

# A CASE FOR IMPROVING TEACHING AND LEARNING IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is now widely accepted that, in the contemporary context of the knowledge society and economic globalisation, higher education is vital for development in all its facets. The higher education sector has a range of roles but its traditional, interlinked functions of research and teaching – that is, knowledge creation and high-level human capacity development – continue to represent its key contributions and responsibilities. In the South African context, the inclusiveness of the higher education sector is also a key factor affecting its value to the society. Given the significance attached to higher education, it is important for the performance of the sector, in all its main functions, to be critically assessed. This paper is concerned with the educational role of higher education, and particularly with the capacity of the sector to meet the country's growing need for an appropriate number and mix of graduates of good quality.

Recent issues in South Africa have prompted a renewed focus on higher education and its role in national development. Government's emphasis on economic development, the establishment of clear growth targets and the introduction of ASGISA (the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa) have highlighted the importance of advanced skills, and shortages of such skills have been identified as one of the major obstacles to development (see for example Jipsa 2006). The role of different education sectors in delivering appropriate education and training has consequently attracted much attention. Policy-making has lately been directed particularly at the reform and expansion of Further Education and Training (FET) but higher education has also come under the spotlight.

The skills issue is complex and contested but, in relation to higher education, it has served to raise important questions about the goals and performance of the sector. For many, these questions need to extend well beyond skills for economic development and encompass wider matters of social and cultural development and inclusiveness.

In the context of the debate on higher education and skills, the possible need and justification for further state investment in the higher education sector has also arisen (DoE 2006a). This has happened in a period when sector-wide, longitudinal data on student success have become available through the Department of Education (DoE) for the first time. Since the data are disturbing, they raise more specific questions about performance in the sector, what kind of investment would be optimal, and what it would take to ensure that higher education can progress towards meeting national needs.

These developments point to the need for detailed analyses of the various key elements of higher education to be undertaken, for the purpose of stimulating a review of priorities and providing a research-informed basis for the further development of the sector in its second

decade since the political transition. Considerable work has been done on knowledge production and policy development, and a major overview study, *South African Higher Education in the First Decade of Democracy*, has been published by the Council on Higher Education (CHE 2004). Valuable studies have also been undertaken on educational topics, including a wide range of qualitative studies as well as quantitative work on, for example, access and enrolment (e.g Cooper and Subotzky 2001; Cloete and Bunting 2000). However, the absence of detailed longitudinal data on student progression has until recently constrained research on the educational performance and output of the sector as whole. This paper is offered as a contribution to analysis of this aspect of the sector.

The study on which this paper is based was commissioned from UCT's Centre for Higher Education Development by the CHE as part of the 'Improving Teaching and Learning for Success' (ITLS) project of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC). The HEQC's Directorate for Quality Promotion and Capacity Development has a mandate to improve teaching and learning through building capacity in the higher education sector, and ITLS is a means to that end. The following extracts from the project agreement outline its purpose:

The purpose ... is to contribute to improving the educational outcomes of South African higher education by building capacity ... for effective, high-quality provision and management of the educational process. ... 'Effective' here refers to meeting national higher education goals relating to the educational function of higher education, and thus includes effectiveness in addressing equity, efficiency and appropriateness of outcomes as well as quality and standards. ... (ITLS) is intended to contribute to the development of an effective and systematic capacity-building approach and plan.

The section of the project covered in this paper entails research on student performance patterns across the higher education sector, and educational strategies designed to improve this performance. At this stage it is focused on undergraduate performance. There are two main aims:

- to make a case for the importance of improving graduate output by increasing the effectiveness of the educational process in higher education, in the interests of national development; the case is based on analysis and interpretation of current student performance patterns in the sector;
- to provide analysis of major factors affecting graduate output, with a view to (a) identifying educational strategies that can substantially improve student progression, and (b) considering the implications for policy development and for capacity building in relation to teaching-and-learning across the sector.

There has long been awareness of unsatisfactory student performance patterns in the higher education sector, particularly in relation to first-year attrition and, in the last two decades, concerns about 'equity of outcomes', as the higher education White Paper termed it (DoE 1997). The awareness has, however, been based largely on institutional experience and data, and the problems and challenges could not be quantified across the sector.

Recently, however, the maturing of the Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS) has made it possible for the DoE to compile longitudinal data on the progression of all students and to produce broad undergraduate cohort studies, starting with the 2000 first-time-entering intake. The availability of these data has created the opportunity for more in-depth analysis of sector-wide performance patterns, disaggregated by categories such as race, qualification type and subject. It is analysis of this kind that has been undertaken in the ITLS project.

As implied in the two aims specified above, the purpose of this paper is developmental. The limitations of quantitative analysis are fully acknowledged but it is intended, and hoped, that the data analysis and interpretation presented here will provide a useful basis for considering policy development, resource allocation and further research, particularly the kind of qualitative research that is at the heart of understanding and improving the teaching-and-learning process.

The body of the paper comprises the following main sections:

- What should the higher education sector be aiming to achieve?
- What is the higher education sector achieving? Key patterns in graduate output
- Improving graduate output as a national priority
- Indicators of the need for systemic change
- Where does responsibility for improvement lie? Key factors affecting student performance in higher education
- Educational strategies for improving graduate output
- Approaches to building educational capacity in the higher education sector

### **A note on terminology**

- The 'race' or 'population group' categories used here are those used by Statistics SA with the term 'black' referring to 'African Black'.
- Various terms are used generically for the sake of brevity. For example, 'undergraduate' refers to national diplomas as well as all first degrees. Notes on this are included where appropriate in the text.
- In keeping with usage in other education sectors, the term 'professional development' is used here to mean developing the capacity of academic staff as professional educators.

