

Is Access to Higher Education a Sufficient Condition for Social Equity in South Africa? A Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT Access to higher education in South Africa has become an urgent imperative after the demise of apartheid in a bid to redress the inequities of the past. This has given rise to the massification of higher education and the phenomenal increase in the number of students participating in higher education. As a direct consequence, debates and discourses in Higher Education (HE) have foregrounded access as a key component of successful higher education transformation. However, critics have argued that debates and discourses in higher education that are only driven by access as measured by rates of participation remain largely ineffective if they do not pay sufficient attention to access as measured by success and graduation rates as well as the quality of graduates produced. This is equal to saying that students of all races and social classes who participate in higher education should have equal chances of success in higher education so as to bring about social equity and equal educational opportunity in society. This paper, therefore, argues that while the issue of access to higher education is a necessary step towards social equity in South Africa, it is however, not sufficient on its own to bring about this noble ideal.

INTRODUCTION

The notion that higher education is a major tool for individual and social mobility and a potential instrument for social progress has gained popular currency among many nations, particularly in the African context. This has been particularly so in post-independent African States, where education has previously been a privilege of a selected few. In the case of South Africa, the attainment of independence in 1994 has seen many heroic measures being instituted by the state so as to transform the social terrain of higher education. Higher education transformation in South Africa has necessitated that all students regardless of racial differences access higher education in increased numbers. The increased student access to higher education has been part and parcel of the massification of higher education (Higgs 2010).

The concern with greater participation has become an urgent imperative after the demise of apartheid. At the international level, calls for greater access were evidenced in the UNESCO

World Conference on Higher Education in 1998 where the emphasis was on 'equality of access' (UNESCO 1998). Therefore, it is not surprising that higher education discourse on transformation has tended to revolve around the issues of access. While significant progress has been registered in the improvement of access, challenges still abound in success as measured by graduation rates (Motala 2005). In other words, while much has been achieved in the area of equality of access, this did not translate into equality of opportunity or equality of outcomes. This article argues that while access to higher education is absolutely necessary, it is not sufficient on its own to bring about social equity and social equality. There is, therefore, need to evaluate the success of the participation strategies that have been adopted in the South African Higher Education landscape. This article argues that access as measured by rates of participation remains of very little significance if it is not matched by success. Success in education is crucial in order to improve the quality of life of all citizens and to free the potential of each person.

THE CONCEPT OF AND RATIONAL FOR EDUCATIONAL ACCESS AND EQUITY

The concepts of equity, access and equality revolve around the issue of opportunity, poten-

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tial and fairness. As aptly conceptualised by Pityana (2009), they suggest that for any education system to become meaningful, the circle of opportunity must be expanded, potential extended to those who might otherwise not be considered worthy enough and that everyone be treated fairly. Equity in higher education includes equality of access and provision, equality of programme quality and content as well as equality of calibre in terms of graduates. What comes to the fore from this conceptualisation is that equity has a substantive quality rather than being confined to mere numbers. In this regard Cassim (2005) elaborates that equity suggests a fair access to educational resources of equal quality and value to enhance educational attainment. The fact that equity and access touch the very heart of people's beliefs about fairer societies, social change and national development implies that universities and governments can hardly afford to ignore issues that relate to equity and access to HE (Higher Education) in South Africa. Therefore, as perceived by Akoojee and Nkomo (2007), the concept of equity, equality and access are fundamental measures used to gauge the effectiveness of any public higher education system.

In this discourse access implies all the efforts and measures taken by the South African national government, universities as well as other stakeholders to widen educational opportunities to all the citizens. This entails among other things the removal of all perceived constraints, barriers and impediments that affect individual or collective participation in educational activities. These barriers and constraints can have various manifestations ranging from financial, geographical, socio-cultural, political and so forth. The thrust for access is premised on the moral high ground that education is a basic human right that empowers the socially and economically marginalised and vulnerable groups in different communities to get out of impoverishment and safeguards them from exploitative and inhuman practices (South African Human Rights Commission 2004). The provision of basic and higher education is thus central to any programme linked to economic development and poverty eradication. Given the acknowledged role of higher education in socio-economic development, the issue of access thus assumes greater importance particularly in the African continent. This is particularly so given the widely held belief that with-

out adequate access, nations are likely to remain mired in poverty and chronic underdevelopment (Pityana 2009).

Impact and Outcomes

With regards to the South African higher education context, it is crucial at the onset to indicate that spirited efforts were made to explicitly remove racial considerations from higher education policies following the attainment of democratic rule in 1994. On this basis, it is fair to say that equity defined as race-blindness has been achieved at the level of policy.

Cooper and Subotzky's (2001) research concluded that South Africa has experienced a tremendous leap in the increase in proportion of black students in higher education. The same study revealed that the ratio of black students in total university enrolment increased from 32 percent in 1990 to 60 percent in 2000 while in technikons enrolments rose from 32 percent to 72 percent over the same period. The study concludes that by 2000, there was a majority of African students in both universities (60%) and technikons (72%). Admittedly, the expansion of access to higher education in South Africa has improved access particularly amongst poor students. The proportion of African students in the system has been on a steady increase ever since 2004 and in 2007, 63% of the total student population was African. With regards to female students' participation, in 2007 it stood at 55.5 percent of the student intake (Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD) 2010).

Admittedly, there is an ongoing increase in access to higher education in the South African society. As articulated by the South African Minister of Higher Education and Training, there have been significant improvements in the democratic profile of students, particularly in terms of opening space for African and other poor students. The Minister went on to observe that the current university population comprise two-thirds of African students. In his analysis of the South African situation in the period 2001 to 2007, Badat (2005) has shown that there has been a broadening of access to HE in respect of all racial groups. The study further showed that over the six year period referred to in the above, the overall increase in enrolment rates at universities was 22 per cent. The specific details of the increases in terms of the different categories were as follows:

- (a) African Blacks - 31%
- (b) Coloureds - 55%
- (c) Indians - 8%
- (d) Whites - 14%

The above statistics are a clear testimony of the concerted effort made by institutions to access higher education to as many South African students as possible as provided for by the South African constitution. Nevertheless, while enrolment patterns have been on the increase, the sad thing is that these figures did not necessarily indicate increased output (that is, completed qualifications) rates in respect of all the racial groups (Cassim 2005; Cloete 2002).

CEPD (2010), aptly notes that although former whites- only universities now have a significant number of black students, they tend to thrive and do better than universities formerly meant for black students. The report further noted that historically disadvantaged universities in the so-called former Bantustan areas struggle financially, administratively and academically. Furthermore, they continue to cater for the poorest students and employ less qualified academics on the whole. In addition, there are serious student-related concerns in historically disadvantaged institutions ranging from low student success rates, curriculum relevance, unsuitable student accommodation and several others (Cele 2004). This paper therefore argues that it is not enough to merely ensure that student profiles in higher education progressively reflect the demographic realities of the South African society without providing sufficient resources and support to ensure that student performance meet or surpass predetermined levels. This is crucial as it acts as a first step towards equal educational outcomes and equity.

This, therefore, gives credence to the argument that the current system in the South African HE tends to privilege some and continue to disadvantage others through latent ways. In this regards, Badat (2005) and Cele (2004) noted that the higher education sector is still plagued by its apartheid legacy and accompanying characteristics of racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination.

The enactment of race-blind policies, while a necessary step in opening space, should not be construed as implying that students of all races have equal access in practice to whatever, institution they might like to attend or that all higher education institutions have comparable resour-

ces at their disposal (Fiske and Ladd 2005). Suffice to say that currently, equal access exists in principle as most African learners are still confined to certain type of institutions largely because of their socio-economic status. Bitzer (2010) succinctly observes that the majority of black undergraduate students in South Africa are to this day enrolling at less reputable and even poor quality higher education institutions. As argued by Erasmus (2010), worldwide socio-economic standing is widely influencing the profile of students entering higher education and that people from low socio-economic status backgrounds are highly under-represented in higher education. This is not surprising given the fact that school completion rates and levels of achievement are closely linked to social class and race.

It is, therefore, critical that any discourse on access and equity in HE should have access with success at its core as opposed to access as mere participation.

National Students Financial Aid Scheme

The South African government, keen on addressing social exclusion, in higher education, based on financial constraints, established the National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) to all universities in South Africa (Akoojee and Nkomo 2007). Through this programme, funds have been allocated for financially needy students in the public sector of higher education. The NSFAS scheme is informed by the thinking that affordability is a critical issue that has a huge impact on the throughput and output of higher education in South Africa. As cogently argued by Cele (2004), affordability directly limits access at an entry level where capable students cannot be admitted into higher education institutions because of inability to fund their studies. The NSFAS loan scheme sets out criteria that are targeted at ensuring that access to higher education is facilitated by offering loans to disadvantaged students provided the students meet the entrance criteria of the institutions (Berte van Wyk 2010). This programme should be hailed for making education affordable to a number of students from low socio-economic background. This is critically important as affordability is one of the critical issues that has a negative impact on the throughput and output of higher education institutions.

As noted by Cassim (2005) some students drop out of university not because they cannot cope with the academic and intellectual demands of higher education, but primarily because they cannot secure enough funds to take them through their studies.

Be this as it may, it should be pointed out that the provision of these bursaries should never be construed as implying that all those who are financially in need necessarily get them. The NSFAS loan scheme sets out criteria that are targeted at ensuring that access to higher education is facilitated by offering loans to disadvantaged students provided the students meet the entrance criteria of the institutions (Berte van Wyk 2010). As Fiske and Ladd (2004) observed, the NSFAS programme was never funded adequately and their effectiveness varied widely across institutions. The same authors went on to observe that this form of financial aid covered only 60 to 70 percent of the total costs of the educational upkeep required for each student per year. This means that the student has to fork up the remaining amount from his/ her own pocket. This has the overall effect that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are ejected out of the higher education system through failure to raise sufficient funding to sustain their studies. In addition, Fiske and Ladd (2004) make a cogent observation that the current funding model applies to all institutions and does not fully recognise the need for differentiation, neither does it adequately take into account the imperative to develop appropriate role for each university based on its capacities, location and history.

Language Policy

The existing language barrier inherent in many institutions of higher education ultimately reduces the possibilities of success for the majority of students. While the NSFAS and other related programmes clearly attest towards the government effort to boost access to higher education, there remains latent aspects of social exclusion that require analysis and scrutiny. These include but are not limited to the language policy, under-preparedness of learners, poverty, class, and race (Motala 2005).

Commenting on the situation in previously white universities like Pretoria, Stellenbosch, North-West, Cape Town and Rhodes, Cele (2004) maintains that though admission policies no

longer explicitly discriminate against students on the basis of their race, black students in South Africa may continue to be differentially excluded because of the language they speak, poverty in the family, and inability to afford school fees, or prohibitive transportation costs. Although the question of language is often taken for granted, in academic discourses and debates, it has far reaching impact on the student overall achievement in higher education (DOE 2004; Higgs 2010). This is particularly so with students from lower class social backgrounds.

A socio-linguistic study conducted by Bennett and LeCompte (1990) in Britain showed that many language differences exist between the lower, middle and upper socio-economic strata. The study found that such language differences involve grammatical distinctions, pronunciation, stress and intonation, richness of vocabulary style and taste in the selection and use of words and phrases. The study concluded that differences in these linguistic features mean differences in how the world is experienced and communicated by students. This argument links very well with Basil Bernstein's elaborated and restricted language codes which he used to classify the speech patterns used by people of different social classes (Bourdieu 1992) Bernstein argues that students from poor families who are socialised in terms of the restricted code, which is far removed from the language used in schools, experience disadvantages and alienation when it comes to learning in schools. This disadvantage comes about since such children tend to experience serious difficulties in deciphering abstract ideas and concepts. On the other hand, the middle and upper classes use the elaborated code which is more formal, complete, universal and grammatically correct. The critical point here is that educational institutions operate on the basis of the elaborated code, a thing which gives students from well to do families a definite advantage when it comes to education. This view is reinforced by Collins (1994) who observes that schools use middle class language with the concomitant effect that working class pupils have an inbuilt barrier to learning in schools. This way, poverty is mediated through language and this result in serious scholastic hindrances in the learning of students from poor families.

CEPD (2010) expressly notes that the possibility of success for the majority of students is hampered by the existing language barrier inhe-

rent in all higher education institutions. Therefore, the issue of developing African languages as part of the formal academic programme remains critical.

There is, therefore, a need for developing African languages as academic languages to be used in universities if at all the issue of access with success is to be taken to another level (Fiske and Ladd 2004). Related to this is the issue of failure by the Higher education system to recognise and integrate indigenous knowledge into their systems (DoE 2004).

Access, Quality and Graduation Rates

Issues of quality, retention, and learning achievements have often been sacrificed in the quest to get as many students into HE as possible. As Badalt (2005) argues in respect of South Africa, in an attempt to expand social inclusion by widening access, there are cohorts of students who take too long to graduate. He goes on to observe that the unregulated widening of student participation in higher education has recently been perceived as causing a significant systemic impasse and a financial strain as many institutions increasingly fail to account for their failure to graduate these learners out of the system. The contentious issue here is that equity remains elusive when students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds drop out in large numbers, fail to achieve their grades or are confined to academic programmes unattractive to the labour market.

In this regard, Fiske and Ladd (2005) make an apt observation that while the South African labour market trends indicate the need for higher education institutions to produce more graduates, the South African higher education system does not meet this need in terms of enrolment trends. This has led many critics to argue that the higher education system is characterised by significant inefficiencies in relation to outputs of the system as measured by graduation rates. The realisation that access in general does not easily translate into improved retention or throughput seems to suggest that systemic adjustments that support increased graduation outputs are critically imperative.

The Department of Education believes that the low graduation rates are a function of the high dropout rate. A study conducted by the DoE (2004) on 120 000 first-time entering undergraduates revealed that 30 percent of students

dropped out at the end of first year, a further 24 000 after two or three years of study. This leaves 60 000 students (50 percent) in the system. Of these, only 26 500 (22%) of the total cohort had graduated by the end of third/fourth year of study (DoE 2004). Clearly this suggests that a tension exists between the widening of access and efficiency in relation to graduation rates. Therefore, what comes to the fore is that while equity of access is necessary and may have been achieved to a larger extent, this did not translate into equity of outcomes. This issue is elaborated in detail in the next section.

Does Equity of Access Lead to Equity of Outcomes for Students of All Races

The argument so far points towards serious problems in the standards used to determine the country's progress towards a more equitable system of higher education. Most of the reforms adopted by the South African government seem to reduce equity to mere equal treatment (Ptyana 2009). This notion of equal treatment has "race blindness" in respect of policies at its heart. Simply put, this means that none should be treated differently simply on the basis of his or her race. For instance the present scenario in South Africa is that the delivery of higher education is done through race-blind policies. This view finds its clearest manifestation in admission policies and funding formulae which make no distinctions between universities on the basis of their learners as used to be the case during the apartheid era. Such an approach is generally consistent with philosopher John Rawls's first principle of justice. According to this principle, each person has an equal right to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties. In the context of the current discussion, basic liberties include access to higher education.

The critical point in this regard is to question whether this principle, good as it may appear, is morally sufficient. As Fiske and Ladd (2004) assert, when racial groups start out on an uneven playing field, as they certainly did in South Africa in 1994, equal treatment may not, in and of itself, go far enough in addressing equity concerns. Hampered by decades of underinvestment in school facilities, and in the quality of teachers serving black students, uniform funding formulae for current operating spending will not provide the same educational opportunity to

black students as is the case with white students (Cloete 2002). As maintained in the Department of education (1997) White Paper 3, the principle of equity as a form of social inclusion requires fair opportunities both to enter higher education programmes and to succeed in them. In other words, failure by the institutions of higher learning to strike a balance between equity of access and equity of outcomes consequently lead to the continued exclusion of historically marginalised groups from participating in the broader economic and social spheres of life.

Contributing to the debate on access and equity in HE in South Africa, CEPD (2010: 16) accurately reports that "...a higher participation rate, achieved through improved access to higher education, is not an adequate measure of transformation in higher education. The report further notes that transformation is complex and involves a mesh of factors such as improving graduate output, revising the curriculum, providing decent student accommodation and developing existing staff.

The Issue of Underprepared Students

There are other aspects of social exclusion that require analysis and scrutiny like the under-preparedness of learners, the progression from the school system into higher education and into the labour market (Cele 2004). This section focuses specifically on student level of under-preparedness as a variable that makes the achievement of equity even more elusive.

The massification of higher education implies that a lot of mediocre type of students, many of whom are least prepared for HE can now access it in increasing numbers. To this end Erasmus (2010) postulates that since it is unlikely that there is going to be a radically different type of student anytime soon, there is need to adapt the curriculum and teaching strategies to suit the student population that we have.

According to Motala (2005), poor success rates in previously disadvantaged schools are a function of dismal levels of student preparedness as well as limited educational resources and oversized classes. CEPD (2010) however believes that the existing cohort of students is not necessarily under-prepared and that failure to succeed lies more in systemic weaknesses in HE. There is, therefore, need for universities and academics to develop a deeper understanding of who

students are, so as to be able to develop them to their full potential. The crux of the argument here is that academics should undergo a paradigm shift and revisit perceptions that depict students as the "hassle factor". This argument is a clarion call for academics in HE to acquire a new perspective on students as individuals with their own identities and who have the potential to thrive (Motala 2005)

It is critical for universities to have a stake in ensuring smooth transition for students coming from diverse backgrounds into the institutional culture of university. A contributory factor to lower success rates, according to Cooper and Subotsky (2001), is the de-contextualised curriculum that appear socially removed from the students' lived experiences. In terms of Bitzer (2010)'s argument, the problem of under-prepared students can be significantly addressed if there is better articulation between the schooling system, FET colleges and universities. Programmes that are aimed at facilitating the academic transition from school to university for students from disadvantaged backgrounds should therefore be strengthened by all means.

Further, the provision of suitable student services where emphasis is on the total student experience could be a step in the right direction. Such student support services could include accommodation in residences, catering services, diverse programmes, health and wellness programmes, counselling. According to Higgs et al. (2000) student services in many universities are fragmented and are not recognised as part of core business. This paper, therefore, argues that it is not enough to merely ensure that student profiles in higher education progressively reflect the demographic realities of the South African society without providing sufficient resources and support to ensure that student performance meet or surpass predetermined levels. This is crucial as it acts as a first step towards equity and equal educational outcomes.

Rural Versus Urban Universities

It should be pointed out that efforts to extend access to rural and remote inaccessible areas, while contributing to reduce national imbalances, and promote equity, were not without problems. As Bourdieu (1992) observes, everywhere in Africa, quality of education decreases, the further one moves away from urban centres or ca-

pital cities. In this regard, Cele (2004) succinctly observe that the constraints of resources mark a shift from inclusion to a different form of exclusion that hinges on affordability and limits widened participation.

The critical issue here is that students originating from shunned rural areas are handicapped not as a result of lower intelligence coefficients but simply because they have fewer and poor opportunities. For example, before coming to university, a number of students from rural backgrounds would have had less opportunities to use the language of instruction in daily interactions, to get access to all kinds of information, to libraries or to personal books, to properly trained teachers-and often they go without teachers in some key disciplines (DFID 2008). In terms of Bourdieu's analysis, such students lack the social and cultural capital that is needed to succeed in education. In the South African education situation, many schools and higher educational institutions in the rural areas are finding it increasingly difficult to attract and retain well qualified teachers particularly in the areas of Science, Mathematics, Technology and Accounting (DoE 2004). Such a situation cannot be taken lightly because it introduces new forms of social exclusion that makes the equity agenda even more elusive.

CONCLUSION

South Africa deserves to be hailed for the immense and profound gains made in higher education transformation since the demise of apartheid in 1994. Admittedly, participation rates have significantly increased mainly through improved access to higher education. However, the overall transformation of the HE sector remains laden with challenges and HE itself is still far from being able to respond to the increasing challenges facing society. It appears that for quite some time, the issue of opening access to HE has been misconstrued as a panacea for equity and equality of educational opportunity for students irrespective of their different social backgrounds.

Equality of educational opportunity can thus be conceived in terms of equal educational outcomes, on average, for students of all races. This standard is far from being achieved in the South African situation where institutions of higher

learning have not been very successful in striking a balance between equity of access and equity of outcomes consequently leading to the continued exclusion of historically marginalised groups from participating in the broader economic and social spheres of life.

To this day, success and graduation rates and outcomes in HE are still skewed in favour of students from well-to-do families. At institutional level, higher educational outcomes are still more favourable in previously advantaged as compared to previously disadvantaged universities. Thus, at a much latent level, we see the perpetuation of a differentiated HE system in South Africa. It can, therefore, be concluded that access to education, while crucial, is not adequate on its own to bring about social equity in society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The South African government and universities should ensure that all students who enrol with institutions of higher education are provided with conditions that are conducive to their success. That is to say, it is high time the government and all those concerned with the provision of higher education, realise that merely offering access to students without putting in place mechanisms to ensure student success is not only an act of irresponsibility but also a waste of acute resources.

2. Universities need to take enough initiative to explore other avenues of generating income so as to support and increase the viability of their programmes. Thus, universities should not merely rely on the state as there are many other developmental programmes that are competing for funding from the state.

3. Universities should maintain vibrant academic development programmes that are meant to capacitate and empower staff members so that they are able to function effectively in a mass and challenged higher education system.

4. Universities should form and strengthen partnerships with local, regional and international organisations in a bid to share best practices in teaching, learning and management in higher education. It is most likely that institutions will benefit immensely from such partnerships as institutions with less expertise will receive more stewardship from those with more experience and expertise.

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