

Access to Labour Market Equity: Advancing the Case for National Development in South African Higher Education

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Abstract

The responsibilities of higher education and training (HET) institutions include, but are not limited to, preparing students for absorption and productive participation in the labour market. Although the post-1994 period has witnessed a rapid expansion in enrolment into tertiary institutions in South Africa by black people who were previously excluded, this has not resulted in transforming the South African labour market. Although increased black graduate production has resulted in more black people emerging from the university system, the labour market outcomes of black graduates and those emerging from previously black tertiary institutions (referred to as previously disadvantaged institutions) is less than consistent. While this must reflect on the reality of a racialised labour market selection process that favours white rather than black students or their 'traditional' institutions, it is necessary for supply side institutions to respond appropriately. The role of universities in this process is considered critical. This article argues for a more responsive higher education system that provides a bridge between the worlds of the institution and work.

Keywords: Education and labour market, South Africa, higher education, access

Introduction

In the South African context, the attention to redress, equity and inclusion in response to a past that has been exclusionary looms large. In this paper we argue that the responsibility of higher education and training institutions must include responsiveness to national development prerogatives. Current labour market contradictions in South Africa suggest that much more is needed to change the labour market dynamics and also to enable a more inclusive labour market. The role of higher education is thus more expansive. In addition to knowledge production and higher level scientific education and training provision, the sector has to be more responsive to making a contribution to the national redress project. It is therefore necessary to insert a labour market component to the responsibilities that universities face. This has conventionally taken the form of ensuring access of those that have been hitherto excluded. This paper proposes an interventionist notion of access—suggesting that institutions of higher learning might need to consider going beyond their traditional supply-notion of qualifying appropriately-skilled personnel for the labour-market. It requires institutions to think through the possibility of providing opportunities to black learners to be inserted into the labour market. This also suggests that institutions need to go beyond simply creating higher education (HE) and training access¹ opportunities. South African universities should, we propose, fulfil their national development mandate by ensuring that some institutional mechanisms are in place to maximise student success in the labour market. Preparing students for absorption and productive participation in the labour market may provide an important mechanism for ensuring that these HE institutions are both appropriate and relevant to our needs. This suggests that institutions need to go beyond simply creating increased entry to vulnerable and previously disadvantaged sectors, nominally referred to as access in this paper and the conventional literature (Badsha & Cloete 2011; Akoojee & Nkomo 2011). In light of labour market dysfunctionality, there is perhaps need to ensure that some mechanisms are in place to maximise the students' success in the labour market particularly for black students as research has shown that labour market outcomes for white students surpasses those of blacks (Bhorat, Mayet, & Visser 2010).

¹ Access in this article refers to both enrolment and success of graduates that have been included in the system.

We begin with an analysis of the theoretical context that underpins the economy and labour market. We then explore the nature of the South African labour market, identifying employment and unemployment patterns that are essentially conditioned by economic parameters. This is followed by an overview of the skills conundrum in South Africa - a situation which allows skills shortages to co-exist with considerable unemployment. The discussion is anchored on existing evidence of labour market outcomes of higher education graduates, with recommendations and challenges associated with the recommendations.

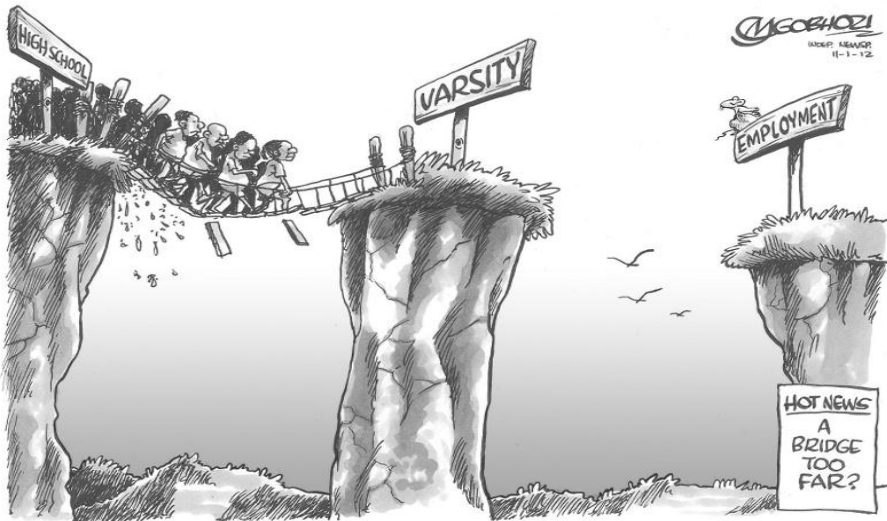
Theoretical Context: Making the Case for Linkages between Education and Economy

The relationship between education and the world of work is always fraught with difficulty, not the least because of the tenuous relationship between education, training and the world of work. Economists, working within a human capital framework have always argued that the primary responsibility of education and training is its service to the labour market. But the reality of a whole range of intervening variables that include life and human development are important components of the fundamental purpose of education and training. While the latter is clearly a primary focus for education and training, it is important that for individual, community and human development, education and training should include livelihoods development. A livelihoods development approach must make, of those that receive it, productive individuals who give their life meaning thereby. Thus the relationship between education and work as encapsulated by this cartoon must represent an important element in the contemporary education and training landscape.

Human capital theory has impacted in various ways on the importance of education and its relationship with the labour market. While a discussion of the intricacies of the theory would be beyond the scope of this paper, we agree that the purpose of higher education includes, but is not limited to, imparting students with skills, both for public and private good, which they will use in the labour market in support of the country's economic development (Ehrenberg & Smith 2009; Bowles & Gintis 1976). However, the manner in which these students access that labour market and the

differential access to it has not been problematised by mainstream theorists. As Allen and De Weert (2007) argue, the theory overlooks the differences in the types of knowledge and skills produced in higher education in relation to labour market demands. The roles of social, economic or political factors to either enhance or compromise it need some serious attention in the international literature.

Figure 1: High School – University - Employment path



Source: The Star, Wed. January, 9th 2011, p.8

Human capital theorists admit the challenge with labour (the ability to work) is inseparable from the labourer. Educated people cannot sell their education, just as height, complexion and weight cannot be sold because they are not tradable commodities. The implications of the link between labour and labourer for learning institutions is the recognition that what students learn is what is tradable in the labour market (Bowles & Gintis 1976). From this perspective, the major purpose of schooling is to equip students with skills that they will need for their later work life. Higher education institutions, therefore, need to identify and address the obstacles that prevent graduates from trading their skill in the labour market. While human capital

would arguably overstate the case for labour market linkages, the reality of the labour market needs to be taken seriously.

The relationship between education and labour market has also been emphasised in Bourdieu's (1997) assertion that access to human capital is a product of socio-economic considerations. Bourdieu (1997) draws attention to the skill formation process, and unlike the human capital theorists who only consider the economic perspective of skill formation, he emphasises the role of cultural and social capital in securing social mobility. He contends that the success of human capital is based on the cultural and social foundation laid by the family. Thus, those from elite family backgrounds have leverage over their counterparts from poorer socio-economic backgrounds. Access is, therefore, a result of human, cultural and social capital and would explain that the likelihood of those excluded from the labour market is most likely to be determined by their backgrounds and circumstances rather than credentials and certification, whose attainment, we are reminded, is the product of social circumstances (Bourdieu 1997). Intervention in this regard is, therefore, necessary since the social circumstances that determine credentials and certification acquisition are constructed by context, and mediated as they are by human intervention – i.e. as a product of personal, economic and political expediency.

Drawing from this broad perspective, the analysis of the South Africa racial imbalance has been considered by some to be rooted in key cultural factors. Alexander (2011) argues that the language acquisition element of social capital has implications for educational outcomes, in other words, as performativity of students. Language from this perspective proved to be a powerful predictor of school success and furthermore, augured well for possibilities outside of it. Those that have English language skills were clearly advantaged both within the education system and for pathways and possibilities outside of it. There is therefore need for understanding the key features of inequity and realise that despite the most well-meaning legislative environment that could 'nudge' employers to recruit black graduates, the possibilities are perhaps a bit less likely, as is evidenced by the current evidence. Undoubtedly there is, need for intervention by various social role players for real equity to be realised.

Unemployment and the Racialised Labour Market

South Africa experiences high levels of poverty, inequality and unemployment leading to a range of concomitant social challenges. In particular, crime and corruption are becoming endemic, perhaps as a consequence of these considerations.

Unemployment is significant in the South African context, with significant racial characteristics. One report conducted in 2009/10 (SAIRR 2010), revealed that unemployment reached 4 310 000 in 2010, with 3 704 000 (86%) of that number being Africans and unemployment (wide definition) reached 6 149 000 with 5 430 000 (88%) of that being Africans. Hofmeyer's (2009: 33) depiction of unemployment patterns over the past decade shows increased employment in the period from the early 1990s (9.6 million) to 2008, (13.7 million). However, the rate of unemployment declined from 27.8% between 1990 and 1994 to 25% in 2011. The absorptive capacity of the labour market shows a small percentile improvement from 41.5% in 1990-4 to 45.4% in 2009. The high of 46.6% in 2008, when the international recession began, was a result of infrastructural spending for the FIFA World Cup hosted by South Africa in 2010.

There are also serious race characteristics (see Table 1 below), which indicate that unemployment amongst Africans reached 29.7% (on the narrow definition²) and 38.2% (expanded definition) as compared to 6.1% and 6.9% respectively among Whites.

Table 1: Unemployment rates by race

	African	Coloured	Indian	White	Total
Official definition	29.7%	21.8%	4.6%	6.1%	25.2%
Wide definition	38.2%	24.9%	11.4%	6.9%	32.4%

Source: (SAIRR 2010)

The challenge of obtaining employment as identified by Bhorat *et al.* is the following:

² The terms narrow and wide indicate the nature of the unemployed, with the narrow excluding those 'job seekers' considered to have been 'discouraged' (i.e. were not actively seeking employment within two weeks from the survey date).

... the most stinging indictment yet of employment practices in the domestic economy is that, on the basis of this evidence, even when type of institution and field of study are controlled for, African graduates are finding it distinctly harder to secure employment than their white counterparts (Bhorat, Mayet & Visser 2010: 109).

The challenges of obtaining employment are reinforced by Moleke (2005: 6) who argues,

although Africans were concentrated in fields of study with lower employment 'prospects', a comparison within the study fields indicated that their white counterparts had better prospects (Moleke 2005: 6).

The latter study showed that more than 50% of whites found employment in all fields in which they studied. The only fields with a success rate of more than 50% of African graduates were 'engineering' (88%), medical sciences (66%), and agriculture (53%).

It is clear that the significant unemployment levels in the country is not only associated with skills and education level, it also reflects the reality of a racialised labour market with a distinctly apartheid-like architecture. This is reinforced in the current occupational profile as the following table shows from the labour force survey in 2010.

Table 2: Occupational skills profile of manufacturing employment by race, 2010

	African	Coloured	Indian	White	Total
Managers	15.6	7.2	9.1	68.2	100.0
Professionals	44.8	9.0	10.6	35.6	100.0
Technicians	48.4	19.9	5.9	25.8	100.0
Clerks	38.5	20.3	10.8	30.4	100.0
Service & Sales	56.4	18.1	6.4	19.0	100.0
Crafts	68.3	17.5	3.3	10.8	100.0
Operators	76.5	17.5	4.1	1.9	100.0
Elementary	77.5	17.2	3.1	2.2	100.0
Total	62.0	16.7	5.2	16.1	100.0
Total (*000s)	1 026	277	87	267	1 656

Source: Statistics South Africa (StatsSA 2010)

The racialised nature of the labour force shows that more than a decade of democracy has not changed racial patterns. White males still dominate the top echelons of workplaces, with more than two-thirds (68.2%) of the managers in the manufacturing sector, as compared to less than a fifth (15.6%) Africans³, the other groups Coloureds (7.2%) and Indians (9.1%) accounted for the rest. Conversely, the 'lower echelons' of the organisational structure has a predominant African (77.5%) component. Coloureds (17.2%) make up the second largest and a minimal White (2.2%) and Indian (3.1%) composition. This must suggest that well paying positions are occupied by Whites and the least paying ones by Africans⁴.

The unequal race distribution in the employment sector is reinforced by the report of the *Commission for Employment Equity* which pointed out that Whites are, '... continuing to be recruited and promoted in the private sector and are likely to continue to benefit from training and development opportunities' (Nkeli 2010). Indeed, despite the range of equity and skills development legislation, there is still considerable unease that little has changed since 1994 and that there is need for urgent transformation to ensure redress and equity in workplaces (RSA 1998a; RSA 1998b). The Minister's preface to the Draft Green paper on Higher Education and Training (DHET) for instance points out that,

...the focus on employment is not to the exclusion of all other development and transformational goals; quite the contrary - unemployment can only be reduced if the transformation agenda is taken forward with renewed vigour. Opening the doors of learning is as important today as it was when the Freedom Charter was written. Today, the barriers to post school education are not formalised or legalised through the colour of one's skin and racial designation. However, the legacy of apartheid lives on in a host of problems related to the poor quality education in many parts of the country, and the socio-economic conditions that young people have to grapple with as they pursue their education and work careers (DHET 2012: viii).

³ Our use of racial categories should not indicate acceptance of these broad ethnic identities identified by the country's constitution.

⁴ Census data (2005) shows Africans make up 79.5% of the total population, White and Coloured 9% each and Indian, 2.5%.

Skill Shortages, Mismatches or Selectivity?

The South African labour market is associated with considerable contradictions and nuances that need to be reviewed before examining the relationship between education and the labour market. Three broad areas are analysed in this section to explore the sometimes quite glaringly conflated education and labour market relationship before one or other explanation of the relationship is proposed. The first is the notion of skill shortages, second, skills mismatch and the third a notion of selectivity. Each is described in turn.

The Workings of the Labour Market

High unemployment accompanied by a conundrum of skills shortages in South Africa. At this stage, the notion of skills shortages is an important component of the official government discourse in the country (see draft Green paper 2011: 9). There is a widely-held and repeated concern that skill shortages represent a critical area that holds back economic growth (see e.g. the latest National Development Plan RSA 2012) (National Planning Commission, RSA 2012). For instance, the per capita numbers of qualified engineers in the country does not coincide with either its level of development or its population. The increase of engineering professionals is an indispensable feature of South Africa's economic development. Indeed, in the case of engineers⁵ it has been suggested that the numbers are less than that required. Although the South African average is below that of other middle income countries, one cannot refer to the country as having a shortage of engineers outside of the creation of work that justifies their production or existence. The head of the engineering council is on record as saying that unless the economy is stimulated in the near future by the government's investment into large-scale infrastructural projects and the capital investment⁶ necessary for this, the need for engineers will be muted.

⁵ The case of accounting professionals have also been similarly cited, see for instance (Excell 2010; Kruss *et al.* 2011).

⁶The much vaunted Strategic Infrastructural Plan has just this year been launched. The head of the Consulting Engineers of South Africa (CESA) argued that outside of this plan, the shortage of engineer was perhaps more imagined than it was real (Esterhuizen 2012).

The reference to widespread skill shortages⁷, with its attendant and associated contradictions has for this reason been described as a conundrum. The considerable human potential and large unemployment suggests that there is likely other dynamics at play to understand the labour market in South Africa. While it is likely that there are indeed some shortages in key higher level areas of those with expertise and experience, the discourse of a 'skills shortage' does allow some attention to be paid to education and training.

Another widely cited dynamic of the labour market workings is based on the notion of skills mismatch (Sharp 2010; Shevel 2011). Here it is argued that the real skills necessary for effective labour market synergy is not being produced by national entities. Wolf (2011), for instance, in reference to the British system, notices an oversupply from certain higher education fields and recommends that consideration also be given to demand-side imperatives when government incentives are considered. This is echoed by some local commentators. Lolwana (2011) attributes skills mismatch to the 'graduate oversupply' phenomenon and to the lack of effective relationship and a 'connection' between education and the labour market. In effect, the conclusion is that the areas of 'education' and the 'labour market' run parallel to each other rather than conjoin for effective synergy and understanding.

While skills shortages and skills mismatches are likely to be important contributors to labour market contradictions, a key feature of the labour market is its candidate selectivity. The mediation of human actors with peculiar biases, prejudices and notions of efficiency represent a critical area of labour market activity. Dias (2005), for instance, has argued that the employment and labour market in South Africa is less a product of skills shortages than it is about selectivity and choice which is, quite interestingly, a product of excessive labour supply. In this view, the primary issue is the labour market's inability to absorb new entrants with tertiary qualifications. Hence the cautionary corollary that improving the education qualifications of the unemployed is not likely to be a passport to employment since the labour market itself is saturated. In an important manner, this explanation complements the selective inclusion of some individuals rather than others

⁷ See for instance Akoojee (2008), for a discussion of this conundrum as it applies to the South African Further Education and Training College sector.

that both Kraak (1993) and Yakubovich (2006) attribute to the lack of transformation in the labour market.

It is therefore evident that the South African labour market, whether it is beset with challenges related to skill shortages, skills mismatches or candidate selectivity, there is need for a clearly defined rationale relevant for various sectors of the economy and areas of economic activity. The notion of both skills shortages and skills mismatch, while useful need also to be understood within a framework that takes as a starting point the selectivity of individuals within a considerable wide and diverse labour market pool.

Graduate Unemployment and Labour Market Contradictions

The skills shortages discourse could, ostensibly, have explained the graduate unemployment phenomenon in general. But, whether it is due to labour market saturation or inappropriate skills, the unemployment of graduates with degrees is clearly a paradox in light of the skills shortages claim. The fact that the claim for skills shortages coexist with racially based graduate unemployment suggests that there are considerable challenges in the way in which the labour market is structured. Thus, whether the skills shortage discourse is real or not, is not as serious as the reality of a racialised labour market. Whereas there are a large number of unemployed graduates in short supply in designated fields like engineering, the reality is that black graduates find it more difficult to obtain employment as compared to their counterparts in the other racial categories. It is clear that no amount of intervention is likely to change this situation. We want to posit that the situation, which is a product of historical misappropriation, can be resolved by a labour market that will need to be cajoled into understanding that race is indeed less of a predictor of workplace efficiency. Clearly the reality of a higher education intake and enrolment system that is less informed by labour market demand than it is by supply-side capacity needs to be addressed.

The recruitment and selection practices in some firms reflect the manipulation of the labour market for the social reproduction function of particular companies which is described as the extended internal labour market (Kraak 1993; Yakubovich 2006).

Access and Higher Education: Expanding the Agenda

Our key argument is that the role of higher education needs to be expanded.

Indeed, it is argued that in light of the national development responsibility of higher education institutions, some attention should be paid to their labour market responsibility. While not proposing a technicist neo-liberal perspective that assumes that the role of higher education should be geared to labour market ends, the knowledge generation activity needs to take cognisance of labour market outcomes of those that the institution is charged. It is therefore necessary to understand the relationship between the higher education institutions and the labour market.

Higher education has been widely lauded in the country for its transformational perspective. Not only has enrolment expanded within steadily tightening fiscal conditions, institutions are clearly asked to do more and more with less and less (Altbach 2008). Thus it is not insignificant that the gross enrolment ratio of higher education institutions has significantly increased in the post-apartheid period. Between 1986 and 2007, enrolment increased by as much as 151% from 303 000 in 1986 to 761 092 in 2007 and was forecast to reach 836,800 in 2011 (Department of Education 2009). The massive expansion led some to review its unbridled expansion and amidst concerns about its quality implications, some in the Department of Education considered various means for containing expansion. Thus although the Department of Education (2005: 23) considered capping head-count enrolment ‘at 723 000 in 2005, at 730 000 in 2007 and at 740 000 in 2009’, the decision to cap enrolment was consequently left to the Ministry of Education and the respective HEIs.

While the enrolment figures have increased, associated as it has been with a larger black intake, concerns have been voiced about issues linked to quality.. These have to some extent been responded to by various mechanisms including the issue of non-readiness of school graduates for university. Thus various government measures to expand and fund academic development programmes and various initiatives for ‘extended degree’ have been implemented. . Government’s response to access was designed for expanding the possibilities of success of those not adequately prepared for the rigours of university life in an effort to increase throughput of those disadvantaged by the previous system.

Despite these measures, some concern has been raised in recent times regarding the high rate of failure and throughput at higher education institutions. It has been estimated that on average government annually

spends R18 000⁸ (World Bank 2010b) per Higher Education student. While it would be disingenuous to reduce education to monetary terms, the reality of a sector not doing enough with its spending in tight fiscal conditions is troubling. Consequently, it is alarming that the current graduation rate is 16% for under graduate degrees and diplomas 19% for Masters degrees and 13% for doctoral degrees (DBE 2010). This was not new. The *National Plan for Higher Education* (DoE 2001) nine years earlier had reported that, at 15%, South Africa had the lowest graduation rate in the world. The same document also raised the issue of the disparity between black and white student graduation rates with black students spending more than double the time spent by white students for completion. Institutional efficiency was also differentiated, with graduation rates ranging from 6% at the low end and 24% at the high end.

Attrition of students has also been of concern. A study conducted by the Department of Education in 2005 showed that of the 120 000 students entered into HE, about half of them had dropped out by their third year (30% had dropped out by the first year), and of the remaining 50%, fewer than half (22%) graduated within the three years stipulated (DoE 2005).

If one superimposes this attrition on demographic data, it is not surprising that attrition affects black students more than they do the other racial groups. A key finding of the graduate destination study was the crucial role of finance in dropout rates (Letseka & Maile 2008).

That black students are unable to obtain the requisite qualification, and that those who do are not able to access labour market opportunities is a telling indictment of the social transformational prerogatives which have been marginalised. Some attention has to be paid to those black students that succeed despite all the odds to which they have been exposed. The shifting of focus from failure to successful completion is a starting point of transformation. Translation into practice, therefore, calls for an expanded notion of access that takes as a critical responsibility the labour market placement of those that are able to graduate from HE institutions.

This means that some attention has to be given to institutional placement as a responsibility which must take account of the context in which it finds itself. Expanding the notion of access provides a powerful mechanism

⁸ This is only government's contribution and excludes private contribution in the form of fees.

by which to close the loop that deprives access. We refer to this notion of access, as meaningful or ‘productive access’- i.e. access designed to lead to production and utility of the qualification in the labour market. The objective in this case is related to the national transformational project.

Evidence suggests that exposure to workplaces represents a powerful means by which initial employment is secured. This is confirmed in national policy proposals. For example, the National Planning Commission’s Diagnostic Report points out that the ‘inability to support young people to make the school-to-work transition is probably the biggest challenge in the labour market’ (NPC 2011: 13). This is clearly drawn from an age-old apprenticeship model which considers the crucial role of exposure to workplaces as an indispensable component of education and training. Indeed, economists⁹ have now considered the value of this model in skills development practise.

Conclusion

This paper suggests that for real access to be realised, institutional responsibility needs to be expanded to enable black students to access labour market opportunities. Furthermore, the work of universities needs to go beyond that of preparing students academically. The work of the university, we argue, should be about expanding access for those graduates that have been disadvantaged in the past. The paper does not assume that by so doing the challenges that preclude the market from employing graduates will be eliminated, but that by providing some support to these graduates, that some progress in enabling labour market outcomes would be realised. While we are mindful that this might well lead to charges of being technicist or reductionistic by human capital theorists who assume that HE institutions simply need to respond to labour market imperatives, the reality of a

⁹ It is therefore not surprising that contemporary commentators, for instance, Sharp (2010: 12) suggests that, ‘most valuable lesson emerging from the skills development experiment is that marketable skills are acquired on-the-job, in a practical workplace setting’. In addition, the September, 2010, Adcorp Quarterly Report (Adcorp Holdings 2010) argues that the primary obstacle to skills development for inexperienced youth is finding their critical first job.

misaligned education-labour market relationship means that interventions with a critical dimension are necessary to respond to the economy.

One possible way of making inroads in the inaccessible labour market challenge includes institutional commitment to productive student experience. While this is likely to expand on the university mission, the consequences of not doing this in a developing context like ours is likely to be severe, not only to those that have been included in the system as a result of redress initiatives, but also to undermine the entire higher education project with, potentially, disastrous consequences for national development.

The cartoon which in Figure 1 shows multitudes crossing an unsteady bridge from high school to university appear not to have any link with the world of employment from university. The access suggested in this paper will begin the process of links with the labour market.

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