

ON RESPONDING AND RESPONSIVENESS TO SCARCE SKILLS NEEDS

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Higher education institutions in any region in South Africa find themselves exposed and variously attuned to a multitude of voices. Some of these may be more strident and insistent; some may be near at hand and others more remote. Nonetheless there is the possibility that each may carry some compelling message. We see it as our responsibility to make sense of these voices and to determine our course of action in response. This entails understanding a range of contextual elements at a number of levels. Thus this paper explores three general groups of factors that have a role in the capacity and ability of higher education to respond to the need for the development of scarce skills. The first group deals with the general national and international context of universities, the second focuses on some historical and conceptual issues and the third on the various possibilities for responsiveness that lie in the curriculum, enrolment planning and potential growth areas. This discussion bridges into some suggestions about the essential elements of partnerships with the province and of the actions that need to form part of the way forward.

In the first instance, as publicly funded Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), we are conscious of our responsibility to contribute to the public good. At a very important level we see ourselves as national competencies and for this reason Higher Education South Africa and its member institutions have engaged in responding to the calls for accelerated growth and development.

Secondly we have to be constantly mindful of the funding and planning constraints on higher education in South Africa. The fact that we are funded by the national treasury implies that our responsibilities are primarily national, but at a local planning and resource allocation level there are other considerations. In a time of diminishing levels of public funding for higher education and consequent financial constraints universities increasingly find themselves limited in their capacity to respond because of considerations of financial viability.

The Department of Education has attempted to manage the HE sector through the three steering mechanisms of planning, funding and quality assurance. It is for this reason that HEIs have been asked to validate their Programme and Qualification Mixes and to present projections of enrolments to 2010. It is obviously essential for national planning purposes for the Department to have a reasonable picture of the present situation and the likely short-term future.

On the other hand the recent enrolment planning exercise conducted by the DoE has revealed that the higher education sector as a whole sees itself as unlikely to expand enrolments beyond the level of modest increases. It would appear that institutions feel that they have reached capacity and are reluctant to commit to significant growth without some guarantee of sustainability. This is hardly surprising in a situation where public higher education has been shown to be consistently under-funded for a number of years and where there has been no funding for capital projects for more than decade.

¹ This paper is based on discussions with the institutional planners and members of the provincial scarce skills task team

However the DoE has responded by suggesting to higher education institutions that capping of student numbers is not part of the policy framework and has instead invited institutions to submit proposals for fundable growth in areas that are supportive of the national skills agenda but that would also be aligned with the strategic planning of that institution. This differentiated approach suggests that national education is attempting to link the allocation of some of the funding to a greater possibility of success while at the same time addressing the national skills shortage. The complex nuances of these funding and planning elements are an important part of the current context.

The third contextual voice is the international one. In an age of globalisation much is made of the influence and confluence of global trends on local practices but the truth is that universities have historically striven, albeit with varying degrees of success, to be part of an international if not truly global environment. HEIs find themselves increasingly part of a network of collegial connections based on the exchange of knowledge.

In one sense this means that there is an imperative to prepare students for a place in a global economy. In another it means that academics are increasingly conscious of and responsive to international ideas. The consequence is that universities envision themselves as part of an international environment and seek to interpret and act upon international trends and developments. This point should be emphasised. Good universities have an international focus. They do this in order to create new knowledge and to seek out and apply global knowledge for local application. But they also see themselves as having the task of predicting the shape of future knowledge and responding appropriately. In claiming this role universities do not seek to diminish the capacity of other agencies to access and apply global knowledge, they are merely asserting that this is part of their traditional role and an essential element in their self-conceptualisation.

The above discussion has served to illustrate that there are a number of national and international voices that carry weight in the selection and shaping of adequate responses to the numerous demands on higher education institutions. An inherent feature of this chorus of demands is that there may be competing and conflicting elements. This is crucial in understanding the capacity of higher education for local responsiveness.

In addition to these there are also a number of historical and conceptual factors that underlie participation in regional planning.

We need to acknowledge that universities have a wide range of existing partnerships within the region and that these also play a role in shaping the nature of responsiveness. Traditionally these relationships have been with industry and business, non-government organisations, government and other agencies but they are changing in both their nature and focus. These partnerships are likely to continue to be influential in the future.

For instance, it seems that professional bodies such as the Health Professions Council of South Africa are seeking a stronger voice in the curriculum and the programmes that are offered. In addition there is an increase level of interaction with national government departments around the responses of HE to national strategies. The latter has strengthened in tandem with the increased alignment between regional and national government strategies. This does not imply that Higher Education should be blindly responsive to market needs.

Given that HEIs have often been excluded from national and provincial development planning discussions, which should inform academic and enrolment planning, it has not been easy to access appropriate information for planning purposes. The recognition of the importance of accessing appropriate information about skills demands should not, however, be interpreted to mean that we believe that academic planning in higher education should only, or even predominantly, be driven by the needs of the labour market. Indeed there are often tensions between the need to retain capacity in certain areas and market forces. If market forces alone were to determine academic planning, higher education institutions would be forced to close down expensive departments which have no direct impact on economic growth such as the creative and performing arts and this would have adverse consequences for the general wellbeing of our society. Many courses help to build critical and analytical skills which are essential for active citizenship and for social scientists, but are not geared to producing graduates for any particular career. These graduates play a crucial role in developing and evaluating the impact of government policies and for generating plans for improving the quality of life of people in the second economy.

A disproportionate focus on the production of the kinds of skills needed for economic growth could result in a neglect of issues related to the wider public good. An example of the tensions between being demand led and contributing to transformation and the public good involves the case of African language departments. Although there is a declining demand for these courses, we have tried to sustain them because of our commitment to promoting multilingualism within our society. In preparing for this submission we have accordingly adopted a definition of development which encompasses social, cultural, political, environmental, and economic dimensions in line with the view that higher education needs to be more broadly focused on human development and enlarging people's choices in life and not just on meeting high level skills for the economy.

We believe that it is important to note that enhancing higher education contributions to growth and development may not necessarily entail taking in more students in all instances. In some cases it may be more appropriate to review and modify the curriculum to respond to changing needs.

Curriculum responsiveness is limited by a number of factors. The DoE itself has been attempting to gain a complete understanding of the programmes and qualifications offered in all the public institutions in South Africa. Beyond this it has also sought to restrict the offering of new programmes in some institutions, particularly in newly merged universities.

In addition the new quality regime instituted through the agency of the HEQC has ensured that a rigorous quality process is followed for the accreditation of new programmes. Finally the process of registering a new programme on SAQA also requires extensive consultation and procedures. What this means in essence is that it takes about two years for a public higher education institution to generate and to be in a position offer a completely new programme. In the situation where there is an existing qualification already registered on SAQA this time can be reduced to eighteen months.

This places universities in an ironically ambiguous position. It is the stable programme mix of the institution that is the essence of its academic reputation. The reputation of a

university is not founded on the quality of its short courses and informal offerings but on the quality of its research and the curriculum in the programmes leading to the award of formal qualifications. The current landscape militates against rapid responsiveness in the form of new formal programmes.

Thus in seeking to respond to the needs of the region for the provision of scarce skills and for development there has to be a realisation that the avenue of formal programmes cannot provide quick solutions. If we are going to introduce new programmes this has to be part of a long term strategy which can be shown to have benefit for both the region and higher education. The implications of this are profound. It becomes clear that if there is to be a sustainable partnership with the province around new formal programmes then this has to be based on a co-operative understanding of the needs, and the development of a research-based capacity to respond to the scarce skills shortage.

This will require a multi-year plan based on a fully informed understanding of the current situation, the perceived long-term skills needs and the necessary infrastructure. This last is absolutely vital in terms of the previous comments on the financial parameters within which HE has to work. It is particularly relevant to the issue of building capacity in areas that require expensive resources. As a practical example a local university cannot be expected to provide more places in engineering without long-term investment in infrastructure. This would in turn only be possible if there were a source of capital funding, a properly researched study of future demand, and commitments from the institution, the province and the national government.

Beyond the scenario of the introduction of new programmes there are other possible avenues of response. These lie in the two areas of the contents of the existing curriculum and in short courses. Firstly it is possible that elements of the existing curriculum could be used to provide formal skills training. It is even possible that discrete elements of whole curricula could be accredited separately but it would not be worth going this route unless there was a clear idea of the long-term sustainability of these offerings. Inversely there is a possibility that where there is a clearly defined need for training in a particular skills area, this element could be taken up into the formal curriculum of an existing qualification and thus could also build long-term capacity in an area of need.

In tandem with using the elements of the existing curriculum it is possible to utilise the wide range of short courses that are currently offered. In many cases these are already formalised as unit standards on SAQA while some have been expressly developed in response to the needs of local business and government. Whether they are all relevant or adequate is a matter for further investigation.

The avenues of using the curriculum and short courses to match existing needs could be seen as a short term response to the skills needs, while the issue of the reconfiguration of the PQM could be seen a long term solution which speaks directly to the principal business of higher education. However both responses entail a number of elements that need to be established before constructive progress can be made. In general terms this would imply commitments from both the HE sector in the region and the province.

To some extent the push from the DoE is for individual universities to be distinctive as evidenced through a unique range of programmes. There is an attempt to build diversity

in the system, which is sometimes in conflict with the notion of regional co-operation. However it becomes clear that if there is to be any semblance of a co-ordinated response to the skills needs of the province the local universities will be required to adopt a more cooperative mode of thinking and working. This might involve at least the following actions.

There needs to be an opening up of the institutional understanding of the individual Programme and Qualifications Mixes and a truly regional approach to programme planning, development and offering. The present system of nominal regional consultation when applying to offer a new programme is inadequate.

Both the HEIs and the province need to have a comprehensive mapping of the current strengths of higher education in the region. This would go beyond the formal qualifications to include all short courses and eventually elements of the formal curriculum that could be adopted for the response to skills needs.

The recently compiled enrolment projections and description of potential growth areas need to become the subject of mutual discussion and interrogation by all those involved. For a start there needs to be an understanding of how these could be taken forward cooperatively and of where there is alignment and mismatch.

There needs to be a clear and shared understanding of the present and projected enrolments, broken down by study area, race and gender. The table below gives the overall projections of enrolments as presented to the DoE in the first half of 2006. These would need to be further disaggregated and analysed.

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
CPUT	29 250	29 678	30 132	30 614	31 130
UCT	21 508	21 726	21 984	22 283	22 590
US	21 544	21 731	22 046	22 365	22 590
UWC	14 750	14 915	15 000	15 047	15 097
TOTALS	87 052	88 050	89 162	90 309	91 407

Table 1
Projected Enrolments in the four regional universities in the Western Cape

These initial projections reveal a remarkably similar approach with an underlying rationale. In common with many HEIs in the country local universities foresee steady but limited growth in the next four years. This may be attributed to a variety of factors but most prevalent seems to be the belief that there is little possibility of expansion without increased funding for permanent infrastructural development.

Within the context of a possibility of further earmarked funding, the DoE has invited institutions to suggest areas for possible expansion in enrolments beyond these initial projections and it is too early to predict exactly how these will evidence themselves. It is certain though that a common refrain will be that there can be no growth without investment in infrastructure. What is clear is that there would need to be a more detailed interrogation of the likely patterns of enrolments in the medium term.

There needs to be a more focussed exploration of the areas of growth described in enrolment plans and their relevance to local needs as well as an understanding that in identifying the areas for marginal or for more substantial growth HEIs have taken account of the following factors:

- The general need to increase the pool of people eligible for academic and research careers – hence the general need to expand honours and masters programmes in the interests of long term development and sustainability
- Academic strength (using the proxy of student throughputs)
- Conduciveness to flexible modes of delivery, because areas of expansion within the existing mainstream timetable would required increased investment in transport and access infrastructure, student services and teaching facilities
- Alignment with development needs
- Alignment with identified scarce skills
- The size of the potential market demand on the part of students.

Given the increasing alignment between national and regional strategies for development it is likely that, in a general way, the growth areas suggested in the enrolment plans will be aligned with the needs of the province but these would need to be refined and aligned in mutual interaction between regional HEIs and the provincial government. By way of example there would need to a more sophisticated understanding by HEIs of the strategies and needs of the province. At the same time this should be matched by a fuller appreciation of the current strengths and assets of the regional HEIs. Some of these are illustrated in the tables that seek to present a preliminary analysis of the priority areas of the province and the corresponding focus areas of higher education.

A necessary extension of this process would be a greater commitment by the province to both inform HE of future planning and needs but also to commit itself to real support of the initiatives in terms of possible financing. This might be in the form of bursaries or other incentives. In this context an analysis of the projected graduate patterns over the next five years would be useful. Another possibility would be to explore customised and flexible models of delivery of courses, such as internships.

A critical area for the long-term success of capacity building in key areas is the issue of the preparedness of learners for higher education. Greater clarity is needed on future strategies for offerings in schools. There needs to be greater alignment and far better understanding on both sides.

By way of illustration of the possibilities all the HEIs have initiated a project to improve the quality of Mathematics and Science teaching in selected township primary and secondary schools to enable more black students from disadvantaged communities to gain access to higher education.

The institutions have also launched a range of interventions to improve student success rates.

Similarly both HE and the province need to develop far greater clarity on the interface between HE and FET. Without this, there will continue to be overlaps and duplications and a continued lack of articulation.

What emerges from these limited examples is that there is a critical need for an unfettered partnership between regional HEIs and the government of the Western Cape. The nature and extent of the partnership will need to be fleshed out in future discussions but it becomes clear that there needs to be a continuing, structured dialogue between the provincial government and the regional HEIs.

It has become apparent, though, that if there is to be real progress in the partnership between the province and higher education, the continuing relationship needs to be structured in a particular way that takes it beyond a mere conversation.

Firstly the exchange needs to be: two sided, based on research and data. It needs to be structured and sustainable. It needs to be based on a vision of growth that will require investment in terms of resources translating into real returns that are of reciprocal benefit to both the province and HE. There needs to be a realisation that funding is needed to build both human capacity as well as infrastructure.

In our view improved throughput and retention rates are essential to being able to produce more graduates with high level skills and to redress imbalances in the equity profiles of our graduates.

We see our goal of achieving significant improvements in student graduate rates, and levels of success, as a contribution to the provision of high level skills in relation to the growth areas. We believe that it is dangerous to model growth with too great an emphasis on input factors. Given the prevalent inefficiencies across the higher education sector in South Africa, achieving, and regularly exceeding, national benchmarks for throughput and graduation would, particularly in view of projected marked shifts in the demographic profile of the enrolment, make a very significant contribution to meeting skills shortages.

We believe that the strong emphasis on teaching inputs within the current funding model should be reviewed: the systemic allocation of a larger fraction of the block grant to teaching outputs, with a parallel reduction in the teaching input fraction, would heighten the focus efficiencies in terms of student throughput and retention across the HE system.

In charting the way forward we also need to realise that certain governance and management issues within the HEIs will have to be taken into account.

Universities are currently faced with so many competing demands that staff members are becoming increasingly despondent and are voicing their resistance to what are seen as unrealistic and unreasonable demands. The enthusiasm with which the memorandum of understanding between CHEC and the PGWC will be embraced by the ordinary staff members of the respective higher education institutions is dependent upon whether these members understand and accept the vision and commitments emanating from it; whether the individual and institutional incentives support such a venture, and whether the new challenges are seamlessly integrated with the normal output of the University in terms of its definition of its core business. The best results will be achieved when:

- Top management clearly defines responding to the provincial challenges as part of the core business of the university and therefore as of strategic importance.
- The organisational structuring of the institution reflects the importance assigned to the commitment to being a partner in the pursuit of provincial growth and well-

- being.
- The strategic business indicators utilised to measure the performance of organisational units reflect the importance assigned to acting as a co-responsible partner.
 - The key performance indicators at the individual level emphasise the importance of community engagement (and therefore responsiveness to the provincial challenges) in learning and teaching programmes, research activities and community interaction projects.

When the listed preconditions have been met, staff members are more likely to perceive responding to the new set of challenges as part of their normal activities.

Finally we acknowledge that much of the tenor of the discussion in this paper originates from an exploration and development of the **traditional** roles and functions of the university in society. Further to this we would want to believe that higher education in the province has both the willingness and the flexibility to be able to move beyond the constraints of historical practices into a realm where they are prepared to enter into partnerships that are both challenging to the institutions and meaningful to the province. In seeking to make a meaningful contribution we would also hope to be able to embrace new modes of thinking, interaction and cooperation.

The successful co-operative discussions between provincial government departments and the university planners over the last year are evidence that there is spirit of willingness and commitment. Thus we welcome the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding that will incorporate a commitment to tangible outcomes, broad-based partnerships and mutual benefits.