

Is Massification Producing the Desired Results for the Stakeholders in Tertiary Education in South Africa

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ABSTRACT Notions of quality differ for each of the stakeholders in education – students and parents, business and government. Quality massified tertiary education in response to the demographics of the country has raised some concerns in South Africa. The concerns, naturally differs for each of the stakeholders but running through are issues such as, quality and returns on the parents', businesses' and government's financial investments. These concerns address the fundamental question: What is quality massified education? The objective of this paper is to reflect on this question in an attempt to understand the position of South African tertiary education today. Focus will be placed on what each of the stakeholders in education see as the nature and outcome of quality education. The discussions also address whether there is disjuncture in how these stakeholders perceive quality massified education and its results. An examination is also made about how each stakeholder has contributed to South African tertiary education and intervention initiatives that can ensure massification meets stakeholders' expectations. The paper concludes that all stakeholders need to cooperate to redefine relevant quality tertiary education and how it can be achieved.

INTRODUCTION

An appropriate education is vital for the social, psychological, political and economic development of any country (Hanushek and Wößmann 2007; Bhorat et al. 2009; Negash et al. 2011). Finding solutions to challenges in attaining these developments are at the forefront of many leaders' thoughts. The responses to these challenges, from governments, are very dependent on the present and the historical picture of the country. South Africa, with its pre-1994 history of imbalances has decided that one immediate way to ensure equitable development is to liberalise access to tertiary education. Liberalising access or massification, it is hoped will result in a tertiary system which is beneficial to the demographic picture of the country (Department of Education 1996, 1997a; Akoojee and Nkomo 2007; Negash et al. 2011; Tjabane and Pillay 2012; Kaburise 2014a). Policy documents, after 1994, focused on a mandate for higher education to show responsiveness to the country's diverse socio-cultural and academic landscapes. In response, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) attempted to transform the picture of tertiary education, by the massification of tertiary studies. Universities, particularly the Historically White Institutions (HWIs) attempted to have staff and student patterns representative of the nation's demographics, hence, the total number of students

increased from 473,000 in 1993 to 799,388 in 2008, to 837,779 in 2009. In 1993, 40 percent (191,000) of all students were Africans by 2008 the numbers of Africans had risen to 64 percent (513,570) (Badat 2010). This also meant that the proportion of white students enrolled reduced from nearly half of the total student population in 1993 to around 25 percent in 2008, thereby allowing for the participation of the other population groups (MacGregor 2009).

Theoretical Framework

One concern usually raised about massification is that quality might be compromised in ensuring that tertiary education is accessible to a diversity of students (Lomas 2002; Lederman 2012). Harvey and Green (1993) are credited with identifying five categories of quality - *exceptional* (distinctive, embodying excellence and passing a minimum of exclusive standards); *perfection* (zero defect; focusing on process as opposed to inputs and outputs); *fitness for purpose* (relates quality to aims and purposes as defined by the provider/stakeholders); *value for money* (focus on efficiency and effectiveness, measuring outputs against inputs); *transformation* (a qualitative change, doing something for the student and includes concept of enhancing, empowering and adding value, emphasising the democratisation of the process not just the outcome) (Kis 2005). These ways of opera-

tionalizing the concept of quality show the intrinsic ideological slant to the concept (Akoojee 2002). One's perception of quality, in any context, therefore, is determined by one's personal philosophy on life (liberalism, marxism, socialism and others) and what education is, hence there cannot be a neutral evaluation of the quality of education (Akoojee 2002).

Quality as '*exceptional*' and '*perfection*' has the minimum acceptance by most theorists. Watty (2003) for instance, totally rejects quality as '*perfection*' or '*zero defect*' believing that dimensions of quality as perfection can be removed, since higher education does not aim to produce defect-free graduates, a concept which is more appropriate in the world of wholesale productions (in Kis 2005). Stamelos and Kavasakalis (2011) also note that quality as '*perfection*' and '*exceptional*' are inapplicable in education contexts but rather more appropriate in manufacturing concerns, like factories. Kristensen and Harvey (2010) argue that issues of perfection are applicable to the more administrative aspects of education, for instance, capturing of student data, applying of rules and regulations, infrastructure and examination processes. Kunz (2010) however is quite concerned with perfection not being sought in all aspects of education as this allows for the tolerance of mediocrity. Quality as '*exceptional and perfection*' also gives the impression of tertiary education being elitist and therefore, incompatible with the mandate for massification and redress (Akoojee 2002).

Quality as '*value for money*' is understood as whether or not an organisation has obtained the maximum benefits from the goods and services it both acquires and produces within the resources available to it (Higher Education Funding Council for England 2010). Value for money assesses the cost of a product or service against the quality of provision and requires accountability on the understanding that there should be restraint and vigilance in public spending (Campbell and Rozsnyai 2002; Erlendsson 2002). Quality in this vein requires visible returns on any investment, which is commiserate to the input, hence notions of education for intrinsic personal development is insufficient. Education should produce tangible gains for all the stakeholders. The growing tendency of government and funding agencies to demand accountability from HEIs and funded students are clear indica-

tion that investments must produce satisfactory results. Quality as '*value for money*' can be accused of consumerism and funding agencies which strictly equate quality with improved efficiency and effectiveness is therefore seen as not being socially just or humanistic. The same point is made by Akoojee (2002: 6) when he notes "Similarly quality as '*value for money*' suggests responsiveness to consumerist version of education that cannot be accommodated, even within a global economic framework".

Quality defined as '*transformation*' sees education as a student-centred process of qualitatively effecting a change in an individual or an institution. In other words, the education process should see value added to students, hence making them an asset to their immediate societies, the nation and even the global village. In addition, during the process of transformation, HEIs would introspect, design and implement policies aimed at changing any of their policies and behaviours not compatible with massification. Students, in such transformed HEIs' environments would become empowered, enlightened and enhanced from their original 'state' as they undergo education (Campbell and Rozsnyai 2002). This definition of quality supposes the transformation of students, on various fronts – critical thinking, intellectual, personal, physical and emotional. The transformation would then be reflected in the students' lives, such as in their content base, opinions, confidence levels, behaviours, attitude towards knowledge and its creation and their whole value systems (Chen and Taylor 2011). This broad spectrum of possible areas of transformation makes its evaluation subjective with no well-defined standards for its measurement. Quality as a betterment of an individual is also accused of ignoring the fact that education must prepare graduates to contribute to the development of society and the economic world, hence education is not an individual project (Giannakopoulos and Buckley 2008).

Quality as '*fit for purpose*' equates the end product of education against initially-stated objects of the stakeholders. Like most of these definitions, the business world is used to explain quality as meeting the specifications of 'customers' or stakeholders in education. Stakeholders in education can be classified under three broad sectors – students, parents and the wider social community, business and government rep-

resenting national and international interests. Each of these stakeholders will have different objects for investing in education which will serve as the criteria for these stakeholders' definition of quality. An issue with quality education being one that is 'fit for purpose' is that it is open to dissent among stakeholders in them determining 'purpose' or if the different purposes are not compatible. The resultant uncertainty would mean HEIs' operations would not be underpinned by a concise mandate and stand the danger of the end product satisfying none of the articulated purposes of the stakeholders (Campbell and Rozsnyai 2002). A solution for Campbell and Rozsnyai (2002) was for an addition of a sub-criteria, quality as '*fit of purpose*' explained as an evaluation of the articulated purposes of the various stakeholders in preparation for the final drafting of 'a common purpose'. This extra scrutiny, the authors felt should ensure that stakeholders' demands are appropriate and unified.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

South African education can be commended on a number of fronts but of interest to our discussions is South Africa's interpretation and implementation of massification. South Africa is credited with one of the highest level of investment, in the world, in education, standing at 7 percent of the GDP and 20 percent of the total state expenditure (Education in South Africa 2014). In addition South Africa has vigorously embraced the notion of massification as a redress mechanism and has devised practical and innovative strategies to translate the notion into reality. This is demonstrated by the various support initiatives – recognition of prior-learning, moderation of matric results in response to the different disadvantages inherent in pre-tertiary schooling, academic support for staff in the form of extensive financial backing for HEIs' academic development units (ADUs), various interventions to assist students with potential (remedial, bridging, foundation, extended degrees and a proposed 4-year generic degrees) and easy access to loans -National Students Financial Assistance Scheme (NSFAS) and Eduloan—all aimed at ensuring a representative population participate in tertiary studies.

Massification has also seen the redrafting of HEIs' fundamental governing policies, such

as attempts to differentiate offerings at tertiary level to enable HEIs to specialise, develop their niche areas and accommodate a diversity of students. Currently, higher education is offered in 23 universities – eleven traditional universities offering Bachelor degrees with strong research bias, six universities of technology offering vocation-oriented degrees and six comprehensive universities focusing on both Bachelor and vocational degrees. These are in addition to others, like the Further Education and Training (FET) colleges specialising in certificates and diplomas and the promulgation of the Skills development Act (No. 98 of 1999) which saw the creation of bodies like the Sector Education Training Authorities (SETA) aimed at specific skills. All these are initiatives to massify education by offering diversity of qualifications.

Ideally, any kind of education should satisfy, to varying degrees, the five categories of quality listed by Harvey and Green (1993) and it is also imperative that the definition of quality education should be uniformly understood by the providers and beneficiaries of education. The current tendency in education managers to use the business world's understanding of 'quality products' as being end products that satisfy the specification of customers (fit for purpose and value for money), has been accused of negative commercialisation of education (Rossouw 2001; Akojee 2002; Materu 2007). Lomas (2002) advocates that a combination of quality as 'fit for purpose' and 'transformation' escapes such criticism, as the combination also accommodates the human development aspect of education.

Another approach to quality is proposed by Vlasceanu et al. (2007) who note that 'fit for purpose' is a super-ordinate for the notions of 'value for money' and 'transformation' hence these demands on quality cannot be separated. The researcher is in agreement with the view of Vlasceanu et al. (2007) that other qualities are subsumed in the term, 'fit for purpose', although the multiplicity of possible subjective consequences of transformation detracts from that criterion's practical application as an evaluation tool. A middle ground needs to be found among all these concepts of quality, for our discussions, therefore, *quality massified education would be deemed as one offering value for the stakeholders' investments and expectations*. Naturally, the investment levels and expectations for each of the stakeholders will be different.

Quality for students means an education which, foremost, guarantees them a place in the work world, personal polish and competence to participate in local and international work-related activities (Hanushek and Wößmann 2007; Materu 2007; Negash et al. 2011). For parents, quality education is an endeavour which shows returns on their financial and psychological investments and ensures betterment of their lives and the next generations'. Francis (2014) comments on findings by two authors, Jacob and Lefgren (undated), who identify two types of parents/families, in relation to education. Families with low-economic status aspire for a 'value-added' education; education which will ensure achievement and success in the future, or as the authors put it, education for 'consumption good as well as investment good'. The authors were contrasting this type with the more affluent parents who place greater emphasis on student satisfaction with the tertiary experience or 'consumption good'. Low socio-economic families, such as those in parts of South Africa, for example, in Limpopo Province, have high expectations from tertiary education (Kaburise 2014b). Tertiary education for students from such background is for the 'general good' (immediate and extended families) and is a financial investment for the current and next generation. The significance of education being an investment is sharply brought into focus when one examines the socio-economic status of most families and the degree of financial investment necessary for tertiary in South Africa.

The fee structures among the 23 HEIs in the country are difficult to compare, as some fees are inclusive of items like, support materials and activities, administrative and equipment fees, however, for a year in a tertiary institution, a student is likely to pay, minimally, between R20,000 to R30,000 (twenty to thirty thousand rands) just for tuition fees, depending on the degree enrolled in and the institution. Accommodation is likely to set a student back by another R20,000 to R30,000 (twenty to thirty thousand rands) and meals another R18,000 to R20,000 (eighteen to twenty thousand rands) with institutions like Universities of Cape Town and Witwatersrand being 60 percent more expensive than Universities of Venda and Johannesburg (Ress 2012). Private HEIs, like Monash is even higher with tuition alone, for a foundation year, costing R48,000 (forty eight thousand

rands). These fees are not inclusive of pocket money, textbooks and other miscellaneous expenses vital for a student to perform at his or her optimum and to fit into the social and academic world of higher education. Fisher–French (2013) paints a bleak picture of cost of education by quoting a figure of nearly half a million for 12 years of public schooling and R1.5million for private education, from 2013.

In this financial context, it is not illogical that parents and graduates should expect some returns on their investment, in the form of gainful employment and not only the personal transformation of the graduate (Jacob and Lefgren 2014). Rather, matters, such as - high dropout rates, graduation and success rates being below the national expectations, the inability of students to graduate within regulation time, the need for HEIs to contemplate introducing a 4-year generic bachelor degree and the increasing number of unemployed/unemployable graduates - raise concerns about whether massification is providing quality education which is beneficial for the parents and students. It is emotionally, psychologically and financially most traumatising for students not to succeed after enrolling for tertiary studies or doubling the length of their qualification. Even extending their studies by an extra year has an enormous impact on finances and morale of students and their parents, infrastructure of the institutions, teaching and learning practices in HEIs, funding and the economic development of the country. Some of these sentiments are captured by Dube (2009) in his article, *Skills Shortage: An Unemployed Black Graduate's perspective*.

Quality education for business is one that supplies the labour demands of the country (Rasool and Botha 2011). Any nation needs to resource its workforce from the educated sectors of the population. The relationship between industry and HEIs is a long standing one with industry, through its various funding initiatives to institutions and individual students able to exert some pressure on how the relationship can be maintained and to bring a social integration between industry and HEIs. For employers who are in business for profit, it is imperative that quality education ensures a comfortable fit between what is required in the job and the curriculum taught to the graduates so that transition traumas between being a student and an employee are lessened, hence reducing costly induction processes.

Statements about unemployment need to be made with caution as in some sectors there are acute shortages of manpower (Cawood 2009; Rasool and Botha 2011). The employment picture shows that there is a preference for skilled over semi-skilled or unskilled graduates; that is skilled for a particular job. Global trends show a shortage of graduates in managerial, professional services and science, engineering and technology (SET), hence graduates in these areas are unlikely to face unemployment (MacGregor 2012). Unemployment rate at the moment, however, is a cause for alarm. According to the Treasury Report of 2011, 51 percent of the 18 – 24 cohorts are unemployed but the Adcorp Employment Index in August 2013 shows there are 829 800 unfilled positions for highly skilled workers across all professions.

An anomalous situation is created when on one hand graduates are bemoaning the lack of employment while on the other hand, skills shortage is rampant in business (Dube 2009; Rasool and Botha 2011). The obvious explanation is that graduates do not have the skills that businesses require. This misfit has occurred because business and the other stakeholders are not talking to each other so that a common definition of ‘fit for purpose’ could be established. If, for example, the economy is in dire need of engineers, who by necessity should have a strong background in Mathematics and Sciences, surely that should be factored into the education picture as low down the schooling system as in Grade 8? At that level – beginning of secondary schooling - financial support initiatives can be offered for remedial, foundation and extension classes in those crucial subjects. Such students then are focused quite early in their schooling and are more likely to opt to be the future engineers for business.

The lack of synergy between business and the other stakeholders is also seen in business reluctance for long term investments in tertiary students. Students, on bursaries awarded by business lose this support once they fail a year. Business does not usually offer such students another opportunity nor does it sponsor remedial, bridging or foundation extra classes for these students, so that, hopefully, they will develop enough competence to continue the following year. This practice of business continues despite the numerous research reports on the degree of under-preparedness of first-enter-

ing student (Rossouw 2001; Boughey 2009; Case et al. 2013).

Quality tertiary education for government ensures a satisfied citizenry who can access and contribute to development. This purpose the government attempts to achieve through liberalising access to tertiary. Massification of education is explicit in the statement, ‘Everyone has the right to education’ (Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights); however the declaration goes on to say ‘... higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit’ (Negashet al. 2011). This declaration should be taken in conjunction with the mandate from Department of Education 1996, 1997a for the development of the individual’s learning needs and aspirations by developing their intellectual abilities and attitudes and to provide the labour market with high level competencies and expertise necessary for the growth and prosperity of a modern economy (Department of Education 1996, 1997a; Giannakopoulos and Buckley 2008). These statements call into question the extent to which massification can provide a forum for the South African government to achieve its mandate of a tertiary education system that is fit for its purpose of “equity, sustainability and productivity” (The National Working Group: Determining fitness-for-purpose). A crucial point not receiving sufficient consideration here, by the government is that tertiary, as the third level in the system of education calls for considerable academic attributes and sophistication.

Massification should be implemented bearing in mind that ‘a want’ does not guarantee an ability to satisfy that want (Kaburise 2014a). Giannakopoulos and Buckley (2008) articulate a similar moral dilemma when they ask the question: “*Accessing higher education: a right or a privilege?*” In answering the question, they draw on both moral and pragmatic principles. They acknowledge that, morally, higher education should not be denied to any determined student with potential but equally compelling is the fact that tertiary education is expensive for all stakeholders. This fact should conscientise the government as to *how, where* and *how far* massification can be implemented. In other words, various initiatives to liberalise access, including the proposed 4-year degrees require extensive and comprehensive foresight and projections based on data from the complete schooling system and not just the current picture in

tertiary education. Other educational intervention policies, at pre-tertiary levels need to be considered if massification of tertiary will have the desired quality results.

Massification within the FET colleges is also not yielding the expected results for stakeholders so that they can be considered viable options to traditional tertiary studies (Cawood 2009). This situation exists despite skilled artisans being in short supply. This may be partly due to parents' and students' misconceptions about FETs and partly due to the non-formalised articulation between the colleges and traditional universities as well as businesses' reluctance to invest in learner-ship programmes which most of FET semi-skilled graduates need to access the job markets. This is also a crucial area that the government can target more interventions.

CONCLUSION

Ensuring that massification has the desired effect should be a combined effort of all the stakeholders. First, it is the responsibility of students to realistically assess their potential and for their parents and other concerned parties to provide informed discussions and some career guidance. This will lessen instances of mismatch between students' profile and their career of choice, dropping out, extension of time taken to do a degree and families' financial burdens. For businesses, it is imperative that there is a dialogue between them and the different levels of schooling so that they communicate the profile of their desired employees to reduce the anomalous situation of the flooding of the job markets with unemployable graduates. Government needs to rethink the role it wants tertiary massified education to fulfil and how best this can be achieved. Tertiary education is not the solution for all the pre-1994 discontent in South Africa; massification is just one possible solution and others should be contemplated. Stakeholders' concerns with massification can only be resolved by a joint venture where each stakeholder's responsibilities are clearly defined.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As discussed above, massification of tertiary is only one solution for addressing the lack of representation in South African education and inequality in society as a whole. It is necessary

that tertiary does not operate in isolation from the other levels of the education system so that more relevant support is provided for first-entering students. Improving performance of students in tertiary should not be the sole responsibility of HEIs in the form of the various support services offered there but should be gradual, throughout the whole pre-tertiary preparation. Remedial or support initiatives should be undertaken by government as well as businesses who are in a better position to say exactly what they want and how they can support students to achieve this.

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