The need for educational reform in South African higher education

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Inter-related drivers for improving graduate output and outcomes in South Africa

- Improving the effectiveness of curricula for contemporary conditions
  - breadth of subject matter
  - multilingualism
  - the literacies: academic, quantitative, information/ICT
  - education for responsible citizenship
  - experiential and service learning
  - ……

- Towards equity of access and outcomes
  - in the interests of national developmental needs

Drivers for improving graduate output and outcomes in South Africa

- Importance of prioritising and evaluating developmental interventions against the key goals of equity and development (Badat et al 1993)

Drivers of educational reform in HE internationally

- 'Modernisation': adjusting to changing world and regional conditions
  - international moves for 'transformation'
  - 'Graduates for the 21st century'

- Equity
  - international moves to widen participation, for economic and social reasons

- Standardisation, mobility and management
  - e.g. Bologna, credit recognition systems
  - in SA, the 'Hons' problem

(a) Equity: the national picture

- Participation rates and their implications

Participation rates*
and their significance

- Overall: 16%

- White: 60%
- Indian: 51%

- Black: 12%
- Coloured: 12%

- *Approximate gross enrolment rates derived from HEMIS 2005: all participants as % of 20-24 age-group*
  Source: Scott, Yeld and Hendry 2007

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Equity and efficiency: the national picture

- ## Participation rates and their implications
  - view that large proportion of students 'do not belong' in higher education is not tenable

- ## Cohort graduation rates after 5 years
  - 50% in contact university programmes
  - 32% in contact 'technikon' programmes
  - patterns similar in many subject areas

Equity: the national picture

- Equity of outcomes
  - in degree programmes, black completion rate generally less than half the white completion rate
  - neutralising access gains

- <5% of black age-group succeeding in any form of higher education

Equity: implications of the patterns

- Graduate output not meeting national needs in terms of 'economic development or social cohesion' (Pandor)

- The equity and development agendas have converged

- Status quo is failing the majority

- Compelling indicators of need for reform in the educational process in higher education
  - the CHE project

Whose responsibility?

- Factors beyond the higher education sector's control
  - 'money and poor schooling' (M&G 2006)

- Factors within the higher education sector's control
  - The educational process in higher education is itself a major variable affecting who succeeds and fails

Factors within the higher education sector's control

- The curriculum as framework for enacting our educational goals and values
  - enabling or limiting

- The effectiveness of the teaching-and-learning process
  - especially capacity to cater for diversity

- The learning environment and institutional culture
  - 'Involving Colleges' (Kuh)

Institutional differentiation as the solution?

- Mission differentiation an important goal

- But given embedded inequalities, formal stratification risks 'ghettoisation'

- Particular obligations of top research-led universities irt equity and efficiency

- A key challenge is dealing with diversity in educational background ('bad' diversity) in individual institutions

Curriculum provision for equity

- Graduation in regulation time
  - in contact degree programmes, predominantly <30%
  - for black students, predominantly <15%

- Need for overt allowance for differential curriculum duration for different student groups
  - unitary curriculum structures cannot meet the legitimate needs of the diverse (necessary) intake

Note on the 'Honours problem'

- View that Hons should be added on to current 3-year degrees to make a single 4-year degree the standard 'formative' qualification

- Effect of this on 'equity' and 'modernisation'?
  - no allowance for diversity
  - likely deterioration in equity of outcomes
  - likely reduction in existing Hons standards
  - no space for non-core development

(b) Meeting contemporary needs

- Contestation over value of non-core disciplinary learning esp in 'formative' programmes
  - dangers of superficial, decontextualised 'generic skills' approach
  - and of conflating the whole 'modernisation' agenda with this

- But focusing on graduate attributes is non-trivial
  - not least in professional programmes - cf. current issues in Health, Law and Engineering
  - includes the key question of teaching-research linkage in undergraduate education

Why is it such a problem?

- Opposition arising from, *inter alia*:
  - epistemological or ideological considerations
  - vested interests, including ownership of curriculum space and related resource benefits

- Chronic shortage of curriculum space
  - cf. experiences with initiatives in multilingualism, writing, numeracy, experiential and service learning
  - What would give way, without reducing necessary standards?

Implications for curriculum structure

- In SA context, not possible to responsibly address equity and contemporary needs without extending the standard 'formal time' of first degrees and diplomas

Implications for mainstream 'teaching'

- Need for educational design and teaching approaches that accommodate the realities of the student intake (rather than the 'oughts')
  - and effectively address the diversity that will continue to characterise many mainstream courses

- Performance patterns indicate that the traditional craft approaches are not proving effective in contemporary conditions

Implications for institutional orientation and ethos

- The academic community's acceptance of responsibility for the diverse student intake needed to meet South Africa's needs
  - the Soudien report

- Overtly addressing the tensions between equity and development, the local and the international, 'teaching' and 'research'…

- Creating conditions, within and outside the formal curriculum, that actively foster learning

What will it take?

- Effort
  - 'If there is a single factor that seems to distinguish colleges and universities that have truly made a difference on behalf of minority students, it is *attention*.' (Carey 2008: 8)

- Educational expertise
  - systematic knowledge of teaching-and-learning as a basis for effectively dealing with curriculum reform, teaching in contemporary conditions, and creating a stimulating learning environment

What will it take to foster educational effort and expertise?

- Raising the status of teaching
  - through recognition and the reward system

- Professional accountability and 'integrity'
(Rowland 2007)

- Establishing educational scholarship and research as a valid and intellectually challenging field of work

Core business

- The Lisbon Council (2008)
  (with reference to the EU):

  - 'First and foremost, our universities … exist to educate and prepare people to be fully-functioning, well-developed members of our advanced, post-industrial society.'

  - '… seeking excellence in research should never be allowed to become an excuse for underperformance in the educational tasks [of higher education].'

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