

9. IN CONCLUSION

While acknowledging the major achievements gained in South African higher education since the political transition, this paper identifies patterns of performance in undergraduate educational outcomes that indicate that the sector is not meeting key needs in respect of national development and equity. It argues that the development and equity agendas are in fact converging, in that the overall need for high-level human capacity building cannot be met without catering effectively for diversity in the student intake, which makes it possible for the potential of academically talented people from all communities to be realised. The importance of these needs warrants making the improvement of graduate output a priority in the sector.

Based on analysis of the performance patterns as well as institutional experience, the paper argues that systemic responses are essential for improving the educational outcomes of the sector in line with national needs, and that the higher education sector should accept a share of the responsibility for this. Broad strategies that are seen as necessary conditions for substantial improvement include: the reform of core curriculum frameworks; enhancing the status of teaching and building educational expertise in the sector to enable the development and implementation of teaching approaches that will be effective in catering for student diversity; and clarifying and strengthening accountability for educational outcomes.

It is recognised that this represents a substantial undertaking, which will probably depend primarily on attitudes, values and understandings in the academic community. Some traditional views may have to be challenged. For example, a concept that is central to changing embedded structures and practices is that the educational process in higher education – including curriculum frameworks, the assumptions on which these are based, course design, and approaches to delivery and assessment – constitutes a significant variable affecting performance and determining who gains access and who succeeds. The way things are done is historically constructed and not neutral. However, there is often resistance to seeing the educational process as a variable, at least partly because changing embedded structures and practices is seen as eroding standards.

Given the high stakes attached to higher education, we argue that it is critical for the sector – particularly the mainstream academic staff who carry the major responsibility for teaching – to come to terms with the profile of the student body that the sector and each institution needs to cater effectively for, in the national interest. If this does not happen, it is likely that there will continue to be a mismatch between what the institutions are prepared to offer and what many students actually need to facilitate their learning. On the other hand, if the realities and obligations of our context are generally accepted in the sector, it could be a real stimulus for recognition of the importance of educational effort and expertise, and hence for creative initiatives that make a substantial difference to the outcomes of the system.