Rural Education Access Programme – REAP

Response by Antony Melck to the REAP Report, entitled:

Factors that facilitate success for disadvantaged higher education students. An investigation into approaches used by REAP, NSFAS and selected higher education institutions,

prepared by B Jones, G Coetzee, T Bailey and S Wickham.

Introduction

According to its website, REAP is a not-for-profit organisation with a small number of fulltime staff and a network of some seventy volunteers throughout South Africa. It functions in partnership with the South African National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), in that all its students receive subsidised student loans through NSFAS

As stated on page 3 of the Report, "(t)he Rural Education Access Programme's (REAP) mission is to provide Higher Education opportunities for marginalised rural youth and to provide holistic, yet tailored, developmental support so that these young people may overcome inherent economic, academic and social hurdles in order to realise their potential. Through the development and empowerment of skilled, community-conscious graduates, REAP reduces poverty and makes a contribution to securing peace, socio-economic justice, development, freedom, dignity and integrity for the individual South African and the community."

The following points (to be found on the website) summarise how REAP functions:

- REAP Students have access to NSFAS loans.
- Additional grants are given to assist with further study costs such as: registration, books, living expenses, technical equipment, spectacles and health care.
- A support programme is provided consisting of:
    - Dedicated student advisors
    - A toll free line for student counselling & advice
    - 3 face to face individual student consultations each year
    - Performance monitoring
    - A developmental approach encouraging students to solve their own problems
    - Semester workshop programmes for the development of social and academic skills
    - Information and support for HIV/AIDS
    - Work preparation workshops for senior students
    - Liaison with institutional student services
    - Introductions to additional service providers
    - Peer group organization
    - Payback through community service

- REAP maintains a network of rural volunteers who identify poor rural students and assists with application & selection processes as well as with supporting students during vacation time.

Overview of the Report

As stated in the Executive Summary (p.5), the Report draws "… on primary data written up as case studies conducted in five higher education institution (in South Africa) as well as selected literature on student access, retention and throughput, … (so as to highlight) factors that impact on the success of disadvantaged students in the higher education sector. … Two key questions are addressed:

1. What are the factors that facilitate (and inhibit) access to and completion of higher education studies by disadvantages undergraduate students?
2. What recommendations can be made for improving access to and completion of such studies for these students?"

These questions are addressed in five chapters, in which a detailed analysis of the evidence obtained from the case studies, supplemented by points from the literature consulted, is set out. Chapter one outlines the background to, reasons for and aims of the study. The key elements of "disadvantage" are identified as students' geographical (i.e. rural) location, inadequate financial resources, coming from under-resource schools, studying in a second or third language, and finally, a range of socio-cultural factors. An important point is that, besides such students being under-prepared for higher education, the institutions themselves are generally also under-prepared for accepting them.

The financial problems faced by disadvantaged students are discussed in chapter two. It is emphasised that these problems extend to well beyond paying tuition and boarding fees and range from being able to afford application and registration fees to the financial issues of the students' families.

Chapter three is devoted to an analysis of the factors that have an impact on the academic integration and success of disadvantaged students, including those that pertain to their education prior to enrolling for higher education, the problems encountered in choosing an appropriate academic programme, and those that are experienced while at university, of which inadequate academic literacy is a major element. Emphasis is given to orientating first-year students and providing adequate academic support for the duration of their programmes. The latter includes extended programmes, tutorials, mentoring, peer support and the advice and monitoring provided by REAP advisors.

Chapter four is devoted to the range of socio-cultural problems encountered by disadvantaged students at university, and the alienation that results from students' not being well integrated into the social environments of their institutions.

Chapter five draws together the key conclusions and makes recommendations on how the identified issues could be addressed.

Evaluation of recommendations

One of the key findings of the report is that finance is "… the most tangible and critical factor facilitating disadvantaged students' access to higher education and completion of their studies". The report goes on to highlight the gaps that exist in institutional structures for addressing students' financial problems, the stress that these issues cause and the "…complex way in which financial circumstances interweave with other aspects of student success". (p 39)

This conclusion would be generally supported by persons experienced in student affairs at South African universities. Even though there are many additional factors that all play a part in complicating disadvantaged students' experiences of higher education, finance is considered by most to be the single most significant factor.

In dealing with the academic factors that impact on student access and success, the Report gives a comprehensive overview of the main issues normally encountered in South African universities – those relating to the preparedness of disadvantaged students for higher education, such as their prior schooling and home circumstances, and those relating to the preparedness of higher education institutions themselves for taking-in disadvantaged students. The issues identified, ranging from the selection of the students' programmes, the students' admission, their attendance of orientation programmes, and the variety of academic support structures that institutions have tried to put into place to assist under-prepared students (e.g. foundation and extended programmes, targeted support in certain courses, and tutorial and mentoring programmes), all ring true.

The conclusions reached on these aspects are that institutions should provide holistic student development in an integrated way with strong formal links between academic development, student support, counselling and the institution's social structures. This will enable "success" to be seen from a broader perspective than "just academic throughput" (p.67). An important condition for these ideals to be reached is that a higher education institution should have a tracking and monitoring system in place that will enable it to identify problems being experienced by individual students early, before they have become insurmountable.

These are important conclusions, and ones that ideally should be supported. Implementing them in practice will, however, prove to be challenging, even though many of the elements are already in place in some institutions. In explaining this one needs to begin with highlighting the difference between tutoring, which relates to assisting students with their academic work, and mentoring, which refers to a broader range of support that includes advice on accommodation, health, social matters and accessing the institution's formal structures. Mentoring requires a personal relationship between mentor and mentee and information on the mentee covering many matters. Because South African university degree structures allow a wide range of courses to be combined into programmes, often across faculties, collating the academic information, held in decentralised departments on each student's progress, quickly enough for mentors to take corrective action timeously is not easy. Although in principle this is attainable nowadays by means of the sophisticated electronic systems that are available, these are still beyond the reach of most universities. In the absence of such systems, mentors must rely on informal reports from their mentees,

which may or may not be accurate. Nevertheless, emphasising the importance of tracking and monitoring systems is the way to ensuring their introduction when institutions need to renew their Information Technology enterprise systems.

In the chapter on socio-cultural factors some of these points reoccur, but with the emphasis on the "match" or "fit" between the student's prior experiences (in their rural areas) and the prevailing circumstances at the university. This is a multi-facetted issue that includes factors such as language, participation in extra-curricular activities, accommodation, relationships with peers, newfound responsibilities and freedoms, the expectations and needs of families at home, peer pressure, and much more. It is pointed out in the Report that, although most institutions have a range of services on offer to their students for addressing many of these issues, they are not always used, as they are often seen as culturally irrelevant and even threatening. Often these circumstance lead to alienation with all its detrimental consequences. It is pointed out that REAP itself attempts to overcome these difficulties in a variety of ways, most of which amount to various forms of mentoring, as also tracking and monitoring as discussed above. The fact that REAP's interventions have proved to be positive, lends credence to the recommendations that higher education institutions should attempt to replicate similar processes within their own domains.

The resource constraints that inhibit the implementation of some of the recommendations made in the Report are discussed in the final chapter. It is suggested that universities should attempt to enter into partnerships with external (and sectoral) bodies (such as REAP) for acquiring additional resources and help. It is pointed out that government has taken significant steps through the introduction of the NSFAS programme for addressing one of the major inhibiting factors for disadvantaged students, even though important problems continue to exist, as already mentioned.

What is not mentioned is that there are factors in the national higher education funding framework for addressing disadvantage in the student body. The first is an "institutional factor", based on the demographic composition of an institution's students, which allocates additional funding to universities that have a high percentage of African and Coloured students. This is on the assumption that disadvantage is correlated with the institution's demographic profile. Although generally true, this rather rough and ready measure, being based on group analyses rather than individual need, overlooks the significant numbers of disadvantaged students that are admitted to some institutions that do not qualify for this additional assistance.

A second measure in the higher education funding framework is the provision of "teaching development grants" that are allocated to institutions with low academic throughputs. The intention of these grants is that they should be used for addressing both the training of teaching staff and the provision of academic support structures of the kind analysed in the Report. Whether or not these allocations have been used effectively (or for addressing the problems at which they are aimed) is a moot point, as in the past they have been paid to institutions as part of their block grants. However, the Department of Education has recently reviewed the teaching development grant system and converted these funds into earmarked grants.

In reviewing these measures (i.e. NSFAS, institutional factor grants and teaching development grants) one must conclude that significant steps have been taken by government to address the financial constraints that everyone would acknowledge are significant for disadvantaged students. This does not mean that more should not be done, but it does suggest that part of the problem is the efficacy and efficiency with which this funding has been used by institutions in the past.

Where the funding has not had the impact that it might have had, the causes may be related to the lack of insight in higher education institutions into the complexities of dealing with (rural) disadvantage in a cohesive and comprehensive way. In this respect the Report is a valuable contribution to the literature on the subject in South Africa. Its analysis is wide; it includes all the major related issues; and it is well written. It should be made available to all persons working in this field.

Statistical aspects

As mentioned above, the Report is a valuable document. In a sense it is a textbook on the subject. As a research document, it would however have benefited from the inclusion of more statistical information and analyses. Although there is an appendix on the statistical sampling used and methodological issues encountered, what is given is insufficient for the reader to assess the statistical rigour of the research. It would also have been useful for the reader to be given information on the incidence of the problems identified by students. For example: What is the relative importance of the problems identified? What percentages of the students had difficulties with particular issues? One realises that statistical information can change a "reader friendly" text into one that is ignored by some who would have benefited from it. However, it may have been possible to include such detail in foot or end notes.

Commendation

Despite the note above, I would like to conclude by commending the researchers and writers on their Report, and REAP on its efforts on behalf of rural disadvantaged students.

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