

approximately 7,500 university instructors. In other words, while enrollment nearly quadrupled, teaching staff barely doubled. This disparity is also apparent in the evolution of the teacher-student ratio, which grew from 1:8 in 1995 to 1:15 today.

The system struggles to fill many teaching vacancies given the absence of enough qualified Ethiopians to fill these positions. As a result, instructors are also hired from abroad. Most universities do not have the resources to effectively supervise or mentor so many new and inexperienced instructors. Fewer than 20 percent of the current teachers hold master's degrees, and fewer than 4 percent hold PhDs, underscoring the limited experience with scholarship.

*Accordingly, the government has expanded the higher education system while growing enrollment, both at breakneck speed.*

Quality is also constrained by infrastructure. During the past two years, the country has suffered from regular rolling blackouts, and few universities have generators to keep technical infrastructure operational during power cuts. The construction of classroom space, expansion of library collections, addition of computer labs, and the development of electronic networks lag behind enrollment expansion. International agencies are helping the government to develop new facilities and infrastructure; however, these efforts are largely uncoordinated and will take time.

#### **COST CONSIDERATIONS**

The cost of educating a growing cohort of university students is quickly exceeding available government funds. A new policy has eased the country away from fully subsidized higher education to a cost recovery scheme, but this system will not return funds to government coffers for several years to come. The government currently depends on international aid as well as expatriate faculty to fill in the many gaps that result from the rapid growth of higher education. But even with aid, funding is insufficient to address the enormous needs of this nascent system.

#### **HUMAN RESOURCES AS A "MOVING TARGET"**

Too many of the best and brightest academic and administrative staff in Ethiopia are on the move. Graduate study and professional development opportunities are currently available overseas through national and donor agency programs. In the long term this will certainly strengthen Ethiopian higher education. However, educational opportunities abroad often lead to "brain drain," while even the short-term absence of professors and administrators presents significant challenges at the home institution. Extra teaching responsibilities fall onto the colleagues who remain behind, and a wide range of develop-

ment and research projects are often handed off to less-experienced and less-qualified staff.

Meanwhile, the movement of individuals from one university to another or out of higher education altogether is pervasive throughout Ethiopia. Staff turnover takes place at all levels, driven by the desire to improve earnings and to move from rural toward urban areas. Constant staff turnover wreaks havoc on an institution's capacity to operate efficiently and to manage long-term planning and development.

#### **LONG-TERM PLANNING VS. SHORT-TERM ACTION**

What are the alternatives to rapid growth without the corresponding infrastructure, staff, or resources? In 1999 less than 1 percent of the age cohort was enrolled in higher education. If the Ethiopian government had decided to "build the house before moving in" for a decade or more the country might not have achieved much progress in expanding access. Instead, the government has pushed forward, putting pressure on university leaders and instructors to "catch up" as they can while providing larger numbers of young Ethiopians with opportunities for further study.

Today 3 percent of the age cohort in Ethiopia is now enrolled in higher education, according to UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) data. Although far short of international levels, Ethiopia has achieved a rapid 300 percent rise in enrollment, and the government will continue to push for greater gains. The question is whether the universities respond to enrollment gains with relevant resources and personnel.

This period has proven to be an exciting time for Ethiopia's higher education system, but "growing pains" are evident and will continue, given such rapid expansion. At this critical stage, where much has already been accomplished, quality assurance and a commitment to appropriate and sustained infrastructure must rise to the top of the national agenda. ■

## Enhancing Retention and Success in South Africa

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Internationally, one of the key challenges facing higher education institutions is to match expanding enrollments and more diversified student bodies with enhanced retention and success rates. Nowhere is this imperative more pressing and topical than in South Africa, for a number of reasons. First, the

majority of its students are severely underprepared for higher learning. This is mainly the consequence of the ongoing legacy of apartheid and the predominantly substandard primary and secondary education system in South Africa. After 15 years of democratic rule, the postapartheid government has been unable to rectify these inequalities and inefficiencies significantly. Most students emanate from disadvantaged backgrounds and face challenging socioeconomic and financial circumstances that, in combination, threaten student retention and success. While the participation of black South African students has expanded dramatically over the past two decades, no corresponding increase in black faculty and staff and no meaningful shift in institutional cultures have been evident.

As a result, many black students report experiences of alienation within the prevailing Eurocentric cultures and practices in historically white institutions. This, in part, has contributed toward particularly poor retention, success, and graduation rates among black students. A recent self-made video by white extremist students at the conservative University of the Free State, in which they purposefully humiliated black cleaning staff with the intention of demeaning the process of racial integration, highlighted the persistence of racism in the South African higher education institutions. The video precipitated national outrage and led to the appointment of a commission by the Ministry of Education to investigate both the overt and subtle manifestations of this problem and to propose recommendations. This event has focused fresh attention on the barriers experienced by black students as a result of insufficient transformation in South African institutions of higher education. Fourth, South Africa has been experiencing an ongoing high-level skills shortage, which continues to obstruct growth and development. Increasing participation, retention, and graduation rates is therefore a top priority, particularly because of the enormous impact of HIV/AIDS on student retention and in the workplace and as South Africa enjoys notoriety in having among the highest prevalence rates in the world.

#### QUANTIFYING THE PROBLEM

A recent national study commissioned by the Council on Higher Education revealed the extent of the retention and success challenge in South Africa. The sobering reality is that only 30 percent of South Africa's 2000 first-time entering student cohort had graduated within five years, with a further 14 percent still registered. This meant that well over half the cohort, 56 percent, had dropped out. Within these aggregate figures, wide variation among institutional types was evident—particularly so between contact and distance institutions, between the academic universities and the vocational technikons, and between historically advantaged and disadvantaged institutions. The five-year graduation rate ranged from 50 percent at contact universities, to 32 percent at contact technikons, to 14 percent at the country's largest university—the distance education University of South Africa (Unisa)—and to a disturbingly low 2 percent at the distance education Technikon South

Africa. Dropout rates also varied widely from 85 percent at Technikon South Africa to 59 percent at Unisa, 58 percent at contact technikons, and 38 percent at contact universities. Due to their sheer size, Unisa's and Technikon South Africa's poor graduation and retention rates had an enormously negative impact on aggregate figures.

#### THE CASE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

With this background in mind, it is not surprising that government has exerted strong pressure to improve retention and success rates and that institutions continue to carry the burden of large-scale academic development programs aimed at rectifying the effects of poor schooling. The pressure to improve is particularly strongly felt at the new Unisa, which as part of a major government-driven restructuring of the institutional

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landscape merged with Technikon South Africa and another small distance education provider to become one of the world's largest megauniversities. With approximately 260,000 students, Unisa now constitutes around a third of total South African enrollments. Offering open access to a mix of academic and vocational programs and catering for a large number of occasional, nondegree students, Unisa plays a major role in national and continental human-resource development and in providing for labor market needs and opportunities for formative education. Given its enormous size, the university absorbs a high proportion of government subsidy. As this is weighted toward outputs, the institution also faces compelling financial reasons to address this challenge effectively.

The issue facing Unisa is particularly daunting. The vast majority of its enrollments comprise nontraditional, part-time students with an average age of 31 years. In addition, the rapid increases in enrollments over the past few years have severely strained Unisa's operational systems. This has resulted, at times, in service-delivery problems such as the late distribution of study materials, which reduces tuition time. Internally conducted cohort case studies of three large commerce and law undergraduate programs indicated very low 10-year graduation rates that ranged from 14 percent to 30 percent. Interestingly, the time-to-completion of students who did graduate was within the expected minimum time for these qualifications, based on average course loads of just under half full-time equiva-

lents. These findings suggest that time-to-completion was satisfactory and that, consequently, reducing the inordinately high dropout rates of around 50 to 70 percent constitutes the major challenge to enhancing success.

### EMERGING STRATEGIES

For these reasons, improving retention and success at Unisa has been foregrounded as a strategic priority, and a coordinated effort in this regard has been undertaken. This plan involves developing a framework to manage this challenge and a strategy for implementation. The first step was the development of a conceptual model identifying all factors impacting on student retention and success in the Unisa context. To this end, a comprehensive literature review was undertaken, covering numerous student retention models from the 1970s onward and focusing on a number of theoretical perspectives: sociological, anthropological, social-critical, and psychological. Drawing from these, the model incorporated a number of key constructs and explains retention and success in the Unisa context with a sufficient fit between students and institutional attributes, expectations, and performance at each step of the student's journey through higher education. Sufficient fit arises from mutual knowledge and coresponsibility for meaningful change. On the student's side, such transformation entails developing the personal attributes, skills, and knowledge required to master the demands and expectations of higher learning while simultaneously managing the many and often conflicting nonacademic life circumstances that impact retention and success. On the institutional side, transformation entails configuring and improving all academic, nonacademic, and operational services to meet specificities of students' lived experiences. Thus, the more that is known about students' life

and learning circumstances, the more innovatively the institution can design and deliver effective academic and nonacademic services and support. Conversely, the more informed a student is on the rigors and demands of tertiary education and the support services available, the more chance exists of uptake and success.

The required quantitative and qualitative data are being gathered through the Unisa student-tracking system. This includes the innovative use of information and communications technologies and data capturing instruments such as mandatory student profiles and online surveys, structured journal writing, blogs, and social networking tools to capture relevant ongoing life and learning experiences. Unisa's student portal is used by approximately 190,000 students. This provides a goldmine of opportunities for particularly rich quantitative and qualitative data gathering, data mining, and statistical and analytic modeling to determine and predict factors shaping success. On the basis of these predictions, proactive supportive interventions are being designed and implemented, again through innovatively using information and communications technologies, in order to reduce the risk of dropout and failure. In these ways, serious efforts are being undertaken to configure Unisa's academic and nonacademic services and support to effectively address the complex learning and life circumstances of its heterogeneous student population. While not yet evaluated, the full impact of these initiatives is anticipated to help enhancing South Africa's overall retention, success, and graduation rates—not only through Unisa's performance in this regard but also through providing practices that are replicable and adaptable in other institutional contexts.

## New Publications

Andreade, Maureen S., and Norman W. Evans, eds. *International Students: Strengthening a Critical Resource*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009. 301 pp. (hb). ISBN 978-1-60709-175-2. Web site: [www.rowmaneducation.com](http://www.rowmaneducation.com).

A practical guide to serving international students, this book provides case studies and broader analyses. Written mainly for an American audience, the topics include recruitment of international students, campus orientation, English-language programs, social support for international students, intercultural adjustment, and immigration and legal issues.

Bassett, Roberta Malee, and Alma Maldonado-Maldonado, eds. *International*

*Organizations and Higher Education Policy: Thinking Globally, Acting Locally?* New York: Routledge, 2009. 312 pp. \$160 (hb). ISBN 978-0-415-99043-1. Web site: [www.routledge.com](http://www.routledge.com).

The editors of this volume argue that the role of international and regional organizations on higher education worldwide is increasingly important. These organizations help set both international and national policy agendas, sponsor research, shape debate, and link policymakers and researchers worldwide. This volume examines the role of such key players as the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the World Bank, and the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). Regional analyses are provided for Asia (with a case study of China), Europe, Africa, and

Latin America. A final section examines international assistance to higher education institutions in developing countries.

Bowen, William G., Matthew M. Chignos, and Michael S. McPherson. *Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America's Public Universities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009. 389 pp. (hb). \$27.95. ISBN 978-0-691-13748-3. Web site: [www.press.princeton.edu](http://www.press.princeton.edu).

Based on a careful study of 21 flagship public universities and four statewide systems, this book explores retention and graduate rates for undergraduates. The authors look at parental education, family income, high school grades, and other key variables. Among the findings are that students from minority backgrounds and from poor families have lower graduate rates and only 30 percent of students in the 8th grade will obtain a BA