RESEARCH ARTICLE

Designing the South African Higher Education System for Student Success

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Abstract

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 responsibilities that must be taken by the key stakeholders and the underlying obstacles that must be addressed.

The paper offers an outline of the major points of the argument, including the importance of applying design principles to any comprehensive response to the need to place student success at the heart of the higher education agenda.

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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 graduates 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 has put 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*, 27 September 2017)

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, p. 20). Especially in contexts where life-chances are strongly dependent on educational attainment, 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 the lead 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' – should be strongly welcomed. This paper is based on 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 three key constituent ones that need to be addressed:

1. Why should student success be at the heart of the higher education agenda?
2. What will it take to put it there, at system and institutional level?
3. What kinds of changes and developmental interventions are required to make substantial improvement in performance actually happen?

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, sec. 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. It is this educational mission that is the focus of this paper.

The meaning of student success

There is a long history of debate about the complexity of the outcomes 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 and society at large – student success carries the essential meaning of mastering a field of learning sufficiently to earn a sound tertiary qualification. A definition of the goal of student success used by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) captures this succinctly: "Enhanced student learning with a view to increasing the number of graduates with attributes that are personally, professionally and socially valuable" (CHE, 2014, p. 1).

It is this meaning of student success on which the argument in this paper is based. The end goal is thus seen as the successful completion of studies, and the key unit of measure is graduates. Particularly in contexts like South Africa, access to higher education has minimal value without successful completion (CHE, 2013, pp. 32–34). Student success therefore has a critical transformative role, for individuals and the country as a whole.

Central proposition

A fundamental judgement that has 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 old, persistent, racially skewed and unsuccessful patterns of provision and hence of performance.

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 purpose is to ensure that higher education makes its full contribution to social and economic advancement and to achieving social cohesion (Pandor, 2005). A key implication of this proposition is that the higher education teaching-and-learning system is currently not designed for this unequivocal focus.

There are two considerations that are inherent in the proposition. Firstly, 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.

Secondly, 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 student learning and thereby the fulfilment of the students' educational aspirations; this is best manifested in successful completion of the programmes the students embark on, provided always that the programmes are of appropriate quality*. 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. The sub-goals – whether they concern, for example, staff development, educational research or student financial aid – are crucial to achieving the end goal but must not be reified as ends in themselves, lest sight of the end goal should be obscured.

Student Success as the End Goal

This section offers a brief substantiation for seeing student success as the end goal, 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. 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, pp. 39–53; Scott et al., 2007, pp. 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, pp. 41–42; CHE, 2017, p. 5).

The country needs to confront 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; and
- significant racial inequalities persist.

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

Moreover, comparing contact cohort performance in the biggest two qualification types since the institutional mergers indicates virtually no improvement over the period, overall or by population group, and persistent racial disparities:[1]

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1   The 2006 cohort data are from the early post-merger period, when the institutions had re-stabilised; the 2010/11 cohort is the latest for which comparable data are available. 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.

Table 1: Comparison of **contact** completion rates of the 2006 cohort (from CHE) and the 2010/2011 cohort (from DHET) by qualification type and population group

Population group	3-Year diplomas: graduated within 5 years (%)		3-Year degrees: 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, pp. 45, 49; DHET, 2017b, pp. 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, sec. 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, pp. 4–5). To compound this, completion rates remain racially skewed, neutralising much of the improvement in access (DHET, 2017a; Scott, 2017a, pp. 18–22). The resulting failure of equity of outcomes is encapsulated in the fact that only 7% of African and coloured youth are succeeding in higher education.

The extent and the persistence of lack of equity of outcomes have a major 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, p. 52).

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, p. 56) indicates insufficient 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

The shortcomings in student success are severely hindering progress towards a range of key societal and economic goals (CHE, 2013, p. 32). 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, duly supported by statutory national bodies. It is consequently the obligation of the sector as a whole, including the DHET, to play its full role in societal advancement by ensuring the requisite graduate output and outcomes.

It seems clear that the higher education sector cannot fulfil this obligation – 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

The need for a comprehensive strategy for change

If the argument is valid that student success is the end goal, 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 of the higher education sector and government, with the purpose of ensuring that effective means of achieving a decisive improvement in student performance can be designed, committed to, and brought to fruition in practice.

The following steps are essential for designing an effective 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 an effective new approach to advancing student success;
- gaining in-depth understanding, and sufficient acceptance, of the nature and scope of the systemic changes and interventions necessary for optimising student success;
- specifically identifying the authorities and bodies that must take responsibility for making appropriate policy and for designing and implementing the necessary developments at different levels of the system;
- determining what kind of environment and enabling conditions will best foster the work, 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 has 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, pp. 70–90). As the

performance figures show, however, they have not had the collective impact needed for a decisive break from "apartheid-era patterns of inequality" (DHET, 2015, p. 56). The central challenge, then, is to establish approaches that can be applied in the mainstream teaching-and-learning process across the sector, to benefit all students who need them.

The complexity, magnitude 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*. Historically, the impact and the sustainability of developmental initiatives have been greatly limited because the initiatives have been fragmented or have not taken realistic account of contrary interests at institutional or sector level.

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 some key characteristics, including:

- intentionality and political will, without which there is no genuine commitment;
- systemic rather than peripheral approaches, to match the scale of the need;
- comprehensiveness in scope, including clear delineation of linkages between related areas of the strategy;
- realism, not pursuing naïve solutions; and
- design thinking, as 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 a range of means towards a specific end, and creativity. All of these are central to effective educational development.

The relevance of 'design for learning' has special features, for example:

- "… design is probably most powerful when conceived as the intelligent centre of the whole teaching-learning lifecycle." (Goodyear, 2015, p. 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., p. 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., p. 38)
- "Design usually entails resolving tensions between competing objectives." (op. cit., p. 35)

The potential of 'design for learning' to refresh teaching-and-learning approaches, to better match contemporary conditions, is the basis for the case that commitment to coherent design should underpin higher education development.

Examples of analysis for a strategy for student success

Detailed analysis of what needs to go into a comprehensive improvement strategy is beyond the compass of this paper. However, the remaining sections offer examples of analysis in two key areas of the strategy, viz. (a) the nature and scope of the developments needed for optimising student success, and (b) the roles and responsibilities that different bodies need to take to bring about an unequivocal focus on student success.

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

In order to design the higher education sector for student success, the essential first 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, pp. 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 area 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, pp. 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 it and for the students' learning needs.

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 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, p. 60);
- failure to develop language-related and other academic literacies; and
- 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, pp. 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, 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 key 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, pp. 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, sec. 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, p. 1; CHE, 2013, pp. 98–99). How should this be addressed?

In recent years, while continuing its limited support for extended programmes, the Department of Higher Education and Training (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. 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 effectively used, and more importantly the articulation problems among mainstream students will not be resolved and 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, pp. 70–90 and 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, p. 35).

The importance of the inter-relationship between the key dimensions of the teaching-and-learning process in designing for student success: An overview

The following is an overview of the key points arising from the analysis in this section.

- 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 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 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.
- 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. This undermines the cohesive effort needed for success.

Conclusion

The analysis above 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 need is not reflected in DHET priorities or most current 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 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: What will it take?

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 form 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. However, 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.

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', in the institutions as well as in the national bodies, on the nature and scope of the development required (as discussed above);
- 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; and
- developing the change strategy in detail and implementing it through a realistic operational plan.

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, given that the field of higher education is characterised by multiple interests and semi-autonomous bodies and individuals.

Offering any detail on the implementation of the strategy is beyond the scope of this paper, so the remaining sections aim just to highlight key considerations about the issues of responsibilities, obstacles and leadership.

The key decision-makers and what should be expected of them

Higher education has multiple stakeholders but this section is confined to the two most influential decision-making parties, the state and the institutions.

Essentially, the state has two interlinked responsibilities in respect of prioritising student success: providing enabling policies; and ensuring that state funding for higher education is directed at facilitating and rewarding student success and equity. 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 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; and
- accepting accountability for the *outcomes* of their educational role, including graduation rates.

The status quo is far from meeting these conditions, as outlined below.

Obstacles to an unequivocal focus on student success

There are ample indications that the educational operation of the public university system is not designed around student success as its end goal. In particular, universities are not held to account for the outcomes of their educational process, as manifested in the quality and efficiency of their graduate production.

A realistic strategy for prioritising student success will hinge on a thorough, candid understanding of the obstacles to it. Here are examples.

In the universities, arguably the most influential obstacle is lack of 'parity of esteem' for the main functions of higher education. 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". 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. Since culture and attitudes cannot be imposed by fiat, sophisticated strategy will be needed to create alternative incentives and conditions to modify institutional culture.

Within the state, the university education management system is not designed around student success as the end goal either, despite recent attention to student performance (DHET, 2017b, p. 3). This shows particularly in the funding system, which is geared to enrolments rather than graduates, chronically underfunds operating budgets and interventions designed to improve student success, and tolerates major wastage of resources arising from under-performance (CHE, 2013, pp. 136–137).

The fact that, in the recent contestation over financial access, the issue of student success has been absent (Scott, 2017b) is telling. The low priority of student success evident in such examples constitutes a primary obstacle to any strategy for change.

Who will take leadership in fostering a focus on student success?

There are two major leadership tasks: (a) achieving sufficient consensus on what developmental action is needed, and (b) creating the conditions that will enable the prioritisation of student success.

Considering who should assume leadership is beyond the scope of this paper. Two key points warrant noting, however. Firstly, in terms of authority and political power, the DHET must exercise leadership, but it is impeded by factors such as shortage of capacity. Strong support would therefore be needed from national bodies (like the CHE), relevant professional organisations, and new organisations arising from the reconstruction of student financial aid.

Secondly, there is an opportunity for the higher education development community – made up primarily of academics and professionals in fields such as academic development and the first-year experience, student affairs professionals, and regular university staff with particular expertise in education – to play a special role: to mobilise around the student success goal and to contribute intellectual leadership, informed advocacy, and support for national bodies.

Conclusion

There is at present no indication – in the state or the institutions – of a 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 management 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 goal and facilitating student success in practice through a system that is designed explicitly for this purpose.

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