

Challenges facing SA higher education

Universities in SA have a lot to be proud of, says the vice-chancellor and principal of the University of Pretoria (UP), Professor Cheryl de la Rey.

"In several fields, such as engineering, plant and animal sciences, and health sciences, our universities produce research that is cited internationally. And many academics from SA universities appear among the top 100 most-cited scholars in their fields of expertise."

At the same time, she says, local universities are very aware of the role they have to play in supporting the country's under-resourced universities.

"Many are working on joint projects and facilitating staff and student exchanges. UP, for example, has a partnership arrangement with the universities of Venda and Limpopo. We have jointly developed funding proposals to external agencies to support postgraduate programmes and research to address national priority areas such as nursing."

Funding boosts research

Professor Adam Habib, deputy vice-chancellor of research, innovation and advancement at the University of Johannesburg, says funding from the Department of Science and Technology has given a welcome boost to research, with top-tier universities registering growth of up to 25% and research outputs among second-tier universities almost doubling.

The university system is not without its challenges, however. Perhaps the biggest of these, says Dr Peter Clayton, deputy vice-chancellor: research and development at Rhodes University, is the fact that a large component of the country's secondary schooling system is under-performing.

"We have some fantastic schools in SA, but they make up only 10% to 20% of all schools," he says.

Habib says this presents a huge burden for the university system. "It's impossible to make up for the deficit in 12 years of schooling within the space of a couple of years at university."

The second concern, he says, is that SA's higher-education system needs to replicate itself. "Considering our size, our academic community is producing well, but it is ageing, and the new generation of scholars isn't coming through the system quickly enough.

"In part, that has to do with the nature of our social structure. A large percentage of our student base, particularly blacks, comes from working-class families. They're under huge pressure to earn a salary and support family members, which

means that progressing to postgraduate studies is perceived as a luxury.

"If we don't fix that, in 10-20 years we may very well have an academy that is no longer efficient or, even more seriously, one that is staffed entirely by expatriates."

Too few PhDs

Universities around the world are increasingly expected to produce high levels of scholarship and innovation. However, says Habib, this is something that emerges out of well-staffed higher-education systems, which SA does not have.

"In the past decade or so, student numbers have risen from about 500 000 to 750 000, while the number of full-time academics has declined from about 45 000 to 39 000.

"System bureaucrats will tell you that part-time staff has increased, but having large numbers of part-time staff does not contribute to innovation and scholarship.

"Secondly and more significantly, a fair percentage of our academics aren't trained as PhDs - there is a high correlation between innovation, scientific production and PhD qualifications."

Clayton says an initiative - the Next Generation of Scholars Programme - holds a lot of promise to boost postgraduate numbers. Using funding primarily from the Mellon and Kresge foundations, a number of universities have targeted young black academics who are either close to completing or who have just acquired a PhD, putting them on a fast track.

SA university system performed well

"In the six years since it was piloted, it has proved successful in getting new people on board. Higher Education SA, the body that represents SA universities, has presented the Minister of Higher Education, Blade Nzimande, with a proposal to persuade him to budget from next year onwards for a substantial intervention of this kind across universities, specifically for equity candidates, to make it attractive for them to stay in academia. We believe this is what's needed to turn the trend around."

Despite its many challenges, Habib believes SA's university system has performed well. Clayton agrees that, while the entire sector cannot claim to be world-class, there are certainly areas that are world-class, particularly in research.

"Our graduates, for the most part, are able to travel anywhere in the world and hold their heads up high. We regularly have graduates from SA universities going to places like Princeton and Cambridge, and doing well."

Says Habib: "We should be thrilled that the system is as productive as it is, but there is no question that if we don't address the challenges, we will have a crisis."

Can the problems be fixed? Yes, says Habib, but not without significant political will. "Brazil was in a similar position about 20 years ago.

"It flooded the system with bursaries, trained people, sent some of them overseas and focused the training of a lot of them internally. In so doing, it has created a human resource base for the university system that it's capable of addressing."

Even with the necessary political will, he says, SA faces two dilemmas: forces competing for funding and the divide between political leaders and universities, and their implicit questioning of the value of the higher education system.

Political elite 'doesn't seem to understand complexities of education process, market forces'

"Do we put money and resources into higher education when there are other significant needs and demands elsewhere? If we spread things too thin, we'll simply end up being ineffective in all areas.

"And while the political elite questions the value it gets out of our university system, it doesn't seem to understand the complexities of the education process and market forces.

"It is a myth that people can perform at their peak immediately after graduating. Any education or skills-transfer process has two elements: one is training and the second is mentorship. Universities do the one; they don't do the second."

He adds that the immediate employment of graduates is not simply a product of the particular skill sets that they develop, but also a product of the absorbability of the market.

"The one thing we need to understand about SA is that it is in a particular stage of its historical evolution. You can't think of judging an institution with the same yardstick as you would in another context.

"If you have a high level of middle class, as in the US, the alumni base is fundamentally different than if a large percentage of graduates are working-class first-generation. That doesn't mean we need to be less efficient, effective or productive, but it does mean we need to understand context, because context defines who we are."

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