MERRIDY WILSON-STRYDOM

Multi-dimensional approach to readiness for university

THE ISSUES of access and success are vast, complex, contested and fundamental to meaningful transformation within the higher education sector.

But we need now to rethink what university readiness means, and the implications of this for student retention, throughput and, ultimately, success.

Drawing on research that focuses on students' lives and everyday educational experiences in school and at university must influence such rethinking. Doing so can provide a platform for a deeper conversation about access and success, a conversation rooted in the realities of students' lives.

South African higher education has made notable progress in terms of widening access. African students accounted for 42.5% of enrolment in 2004 and this proportion grew to 70.1% in 2013.

Yet approximately 30% of students drop out of university in their first year, and about 55% of all students never graduate. This is clearly an issue of injustice, and so turning this tide must be central to any higher education transformation efforts.

As powerful as these numbers can be, what they don't tell us is anything about the students' lives and the numerous social justice issues that play out on a daily basis. The so-called "capabilities approach" calls on us to consider individual wellbeing and quality of life as central metrics.

That is, we need to ask questions about what students are able to be and to do in their lives as students, and we need to understand students' achievements as well as the opportunities that are (or are not) available to them.

In September 2010 and February 2014 first-year students at the University of the Free State (UFS) drew pictures of their experience of coming to university. These drawings visually highlighted the injustices faced by many students, despite being granted a place at university (and so being positively counted in our access statistics). Where universities increase access without improving chances of
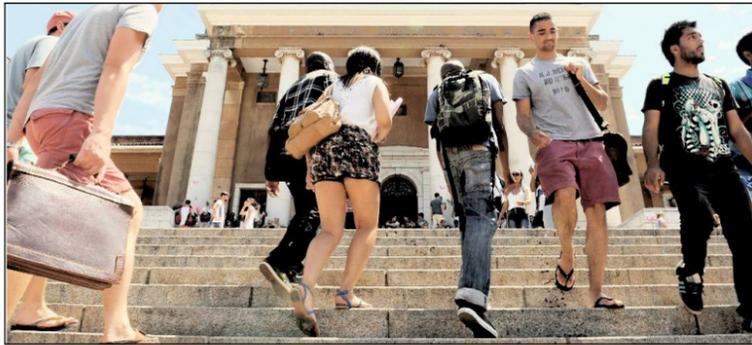
Universities need to develop much deeper, contextualised understandings of who their students are and the complex web of conditions that influence what they can and cannot be and do as students, says the writer. PICTURE: TRACEY ADAMS

success they create new forms of injustice, while seeking to overcome old forms.

One student in the 2010 group drew herself on a swing, swinging above the world and stated "Can c the whole world before me – a new one to experience." Another student drew himself pushing against a high brick wall that he could not see over. On his side of the wall it was dark and on the other side of the wall was sunshine and success. Similarly, a student in the 2014 group depicted his degree as a monster. These examples highlight the differences in quality of life or well-being of these students. How can we begin to knock down the brick walls and defeat the monsters that many students are up against when they start at university?

Being *eligible* for university (meeting admission criteria) does not necessarily mean that one is *ready* for university — even for students entering university with top school-leaving results.

While the gap between school and university in terms of content knowledge (and to some extent learning skills) is often noted and is the subject of much media attention

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 groupings of students are ready and others are not.

Ideally, capabilities for university success should be created at high school and during the first year. Because decisions made (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 matters greatly for the development of capabilities for university readiness. Personal, social and environmental factors influence the

extent to which students can convert the resources at their disposal (such has having a place at university or funding from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme) into meaningful opportunities and achievements.

While resources are critical for success, we should not assume that equality of resources necessarily implies equality of access or success. We need to understand the social conditions that either enable or constrain the development of capabilities for university readiness. At the personal level, particularly important factors include a will to learn (curiosity and desire for learning), having confidence to learn, and one's home language in relation to the language of instruction.

At the social level, class, gender, school context and culture, quality of teachers, quality of subject choice, freedom to choose school subjects, and home environment created both enabling and constraining conditions for the diverse students in this study – and sometimes in unexpected and intersecting ways. Universities need to develop much deeper, contextualised understandings of who their students are and the complex web of conditions that influence what they can and cannot be and do as students.

Amartya Sen reminds us that, although an ideal world (or higher education access context) may be out of reach given current conditions, there are numerous "remediable injustices" around us that we ought to work to change.

The current access dilemmas we face, and complexity of factors that affect access and success, should therefore not limit our thinking about what the transition into and through university ought to be like

for our students. To move beyond the status quo, we need to ask different questions and apply new theoretical approaches to understanding access and success.

The research I have drawn on here produces the following recommendations for what universities could do to improve access and success:

1. Forge meaningful, long-term partnerships with schools to create more easily visible access pathways from high school into university; and assist with decision-making about courses of study much earlier than at the point of application or registration.

2. Marketing at schools should focus less on selling the given university and more on raising awareness about the range of capabilities underpinning readiness and providing substantive information about what it means to study at university – so confronting the gap between eligibility and readiness.

3. Embrace a more comprehensive and multi-dimensional understanding of access and readiness that infuses the ways in which universities work – at all levels (administratively, academically and outside of the formal curriculum).

4. Assist first-year students to understand the complexity of university readiness (as opposed to eligibility), and to see that they are not alone when they are confused and scared or lack confidence in their ability as a university student.

5. Integrate across the curriculum opportunities to learn the required academic behaviours and learning approaches, including language competence and, importantly, confidence.

6. Create more flexible learning pathways through higher education and multiple opportunities to develop university readiness capabilities to accommodate the diverse personal, social and environmental factors that impact on students' lives, and hence, their success.

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Transforming higher education for a transformed South Africa

As stated in its theme, the summit is about "transforming higher education for a transformed South Africa". The role of the universities must be considered on the basis of the education system as a whole and of wider society.

First, though, we must clarify what we mean when we use the word "transformation".

Higher education transformation takes place within and in line with the transformation of the entire education and training system and especially the post-school system. It also takes place within the larger project to transform South Africa as articulated in the National Development Plan and other policy documents of the South African government.

The term "transformation" refers to a profound and radical change. In South Africa as a whole it refers to such change from 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 comprised a wide-ranging discussion on higher education issues and in particular the issue of transformation in its broadest sense. The summit adopted a Declaration that set out the main challenges as understood by the participants.

Concrete steps have been taken to achieve most of these. For example, the historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs) are being prioritised for infrastructure spending in all areas but mostly student housing and historic backlogs; an HDI development fund has also been introduced to help these universities fund initiatives that

can improve their financial standing.

So too, the expansion of postgraduate studies and research is getting attention as is shown by the increasing enrolments, programmes to expand research outputs and plans to further increase the number of those who complete post-graduate qualifications.

Also flowing from the 2010 summit, the DHET has recently adopted a new policy for the revitalisation of the academic profession; a number of programmes have been developed to improve opportunities for young African academics and women; most universities continue to make progress towards developing curriculum in a socially relevant direction; and some universities have made progress in affirming the African languages and African language departments.

Since that summit, the DHET has undertaken a wide range of other initiatives. Some of the most important include major reviews of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme, the provision and conditions of student housing and

the funding of universities.

The Department has also developed a draft policy framework for university differentiation that was released for public comment and those comments are currently being analysed.

A Higher Education Amendment Bill was introduced to the National Assembly this year aiming, inter alia, to strike an appropriate balance between institutional autonomy and the public accountability of universities. It also provides for the Minister of Higher Education and Training to determine transformation goals for the higher education system and institute appropriate oversight mechanisms in the best interests of the university system as a whole.

Furthermore, the Department has developed the "Staffing South African Universities Framework" to ensure that in the future the number and quality of academics is suitable and that the academic profession becomes more representative in terms of race and gender. In support of this initiative, the teaching development grants

have become earmarked grants so that they cannot be used for anything other than their intended purpose.

Starting in January 2014, the Minister established the National Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, which is expected to make a major impact on teaching and research in these disciplines. The Central Applications Clearing House has been established to assist people who wish to study at a university or college and either did not apply in time or were not offered a place at their institution of choice. This is the first step in the establishment of a Central Applications Service. Significant progress has also been made towards creating a career guidance capacity in the system.

Taking into account both the achievements and challenges, we need now to examine the way forward in the context of policy developments in the last five years, and in particular of the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (2013).

Blade Nzimande is Minister of Higher Education and Training.