Multi-dimensional approach to readiness for university

Universities need to develop much deeper, contextualized understandings of who their students are and the complex web of conditions that influence what they can and cannot be and do as students, says the writer.

Because readiness is about developing capabilities for university success, a conversation rooted in the realities of students’ lives and education sector.

First, though, we must clarify what we mean by “readiness.” As stated in its theme, the summit is about “transforming higher education for a transformed South Africa.” The role of the universities and higher education is to broaden participation on the basis of the education system as a whole and of wider society.

The Higher Education Summit in 2010 comprised a wide-ranging discussion on higher education issues and in particular the issue of student readiness, as articulated in the National Development Plan and other policy documents for the South African government.

The term “transformations” refers to a profound and radical change. In South Africa as a whole it is about surmounting the apartheid system to the type of democratic and equitable society that is envisaged in the Constitution in all aspects of life, including the political system, the law, the economy, housing, internal relations, healthcare, education, and so on.

As we reflect on the state of higher education transformation, it is worthwhile to consider where we have come from and take stock of our achievements as well as our shortcomings. We should also consider how the environment has changed and to what extent this has required us to rethink our goals and strategies.

The Higher Education Summit in 2010 identified the following as the main challenges as understood by the participants.

1. Create more flexible pathways through higher education.
2. Focus less on selling the given courses and more on assisting students in developing university readiness capabilities.
3. Maintain university success and providing appropriate support and assistance.
4. Assist first-year students to make sense of the changing environment.
5. Address the lack of readiness and providing appropriate support and assistance.
6. Assist in making their career guidance needs.

Starting in January 2014, the National Student Financial Aid Service (NSFAS) was launched in support of this initiative, providing more flexible and accessible funding through the National Student Financial Aid Policy and Assist with decision-making for university or funding from the National Student Financial Aid Service. Significant steps have been taken to expand the number of those who can and cannot be and do as students.

The NSFAS is an important initiative to support students and their families in accessing higher education. It is also a significant step towards creating a career guidance capacity in the system.

Transforming higher education for a transformed South Africa

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High education transformation takes place within and across all sections of the entire education and training system and especially the post-school education and training system, which is a major component within the larger project to transform education as an institution as articulated in the National Development Plan and other policy documents for the South African government.

The term “transformations” refers to a profound and radical change. In South Africa as a whole it is about surmounting the apartheid system to the type of democratic and equitable society that is envisaged in the Constitution in all aspects of life, including the political system, the law, the economy, housing, internal relations, healthcare, education, and so on. When the grade 12 results are released each year, the gap is about much more than subject or content knowledge. When readiness is approached in a multi-dimensional manner it becomes clear that all students are ready in some ways and not ready in others. This approach helps us to move beyond the all too common understandings that certain groups of students are ready and others are not. Ideal capabilities for university success should be created at high school and during the first year. Because decisions (or sometimes forced) at high school continue to have implications for students at university, it is insufficient to begin tackling readiness and transition challenges only once schooling has been completed.

A “capabilities approach” sees human diversity as fundamental, rather than incidental, to our understanding of any situation. This is equally true of access. Individual and social diversity matter: the environment and learning pathways through higher education and multiple opportunities need to be available to all university readiness capabilities to accommodate the diverse personal, social and environmental factors that impact on students’ lives, and be contextualized to the full.

Transforming higher education for a transformed South Africa

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