile of the universities' educational mission, as a key means of prioritising student success, would go a long way towards creating conditions for the development of parity of esteem in the institutions over time. (For a detailed discussion of this topic, see Scott, Yeld and Hendry, 2007: 62-67.)

Clearly, incorporating the development of enabling conditions within a comprehensive change strategy would represent a considerable investment of effort and time. It can be expected, however, that the return on this investment, in terms of the effectiveness and sustainability of the improvement of student success, would provide more than adequate justification.

Strategic Choice of Strategy

An obstacle of a different, non-structural kind lies in divisions within the set of organisations and individuals that actively support teaching-and-learning improvement. Differences in ideology and perspective may be largely intractable, but contestation about choice of strategy for change should be more amenable to negotiation and productive compromise.

In particular, there is a tension between insistence on a ‘total solution’, achieving the necessary changes in all aspects affecting student success in one package, and an approach that, while informed by a comprehensive vision of what is required, acknowledges that different aspects of the challenge have different time-frames, and that introducing an order of priority may be necessary for effective change.

This paper has argued for a comprehensive strategy based on an understanding of the full scope of the challenge. This is not meant to imply, however, that the total-solution approach is feasible. In fact, the other main attribute of the strategy contemplated in this paper, viz. realism, favours the alternative approach. In the latter, aspects of the concept of ‘strategic direction’ or ‘strategic intent’ (Hamel and Prahalad, 1989), which recognises complexity, unpredictability and the longer view, would be most relevant and valuable. It is important that those who are willing to work towards the prioritisation of student success should face up to these strategic issues and seek common ground, in order to avoid situations of paralysis in which ‘perfection is the enemy of the good’.

Placing Student Success at the Heart of the Higher Education Agenda: Who Will Take Leadership?

The key question here is: Who will take responsibility for the tasks of (a) achieving sufficient consensus on what developmental action is needed to substantially improve student performance, (b) overseeing the development and implementation of a comprehensive strategy for change, and (c) ensuring that the conditions that will enable the prioritisation of student success are created?

The Candidates

The following are brief comments on the positions of the bodies that could take on the leadership required.

- *The higher education institutions:* Given the current culture and funding regime, it is improbable that the universities themselves will take the lead in changing the status quo without substantial external stimulus or pressure.
- *Universities South Africa (USAf) and other representative academic bodies:* There are at present no indications of interest in taking on this role, possibly because of the same systemic influences as affect the institutions, as well as the current burden of day-to-day demands.
- *Student bodies:* There is much energy for change that can have positive effects on creating momentum, but there is insufficient unity and stability for a sustained leadership role.
- *The state, through the DHET and relevant statutory bodies:* It is clear that the DHET has an essential role in such a critical element of the higher education sector's duty to the country. In terms of authority and political power, it is clearly in the prime position to exercise leadership, but it is impeded by factors such as shortage of capacity and consequently insufficient creative links with relevant sectors of the academic community. However, if the DHET adopted a proactive stance on this matter, it would no doubt be well supported by national bodies like the CHE and probably by relevant professional organisations. In addition, it may be that new state-related initiatives, such as the Ikusasa Student Financial Aid Programme (ISFAP), will take increasing interest in student success and play a significant role.
- *The higher education development community:* This is made up primarily of academics and professionals in fields such as academic development and the first-year experience, associations that represent them, student affairs professionals, and regular academic staff with particular expertise and interest in education. Current circumstances point to a clear need for this community to mobilise itself around the student success goal and to contribute intellectual leadership, informed advocacy, and support for national bodies.

Given the significance and scope of the challenge, it is evident that the prioritisation of student success will depend on strong, astute leadership. As it is not clear where this leadership may come from, it

appears to be essential for interested civil-society bodies to ensure that the issue is increasingly brought to public attention until it gains traction.

A Special Responsibility for the Higher Education Development Community

The analysis in this paper has pointed to issues of national importance that relate strongly to the goals and values of the higher education development community and its professional associations. The current situation in higher education, including the ongoing lack of significant progress in shifting the outcomes of the system beyond ‘apartheid-era patterns of inequality’ (DHET, 2015: 56), suggests a need for moving the work of higher education development to a new level, in order to significantly influence the way the system is designed.

This in turn suggests that the higher education development community should consider returning to an overtly activist role, such as was played in opposing apartheid education and in contributing to the re-thinking of the higher education sector in the early years of democracy. This would necessarily be integrally linked to the production of scholarly work which is critical for informing and lending academic credibility to developmental projects. In the present dispensation, such a role would entail close engagement with and service to state bodies (particularly DHET and the CHE), national sector bodies (such as USAf), professional and other stakeholder organisations, and student bodies, as well as the institutions. Some engagement of this kind is taking place in various forms, but the pressing need is for work directed primarily at fostering systemic change – including researching, developing and advocating for implementable proposals for policy and related interventions.

Adding this kind of activist dimension would carry significant implications and opportunities for working in higher education development in South Africa. It would mean, for example:

- becoming involved in areas of sector-wide work over and above regular institutional responsibilities;
- undertaking ongoing groundwork with national bodies, including serving on committees, task teams and working groups, making written contributions and policy proposals, and interpreting relevant research literature; and
- undertaking research-for-policy, as well as quantitative and qualitative analysis that provides a basis for proposing or shaping developmental interventions.

One of the most valuable elements of such work is to influence dominant traditional cultures and values by changing what the sector sees as important (Scott et al., 2007: 64). This is arguably at the heart of the higher education development community's responsibility to the country.

Conclusion

There is at present no indication – in the state or the institutions – of a comprehensive vision of the higher education system that is designed to break decisively with the performance patterns of the past.

The prevailing systemic conditions, including dominant academic culture and the funding regime, influence universities' behaviours and priorities much more powerfully than statements of purpose in policies or public-interest arguments, and the dominant culture and governance system favour the status quo. It can therefore be said that the current design of the higher education system is an obstacle to placing student success, including equity of outcomes, at the heart of the higher education agenda.

The obstacles are weighty and complex, but they must be confronted. They cannot be expected to yield to ad hoc or small-scale interventions. The situation calls rather for a sophisticated, comprehensive, coherent and realistic strategy for prioritising student success as a central goal. The development of such a strategy will be most likely to identify some interventions and aspects of policy-change that can bring about significant improvement relatively swiftly. However, it must be expected that building wide support for the strategy and progressively implementing it in cumulative stages will be a longer-term project that must be based on vision and strategic intent. The resolve and patience required should be validated by the positive outcomes of facilitating student success through a system that is designed explicitly for this purpose.

1 In the interest of brevity, the term ‘graduate’ used in this paper refers to anyone holding a higher education qualification, not only a university degree.

2 The 2006 cohort data are from the early post-merger period, when the new institutions had stabilised; the 2010/11 cohort is the latest for which comparable data were available at the time of writing. There are minor methodological differences between the CHE and DHET datasets. There has evidently been improvement in the highly selective 4-year degrees but comparable data are not available.

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