CURRENT TRENDS AND CHALLENGES IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

R. J. Singh
Research Development and Administration Department
University of Limpopo
Polokwane, South Africa
E-mail: Jesika.Singh@ul.ac.za

ABSTRACT

Over the past five years, higher education teaching and learning in South Africa has experienced a significant shift as the focus has turned inwards to teaching, learning and research practice of individual institutions. A specific area of interest has been on teacher education as South Africa struggles to train enough teachers to meet its high demand. A need for increased postgraduate throughput has forced higher education institutions (HEIs) to focus on research capacity building in the areas of supervision, publications and staff qualifications. Amidst these are the challenges of large classes, recurriculation, and development and use of local African languages. Reflecting on these issues is the focus of this introductory article.

Keywords: Africanisation, recurriculation, academic support, information and communications technologies, assessment and evaluation.
INTRODUCTION

‘An interlocked set of social, demographic, economic, technological, environmental and political change forces is bearing down on higher education’ (Scott 2013, 275). This statement gives credence to the title of this introductory article that higher education in South Africa is facing challenges. The article gives some insight on some specific challenges currently being faced in higher education and some of the trends that are emerging. By nature, higher education teaching, learning and research is always on the cutting edge, meeting new challenges and taking knowledge development to unreached heights. The danger is that sometimes the cost of advancement does not take into consideration the scope of diversity that needs to exist in order to serve the existing multiplicity of people and functions without ending up in over-competitiveness for positions in a steeply stratified higher education system (Teichler 2013).

Outwardly, internationalisation has pushed higher education towards integrating intercultural and international dimensions in teaching and research; producing graduates who have global competency; and participating in collaborative dual-degree programmes. This process has fuelled debates about the sustainability of universities in their domestic countries (Msweli 2013, 45–46). Inwardly, the focus is on shaping the curriculum to meet the needs of society (recurriculation of higher education programmes); ensuring quality through institutional audits and quality enhancement projects for teaching and learning (CHE 2014); developing infrastructure of historically disadvantaged institutions; granting allocations to enhance research, teaching and learning; and creating new higher education institutions (HEIs).

What remains at the core of these developments is the rapid expansion of higher education needs and more importantly the accompanying challenges. Deloitte and Touche (2011) identify access, diversity, affordability, sustainability, ICT-enabled learning, online learning, regulations and reporting, employment linked and market-demand academic programmes, strategic priorities, constrained funding and financial sustainability, infrastructure provision and asset optimisation, and attracting the best academic staff, as some of the issues that universities need to negotiate in the current context. This is a tall order for universities, especially those that exist in an emerging economy like South Africa.

Perhaps a more personalised and workable strategy is utilising the nine key change-implementation lessons for achieving teaching and learning performance improvements that Scott (2013) suggests. They are as follows: consensus around the data, not around the table; setting a small number of agreed priorities for action; steered engagement; ‘why don’t we’ not ‘why don’t you’; change is learning; how staff like to learn is how students like to learn; staff knowing ‘where they fit into the bigger picture’ and being acknowledged for a job well done; learning from others; and using a government quality audit as an external lever for internal (culture) change and improvement.
AFRICANISATION

Higgs (2003) suggests an inclusive approach to Africanisation that incorporates the concept of *ubuntu*, which is an African philosophy that focuses on human allegiances, which may enable a better conceptualisation of Africanisation. Waghid (2014, 2) discusses the potential of *ubuntu* by examining it as three different concepts:

As a humanistic concept, *ubuntu* can engender cooperative and harmonious human relations; as a philosophical concept, *ubuntu* can contribute towards cultivating the respect and care that are required to produce a morally worthwhile African society; and as a politico-ideological concept, *ubuntu* can engender human interdependence for transformed socio-political action.

In a chapter titled ‘Towards a different understanding of African education – Reconstituting the place of *ubuntu*’, Waghid (2014, 55) examines a communitarian understanding of *ubuntu* and its resonance with dignified humane action where the ‘potentialities of people’ are evoked. In his view, these practices ‘can contribute to a notion of what ought to constitute African education’ (Waghid 2014, 55). When applied to higher education, Africanisation can be viewed as a call to adopt curricula and syllabuses to ensure that teaching and learning are adapted to African realities and conditions (Letsekha 2013). Africanisation is also seen as a way of transcending individual realities and seeking commonality with others with the intention of connecting to the broader African experience and establishing curricula that can bind people together (Louw 2010). A key element of this process is language. According to Matos (2000), there is a systemic attempt to dismiss the intrinsic value of African culture, language, customs and practices from the curriculum. In South African higher education, the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Blade Nzimande, expressed the view in 2011 that in future one of the conditions for university graduation should be that every university student must learn one African language. With the exception of African language courses, there are a few examples of the integration of African languages into the curriculum. The one exception is the University of Limpopo, which has a dual-medium degree (Nyika and Van Zyl 2013).

RECURRICULATION

Teacher education programmes were among the first in South Africa to be reviewed on a wide-scale national level. The Council on Higher Education’s (CHE) review of education programmes from 2006–2007 was a major move towards some form of ‘standardisation’ of teacher education. Recurriculation has been an on-going process since then. The articles in the current issue reflect the process of recurriculation, both in teacher education and in higher education in general. Concepts such as *reflection* play an important part when change occurs. An accreditation process should not be relied on as the only factor for improvement; programmes should be examined periodically for coherence (Avalos, Tellez and Navarro 2010). Other factors related
to reflection on teacher education programmes are community engagement or service learning (Alexander and Khabanyane 2013; Naidoo 2012). From a research perspective, ‘Faculties of Education are under more pressure because of their generally low proportional contribution to the total research output units at most universities’ (Jita and Mokhele 2013, 127). A shift in focus in teacher education has also begun towards early childhood development. It has become increasingly evident that the under-preparedness of students at university level originates much lower down in the schooling system – where early childhood development takes place. A strong foundation in this regard always makes for more solid development of a student later on.

ACADEMIC SUPPORT

With the many challenges faced in higher education ranging from under-preparedness of first-entering students to large classes (Machika 2013), it has become increasingly important to provide academic support to students. According to Boughey (2013), multiple literacies are needed in higher education. She draws a distinction between school based literacies, home literacies and literacies in higher education, and concludes, based on empirical evidence, that: ‘Where home based literacies differ substantially from both school based and academic literacies, then the mastery of literacies associated with school and university may not be affirmed’ (Boughey 2013, 29). Students enrolled at South African HEIs come from various racial, social, cultural and religious backgrounds. Reading skills in higher education are crucial for success. Bharuthram (2012) argues for the teaching of reading across the curriculum in higher education. Critical reading skills involve questioning of texts and challenging the taken-for-granted (Boughey 2013). An alternate approach is to work with the students themselves by ‘transforming the teaching and learning environment and by addressing the diversity of strengths and challenges that students bring to higher education’ (Pym 2013, 353). Academic support can also be given through scaffolding as described by McKay (2013). This process involves guiding students in a particular discipline by an insider, so that greater access is gained. It is a way of socialising new students into a particular discipline (McKay 2013). The tutorial model is also seen as a way of supporting students, especially those who are underprepared for academic challenges (Hlatshwayo 2013).

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGIES

Communication in higher education has been greatly enhanced in recent years by technology. For lecturers of large classes, information and communications technologies (ICTs) have provided immense relief. Communication of course
content and assessment has become quicker, easier and more efficient, or so it would be expected! However, in the South African higher education context, ‘knowledge about the impact of so-called emerging technologies on learning or the readiness of higher education institutions to engage with such technologies is relatively thin’ (Bozalek, Ng’ambi and Gachago 2013, 419). Their argument is that HEIs need to make more effective use of the emerging technologies as their pedagogical value remains unexploited. One of the challenges of using emerging technologies is that newer versions become available so rapidly that it is virtually impossible to be in a position to continually fund expensive upgrades. Of course, there is always the case of the technologically challenged lecturer to whom students refer to as BBTs (born before technology).

POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

Currently, HEIs in South Africa, especially historically disadvantaged ones, are in a catch-22 dilemma when it comes to postgraduate research and development. Postgraduate numbers have escalated rapidly due to various reasons such as government funding subsidies and massification (Bozalek, Ng’ambi and Gachago 2013; Jita and Mokhele 2013). Accompanying this there has been an increase in the demand for supervisors, which has led universities to institute programmes to increase the numbers of staff with doctorates. Postgraduate research development programmes are also on the increase, their intention being to train postgraduate students in research skills so that they graduate in record time. As in any race, the best equipped make greater strides; universities with higher qualified staff, and more financial and human resources are well advanced in this arena thereby maintaining the gap that was left by the apartheid legacy (Pillay and Karlsson 2013).

ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION

With large classes and the use of new ICTs, academics are re-thinking their assessment strategies for students. This change is also influenced by assessment policies and procedures within the sector and discipline. In addition, innovative assessment practices which are practised nationally and internationally are also considered. For example, the use of multi-dimensional assessment gathers information from a broad spectrum of abilities and skills (Mubangizi and O’Brien 2013). Such a system is useful in a multicultural setup as is found in South African universities. In South Africa, over the past decade, there has been a noticeable increase in assessment activities. Teichler (2013) notes a multiplication of systematic evaluations (research evaluations, institutional evaluations, internationalisation evaluations, accreditations, audits, performance assessment of staff) and an increase of ‘mickey mouse’ assessments (indicator-based funding, rankings, etc.). Two of Teichler’s
(2013) observations are worth mentioning: the need for high quality academics to be found at the famous universities (e.g., movement of NRF-rated academics to ranked universities) and whether researchers’ assessment and incentive measures are successful in fostering ‘qualities’.

The abovementioned factors, together with a myriad other complex, and often controversial issues create an environment in South African higher education that is open to many possibilities. The manner in which these possibilities are handled in this sector remains to be seen. Waghid (2014, 56, 68) suggests ways in which African education can be approached and understood differently: linking ubuntu (humaneness) to ukama (interdependent relations), and cultivating students in a community of engagement where ‘the privilege of education ... is lived through the caring recognition and restoration of human dignity for all of humanity’.

REFERENCES
CHE see Council on Higher Education.


