

## 4. IMPROVING GRADUATE OUTPUT AS A NATIONAL PRIORITY

### 4.1 A CASE FOR A NATIONAL FOCUS ON IMPROVING GRADUATE OUTPUT

On the basis of the current performance patterns, weighed against the importance of high-level skills for national development, this paper seeks to make a case that the improvement of graduate output should be recognised as a priority for higher education policy and resourcing. The main points of the argument are as follows.

- The shortage of high-level skills reported in a number of areas of the economy and the society at large (together with the existence of some graduate unemployment) indicates that the output of the higher education sector is not matching the country's developmental needs.

In material terms, the overall performance of the sector indicates unsatisfactory utilisation of scarce resources. The loss in terms of human resources is, however, arguably much greater. In a context of relatively low participation rates, the great majority of the students who are leaving without qualifying come from at least the top quintile of the population in terms of prior learning achievement. The higher education sector must be able to cater more successfully for this intake profile if national needs for high-level skills are to be met.

- In terms of equity, access remains a key issue despite the increase in black enrolment since the political transition. The persistent disparities in participation rates are not justifiable against the need for redress and social inclusion, and the sector must be able to accommodate more than the current 12% gross participation rate for the majority population group.

However, since it is successful completion that really matters for individuals and the country, equity of outcomes is the overarching challenge. The major racial disparities in completion rates in undergraduate programmes, together with the particularly high attrition rates of black students across the board, have the effect of negating much of the growth in black access that has been achieved. Taking account of the black participation rate, the overall attrition rate of over 50% and the below-average black completion rates, it can be concluded that the sector is catering successfully for under 5% of the black (and coloured) age-group. This has central significance for development as well as social inclusion, as discussed below.

- It may therefore fairly be said that the graduate output of the higher education sector is not meeting national needs in respect of the two key areas of 'economic growth and ... social cohesion' (Pandor 2005). Since graduate output is a unique responsibility of the sector, the situation calls for concerted action to ensure substantial and continuing improvement.

As noted earlier, this argument does not presuppose that detailed forecasting of skills requirements is either possible or desirable, and does not imply that graduate output should be confined to meeting the technical and professional needs of the economy. The aim is rather to ensure that, in the first instance, better use is made of the country's human resources through creating conditions in which a much higher proportion of higher education entrants complete their studies, and, secondly, that the shape of the graduate output is not distorted by systemic obstacles that prevent talented students from being able to succeed in their qualifications of choice.

The concerted action called for would need leadership from central governance bodies, particularly the Ministry of Education, and engagement by the higher education community. Possible strategies for improving graduate output are discussed in section 7 below.

#### **4.2 IMPLICATIONS OF THE PERFORMANCE PATTERNS FOR IMPROVING GRADUATE OUTPUT**

The performance patterns set out above have important implications for how improvement in graduate output might best be achieved in our context. Key points arising from the cohort studies are as follows.

- Although only two national cohort studies have been done thus far (with the 2001 study not complete), there are strong indications that the performance patterns they reveal are persistent. Shortcomings in higher education performance have been acknowledged for a long time. Concerns about attrition go back as far as the period of higher education expansion in the 1960s and 1970s. Addressing historical educational inequalities has been identified as a major challenge for higher education since at least as far back as the 1980s, and has been a central policy goal since the political transition (DoE 1997; DoE 2001). There will be fluctuations in the figures from year to year, but the analysis of the existing cohort studies serves to confirm and broadly quantify patterns that have been recognised in individual institutions and the sector as a whole for a considerable time.

The main implication of the persistence of the underlying performance patterns is that they will not change spontaneously. Decisive action needs to be taken in key aspects of the educational process – and at key points of the educational ‘pipeline’ – to facilitate positive change in outcomes. Such key points occur particularly at the interface between major phases of the system: between general education and FET, for example, as well as between FET and higher education, and, increasingly significantly, between undergraduate and postgraduate studies. While this paper focuses on the undergraduate phase, continuity in the system as a whole is necessary for improving graduate outcomes, without which meeting national developmental needs will continue to be an elusive goal.

- It is clear that, as long as the current undergraduate performance patterns continue, increasing the intake is not in itself an efficient means of increasing graduate output. Given the small pool of adequately-prepared candidates, increasing the intake will result in increasing the proportion of less-prepared students in the sector. Unless there are changes in the educational process, this will mean at best perpetuating, or more likely worsening, the negative aspects of the current performance patterns.

This has implications for further investment in higher education. ‘More-of-the-same’ funding, focusing on enrolment growth rather than improving the educational process, is unlikely to produce optimal returns.

- It follows that improving graduate output depends primarily on improving the performance patterns. Particularly in view of the low overall higher education participation rates, it is essential to optimise the performance of the current student intake in the first instance. In this respect, the performance patterns support the emphasis on success rather than access expressed in the NPHE and aspects of subsequent DoE funding and enrolment planning policy (see for example DoE 2005).
- It is clear from the ‘equity of outcomes’ analysis that the differentials in the completion rates of the different student groups are a major obstacle to progress. While no group’s success rate can be said to be satisfactory, improved performance in the least well-performing groups – that is, the black and coloured groups<sup>8</sup> – is key to substantially improving graduate output overall.

Moreover, given the current disparities in participation rates, future enrolment growth will need to come primarily from the black and coloured groups. In fact, irrespective of how much overall growth occurs, it is evident that there will need to be at least a relative increase in black and coloured enrolment to reach participation levels above the current 12%.

In summary, substantial improvement in graduate output, of the order necessary to meet national needs, depends particularly on improved performance in the black and coloured groups. Progress towards equity of outcomes has thus become imperative for ‘economic development ... [as well as] social cohesion’ (Pandor, *op cit*).

- Since the majority of students entering the sector are not completing their studies, it can reasonably be inferred that the existing system is not effective in contemporary conditions.

Furthermore, as the data analysis shows, the groups from which growth in output must primarily come are those that are least well served by the existing educational process.

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<sup>8</sup> Data on coloured student performance are not provided in this paper but have been analysed in the ITLS project. The analysis shows that coloured completion rates are commonly somewhat higher than those of black students but well below those of whites.

The lack of provision enabling such students to realise their potential and succeed represents a particular obstacle to development. Given the persistence of the performance patterns, it is evident that improving graduate output depends on improving the effectiveness of the educational process – that is, on systemic change.

A central question, then, is what it will take to cater effectively for at least the present intake profile, and particularly the student groups that are under-represented within it. The following section considers some key indicators of where systemic problems lie.