

Calibrating the Barometer¹: Student Access and Success in South African Public Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

In the mid twenty first century there have been three key trends which have been identified across the world in the higher education sector: elitism, massification and access. Studies in South Africa (SA), post- apartheid have also revealed these trends, with an emphasis on massification and the widening of access for previously disadvantaged Black students (with a focus on African students in particular who suffered the worst level of disadvantage in apartheid SA) taking centre stage. Whilst there has been significant progress with regards to broadening access for students into public higher education in the South African context, public higher education institutions have been feeling the pressure to demonstrate that these students are achieving success (good throughput levels and reduced dropout) and this continues to be a challenge. This article provides an overview of some of the discussions related to selected discourses within student access and success in SA higher education, by undertaking a review of the recent local literature with the aim of highlighting the progress made towards understanding these phenomena and the gaps in knowledge that still require more research for greater understanding in the pursuit of achieving student success in South African public higher education institutions.

Keywords: access, success, first generation students, the first year experience, student support

¹ Upon calibrating a barometer, there will be correct pressure readings revealed.

Introduction

There has been three basic trends identified in higher education development worldwide: elitism, massification (i.e. the move from a system that served an elite only to one that every member of society might aspire to experience), and universal access (Altbach 2010). It has been asserted that South Africa (SA) is no different, post –apartheid (after 1994), showing the very same trends (Bundy 2006) but Lange (2006) argues that in the SA context the higher education shifts was more about achieving social justice rather than mimicking an international trend. The CHE (2010:02) by contrast acknowledged that there have been multiple influences stemming from a development perspective on the trajectory of South African Higher education by stating that ‘The policy agenda for South African higher education that has been developing since 1995 has also been influenced by a number of international trends shaping higher education institutions in developed and developing countries’. It is apparent that there are various perceptions on the influences in the South African higher education arena upon SA becoming a democratic country in 1994. Despite the differences of opinion, the merging of institutions in SA from the year 2002, to the present 23 public institutions (consisting of two types namely comprehensive universities and universities of technology) and the genesis of multiple private institutions have positively altered the higher education terrain in promoting greater student access (Maphosa *et al.* 2014).

This paper examines selected current discussions centred on access and success which have become focal points in public higher education institutions (HEIs) in SA.

Access and Participation

Ultimately, the SA higher education transformation agenda has demonstrated a particular emphasis on massification and the widening of access to the previously disadvantaged Black racial groups especially that of the majority population, namely Africans. Studies have shown that there has been significant positive improvements in the composition of the student population in higher education in democratic South Africa with The Council on Higher Education (CHE) (2013) and MacGregor (2014) reporting that the number of African students in public higher education comprised 81% of the

total student body of 938 200 by 2011. In a presentation to parliament on the 5 March 2014, Dr Saleem Badat, Chairperson of Higher Education South Africa (HESA) announced that access into higher education had been achieved citing statistics that since South Africa became a democracy in 1994 to 2014, student enrolment had close to doubled. In addition, representation in HEIs had altered to being more in accordance to the demographics of South Africa. Interestingly he (Badat 2014) also reported that historically white institutions still had fewer black students than historically black institutions implying that the task of changing the historical racial trends at institutions were not rapid enough to overcome the past student demographics. This levelling of the racial demographics at these HEI's still remains one of the challenges requiring further research, in the local access discourse.

Another strand worthy of mention locally relates to participation. Hemsley-Brown (2012), reporting on international higher education, noted that almost all countries had dramatically increased their higher education participation rates whilst it has been argued that in South Africa, participation rates have been relatively slow to increase when compared to the increases in student access. The participation rate in 2005 was 16% (Strydom *et al.* 2010) and five years later in 2010, a mere 18% (CHE, 2011). A racial carving of participation levels in higher education locally is instructive. The participation of White and Indian students presently is 57% and 47% respectively (CHE 2014). Historically, the statistics are more revealing when a comparison is made between African students in public HEIs and the African population in the country. Here the CHE (2011) reported that the share of African students located in public higher education institutions increased from 2006 to 2011 by 12%, which reflected a growth from 451 106 in 2006 to 640 442 in 2011. This signals a phenomenal jump, however, they note that despite the increase in African enrollments in 1995 from 49% to 68% in 2011, racially this reflects 14% lower than the share of Africans in South Africa. Thus, how to increase the participation of African students in public HEIs remains a central area of discussion and a target to achieve for key higher education stakeholders.

Despite the shifts in the general student demographics stated above, another area of concern in higher education relates to student success especially that of African students.

Access but not Success

It has been argued that despite the great inroads made in increasing access for marginalized groups in South Africa, the success of these students has not been evident (Scott 2012, Maphosa *et al.* 2014, Sosibo & Katiya 2015). It therefore comes as no surprise that Sisobo and Katiya (2015: 272) in their paper report on The Department of Higher Education and Training having noted that ‘improving student access, success and throughput rates is a very serious challenge...and must become a priority focus for national policy and for the institutions themselves’ (DHET 2014: 31). As can be seen here emphasis on the phenomenon of student access and their success is being mooted by the DHET in 2014 for institutional and national discussion. What is interesting is that access is still being perceived by DHET as a target to achieve and that for DHET, student access cannot be divorced from student success which is linked to student throughput and dropout discussions. Sosibo & Katiya (2015: 271) also cite several scholars (such as Fisher & Scott 2011; Wingfield 2011; Mabelebele & Parry 2012) who note that ‘high access and disproportionately low output and throughput rates in South African HEIs at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels have been widely documented’. It is very evident that the close relationship between access and success has been noticed by researchers in this field (see CHE, 2010, Scott, 2012) and Scott (2012:26) warns that ‘unless there are decisive steps to improve success across the student body, African student attrition will increase disproportionately, defeating the object of widening access’. It must be chronicled that this appeal for attention by DHET is not a new calling in SA as The CHE, a body which advises the ministry of education, (2010) five years previously acknowledged that there are complexities involved in access, retention and throughput in HE in SA. It then undertook several studies related to the salient trends and challenges within higher education. In a similar vein, public HEIs have also been engaging in studying and monitoring their own students’ success / lack thereof with studies on access, throughput, dropout and related discourses. Thus, in recent years there has emerged a burgeoning literature in the South African context on student access and their success with key emphasis being devoted to discussions on how to increase student throughput and measures to address student dropout (REAP 2008; Prinsloo 2009, Ramrathan 2013, Heymann & Carolissen 2011; Horn *et al.* 2011; Bojuwoyo, 2014; Bokana & Tewari 2014, Sosibo & Katiya

2015). Institutional work have included for example Ramrathan's (2013) paper on a conceptual framework to understand student dropout based on a study undertaken at UKZN; Heymann and Carolissen's (2011) paper on First Generation Students at Stellenbosch university, Bojuwoyo's (2014) paper on first year students' stresses undertaken at five institutions; Manik's (2014, 2015) papers on student dropout and support at one institution: UKZN, Sosibo and Katiya's (2015) paper on support initiatives implemented in the Western Cape, to name but a few. These are the results of recent research at South African public HEIs which attempt to expand institutional understandings of the challenges facing them with regard to these phenomena and to respond with steps in working towards achieving student success.

Below, I present some of the critical discussions that have been unfolding around student access, and their success in these and other related studies. Some studies are quantitative studies along statistical lines whilst others have started to probe qualitatively, the challenges experienced by students from their perspectives, with the hope that understanding students' experiences from their points of view will assist institutions to hone in on what they can implement at institutional level in their own context to make student success a reality. I also outline some of the nuances that these studies have revealed in respect of access and success.

The Statistics 'Speak'

A document on access and success at universities in SA by Lewin and Mawoyo (2014:09) revealed that graduation and throughput rates are low following on the findings of the CHE (2013) and 'thus a matter of serious concern'. This year as well, it was revealed that if throughput and graduation rates are demographically sliced, they are considered to be low for black students, whilst amongst white students the throughput and graduation rates are significantly higher than for black students (Badat 2014). It had long been argued by the CHE (CHE higher education Monitor 9, 2010) and it is very much still an issue that 'overall the higher education system still reflects the legacy of apartheid when it comes to participation by 'race' group and socio-economic status, and when it comes to who among these students finish their degrees on time and with good marks'. Lewin and Mawoyo (2014:09) cite the CHE's cohort studies on the time students take to complete their studies

by reporting that ‘only 27% of all undergraduate students complete their studies in the minimum time’. The implication here is that the majority of students do not complete their studies on time and this had led to national discussions on the extension of the 3 year undergraduate degree to 4 years. Furthermore, Govender (2013) reported on a study where statistics tracking students from their enrolment in school revealed that an ‘analysis of throughput data indicates that fewer than five South Africans in 100 who enrol in Grade one of schooling graduate from university’. So, clearly there are greater systemic issues impacting on higher education’s output.

What is also of interest in the statistics being presented, is the nomenclature that accompanies it which Heymann and Carolissen (2011) warn about: namely that so called ‘historically disadvantaged students’ continue to be at risk of not graduating timeously despite an increase in funding initiatives (such as NFSAS) to financially support them. It was reported (Govender 2013) that the ‘problem is particularly acute for disadvantaged students: only 28% of students in the National Student Financial Aid Scheme of South Africa, or NSFAS, make it to graduation’. The implication here is that measures to financially support students are insufficient in propelling them to achieve success and that additional measures need to be institutionalized, factoring in the impact of educational history. The above signals the need for a deeper interrogation and analysis of the term ‘disadvantaged’ when applied to students. In addition, clearly not only financial imperatives must be prioritized. I return later to the role of finances in SA higher education.

Shifting Stances, Shifting Terms

Inadvertently, improving the success of students also depends on the attitude of the institution which may have bought into the shift of moving from the narrative of ‘unprepared students’ (REAP, 2008) to ‘underprepared students to ‘underprepared institutions’ (Dhunpath & Vithal 2012). This is reflected in the institutional decisions to take responsibility for poor student success by introducing innovative measures to support students after access has been granted. Largely, what has occurred in the past as REAP (2008) has articulated, and at times in the present is the continuation of students being addressed through a deficit discourse, that they are ‘unprepared’ /

‘underprepared’ for higher education, they are ‘lacking in skills’ etc. and insufficient attention is then given to institutional shortfalls because they lack preparedness in dealing with the increase of students experiencing numerous challenges. The DHET is not immune to this form of ‘deficit’ articulation and allocating responsibility. Sosibo and Katiya (2015) note that the department of Higher education and Training (DHET 2012: 42), has stated that ‘inadequate student preparedness for university education is probably the main factor contributing to low success rates’. Dhunpath and Vithal (2012) boldly took this bull of ‘underpreparedness’ by the horns in their book focusing on access to higher education in SA by asking the question of whether it is a case of ‘underprepared students or underprepared institutions’. The former authors have advocated that universities will have to continue to assist underprepared students to make the transition to a successful university career. It was thus evident that a pathologising of students was the discourse for some time and this hasn’t totally disappeared. Interestingly, internationally Woodley (2004) had long warned that there is this danger of pathologising students when discussing their lack of success.

The Throughput and Dropout Discussion Threads

Local research on student dropout, through put and retention span over 10 years (Prinsloo 2009). Recently, Manik (2014) drew on studies to assert that the discourses on dropout in South Africa has been dominated by a discussion of the rates, that is the statistical aspects nationally and institutionally of student dropout. The same very same argument can be made in respect of access and throughput and these rates discourses have come at the expense of a qualitative deeper analysis and understanding of these phenomena.

In addition, using the category of Blacks in the statistics (see Badat 2014 earlier in this article) is misleading because Africans and Coloureds have lower rates of success when compared to Indians, yet all fall within the category of Black. An example of this can also be found in a study conducted by Scott *et al.* (2007: 19) years ago, in which they concluded the following: ‘The major racial disparities in completion rates in undergraduate programs, 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’. Sosibo and Katiya (2015) maintain that this

variance has major repercussions institution wise in the attempts to align access and success for all students and not just designated groups.

With regards to dropout specifically, there have been 2 interesting current discourses: the dropout rates (as explained above) and the reasons for dropout incorporating the notion of first generation students and the 'first year' experience at university.

Dropout Rates

The dropout rates are still considered in some quarters to be high (Badat 2014, Beck 2011, Sapa 2008) and there hasn't been significant improvement since the HESA study on dropout which revealed that some institutions had a rate of 35%. Badat (2014) reported to the parliamentary committee that 55% of all higher education students never graduated. Given these alarming statistics on dropout, it is important to understand how dropout is conceptualized locally. Spady (1970) had long ago highlighted various definitions of student dropout. He noted that one definition could be that it 'includes anyone leaving a college at which he is registered' and another definition could be that it refers 'only to those who never receive a degree from any college'. Spady (1970: 68) does allude to the fact that the former is methodologically easier than the latter 'but it fails to provide a broad enough perspective on the actual rates of retention and attrition pertinent to the system of higher education as a whole'. This difference in definitions has significance because Manik (2014: 158) recently reported that in the capturing of dropout statistics at higher education institutions 'there is no distinction drawn between students who have dropped out to transfer to another institution, short term dropout and re-entry at a later stage'. This presents a quandary because students could possibly be transferring across HEIs and this is being erroneously presented as student dropout, with the implication that they have halted their pursuit of higher education when indeed they have not done so, but rather migrated to another HEI or picked up study after a break.

The dropout statistics in South Africa have also been segmented along categories of economic status and race which has revealed particular trends, most pronounced of which being that dropout rates were high amongst African students. Manik (2014) undertaking a qualitative analysis of student

dropout across multiple sites of UKZN, maintained that many Africans are still powerless to escape the poverty they have experienced since apartheid. Even small scale discipline studies such as that undertaken by Beck (2011) amongst the school of Accounting postgraduates at NMMU on dropout revealed other interesting racial threads, namely that dropout rates were the highest amongst Coloureds followed by Whites. He established that dropout amongst Coloureds and Whites in specific fields also necessitate some level of responsiveness.

The Socio-economic and Academic Influence in Student Dropout

Prinsloo (2009:18) undertaking research in SA has maintained that the heart of student retention in higher education is the result of any one of 3 levels: individual, institutional and supra-institutional. He has explained that ‘some operate at the level of the individual student (motivation and ability and other personal characteristics and circumstances), others at institutional level (quality of advice, guidance and general quality of provision), and yet others operate at supra-institutional level (finance and other socio-economic factors)’. He unfortunately overlooks that there could be interconnectivity between the 3 levels and students could be dropping out due to a composite of levels as numerous studies have recognized (REAP 2008; Manik 2014).

Nevertheless, Tinto’s ground breaking theory (1993) internationally on socio-economic integration of students into higher education in the US has impacted theoretically on local research which has found areas of resonance and dissonance. Tinto suggested that student success and retention in higher education is influenced by the following characteristics: their personal aspirations, objectives, their competences and skills, their academic history and their family’s. Locally, Lewin and Mawoyo (2014:10) reported that the ‘factors influencing access and success at university are complex and multi-dimensional’ and they have separated these factors into social and academic factors. Their explanation of these factors are as follows: ‘Social factors influencing access and success includes schooling background, socio-economic status, race and gender, and the social context of learning.

Academic factors influencing access and success are ...student and staff related, and include issues of pedagogy, language, and literacy, teaching

and assessment practices, and curriculum structure'. In this paper, a number of these issues are flagged for discussion.

Whilst Tinto initially (1982) did not factor in finance as a reason for dropping out, noting that it's the last consideration and not the first, he did comment that future models ought to take note of the value of finances. Studies in SA have outlined some identical reasons to international studies on student dropout. These include students' inadequate preparation for the academic demands of higher education, poor matching of courses which resulted in students' lack of commitment, financial burdens, adverse academic experiences, a lack of adequate integration into the culture dominating higher education and a plethora of personal trials (Beck 2011, Manik 2014, Van Zyl 2015). Van Zyl (2015) recently commented on 'academic problems and life problems' (housing, finance and food) playing a role in dropout and this has resonance with the earlier findings of Manik (2014) who interviewed students who had dropped out. Makoni (2014:online) has asserted that government has responded to 'the need for more historically disadvantaged students to access higher education and the rising costs of a degree through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme, NSFAS'. But he has also commented that 'students have complained that too few students are accessing loans and grants and that, for those who do, the loans are not enough to cover study expenses at a top university'. It thus appears that there is a host of inter-related factors that impact on students' dropping out of higher education making an understanding of student dropout far more complex than it was previously envisaged.

Furthermore, Tinto's model has been criticised by authors (in Koen 2008:69-70) such as Tierney (1992) and Braxton and Lien (2002), who argue that the Tinto's model does not adequately consider 'the notion of cognitive dissonance and even dislocation that students may experience when they enter higher education and encounter various forms of epistemological and ontological dissonances'. Locally, 'epistemological access' has been a key area of concern raised by scholars who research student access and success (see for example Boughey 2005; Dhunpath & Vithal 2012; Maphosa *et al.* 2014). In addition, poor academic preparation at school has been known to disadvantage students who pursue higher education MacFarlane (2013) and Manik (2014) has commented that there is a price that HEIs in SA pay in increasing access to students who have poor matric results, namely the domino effect of their dropout: whilst these students have been provided with

an opportunity to be in a HEI, they lack preparedness for sustained study in a HE environment which demands students be independent learners.

But of growing importance in SA, has been the dropout rate of first year students and the understanding of dropout amongst first year students is perplexing because their dropout occurs at the nexus of multiple interconnecting factors. It's no wonder Van Zyl (2015: 08) has stated that there is 'no magic bullet that could solve the problems of first years'.

Dropout amongst First Years

Initially, discussions around the preparedness of students was being mooted as the reason for student drop (Scott *et al.* 2007) and later (see Prinsloo 2009; Bojuwoyo 2014) there was an acknowledgement that several factors were responsible for dropout and not all of them fell within either the ambit of the student or the institution.

Bojuwoyo (2014:286) undertook a study of the stress experiencing by first year students at five HEIs in SA. His case studies have particular historical influences stemming from apartheid and communities which have been unable to progress sufficiently in a democratic SA. Four of the five institutions were termed HDIs or Historically Disadvantaged Institutions with the following characteristics: being under resourced and for Africans from poor rural contexts. He reported that there are 2 main ways in which first year students suffer stress at university through: '(a) lack of adequate financial support or poor budget to subsist, and that of (a) lack of information to assist in decision-making and early adjustment to the new environment of their universities ...'. Maphosa *et al.* (2014: 410) also point out that the dropout literature does capture the change from school to university and that first year students have to move from being 'dependent learners' to becoming 'independent learners'. This idea conceptualized as the 'articulation gap' (Lewin & Mawoyo 2014; Sosibo & Katiya 2015) has been frequently cited as a key problem-linked to scholars writing about the underpreparedness of students. I pick up this idea of under preparedness yet once again, in a later section on language.

The Influence of Rurality

Bojuwoyo (2014), similar to Manik (2014) reports that poverty is responsible

for the numerous difficulties that students face when they shift from high school to university. But this is not new news because in 2008, the Rural Education Access Programme (REAP) which undertook a study on the factors impacting on the success of previously disadvantaged students established that rurality negatively affects students' success and furthermore, insufficient finances were a key reason for student dropout. REAP was also cognizant that the 'unpreparedness of students' was renowned 'but the unpreparedness of higher education institutions for these types of students is less taken into account' (REAP 2008:6). Earlier, I noted that the discourse since 2008, has altered slightly from 'unprepared' to 'underprepared' in respect of students and institutions suggesting that there is some level of preparation but it is inadequate.

Students termed to be 'first generation students' (FGS) also appear to be at risk of dropping out given that they are the first in their families to transition from school to university without the necessary support. FGSs have been defined by Dumais and Ward (2010) to be either students whose parents have not studied further than high school or students whose parents may have attended a tertiary institution but not graduated. REAP (2008:08) links the concepts of rurality and first generation students in demonstrating the influences inhibiting students' chances of achieving success: rural students may now have to study in a language that isn't their first language, which they haven't previously experienced and ' being the first generation in their families, and perhaps even in their communities, to enter higher education. This means that students' families do not have the educational capital or resources to assist their integration or support them in their academic studies'. But FGSs should not be perceived as a helpless group. Heymann and Carolissen (2011) note that some of the problems faced by FGSs at Stellenbosch University (SU) related to them as individuals or to the environment of the institution where they were studying. They draw on FGS studies which point to a tendency to conceive of FGSs as a 'deficit' group which needs to be 'rescued' but they report on FGSs at SU demonstrating their 'action' by forming a group and stating their needs and making the institution aware of their requirements which need to be met. Due to a third of students dropping out by the end of their first year, Heymann and Carolissen (2011: 1390) assert that FGSs must be understood as having 'real challenges' and in need of institutional support but they caution that a patronizing attitude should be avoided in classifying students according to

categories which will lead to labelling: being ‘pathologised as problematic’ for their specific needs.

Language of Instruction

The role of language (Jama *et al.* 2008; REAP 2008; Maphosa *et al.* 2014) in terms of the medium of instruction at HEIs has been foregrounded as having an impact on students’ achieving success. Jama *et al.* (2008) cite language acquisition as a key area recognizing that students may be struggling with critical skills in English such as speaking, reading and writing and this has been part of the ‘underpreparedness’ discourse of first year students. Sosibo and Katiya (2015: 274) further explain that ‘under-preparedness refers to the state of students who are in general not academically ready, especially in areas such as reading and writing, and particularly in the language of learning and teaching, which in most cases is English’. They add that this trend is more evident in students for whom English is a second language than for students studying in their home language. The CHE (2010: 04) had long recognized that in HEIs ‘Staff had to adapt to teaching more students for whom the language of instruction was their second or even third language. Students had to adapt to an increasingly multilingual social and learning environment’. Thus, the language of instruction at institutions carry weight in determining their success. Another element of value stems from REAP (2008:08) which advanced the link between language and rurality stating that ‘disadvantaged students experience.....having to study in a second or third language, to which rural students in particular may have had little exposure’. Maphosa *et al.* (2014) also builds on this idea of the medium of instruction and notes language competence as a reason affecting the learning ability of students and their academic performance.

From the above discussion and numerous publications, there appears to be consensus that the reasons for local student dropout are multiple and complex (Prinsloo 2009; Manik, 2014; Lewin & Mawoyo 2014) and this parallels the findings internationally on student dropout (see for example Crosling, Heagney & Thomas 2009). Recently, Van Zyl (2015:08) commented at a press gathering that ‘The reasons are as complex for dropout as for those who dropout’. Clearly there exists the understanding that unpacking dropout through the lens of the institution as well as through

students' perspectives are multifaceted and intricate. So how can these reasons be channeled into providing some clarity of insight?

Working towards Success

Prinsloo (2009) advocates 2 key factors, namely timing and appropriateness, in the provision of effective academic support for students offered by HEIs and he draws on the 'Rural Education Action Programme (REAP) (2008:11) which stated that 'In order to be able to provide timeous and appropriate academic support, institutions need to be able to identify at-risk students at an early stage, to track and monitor their progress, and to evaluate the effectiveness of support systems and programmes offered'. In a similar vein, Sosibo and Katiya (2015: 271) argue in their paper based on a study at one HEI in The Cape that 'early identification of at-risk students is at the heart of improving student success, especially for those who enter higher education with gaps in their knowledge'.

But there are other aspects to improving the success of students and the CHE report (2010: 01) on access and throughput using three case studies (at the Universities of Pretoria, Witwatersrand and Western Cape) reported that whilst all the universities 'share a common past' in terms of their apartheid history, they had different contextual realities given their staff profiles, the location from which they draw their students, culture and access to resources.

This means that discussions on access and success have to also be carved according to the uniqueness of each case study institution.

Conclusions

Internationally, Hall's report on retention and wastage (2001: iv) warned that 'widening access is likely to result in increasing levels of student dropout' so it's not a revelation that locally SA is experiencing the same situation. Without a doubt, at present student success in higher education has become a mainstream issue. The political discourse about gaining access to university will not abate soon and continue to be controversial given the CHE statistics on less than 30 % of students completing their degrees in the minimum time. I am in agreement with Lewin and Maywoyo (2014) who state that there are

‘diverse and complex factors’ affecting access and success in SA universities and all of them require attention. One can fall into the trap of agreeing with the gloomy picture portrayed by Lewin Mawoyo (2014:112) who assert that ‘The South African higher education system faces daunting challenges in addressing student access and success. It is a relatively poor performing and highly unequal system, with low participation, high attrition and substantial class and racial inequity’. However, there is arguably an expanse in the literature on student access and success in SA in the past few years, and studies clearly indicate that addressing student success is context specific and strategies have to be fashioned through the lens of each unique case study institution. This is a view that was once echoed by Prinsloo (2009: 19) who drew on Tinto’s (2002:3) ‘warning that research findings are context-specific and that what works in one context’ may not necessarily be of benefit in another.

Thus there is adequate evidence to indicate that public HEIs and researchers are fervently undertaking research on student success and following through with measures to address these context specific challenges and embarking on evaluations of the measures to inform future practices. These are active measures which speak to the emergence of a positive trend in SA higher education to address concerns around student success. This is bound to lead to how institutions and policy can work to accommodate the majority of students who are unable to graduate in the minimum time and possibly also in some quarters, a persistence of the discourse on the ‘deficient’ student or ‘deficit’ institution. Equally so, on-going discussions on epistemological access and ‘underprepared institutions’ will serve as an impetus for continued and concerted efforts to address student access and success. It appears that ultimately the ball will remain in the court of public HEIs who will have to continue in their quest to find creative ways to serve an ace or a series of aces that can work towards reducing student dropout and promoting higher throughput levels for which they will gain recognition as students graduate on time. Ultimately, it should not be forgotten that the most significant aspect when choosing where to study is the institution’s reputation which precedes it (Workman 2011).

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