



Briefing Paper 299

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Barriers to Access in Higher Education

"Sow a thought and you reap an action; sow an act and you reap a habit; sow a habit and you reap a character; sow a character and you reap a destiny."

- Charles Reade

1. Introduction

Despite the numerous well-known problems and weaknesses that bedevil our primary and secondary education systems, there is generally a steady increase in the number of young people matriculating with marks that allow them to apply for a place in a tertiary institution. Unfortunately, for many of these hard-working learners, qualifying for university admission is not enough; they face additional challenges, some of which were discussed at a recent roundtable discussion, hosted by the Catholic Parliamentary Liaison Office (CPLO) and the Rural Education Access Programme (REAP), on 'Removing the barriers to access and success in higher education'. This briefing paper draws on the presentations made by the speakers and the general discussion that followed.

2. The Context

In his budget speech in April this year, the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande, said that his department is obliged, by the performance agreement with President Jacob Zuma, to increase the production of graduates in engineering, education, the natural sciences, and human and animal health sciences. There is a special need for an increase in black and women graduates.

The Minister's commitment is an acknowledgement by government that it needs to

do more to address the dismal participation and completion rates in higher education. For the last 18 years the participation and completion rates of African and coloured under-graduates in particular have been dismally low.

2.1. Participation rates

Based on gross enrolment rates derived from the 2008 Higher Education Information Management System (HEMIS), the participation rates for white and indian 20-24 year olds were 56% and 45% respectively; among the African and coloured populations the rate was only 13%¹. The overall participation rate is just 16%, compared to an average of approximately 70% for North America and Western Europe.

2.2. Completion rates

According to the latest statistics, South Africans take much longer than usual to complete their studies. Less than 50% of undergraduates complete their three-year degrees within five years, while only 40% of those enrolled in three-year national diploma programmes finish within five years. Only 58% of undergraduates complete their B.Com degrees within five years, a figure which drops to 48% for B.Sc undergraduates. For the four-year professional degrees, such as engineering and business management, the statistics tell a sad story - only 41% of engineering students and 35% of business students complete their degrees within five years.²

Students enrolled for three-year national diplomas do far worse. Only 29% of those enrolled for engineering diplomas complete them within five years, while just 37% complete their science diplomas within five years. The statistics for BA and BSocSc degrees are slightly better – just more than 50% for either. In the 4 year professional degrees like health and education more than 60% of the students complete their degrees within 5 years. The statistics are telling – the completion times for the numerate degrees and diplomas are much longer than for health or education related degrees and diplomas.

White students also fare much better than their African and coloured compatriots. According to Professor Scott, approximately only 5% of African youth succeed in any form of higher education.

The consequence of the dismal participation and completion rates is that South Africa is unable to close the huge skills-gap that so negatively affects our economy. To improve on these figures, government and higher education institutions need to address the barriers to higher education access and success. What, then, are these barriers?

3. Barriers to Higher Education Access and Success

3.1. Socio-economic factors

In South Africa, as elsewhere, socio-economic circumstances are a strong determinant of access to quality schooling. Where children live, and what their parents earn, often determines what school they will be able to attend, which in turn impacts on their level of preparedness for academic life. The prospects of a rural child are significantly more dire than an urban child's – the poor quality of rural schooling is well documented.³ In a report by Chrissie Boughey, she states that it is a well-known fact that “the home and the context in which the home is located [is] . . . critical in preparing students for higher education”⁴.

Factors such as nutrition and early-childhood health play an important part in a child's mental and intellectual development, and children living in unfavourable socio-economic situations are clearly at a disadvantage here. Parents' capacity to complement and support the formal instruction a child receives at school is also

significant in reinforcing and consolidating what the child learns. Where parents are illiterate, for example, or where long hours of work and commuting leave them with little time to spend with their children, the latter's intellectual development can suffer. Although it may be difficult to establish how many South African children are affected in this way, there is no doubt that it is a significant problem.

3.2. Poor schooling

According to Prof Ian Scott, South Africa is not necessarily short of matriculants with the potential to succeed at higher education institutions, but potential alone cannot overcome the 'under-preparedness' which is often an obstacle to access and success. Scott further suggests that the best way for a higher education institution to get the most out of undergraduates with potential is to address the barriers to success that it can control – such as its curricula. All curricula, including those at institutions of higher education, are designed on the basis of assumptions, e.g., that an undergraduate has a certain, necessary level of knowledge, gained through 12 years of schooling, to be able to deal with what is required at university or college. However, evidence strongly suggests that matriculants (and especially those from township and rural schools) are 'under-prepared' and do not always have the requisite subject and content knowledge required for higher learning.

To compensate for the negative impact of the under-preparedness of undergraduates, institutions of higher education have started to implement extended programmes (adding an additional foundation year to a three-year programme) for certain degrees. The Department of Higher Education and Training is currently also reviewing the university entrance requirements. The government-funded⁵ extended programmes are the higher education institutions' “systemic response to the systemic faultlines”⁶ to ensure that there is no shortage of qualified candidates in key subjects (for example science and maths); that the first year attrition rate (one in four first-year students drop out) is improved; and that the completion rates are greatly enhanced.

The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) is also considering reviewing minimum admission requirements (the matric pass requirements to get into university). Currently, matriculants who pass the National

Senior Certificate with an average of between 40 – 49% can study towards a diploma, while an average of between 50 - 59% will enable a matriculant to enrol for a bachelor's degree (called the 'bachelor's pass'). Prof Scott argues that the current bachelor's pass is a very poor indicator of the preparedness of a potential student; however the expectation is created that the bachelor's pass is a ticket out of poverty.

The DHET, on the other hand, is of the opinion that these minimum admission requirements should be raised to ensure that better-prepared students enrol at institutions of higher education. Consequently, the DHET is not only going to review the minimum admission requirements, but also the list of subjects a candidate needs to take (and pass) to enter university⁷. However, with the current extended programmes reaching only about 15% of undergraduates, will this initiative bring about much of an improvement in the participation and completion rates? And how will it increase the intake of African and coloured students?

3.3. Cost

Another of the major barriers to education is the high cost of tertiary studies. The 2012 fees for tertiary institutions vary greatly: while some charge as little as R19 000 per year for an arts or humanities degree, others charge a fee of more than R35 000⁸. These amounts exclude the cost of books and stationery, travelling costs and residence fees. Not many can afford these fees, and most students fund their tertiary education through loans, bursaries or scholarships. While the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) supported approximately 32% of all university students in 2011, others were also funded by loans from private institutions.⁹ Since 1992, NSFAS has disbursed a total of R23 billion in loans and bursaries, but by the 2011-2012 financial year only R3.8 billion had been recovered. Statistics are not available to gauge to what extent private institutions fund students. However, one banking institution indicates that the average size of a student loan is R49 500 and that it takes an average of eight years to repay.¹⁰

To address the challenge of high fees, Dr Nzimande announced in his budget speech that he had appointed a working-group to conduct a study to determine the actual cost of introducing fee-free university education for the poor¹¹. Last year, the Minister also appointed a committee chaired by Cyril Ramaphosa to investigate

whether fees should be regulated. Both the working group and the committee's findings are yet to be made public. In addition to funds supplied through NSFAS, money is also made available through the National Skills Fund (NSF): R50 million has been made available for postgraduate scholarships, R63 million for students with disabilities, and R350 million for poor students who were unable to register due to outstanding debt and insufficient funding in 2012.¹²

All these initiatives are welcome, and no doubt make a considerable difference to the prospects of many students. Nevertheless, too many young people with excellent academic potential are still unable to exercise it because of difficulties with money. Even if the fees can be found from bursaries or loans, there is always the question of 'lost' income, and pressure on the student to forego their studies in order to find a job and thus contribute to the family's needs.

4. The Way Forward

While extended degree programmes have a limited reach they are proving to be successful – thus the logical argument would be to extend their reach. It was clear from the roundtable discussion, and Prof Scott's input in particular, that a new approach should be taken to undergraduate curricula. A new undergraduate curriculum framework would extend the three-year degree programmes to four years, while still providing a three-year option to those students who can complete it in time. This would ensure that a far greater proportion than the current 15% will benefit from the extended programmes. However, this is a fairly radical proposal which will probably not be met with enthusiasm from the majority of universities; and it will also have huge funding implications.

5. Conclusion

Access to and success at higher education institutions is a multilayered challenge and it needs a multi-pronged approach to address it. On the one hand, any efforts to increase the participation rate should be applauded; however, this should not come at the expense of an increased completion rate. Pushing through under-prepared matriculants will only result in exacerbating our current problem of low completion rates and a huge skills deficit. As with

so many social challenges, a holistic approach, including early-childhood development, socio-economic upliftment, and the urgent improvement of basic education standards, is the only sure way of making higher education a practical proposition for most of our youth.

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¹ Prof Ian Scott: *Presentation to CPLO roundtable*. 'Participation rate' refers to the percentage of a given population sector (in this case 20-24 year olds of the various racial groups) who have studied at tertiary level.

² Figures exclude enrolment at UNISA. The completion rate of degrees or diplomas (within five years) at UNISA is very low. Less than 10% complete their degrees, and only 2% complete their diploma programmes.

³ At a recent roundtable discussion hosted by CIE and CPLO participants highlighted the plight of rural schooling.

⁴ Chrissie Boughey: *Undergraduate Support and Success*. Available online:

<http://www.ru.ac.za/media/rhodesuniversity/content/institutionalplanning/documents/Undergraduate%20support%20and%20success.pdf>

⁵ Government funds higher education institutions to implement programmes.

⁶ Ian Scott (2012): *Presentation to CPLO roundtable discussion*.

⁷ Currently, NSC candidates must take seven (out of a choice of 27) of the designated subjects – of which the languages and maths or math literacy are compulsory.

⁸ Old Mutual: *Tertiary education fees*. Available online: <http://www.oldmutual.co.za/investright/pdf/tuition-fees.pdf>

⁹ Lynley Donnelly: *Loans weigh students down*. Mail & Guardian online, 31 August 2012. Available online:

<http://mg.co.za/article/2012-08-31-loans-weigh-students-down>

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ Dr Blade Nzimande: *Department of Higher Education and Training Budget Vote 2012*. Proceedings of the Extended Public Committee, Old Assembly Chamber, 24 April 2012. Available online: www.parliament.gov.za/live/commonrepository/.../446132_1.doc

¹² *Ibid*

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