

From Equity to Efficiency

Access to higher education in South Africa

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abstract

In South Africa, the focus of the democratic government elected in 1994 has shifted from the need to achieve equity in relation to access to higher education to the need to achieve greater efficiency in terms of the way the tertiary system functions as a whole. One result of this shift is that debates about what it means to provide 'epistemological access' in terms of curricula and teaching methodologies have been sidelined in favour of the need to develop curricula which will allow students to become members of a global workforce. This article examines issues related to access not only in terms of the theoretical debate just outlined but also in terms of the way financial and other constraints impact on the higher education system itself.

keywords *access, efficiency, equity, higher education, South Africa*

introduction

IN SOUTH AFRICA, access to higher education has long been problematic. During the apartheid era, the policy of 'separate development' not only ensured that the black majority were denied the sort of learning experiences which would prepare them for tertiary study but also that access to well resourced institutions of higher education was largely available only to white students. Election of a democratic government in 1994 has not resolved these problems; divisions in the higher education system created as a result of apartheid have proved hard to eradicate, and the school system continues to fail the majority of students in terms of the quality of learning experiences it makes available to them. Faced with this situation, the most obvious goal for the democratic government in relation to access to higher education is the achievement of equity. At the same time, however, the need for South Africa

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to join a rapidly globalizing economy after years of isolation has placed great emphasis on production of a skilled workforce. But the reforms aimed at achieving a skilled workforce are often at odds with those intended to facilitate equity of access to higher education. Pressure to produce tangible evidence of transformation more than eight years after the transition to democracy also means that the government has to evaluate a higher education system that has been notoriously inefficient in terms of the value for money it can provide. As a result the South African higher education system is subject to a number of contending pressures, which are explored in this article.

from equity . . .

The earliest attempts to achieve a more equitable dispensation with regard to access to higher education in South Africa were located in the historically white liberal universities in the early to mid-1980s. These universities took advantage of loopholes in the law to admit a small number of black students deemed to have the potential to succeed at tertiary level provided that appropriate support was offered. In those days, 'appropriate' support tended to consist of the provision of additional classes in study 'skills' and language, supplemented by additional tutorials in the mainstream courses. Often funded by liberal donors, such academic support initiatives assumed that problems related to the provision of access could be attributed to 'deficiencies' experienced by individual students, which could be addressed in an adjunct manner. In the late 1980s, however, another discourse emerged which constructed problems related to access very differently. In the terms of this discourse, successful access to higher education was not dependent on black students addressing the deficiencies they brought with them to tertiary study, but on higher education institutions examining their curricula, assessment practices and teaching methodologies in order to consider the extent to which they impeded or facilitated access to an African majority. Responsibility for 'disadvantage' was thus shifted from individuals (deemed to carry this burden with them from their socio-cultural backgrounds in 'homeland' or township schools) to the institutions, which were seen to construct that disadvantage through a reliance on curricula, assessment practices and teaching methodologies that had their origins in northern, western, highly developed societies. In this discourse, therefore, the achievement of equity regarding access to higher education was an issue of institutional and systemic transformation rather than individual remediation.

In the 1990s, understandings of the idea of 'discourse' itself (see, for example, Kress, 1989) allowed the construct of 'disadvantage', and thus problems associated with access to higher education, to be developed even further. The idea that access to academic discourses could only be achieved through a process

of enculturation – involving the development of a new ‘identity’, in Gee’s (1990) terms – rather than through the development of a set of a-cultural, a-social, a-political ‘skills’, had radical implications for those working to make access to South African institutions of higher education more equitable.

One such implication was a change in the role assigned to staff employed to assist black students in gaining what Morrow (1993) termed ‘epistemological access’ to the institution. Whereas those employed in academic support initiatives had traditionally spent their time working with students in areas such as language development and the acquisition of study skills, the shift in understanding of ‘disadvantage’ now required them to assist *staff* with curriculum development, assessment and teaching. The majority of these academic support practitioners had been employed on the basis of their expertise as teachers, and many thus lacked the status conferred by postgraduate qualifications as well as the experience to be able to move to a role involving the development of academic staff as educators. Furthermore, the marginalized position of many academic support units in institutional hierarchies, and the fact that the majority of posts were insecure because of their dependence on donor rather than institutional funding, also resulted in high staff turnover. Few practitioners, then, ‘stayed the course’ and developed sufficient understanding of the critical theories that supported the shift of responsibility for disadvantage. Nor had they the academic profile and experience to be able to enjoy credibility with their academic peers. One result of this was that both of the contending discourses, constructing the notion of ‘disadvantage’ (and, thus, problems associated with access) as inherent either to the student or to the institution, became more firmly entrenched. Another equally significant consequence was that the capacity to conduct research that would illuminate issues related to the provision of epistemological access was not developed.

The entrenchment of opposing discourses was exacerbated by resistance within institutions to the need for change in areas such as curriculum, assessment and teaching methodology. As regards mainstream academics and faculty structures, the location of problems associated with access in the individual rather than the institution meant that life could continue as usual. In many institutions, therefore, a change of name for the initiatives intended to help students gain epistemological access to higher education and signal changes in understandings of the ‘problem’, from *Academic Support* to *Academic Development*, bore no relation to the type of work expected of practitioners in the field.

. . . to efficiency

Given the role educational issues had always played in the struggle against apartheid, prompting, for example, the Soweto riots of 1976, educational

reform was one of the first priorities for the new government following the democratic election in 1994. One of the first pieces of major reform was the South African Qualifications Act, which established a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) administered by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) in 1995. The reasoning behind establishment of the NQF was the need to standardize and assure the quality of qualifications across a system that was torn, not only by racial divisions, but also, at higher education level, by a distinction between the universities and other, more vocationally-based institutions and between formal and vocational or workplace-based training. Establishment of a qualifications framework, it was argued, would also promote life-long learning, mobility, progression through the educational system and, thus, skills development at national level. Linked to establishment of the NQF was the introduction of Outcomes Based Education (OBE) at all levels of the education system. This move was prompted by the needs both to ensure the use of a common principle to register qualifications within the framework and to produce citizens with the skills necessary for South Africa to join a rapidly globalizing economy. In addition to the specific learning outcomes that needed to be developed for each qualification, a number of 'critical, cross-field outcomes' were identified. These 'critical outcomes' encompassed generic capacities such as the ability to work in a team and to communicate effectively, as well as the ability to 'develop entrepreneurial opportunities' and to 'explore educational and career opportunities' (SAQA, 2000). Related to the SAQA Act of 1997 was the Skills Development Act of 1998 which, as its name suggests, was intended to promote skills development nationally through the introduction of a levy on all employers and various other measures that would produce the workforce needed for economic growth.

As a result of this legislation, South African institutions of higher education have been involved in registering qualifications on the NQF since 1998, a process which has generated a great deal of curriculum reform. For Kraak (1999), the rapid rise of the outcomes-based educational discourse associated with educational reform can be partly attributed to its use of a radical popular rhetoric of an earlier initiative, People's Education, which had its roots in the struggle against apartheid. The aims of the People's Education movement included achievement of a high level of education for all sectors of the population and a bridging of the gap between theory and practice, as well as the democratization of education in general. According to Kraak, the use of terminology and ideals associated with this radical alternative to the 'Bantu' education system imposed by the apartheid government, gave outcomes-based educational discourses a legitimacy they might not otherwise have achieved. Such legitimacy then contributed to the dominance of outcomes-based discourses in policy-making circles. And the result of this dominance is, for Kraak, a 'micro-level obsession'

with the specification of skills and competencies at the expense of a shift away from 'macro level concerns about a divided ET system and unequal society' (Kraak, 1999: 53). The focus has moved, in other words, from the achievement of equity in higher education and the use of higher education to achieve a more equitable society, to the use of higher education to achieve efficiency in terms of the country's ability to contribute to a global economy.

The need to comply with legislation that promoted an outcomes-based approach was not the only impetus to widespread curriculum reform in higher education, however. As institutions that had been designated for one race only opened their doors to all South Africans towards the end of the 1980s, enrolments in the higher education system grew rapidly; from 1990 to 1994, for example, by 33 per cent (Bunting, 2002). By 1998, however, enrolments were in decline, partly as a result of national government's inability to meet the need for student funding but also because of a decrease in the number of matriculants produced by the secondary system. This decline in student enrolments hit all institutions, although historically black institutions that often offered the poorest facilities were hardest hit. The need to ensure institutional and departmental viability resulted in wide scale reorganization of departments, schools and faculties and also in the development of curricula intended to appeal to students who needed to be sure of employment once they had graduated. As a result of the focus on skills development associated with establishment of the NQF, the introduction of an outcomes-based approach to education and the need to secure student enrolment, a tremendous growth in the number of vocationally oriented programmes was experienced across the system as a whole.

This shift towards efficiency has also been exacerbated by figures detailing graduation and retention rates within the system. In 1993, the graduation rate of students enrolled at universities was only 17 per cent. At technikons, the figure was even lower, at 10 per cent. Retention rates are similarly problematic, with an average of 17 per cent of students being lost across the system in 1999. (Bunting, 2002) When enrolments in different areas of study are considered in relation to retention, and graduation rates are taken into account, further problems emerge since the system produces a preponderance of graduates in the Humanities and Social Sciences rather than in the Sciences and Technology. The needs to reduce wastage and improve throughput, and to ensure value for money with respect to what the system can offer in terms of skills output, have therefore contributed to the drive towards efficiency.

the practical consequences

In practical terms, how have these pressures played themselves out within the system as regards the provision of access to higher education in the early 2000s?

One of the most noticeable effects is increased competition between institutions for a pool of matriculants diminished not only because of failures in the system at secondary level but also because of the impact of HIV/AIDS. Sophisticated advertising campaigns often promoting the marketability of graduates have become commonplace. At the same time, the drop in the number of students available to fill places has also prompted some institutions to use Senate discretionary rules to admit students without the matriculation exemption on the school-leaving certificate previously necessary for admission to higher education.

In 2001 and 2002, governmental concern at a perceived lack of efficiency in higher education has resulted in an attempt to use institutional planning mechanisms and funding to 'steer' the system in appropriate directions. Targets for enrolments have been set, with the focus on reducing participation in the Arts and Humanities in favour of Science and Technology. Plans to relate funding to throughput rather than simple enrolment have also been announced, in an attempt to encourage institutions to ensure students' progression through provision of quality learning environments. Also under consideration is a proposal to earmark funding to encourage the development of foundation programmes, intended not only to facilitate access to and progression within higher education (Scott, 2001) but also to shift students from the heavily subscribed areas of Arts and Humanities to Science and Technology.

Regardless of whatever measures are put in place to ensure that the South African higher education system meets national goals, the question of what constitutes 'epistemological access' to the system remains contentious. Calls for the development of curricula that would acknowledge the African identity of the majority of students, characteristic of the mid-1990s, have been dominated by market-based, efficiency discourses promoting skills-based, vocationally orientated programmes. All too often the characteristics of the graduate of these programmes defined in terms of learning outcomes, are as, if not more, alien to black working class students than the Eurocentric curricula they replaced. The emergence of such programmes thus means that issues related to the provision of epistemological access have become more, rather than less, crucial when the experiences that black working class students bring to higher education are considered. Understandings of epistemological access as the development of a set of skills which will allow students to engage with tertiary study continue to compete with understandings which relate epistemological access to the development of the new identities which will allow them to graduate. All too often, however, claims about the 'problems' students experience as they enter higher education are based on assumption rather than research (Boughiey, 1998), yet production of the sort of research needed to facilitate meaningful debate remains a significant problem.

In South Africa, therefore, access to higher education continues to be problematic, not only because of debates over the nature and role of tertiary education in a developing nation but also because of the way understandings of what constitutes access are constructed. The years since the democratic elections in 1994 have failed to resolve these problems in spite of major attempts to reform the system. It remains to be seen whether the next eight years will see any greater success.

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biographical note

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