

## Quality with access in South African Higher Education: The challenge for transformation

HSRC RESEARCH OUTPUTS

1996

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**Abstract:** *Higher Education transformation in South Africa requires a synergy of creative strategies to engage issues of redress by increasing student access. While there is clearly a need to enable access by improving student success (access with success), as opposed to simply ensuring their participation (access as participation), the adequacy of these initiatives needs to be evaluated in the context of institutional transformation. It is argued that introducing a quality assurance framework is critical to ensuring that access initiatives are institutionalised. Conceptions of access, therefore, need to be situated within appropriate definitions of quality. This would enable institutions to track the responsiveness of measures to achieve national transformational objectives. It is argued that Academic Development (AD) initiatives, suggested in national policy documents, serves not only to legitimate the current social context, but also tends to leave existing institutional practices intact. A supportive and enabling quality assurance framework, quality assurance for transformation, is posited as an alternative framework for achieving access.*

**Keywords:** *Higher Education Quality, (Student) Access, (Institutional) Transformation*

### Introduction

Student access to higher education institutions has been associated with the recent massification of higher education. In this regard, the concern with participation and the success of these participation strategies have recently dominated debate in higher education. International calls for access is evidenced by the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education (1998) which in its preamble called for 'equality of access'. Concurrent with this international tendency, there is an undeniable national need in South African institutions to enable the participation and success of students previously disadvantaged by the Apartheid system. Equity and redress are important imperatives for a society attempting to transform as the following interpretation suggests:

A policy of equity and redress requires resolute intervention in the different levels of working and social life of this country to rectify the consequences of past discrimination. Such a policy is required in order to enable people who were historically disadvantaged in the past to compete on par with their more privileged colleagues...Equity and redress is more than merely a matter of providing equal opportunities. It is an intervention that aims at getting rid of the historical deficits completely  
(Dowling, 1999:10).

Within this perspective, appropriate access measures can be considered an “inescapable priority” in the light of the current need for equity and redress in South Africa. The transformation of a society struggling to undo the ravages of its past requires that black South Africans be provided appropriate opportunities to realise their potential. The strategies developed have to balance on the one hand, the institutional need for autonomy and on the other, the national need for efficiency, equity and redress, without compromising any of them.

This paper examines notions of access proposed in current policy and in particular the strategy of Academic Development (AD) suggested in recent policy proposals. It shows that a particular notion of quality assurance can enable national redress priorities to be realised within a context that still holds efficiency imperatives as important.

### **Access and transformation in South African Higher Education**

The White Paper (1997) set the basis for the envisaged transformation of higher education in the following manner:

South Africa’s transition from apartheid and minority rule requires (that) existing practices and values are viewed anew and rethought in terms of their fitness for a new era. Higher ....In South Africa today, the challenge is to redress past inequalities and to transform the higher education system to serve a new social order, to meet pressing national needs, and to respond to new realities and opportunities (Department of Education, 1997a: 7).

In South Africa, the transformation imperative requires that the previous Higher Education Apartheid order be replaced with a new democratic ethos directed at undoing the past. In this regard, access to higher education institutions is considered key to forging the new order. In this regard, there are two conceptions of access evident in South African policy. They are “access as participation” and ‘access with success’. ‘Access as participation’ is concerned with strategies directed at inclusion or involvement of students from groups excluded in the past. ‘Access with success’ is concerned with strategies that focus on the success of ‘participatory’ initiatives i.e. to ensure that those who participate are provided adequate opportunity to succeed in these programmes. While it is likely that these conceptions are not mutually exclusive, there is a sense of emphasis inherent in any strategy employed. Thus participation strategies would be expected to result in ‘success’ strategies almost by default, when students would be expected to succeed as result of increased numbers.

It was not unusual for earlier policy proposals to focus on the “access as participation” notion, as it was evident that the policy of inclusion was intended to deracialise institutions in keeping with the political imperative of the new democracy. The results of this were clearly successful from a policy perspective. Cloete and Bunting (2001) show that black student numbers at Historically White Institutions (HWI) had increased from 13% in 1993 to 39% by 1999. More recently, however, there has been an outcry that some institutions had tried to subvert the national participation emphasis by ensuring that campuses retained their ‘white’ status. HWIs were accused of, for instance, enrolling large numbers of black students in distance (called flexible) modes, with the result that campuses were ‘White by day’ and ‘Black by night’ (Department of Education, 2001a & b).

It was also found that the success of those 'black' students enrolled in HWI's was equally disappointing. A recent report suggested that at least 25% of South Africa's higher education students fail to complete their studies, at a cost of about R1, 6 billion (US\$ 163 million) a year (Rossouw, 2001). In addition, black student success in key high demand economic sectors is equally gloomy. Throughput rates of black students did not improve between 1991 and 1998. It was estimated that throughput was 3% in engineering fields, 12% in natural sciences and 9% in medicine and engineering (Cloete and Bunting, 2001:31). The report concludes that the "...Graduation trends from 1991 to 1998 suggest that many legacies of apartheid are firmly in place". In fundamental ways, therefore, both actual participation and the effects of participation have failed to yield appropriate outcomes. It is therefore argued that 'access as participation' has not yielded appropriate outcomes. Strategies aimed at changing the demographic profile of institutions simply changes the texture rather than the commitment of institutions to transform. To call for access as participation, then also calls for a sterile form of participation, which serves as a revolving door to failure. This suggests that a new strategy directed at ensuring that those participating are supported to achieving success so that the success of participation strategies is ensured.

### **Current policy and access: Academic Development (AD) reviewed**

The *National Plan for Higher Education* (NPHE) provides the basis for higher education restructuring in South Africa (Department of Education, 2001). The policy suggests strategies directed at 'access as participation' as well as 'access with success'. Specific participation strategies include calls for more liberal selection procedures and national student funding initiatives. As regards 'access with success', specific strategies include funding of institutional Academic Development (AD) programmes, improving the quality of schooling to provide better quality of incoming students and student financial aid schemes (Department of Education, 2001: 49). Underpinning these proposals is the implication that students who enter Higher Education institutions are essentially ill equipped to handle the complexities of academia. This assumption leaves institutions themselves free of the responsibility of student failure. Thus it provides justification for the real redress to happen elsewhere. In schools, as the proposal to improve schooling suggests; at administrative level, as the proposal to introduce student funding implies; and outside of the mainstream of the university, as suggestive of the AD strategy. In this regard, it must be noted that AD is the only internal institutional academic redress strategy.

With regard to the proposal to use AD, the NPHE makes the point that the, "...role of academic development in improving the efficiency of the higher education system in terms of graduate output is critical" (Department of Education, 2001: 31). The current form of AD favoured in the NPHE includes the use of 'extended curricula' rather than 'supplementary support', the need for students to be integrated into the mainstream, the need to be responsive to all students rather than only those who would not normally be admitted (i.e. it should not be directed at black students only) and ensuring that 'technology driven' approaches are not the preferred modus operandi to deal with disadvantage.

While this conception of AD differs markedly from earlier interpretations dominant in the 1980's (see Agar, 1980), it suffers from similar conceptual flaws. They include:

1. AD programmes are still marginal to institutional practices. It shifts the responsibility of effective teaching and learning, and by extension redress practice, to the periphery of the institution
2. AD as a strategy sees the problem of disadvantage as lying with students as, "...it stems from the assumption that Black students are inherently deficient..."(Mabokela, 1997:431).
3. Legitimising this form of AD suggests that institutional transformation is either not possible or realisable in the medium to long term. It serves as a programme directed to ensure institutional fit, rather than enabling institutions to adapt to their new charges
4. The race-based nature of programmes suggests that it is still tainted by racial categories, despite the assurance that extended curricula are to be directed at all learners.
5. Success is indicated by enrolment rather than outcomes, in keeping with the access as participation perspective
6. AD remains an activity that cannot be expanded in view of the resources required to sustain it. It would be far too excessive for use by students that require it.

It is evident that in view of the conceptual and implementation issues associated with AD, there needs to be a more concerted drive to institute measures that would require institutions themselves to transform.

Richardson and Skinner (1991) provide an insightful framework to locate various strategies. For them, 'access as participation' strategies as the AD strategy of the NPHE are located at stage 1 (Reactive) which they describe as simply a means of increasing diversity, suggestive of 'access as participation'. AD type strategies are located at Stage 2 (Strategic), which suggests that institutions in this category simply provide support to more students, without any real transformation. Their framework for institutional transformation is located in Stage 3 (called adaptive) which requires the whole institution to take responsibility for access. It is at this stage that institutional transformation occurs, where, ".....Faculty members become involved to change educational practices, curriculum content, and teaching practices to make them reflect the students they actually serve rather than their historic clientele"(ibid, 14). The history of AD programmes in South Africa, spanning more than twenty years, suggest that lessons learnt from them now need to be carried through to the mainstream to address the disadvantage of "universities themselves"(Mpahlele, 2001). The AD strategy proposed in the NPHE, therefore, cannot be said to respond to this institutional transformational prerogative. There is, therefore, a need for a more co-ordinated institutional approach to ensure that access strategies are successful.

## Quality and Transformation

Quality assurance in South African higher education has been an important consideration since the inauguration of the new democratic order. The White Paper on Education (Department of Education, 1997) made the link between access and quality in a way that suggests that striving for quality is intrinsic to the concern of equity. The Minister of Education pointed out in the *Forward* of the National Plan On Higher Education that:

The people of our country deserve nothing less than a *quality higher education system*, which responds to the *equity and development challenges* that are critical to improving the quality

of life of our people (Department of Education, 2001:1)  
*emphasis inserted.*

This suggests that the need to ensure quality at least in principle is tied to issues closely linked to equity and development. This sets the stage for quality debates in South African education to be situated within a framework of 'public good'.

There is, however, a larger higher education policy debate in South Africa, between imperatives of development and equity. Badat (1997) refers to this as 'permanent or intractable tension' between the concerns for development (participation in the global economy) on the one hand, and equity (the need to ensure social redress and equity), on the other. This 'tension', however, can only exist within a particular notion of 'development' or 'efficiency', which sees it separated from issues of equity and redress. If development is seen through the lens of 'equity', the inconsistency and the 'tension' dissipates. This is the only way that the past can be redressed. There cannot be any real development without equity and social redress.

This development/equity debate is mirrored within the quality and access realm. It is common to find that some commentators (Zuma, 1996; Mabokela, 1997) suggest that there is a tension between access and quality. For instance, Pavlich et al, states that, "Many institutions currently want to enrol more and more black students but in the process confront the consequences of apartheid education and so experience a tension between growth and diversity and maintaining quality education"(1993:1). Even Richardson and Skinner (1991) warn that institutions need to "...accommodate greater diversity without relinquishing their commitment to high standards of achievement" for all students"(p.13). While this begs the question of 'what standards...' and 'whose standards?' as Mabokela (1997:431) reminds us, it is evident that concerns with efficiency appear to be consistent with the need to restrict access, while at the same time inconsistent with the achievement of 'quality'. If we need to ensure that access is foregrounded within quality debates, as it no doubt needs to be, it is necessary to use a conceptual tool which does not see quality as inconsistent with access.

Bergquist (1995) in the book, "*Quality through Access: Access with quality*", provides compelling argument to suggest that quality can (only) be achieved through, and by means of, open and unfettered institutional access, and that real access cannot be achieved without attention being paid to quality. The book is based on three premises that provide valuable direction in quality debates at institutional level. Firstly, that societal change requires a '...reconsideration of basic purposes and functions of institutions that require a reconsideration of issues of quality and access.' (*ibid*, 25). Secondly, that access is critical for the achievement of quality and that '...the more diversified the people and resources of an educational institution are...the greater is the potential quality of education, research, scholarship and community service at the institution.' (*ibid*:26). Thirdly, that access, and by implication quality, cannot be achieved without adequate resources.

These premises have important implications for the reconstruction of South African higher education. It would be true to say that quality and access issues cannot be separated if we are committed to transformation. There is a need to ensure that access and quality do not exist in contradiction to one another and that the achievement of quality is to be achieved by increasing diversity and access. It is therefore, necessary to elaborate on a conception of quality that will accommodate this perspective.

### **Approach to quality. Quality as Transformation**

The literature on Higher Education Quality Assurance resonates with the emphasis on a lack of any objective criteria about what constitutes a quality product (Vroeijenstijn, 1995). The 'relative' or subjective nature of the construct as Pirsig (1974) reminds us should not allow us to abrogate responsibility for its attainment. In an attempt to come to terms with the quality, Harvey and Green (1993:10) have identified five 'discrete but interrelated ways of thinking which could be considered useful in understanding conceptions of quality: They are, quality as 'exceptional or perfection (as exclusive/gold standard); quality as 'fitness of and for purpose' (responding to identified aims); quality as 'value for money' (responding to economic rationale and efficiency), and quality as 'transformation' (moving from one state to another, implying an educational value add).

These 'ways of thinking' about the quality, while they represent an important starting point for understanding quality systems, need to be augmented by the need to see quality as intrinsically ideological. Educational quality and its judgement are not ideologically neutral as the questions about ends are valuable constructs in arriving at quality judgments. The question of who is judging and within what framework will be different for different ideological agendas. Richard Shaull's reminder, for instance, in the *Foreword* to Paolo Freire's, '*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*' (1997) about the nature of educational activity has important implications for approaches to quality:

There is no such thing as a *neutral* educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, *or* it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world (Shaull, 1997:16).

This either/or prerogative of education and its successes or otherwise suggests that education quality cannot be situated within ideologically neutral context. Quality considerations need to be based on values, purposes and ends of the beholder.

This suggests also that the various notions of quality need to be interrogated. The 'quality as excellence', for instance, suggests that a particular notion of 'excellence' is by its very nature 'better' than another. The image of the Cambridge or Harvard type notion of ivory towers is conjured in response to this. It could be argued that this type of academic excellence is suggestive of a form of isolationism, which responds to elite education imperatives rather than one appropriate to a society attempting to achieve equity and redress. Similarly, quality as 'value for money' suggests responsiveness to a consumerist version of education that cannot be accommodated, even within a global economic framework.

The 'transformative' notion of quality as described in the Harvey and Green (1993) also cannot be responsive to the imperatives of a society attempting to radically break with its fragmented past. A transformative notion of quality is proposed which corresponds with the 'quality for purpose' perspective. It is premised on the view that there are important questions of 'ends' that need to be considered in making judgements about quality. In the South African higher education context, these ends can only be understood within a context of redress, equity and access, which has as its objective the very transformation of civil society.

### ***Quality Assurance, Access and Transformation.***

It is evident that the imperative for transformation will need to come from institutions themselves. A particular notion of institutional quality assurance, which enables all sectors of the institution to define quality and actively work towards its achievement, is proposed (Akoojee, 2000). This notion of quality must take on board the equity and redress challenges referred to in the White paper (1997). It must engage institutional responsibility for access to track the extent to which the transformational challenge is being realised. Getting institutions to inform the transformational process will afford them an opportunity to report on and track the success of designated access mechanisms.

As a counter to the academic development support mechanism suggested in the NPHE (Department of Education, 2001), this mechanism will make it necessary for information sharing and discussion at various levels at the institution. It has the capacity to enlist the support of faculty (lecturers), managers (including Deans and Heads of Department) and support staff (Administration). At the time of writing, most institutions have already committed themselves to transformational imperatives that address 'access with success' issues.

The suggestion to get institutions to respond to their own agendas in a meaningful way will tend to ensure that fundamental responsibility for 'disadvantage' is not shifted to students, as AD and other strategies do. There will be institutional accountability to ensure that they respond meaningfully to objectives of access and redress missions that they have committed to. Institutions themselves will develop ways to ensure that personnel will be appropriately skilled and re-skilled into new ways of engaging with the new community of students. This will include novel ways of dealing with teaching and learning provision, including peer mentoring and other strategies. It also suggests that transformation will include review of existing curricula, which are responsive to an African, rather than North American or European context (Seepe, 1998; Seepe, 1999). In addition, issues concerning student alienation and strategies directed at their incorporation into the institution will be taken on board (Seepe, 1998).

### **Conclusion**

Notions of access can be used to transform the higher education institutional landscape to respond to national priorities. I have used constructs of 'access as participation' and 'access with success' to distinguish various notions of access in South Africa. While there is certainly a political imperative to enable increased black student numbers on campuses previously reserved for Whites, there can be little justification for its continued use as a viable strategy in the new era. Allowing increased participation without opportunities for success simply dooms those participating into an abyss of failure and thwarted ambition.

Access and quality represent important cornerstones for the successful transformation of higher education in South Africa. Both, however, need to be considered to be mutually supportive of the general objectives of equity and development. It is when quality is seen to be separate from national priorities and access, that the 'tension' becomes evident. In the same way that there can be no 'quality without access' (Bergquist, 1995), there can be no real 'access' without possibilities for success.

Current policy suggests that Academic Development (AD) can be used as a strategy to increase success of access initiatives. This proposal underestimates the dangers of expanding current notions of AD as a means to ensure the success of national priorities. Besides reinforcing the notion that the problem essentially lies with students, and undermining the institution's ability and capacity to engage creatively with access issues, this strategy not only dooms access measures to the periphery of the institution, but also precludes institutional transformation. The existence of AD programmes, barring effectiveness issues, simply create a justification for the existence of the 'revolving door', which dooms large numbers of disadvantaged students to incessant failure.



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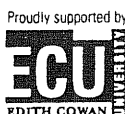


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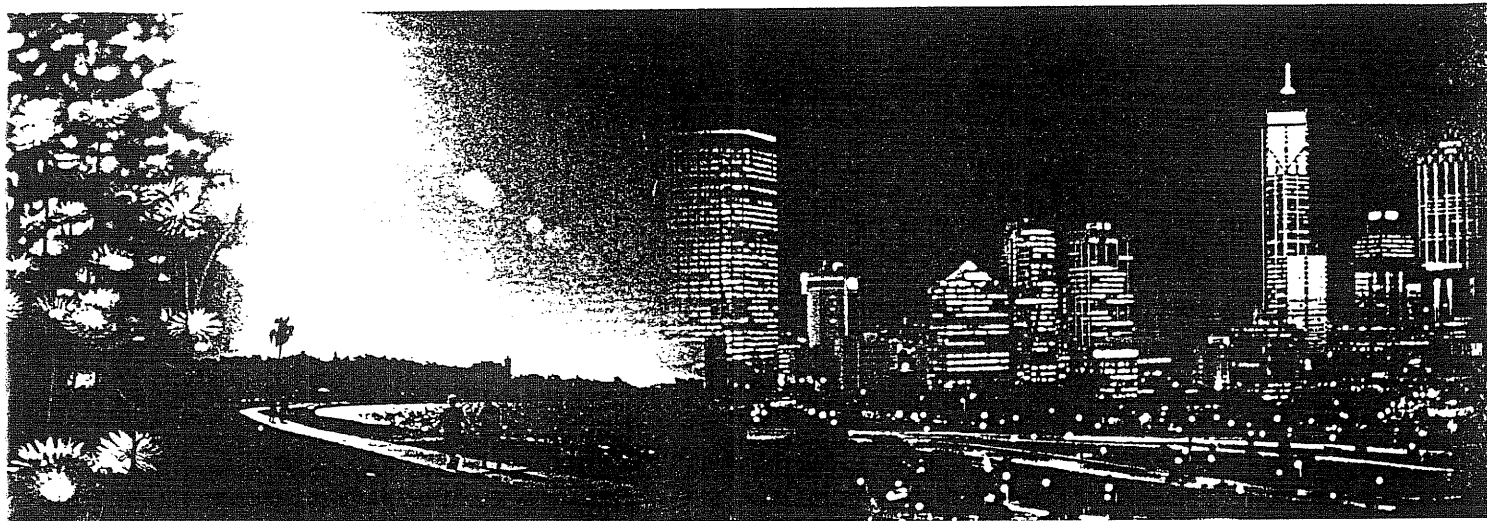
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## List of presenters

Abdullah Shamsul Kamariah	Left Brain Thinkers Hermann Brain Dominance Instrument: Outcomes and Challenges. A further study on Confucius Heritage Culture (CHC) Learners of Curtin Sarawak
Agostinho Shirley	Formalising the description of learning designs
Akerlind Gerlese S.	Understanding academic development: The perspective of university academics
Akoojee Salim	Access and quality in South African higher education: The challenge for transformation
Allen Maurice	Quantitative learning conversations: Constructivism and its application to learning in an engineering environment
Alpert Frank	The supervisory management styles model
Anderson Alison	Keeping it relevant: An object approach to training package content development that facilitates workplace contextualisation
Anderson Sue	Working together to develop a professional learning community
Angela Carbone	Students' reactions to a studio-based teaching and learning philosophy in a three year IT degree
Applebee Andrelyn	"Opening a can of worms?": Initiating conversations about the ethics of online student evaluation of teaching
Appleby David	Implementing quality, accessible learning: A pilot program in developing accessible online learning resources
Arger Geoff	International collaboration in a postgraduate certificate in teaching and learning
Armarego Jocelyn	Quantitative learning conversations: Constructivism and its application to learning in an engineering environment
Arnold Michael	Improving the quality of the PhD experience: SSTSN An inter university support network
Aspland Tania	Framing graduate supervision and examination in the professional doctorate at QUT (This paper forms part of a four-paper symposia titled A conversational case study which interrogates the quality of graduate supervision in the professional doctorate at QUT)
Atchison Mary	Best practice in authentic learning contexts: A case study
Avdjieva Maria	Higher Education Institutions quality initiatives in New Zealand and Australia: Conversations across academic cultures
Baker Wendy	Mentoring - Improving the quality of work life and organisational effectiveness: A case study of a formal mentoring programme implemented in a higher education organisation
Balasingam Dharshini M.	Left Brain Thinkers Hermann Brain Dominance Instrument: Outcomes and Challenges. A further study on Confucius Heritage Culture (CHC) Learners of Curtin Sarawak
Barnacle Robyn	Assessing the quality of research training: The case of part-time students in full-time professional work
Barnden Andrew	Students' reactions to a studio-based teaching and learning philosophy in a three year IT degree
Barrie Simon	Using groups in teaching and learning
Baudains Catherine	Learning botany: Evaluation of a web-supported unit on plant diversity
Beasley Colin J.	"A trouble shared ...": Conversations for survival

## Understanding academic development: The perspective of university academics

Gerlese S. Akerlind - Australian National University, Australia  
Type of presentation: **Round table**

Wed\_11:30am\_4.209

Inherent in the concepts of quality and continuous improvement in higher education is the notion of academic growth and development. This paper reports the outcomes of a study, undertaken from a phenomenographic perspective, of university academics' experiences of their own growth and development, i.e., what it means to them, what they are trying to achieve, how they go about it, why they do things that way

The outcomes presented are based on a series of interviews with teaching and research academics at the Australian National University. The group as a whole showed a range of views of academic development, representing in particular a varying focus on:

- Academic Performance, in terms of increasing work output, academic standing or work quality;
- Personal Learning, in terms of ongoing accumulation of new knowledge and skills or increasing depth of understanding in one's field of study;
- Disciplinary or Social Change, in terms of contributions to one's field of study or a relevant social community.

Keywords: academic development; academic growth; phenomenography  
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## Access and quality in South African higher education: The challenge for transformation

Salim Akoojee - Human Sciences Research Council, South Africa  
Type of presentation: **Round table**

Mon\_12noon\_8.301

Higher Education transformation in South Africa requires a synergy of creative strategies to engage issues of redress by increasing student access. While there is clearly a need to enable access by improving student success (access with success), as opposed to simply ensuring their participation (access as participation), the adequacy of these initiatives needs to be evaluated in the context of institutional transformation. It is argued that introducing a quality assurance framework is critical to ensuring that access initiatives are institutionalised. Conceptions of access, therefore, need to be situated within appropriate definitions of quality. This would enable institutions to track the responsiveness of measures to achieve national transformational objectives. It is argued that Academic Development (AD) initiatives, suggested in national policy documents, serves not only to legitimate the current social context, but also tends to leave existing institutional practices intact. A supportive and enabling quality assurance framework, quality assurance for transformation, is posited as an alternative framework to achieve access.

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