Transformation goes beyond eradicating discrimination

JOHN PAMPALLIS

ONE of the main objectives of this week's National Higher Education Transformation Summit is to facilitate dialogue. Here are some of the main issues in higher education, particularly those relating to transformation, that this week's summit will discuss and debate.

The following summary is not all-inclusive: summit participants may want to raise other issues and are welcome to do so.Expansion and access. One of the most important transformatory developments has been the expansion of the university system, thus increasing access, especially to black and female students.

Since the start of democratic government, university enrolments have increased significantly. Since 1994, headcount enrolments have approximately doubled: from 495 356 in 1994 to 627 277 in 2001 and 983 698 in 2013.

However, Africans and coloureds continue to be under-represented in comparison to the overall population. In addition, the opening-up of access to black students at formerly whites-only universities has been very uneven, with some of these universities now having a of a substantial majority of black students, while in others the majority of students is still white. Black staff are even more under-represented than students.

Gender proportions have also changed. In 2001, female students represented 53,7% percent of university students but by 2013 this had increased to 58.7%, leaving the corresponding figures for male students as 46.3% and 41.3%. Female students constituted 54% of all contact enrolments and 63 percent of distance education enrolments, a clear majority in both modes of study.

The Central Applications Clearing House has been established to assist people who wish to study at a University or Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) college and either did not apply in time or were not offered a place at the institution to which they have applied. This is the first step in the establishment of a Central Applications Service for universities and TVET colleges.

Looking to the future, university enrolments are planned to increase over the next 15 years. Both the National Development Plan (NDP) and the 2013 White Paper on Post-School Education and Training have targeted headcount enrolments of 1.6-million by 2030.

Enrolment expansion from 1994 until the present has largely taken place through the utilisation of available capacity. Academic staff have been required to carry increasing workloads, and physical infrastructure is under strain. This is not sustainable and if it continues, quality in the sector will be severely impacted.

Change and diversity

In common usage – in the mass media and elsewhere – higher education transformation is mostly associated with increasing demographic diversity of the students and staff populations and the need, still, for universities to adapt to the new realities.

Despite being the focus of most public attention, matters of transformation with regard to race and racism are largely – though not entirely – confined to the formerly white universities. Most historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs) have undergone little change in their demographic composition.

Real transformation of universities, though, should go beyond overcoming racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination, and must include issues concerning the quality of teaching and learning, management (including financial management) capacity, staff development, academic facilities, student accommodation and other forms of infrastructure.

The lack of public attention to these issues is probably largely due to the fact that most HDIs are far from major media companies. There appears to be a lack of interest among most editors in rural challenges or problems that do not affect the rich or the middle classes.

One of the most common reasons for conflict at universities is that, despite the enormous funding increases over the last six years, National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) resources are insufficient to meet demand.

This is exacerbated by the inefficient distribution of NSFAS bursaries.

Sexism remains a challenge at all institutions across the board. All institutions have put in place policies to overcome sexism with regard to employment and workplace practices as well as policies aimed at preventing gender-based violence, including the abuse of female students by male lecturers.

The adequacy of anti-sexist policies varies and nowhere do they appear to be wholly effective in practice.

It must also "provide the Iabour market, in a knowledge-driven and knowledge-dependent society, with the ever-changing high-Ievel competencies and expertise necessary for the growth and prosperity of a modern economy". Although White Paper 3 was referring to the universities, the same can be said for the colleges – both TVET colleges and the soon to be established community colleges.

Improving student success

Improving the quality of learning is difficult while enrolments are increasing. The low success and throughput rates are a serious problem and a central challenge for the university sector and must become a priority focus for national policy and for the

STUDENT POWER: The Wits SRC came up with a campaign called "One Million, one month" which raised R1.8m for the students at Wits who were excluded because NSFAS did not cover their 2014 fees.

PICTURE: MOTLABANA MONNAKGOTLA

institutions themselves. South African universities are characterised by relatively low success rates — a sign that many students, and especially Africans and Coloureds, are not benefiting from their university studies.

Research and innovation

South Africa's research output, measured by peer-reviewed academic publications, has increased markedly in in the past decade, growing from 6 660 units in 2004 to 12 364 units in 2012.

Nonetheless, South Africa's research rate is not yet enough to meet the needs of the economy, the health and education systems, our physical and natural environments, and the social and cultural needs of our people. Innovation arising from research is starting to grow in South Africa but there is potential for much more growth.

Staffing the universities

Ensuring the quantity and quality of academics in the system is essential to improving the quality of education and improving the number and quality of research outputs. Furthermore, making the staff of universities more representative of the South African population is also at the core of university transformation from apartheid

The growth in the number of academics has been far outstripped by the growth of student numbers. In 1994 there was an average of 38.5 students to every academic.

By 2013 this had increased to 55.7 students per academic. The result of the rising student to staff ratio has inevitably been increased workloads for academic staff and

an increase in class sizes: first-year classes can comprise of many hundreds of students.

In terms of diversity, although 45% of academic staff were women in 2013, there were four times as many men as women in senior academic positions. African academics made up 32% of permanent professional staff, and were under-represented at the senior levels. White academic staff still comprised 52% of total numbers in academia – down however from 83% in 1994.

Of particular concern is the fact that blacks and women are under-represented in the professoriate. This is partly due to the fact that it takes longer to produce academics who qualify for professorships, but is also often the result of discrimination against blacks and women in recruitment at the formerly whites-only universities.

Student funding

University education is expensive. All 26 institutions rely on state financial support for varying proportions of their operating costs: in addition, most receive some form of third-stream income, though this varies enormously. However, all universities also charge student fees, which are essential to institutional survival in the current funding environment.

Scarce and critical skills

Universities must provide for the education of sufficient numbers of professionals and other graduates in scarce skills areas. These tend to be mainly in the fields of science, engineering and technology as well as certain areas of business studies such as accounting and actuarial

science.

African languages

Ironically, African language teaching in universities is in a worse condition than it was under apartheid. It is an indictment of our democracy that the African languages in our schools and universities have been allowed to suffer such neglect.

If we are to give substance to the much stated intention to actually develop the African languages as languages of academia and to encourage their study and development, then a wide-ranging discussion needs to be initiated to discuss how this can best be done. DHET has already started to redirect funding towards the development of African Languages.

The Humanities and Social Sciences

While it is correct to prioritise scarce and critical skills, there is a danger that this could be overdone and lead to a situation where the humanities and social sciences (HSS) are neglected and that the country suffers as result.

An important initiative by the Minister of Higher Education and Training has been the establishment of the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences. Its purpose is to provide support to teaching and research in South Africans universities and research institutions through providing funding and academic support for academics and PhD students (with the assistance of emeritus professors). Over the past two years 238 PhD scholarships have been awarded to South African students and 74 to students from other African countries who wish to study in South Africa.

Internationalisation

The internationalisation of higher education has grown over the past two decades, and is a reflection of globalisation and South Africa's emergence from international isolation that resulted from the end of apartheid.

The movement of academics and students across borders can improve international communication, cross-cultural learning and global citizenship. All of these are important for improving peace and cooperation, and for finding solutions to global challenges such as sustainable development, security, renewable energy and HIV/Aids.

Strong international partnerships and links can contribute to an increase in knowledge production, intellectual property and innovation in South Africa.

■ *John Pampallis is former special adviser to Minister of Higher Education and Training Blade Nzimande.*