

Race still dogs SA students

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A new study that has been published by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) on higher education in South Africa shows that race continues to be a significant factor on who drops out of university, who graduates and who finds a job. The study titled Student Retention and Graduate Destination: Higher education and labour market access and success is predicated on concerns that at 15% South Africa's graduation rate is among the lowest in the world. Further concerns are that there are huge disparities in the graduation rates of Black and White students with research findings suggesting that the average graduation rate of White students tends to be double that of Black students.

The study proposed to provide a clearer understanding of factors influencing the career paths of South African students by investigating trends at seven institutions of higher learning comprising the University of Fort Hare; the University of the Western Cape; Peninsula Technikon; Stellenbosch University; the University of the Witwatersrand; the University of the North and Pretoria Technikon.

The investigation was two-pronged and involved asking students who are already in the labour market to retrace their learning and career paths from the moment they chose subjects at school, their choice of an institution of higher learning, their choice of a field of study at university up to where they are at present; and interviewing academics from the seven institutions. The student sample was comprised of those who had graduated with a general or professional bachelor's degree in 2002 and those who had dropped out of the higher education system in 2002 without achieving a qualification.

Factors influencing student attrition

In the findings senior researcher Mignonne Breier confirms that the vicious cycle of financial disadvantage and academic under-performance which originated under apartheid continues to hold sway at the University of the Western Cape.

"Abject poverty – manifested in barely concealed physical hunger – is the daily lot of a sizeable number of students at the institution, linking it to the low SES of respondents to the Student Retention and Graduate Destination surveys conducted earlier. It emerges as the primary reason for student drop-out; and precisely for this reason, many students do not so much drop out as 'stop out' in order to earn the money needed to finance their continued studies at the institution," says Breier.

Another senior researcher in the study Michael Cosser argues that ordinarily, the transition from school to higher education is not a linear process but rather is one that is characterised by disjunctures between dreams and their eventual realisations. Cosser says that these disjunctures reveal an inherent volatility in the youth-to-adulthood transition as young people move from one phase of school to the next and from school into and through the higher education system.

He argues further that the key reason for the failure to realise one's educational ambitions is the strong correlation between socio-economic status (SES) and choice.

"In the South African context, the higher the SES of students, the greater their ability to exercise choice of subjects at school, of the higher education institution, of the higher education study field and to map out their career trajectories and destinies becomes," Cosser argues.

"Financial constraints and poor academic performance preclude large percentages of students

from studying at their institutions of first choice in a mutually reinforcing way: they cannot do so because they cannot meet the admission requirements; and if they could, they would not be able to afford the fees". Project leader Moeketsi Letseka says the effects of poverty on students from previously disadvantaged communities extend beyond access to basic needs such as food, shelter and clothing to encompass perceptions of helplessness, vulnerability, voicelessness, social exclusion, and abandonment by the authorities at institutions of higher learning.

Cultural alienation

Letseka says a case study of the implications of transformation at the University of the Witwatersrand shows that institutional culture has a significant effect on the drop-out rate of students from black communities.

"While student enrollment patterns at the institution have been steadily changing since the late 1980s, the same cannot be said of the academic staff complement, which remains predominantly white. The perceived over-emphasis of lecturing staff on content and theoretical knowledge at the expense of study skills invokes feelings of exclusion among students from previously disadvantaged communities and promotes a sense that the academic culture in the institution is inherently alienating," says Letseka.

Another researcher Trish Gibbon argues that the success for which Stellenbosch University has become increasingly known but which is largely based on the relative advantage of the predominantly white student body has been undermined by the conspicuous lack of diversity which has become the institution's nemesis.

Black graduate unemployment

Looking at the performance of the South African graduate labour market, researcher Percy Moleke argues that there are relatively high levels of unemployment among black African graduates whose absorption into the labour market occurs at a much slower pace than does that of graduates of other race groups – especially whites.

Conclusions

Overall the authors of the HSRC report conclude that there is a persistence of subtle forms of inequality and exclusion in South Africa's institutions of higher learning and labour market in relation to graduation, employment and earnings with race continuing to determine whether students will graduate and find jobs; and remains the strongest factor shaping student outcomes even when institution type and field of study are factored out of the picture.