

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It has become widely accepted that, in the context of globalisation and the knowledge economy, higher education is vital for national development, not least in terms of the need for an appropriate number and mix of graduates of good quality. The extent to which the graduate output of South Africa's higher education sector is meeting national needs is therefore a key concern, highlighted recently by government's emphasis on economic development and setting of a 6% growth rate target. *Prima facie*, indicators such as shortages of high-level skills and the concurrent incidence of graduate unemployment suggest that there is a significant mismatch between the output of the sector and the needs of the economy. In addition, data produced recently by the Department of Education (DoE), in the form of national cohort studies, show some disturbingly low levels of performance in the sector.

This paper aims to contribute to higher education development by making a case (a) that the improvement of graduate output – in terms of key parameters such as size, shape, equity, efficiency and quality – should be accepted as a central driver of higher education policy, planning and resourcing, and (b) that improving the effectiveness of the educational process in higher education is an essential element of improving graduate output. The basis of the case is the contention that concerted action is needed to change the current patterns of poor performance in the sector, in the interests of meeting national developmental needs.

The paper provides a basic analysis of current student performance patterns, drawing primarily on disaggregation of cohort data produced by the DoE. Notwithstanding significant improvements in access, the analysis shows substantial shortcomings in performance in terms of completion rates, equity of outcomes, and efficiency, all of which are important for meeting national needs.

In the interests of drawing attention to what can be done to improve the output of the sector, some key factors affecting student performance in the South African context are identified. It is recognised that there are a range of such factors, some outside and others within the sector's control. Particular attention is given to considering some indicators of performance and prospects in the school sector, and it is concluded that improvement in schooling should not be relied on in itself as the primary means of achieving substantial improvement in graduate output and equity of outcomes in higher education. The paper then focuses on aspects of the educational process that are within the control of the higher education sector, and argues that making a commitment to improving output, particularly by means of improving the effectiveness of teaching and learning in higher education itself, should be a central element of the sector's contribution to transformation and development.

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. Strategies that are seen as necessary conditions for improvement include: the reform of core curriculum frameworks; 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.

Since some key obstacles are embedded in traditional higher education structures and practices, it is recognised that bringing about positive change constitutes a substantial leadership challenge, involving strengthening both accountability and incentives. The paper concludes with an outline of the kind of planning, monitoring and professional development initiatives that it is suggested will be needed to constitute a comprehensive capacity building approach that can address the importance and scale of the challenge.