

FOREWORD

This issue of the *Higher Education Monitor* focuses on one of the most difficult and urgent topics which concern higher education institutions, government and the general public: the outcomes of higher education. The research published here was commissioned by the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) in collaboration with the Monitoring and Evaluation Directorate of the CHE in the context of a project aimed at improving the quality of teaching and learning in South African higher education.

The main purpose of this research was to make a case for greater and different forms of support for the teaching and learning core function at public higher education institutions and to point to a number of possible interventions designed to improve the quality of the educational experience afforded to undergraduate students at higher education institutions, and therefore, the quality of higher education graduates.¹

The study that Scott, Yeld and Hendry have produced takes as its point of departure an analysis of throughput rates, i.e. the calculation of how many students in a given cohort completed their degrees and graduated within the stipulated time, how many dropped out, and how many took longer than the stipulated time to graduate. The authors have gone beyond merely using throughput rates as a tool to mechanically determine the shortfall of graduates in broad fields of study in order to be able to comment on institutional inefficiencies. They have located higher education outputs in the intersection between much broader conceptual issues: access and equity on the one hand and the quality of the educational process on the other. This approach provides an opportunity to reflect on the relationship between access, equity and quality, its theoretical underpinnings, and the practical tensions and challenges faced by different stakeholders in the implementation of strategies to improve teaching and learning.

It can be argued that the constitution of access and equity as 'issues' in South African contemporary political discourse started with the Freedom Charter and that different sectors of the mass democratic movement had over time various interpretations of the definitions, implications, priorities and strategies necessary to guarantee access to and equity in higher education. Whatever the strategic and tactical differences, the political bottom line was that access and equity were a democratic right, which was constitutive of the definition of citizenship (Wolpe 1991). As the first democratic government was voted into office and policy development was followed by policy implementation, the conceptualisation of access and equity became both sharper (access to what by whom) and more statistically defined (Cloete et al, 2002). The fact that in order to respond to access and equity imperatives, higher education institutions depend on public funding (in the form of direct funding of student inputs or financial aid provided to poor students), introduced the concept of efficiency at institutional and systemic level as an important aspect in the access and equity debate.

Research in the area of access and equity has so far indicated that the expansion of the higher education system from 395,700 headcount enrolments in 1990 to 732,000 in 2005 has not necessarily meant a

1 This study focused on the public higher education sector because the DoE has an adequate base of information to construct this kind of analysis. This does not mean that effectiveness and quality of teaching and learning are not issues of concern in relation to private providers of higher education. So far issues of teaching and learning in relation to the private provider sector have been dealt with by the CHE in analyses of the outcomes of programme accreditation processes.

significant increase in the actual participation of African students in higher education (Cloete et al 2002; CHE 2004). An analysis of the distribution of student enrolments by race across major disciplinary fields shows some of the limitations that the expansion of access has had in bringing about greater equity in the South African higher education system. In 1993, 57% of all headcount student enrolments were in the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS), 24% were in Business and Commerce (BC) and only 19% in Science, Engineering and Technology (SET). By 2005, the distribution of headcount enrolments at system level had almost reached the target set by the National Plan on Higher Education² with 42.3% of students enrolled in HSS, 29.1% enrolled in BC and 28.6% in SET (DoE 2006: 30). However, these improved figures disguised the fact that Black and, particularly, African students still constitute the minority of the enrolments in SET and BC, which raises the issue of the equity of opportunity among different race groups. These figures suggest that the South African higher education system has been unable to break substantively with pre-1994 enrolment patterns.

The report of Scott et al indicates not only that the improvement of access to higher education might be less significant than initially thought, but that in terms of throughputs the higher education system as a whole is not doing very well. Of even greater concern is that student performance continues to be racially differentiated. Black students do worse than White students in most disciplinary fields and African students performed worst of all. As the authors indicate, these outcomes undermine the gains made in terms of access and raise a number of issues about the quality of the educational process and the possible reasons for the unsatisfactory results.

The problem of poor student outcomes is a complex and multilayered one which is shaped by issues such as the lack of preparedness of students and staff; the nature and organisation of teaching and learning at higher education institutions; the conceptualisation of the educational process, particularly in terms of the appropriateness of content and assessment methods and its relationship with different institutional cultures; the extent or lack of professionalisation of academic staff; the nature and extent of funding; and the role that system differentiation might have in addressing under-preparedness.

The very complexity of the issues at hand might require redefining the problem and the careful examination of the impact that individual and system level initiatives, policies and frameworks are having on equity and quality. As far as the national quality agency's responsibility goes, the HEQC has already started to investigate the impact that its conceptualisation of quality is having in improving the actual quality of the educational process through the accreditation of programmes and the conduct of institutional audits. Is the focus on teaching and learning in all HEQC's systems sufficiently deep to simultaneously support development and accountability at the different layers of higher education institutions? Could it be that the lack of sufficient participation of academics in the quality assurance system is preventing processes of change to take root at HEIs? What initiatives should be put in place to prevent the more mechanistic aspects of quality assurance from obliterating the investigation of the deeper challenges, problems and limitations faced by institutions in the process of educating a new generation of students?

2 HSS:40%; SET: 30%; BC:30%.

With regard to the higher education system, as the initial and more operational aspects of mergers come to an end, HEIs are beginning to look into the development of approaches and strategies for teaching and learning which take into account the needs of their students and staff. This could be used as a point of departure to think through their missions and roles within the higher education system in an innovative and bold manner. Those institutions not directly affected by the restructuring have an equally great responsibility in responding to the educational challenges posed by the imperatives of access with success. Many of these institutions face the challenge of looking into both the effectiveness and the conceptual underpinnings of their organisation of teaching and learning, the relationship between teaching and learning and research, and the development of the necessary mechanisms and processes to engage in a critical assessment of the practice of teaching as common sense and academic excellence and the effects this has on the educational processes and its outcomes.

The implementation of the new funding framework with its renewed focus on teaching outputs, the creation of the teaching development grant and the resourcing of foundation programmes constitute new opportunities for the Department of Education to examine the effectiveness of its own steering of the system. What are the most appropriate ways to measure and monitor the impact of these interventions? What type of cooperation from HEIs is required in this regard? These are some examples of the issues government has to grapple with in this regard.

The publication of this study is a first step in initiating a debate between and among different stakeholders at system level. The CHE hopes that this debate would culminate in a national conversation about rethinking teaching and learning in South African higher education.

Dr Lis Lange

Acting CEO

Executive Director: HEQC

REFERENCES

Cloete, N., Fenhel, R., Maassen, P., Moja, T., Perold, H., and Gibbon, T., (eds) 2002. *Transformation in Higher Education: Global Pressures and Local Realities in South Africa*. Cape Town: Juta.

Council on Higher Education, 2004. *South African Higher Education in the First Decade of Democracy*. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education.

Wolpe, H, 1991. Education and Social Transformation: Problems and Dilemmas, in Unterhalter, E., Wolpe, H. and Botha, T. (eds) *Education in a Future South Africa: policy issues for transformation*. Cape Town: Africa World Press