Diverging Contours in Access to University Education in South Africa

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ABSTRACT The South African government is well respected for its commitment to affordable access to higher education, as it is embedded in the national constitution. Despite this progressive stance, gaining access to university education remains a mirage for many students whose socio-economic circumstances are still precarious, even decades after the advent of democracy. This paper uses a literature review methodology to describe the diverging contours of access to university education, in order to promote debate concerning the relevant policies which can improve the access, which many in South Africa do not have, to university education, despite their academic potential. The relevant literature identifies the challenges which these students face as ranging from institutional challenges, the socio-economic status of their families, deviant behavior, such as crime and violence encountered in universities, to low throughput at the universities as a result of financial constraints. The writers of this paper recommend a proactive pro-poor policy in terms of funding the students, with a holistic balanced focus, to afford all an equal opportunity to receive university education and programs, to support poor parents and their dependents.

INTRODUCTION

Universities in South Africa play a very crucial and distinct role to educate and train people to possess high levels of skills (Kruss et al. 2015) and also to create opportunities for students from the population groups which had been marginalised as a result of the exploitation and discrimination which characterised the apartheid era (Cloete et al. 2011). A lack of access to higher education is not a recent problem in South Africa, as it is one which dates back to the apartheid dispensation (Ratangee 2007; Badat 2010; Mdepa and Tshiwula 2012; Habib 2016). During this period the problem of the inaccessibility of higher education was accompanied by unequal access, as a result of the racial discrimination which promoted the interests of whites at the expense of the blacks. The enduring problem of inaccessibility is a significant component of a ticking time bomb, which could explode at anytime if due consideration is not given to the gross imbalances which linger in post-apartheid South African society and appropriate policies are not implemented, as a matter of urgency, in order to remediate them. The weakening of the higher education system as a result of this state of affairs is widely acknowledged by the governing bodies of universities in the country (MacGregor 2014; Chetty and Knauss 2016).

Some of the numerous problems faced by higher education institutions have been identified by Cloete as including structural flaws, racial differentiation in terms of access, poor management resulting in wasteful spending, irrelevant curricula, incompetent graduates and a system of funding which is not responsive to the needs of students (Odhav 2009: 34). Without ignoring the pressing problem of access to higher education, it needs to be borne in mind that the many injustices of the apartheid era necessitated a new set of policies for education and a programmatic shift to redress the imbalances created by the previous regime. One of the initiatives took the form of the White Paper on Education and Training of 1995, which sought to expand higher education and to ensure that the inequalities of the past were redressed and the needs of all population groups, including those previously marginalised, were met, the funding model and strategy of universities were reviewed and reorganised and an enabling environment for disadvantaged students was created (Republic of South Africa 1994). In addition, pieces of legislation, such as the human right to education, were enshrined in the National Constitution of South Africa of 1996 and the Higher Education Act of 1997 was promulgated. These pieces of legislation sought to redress the imbalances of the past, to promote the needs of

the marginalised and vulnerable, and to over-haul structures such as the Council for Higher Education. Their most significant contribution to the well-being of all South Africans was putting an end to all of the apartheid structures and any processes which hindered development and social justice (Odhav 2009). However, although the new National Development Plan emphasises the need to increase funding and it is theoretically sound in its ambition to create a more balanced and just society, there remain many great obstacles which hinder making social justice a practical reality for the many students whose higher education remains impoverished. In the opinion of many informed commentators, the state of higher education in South Africa constitutes one of the biggest challenges facing the present government (Ramphele 2008). In addition, success rates of students at South African universities are also extremely disappointing. According to Higher Education South Africa (now Universities South Africa), thirty five percent of students drop out within the first year of commencing their studies (SAPA 2008). This depressing statistic motivated the authors of this paper to examine the diverging contours derailing access to education by means of a literature review, in order to make suggestions and recommendations which can generate constructs which strengthen higher education in South Africa holistically and increase access to universities, especially for the needy and vulnerable.

Problem Statement

Compared with other African countries, South Africa has made a commendable investment in higher education, with a total of twenty-six universities, which includes the technical universities. These institutions have produced academics whose achievements have been prolific, policymakers, scientists and other people whose work has been innovative on the international stage. However, the numerous challenges faced by the needy and vulnerable students are immediately obvious to anyone making an in-depth study of many South African universities and have been documented in a great deal of research. These challenges include, but are not limited to financial challenges, a lack of access to opportunities for funding, a lack of academic scholarship programs which prepare and consolidate the capabilities of learners to pursue those degree programs which are compatible with their abilities and academic

leanings. In addition to these difficulties, other challenges, such as those deriving from the low socio-economic status of the families of many students and from behavioural problems among students, such as deviant behaviour, pitting them against numerous financial constraints. This paper seeks to promote and stimulate, providing answers to the question of access to South African universities, particularly with respect to needy and vulnerable students and the role which the government needs to play in attaining social justice in higher education. Accordingly, the authors of this paper recommend that any sitting government needs to become proactive in terms of being a guarantor of the right to education and of ensuring and maintaining equitable access to the country's higher education institutions.

Aims and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this paper is to gain an understanding of the challenges which derail meaningful access to higher education for many vulnerable and needy students in South Africa. By doing so, it could create a platform to alert policymakers and formulators of university programs to the need for more robust measures to ensure that access to higher education does not remain a theoretical human right for many, or a nostalgic reminder of a time when government policy was driven by idealism and a determination to erase the cruel legacy of apartheid.

METHODOLOGY

In order to achieve the aim of the paper in terms of understanding the challenges which mitigate against gaining meaningful access to higher education for many vulnerable and needy students, the researchers elected to employ a review of the relevant literature. They consulted books, articles in journal and policy documents pertaining to higher education which were published between 2015 and 2016. They also made use of their intuition, knowledge and experience in order to compile a meaningful paper.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Disappointing Throughput or Success Rates Among Students

Rates of throughput, which are indicative of successfully concluded degree or diploma cours-

es, for students in higher education in South Africa are somewhat disappointing and disheartening, as much is expected from South Africa in terms of students graduating successfully from their degree programs in an inclusive education system. Statistics show that only fifteen percent of the students in South African universities actually graduate and for several years the figures have shown a trend of ranging from 15 to 20 percent, according to the Department of Higher Education (Mtshali 2013), while 35 percent of the first year students drop out after the first year of registration (SAPA 2008) and the majority of these are first generation students. Among the chief reasons which were found for low rates of throughput were financial constraints and a lack of academic preparedness (Mtshali 2013). As many of the students who enroll in universities in South Africa lack the financial support to see them through the degree, large numbers drop out, resulting in low percentages of students who graduate from their programs in these universities. It is the belief of the authors of this paper that although university education is a platform which produces future leaders, professionals, scientists and others who make significant contributions to society, in an overwhelming number cases high levels of poverty and vulnerability make it difficult for many to gain access to meaningful higher education in South Africa.

Institutional Challenges and Unpreparedness of Students

Preparedness and motivation have been widely acknowledged to be the primary factors which determine whether students will graduate or not (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). Institutional platforms play a crucial role in advancing appropriate access to higher education for aspirant graduates and professionals in any university. However, it has been reported that many students begin their university education without having properly decided upon the degree which they wish to pursue, the type of career for which they would like to be qualified or giving attention to many other considerations which affect their academic futures. This fact is indicative of a failure on the part of institutions of higher learning to supply adequate advice concerning degrees and careers to prospective university students. The tendency of many stu-

dents to struggle with subjects which have a mathematical component, particularly in the domains of the hard sciences and economics, has also contributed to the frequent switching of students from one degree program to another (Mtshali 2013). The authors of this paper have noticed that some students tend to enroll for particular university degrees as a result of pressure to do so from their families and not actually as a result of their own academic interests or decision-making, which often results in students abandoning degree programs, frustration for their families and conflicts which could have been avoided if institutional mechanisms could adequately inform both parents and students concerning the various degree programs. This shows that besides considering applications of students to the higher education system, a lot still needs to be done in terms of ensuring that students are well prepared and given full information and that they have understood it, before choosing to study towards a degree or diploma.

Low Socio-economic Status of Families of Students

The socio-economic status of the families of students is inextricably linked to gaining access to higher education and also to the likelihood of graduating from degree programs. The human capital model advances the widely acknowledged view that gaining access to education and studying successfully improves the productivity of people. Consequently, it becomes imperative for prospective students and their families to ensure that they have the means to ensure that the students are not prevented from successfully completing their studies as a result of a lack of finances. Household dynamics and circumstances of the homes of students have a relatively high influence on the degree of access which they have to higher education and the levels of academic achievement which they are likely to attain (Taylor and Yu 2009). It has been found that students from families with low socio-economic status often perform dismally, which is a poor reflection on Southern Africa as a country, as it implies that the developmental agenda is failing to respond to the qualitative needs of its people, particularly with respect to access to higher education (Spaull 2013). In addition, it has been found that in many families with low socio-economic status, many children

grow up in families in which fathers are absent, in female-headed or even child- headed households or in households headed by elderly relatives, which in most cases is indicative of a serious challenge concerning the level of access to higher education which students from these backgrounds will have, or the levels of academic achievement which they will attain if they are admitted to institutions of higher education (UNICEF 2011). It is also a cause for concern that access to higher education remains omitted from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and that there seems to be an ambiguous policy framework to direct the attention of the government towards strengthening capabilities of families.

Deviant Behaviour Among Students

Deviant behaviour in the form of crime and violence, which greatly impedes the ability of many students to complete their studies in higher education, is another cause for grave concern. It has been recorded that a total of two hundred and forty-seven cases of sexual violence, domestic violence and rape were reported at fifteen different South African universities (Serao 2014). In addition, as a result of the limited support which is provided to female complainants in these instances, many of the victims withdraw their cases, some times out of fear of embarrassment or ostracism, but more often from a desire not to lose their places at institutions of higher education (Serao 2014). Other studies have also established a close relationship between alcohol abuse and deviant behavior, with many students admitting that they engage in deviant behaviour when they are under the influence of alcohol or other narcotic substances (Fakude 2012). It is the considered opinion of the authors of this paper that there is a need to strike a balance between promoting safety and security and instilling values in institutions of higher education which unequivocally reject violent and criminal behavior, in order to ensure that vulnerable groups of students are safe and secure, both physically and emotionally. However, deviant behaviour also affects particular population groups and foreign nationals at many institutions of higher education in South Africa. Xenophobia is rampant in South Africa and the presence of foreigners in the country, or in the universities, frequently provokes hostility and violence. Studies have shown that some foreign students are denied accommodation, as a result of students insisting that they do not wish to share accommodation with foreigners, making access to higher education very difficult for them. Some have even reported being told, during lectures, to return to their home countries (Singh 2013). Hostility of this sort demotivates foreign students and increases the likelihood of their dropping out of the university, while those students who harm them are also likely to drop out as a result of fear of being prosecuted. There is a pressing need to educate and to campaign towards instilling an understanding and an acceptance of foreign students in institutions of higher education.

Performance of Scholarship Programs with an Example Provided by One Selected Program

The scholarship program in the discipline of social work offered by the Department of Social Development has given an opportunity to many students to study towards the Bachelor of Social Work degree by providing funding for their studies and their accommodation and also by assisting them with employment in the Department of Social Development. Since the inception of the program in 2007, the numbers of students being selected have increased. However, mismanagement, in the form of a failure to strike a balance between the human resources actually required and the number of students being funded, has created a problem of unemployment for most of these graduates in recent years. The treasury has funded the program to the tune of ZAR 250 million a year and assisted nine thousand two hundred and sixty-six students. Of these, approximately seven thousand have secured employment, while the rest continue to struggle to do so. If this situation is not effectively remedied, it is going to bring about chaos in the profession, as most will migrate away from the country, thereby potentially creating another skills shortage and very little return on the investment made in the program (Cronje 2015). The problem needs to be properly investigated and lessons need to be drawn from it, in order to avoid similar problems in other departments or scholarship programs.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the paper was to describe and to examine the various challenges or the

diverging contours which are inherent in gaining access to university education in South Africa. By making use of the literature reviewed, the authors were led to the ineluctable conclusion that the country still faces challenges with respect to access to university education, as a result of problems such as the low socio-economic status of the families of many students, institutional challenges arising from a failure to provide adequate support to students to ensure their preparedness for university, deviant behavior on the part of some students and poor success and throughput rates, which, in some cases, are the result of financial constraints.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the findings of this study the researchers recommend that the government should adopt a pro-poor policy in terms of ensuring that all students from poor backgrounds, whether their academic achievements are excellent or average, are assisted in order to enable them to prepare for university education and to ensure that they have access to it. In the course of implementing a program to ensure social justice in higher education, a monitoring and evaluation framework to gauge the effectiveness of its implementation would be essential and needs to be adopted in its management. Conducting more awareness campaigns concerning degree programs and careers by universities and high schools, for both parents and prospective students, should be encouraged. In addition, counselling units are vital for equipping students to make informed choices in both their academic and social lives through career guidance workshops and other forms of support. The social and print media have a vital role to play to educate the public about xenophobia, particularly in all the universities, in order to eradicate this destructive and socially undesirable phenomenon by emphasising the values of Ubuntu or humanity.

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