Higher Education and Graduate Employment in South Africa

‘MABORENG MAHARASOA & DRIEKIE HAY

Unit for Research into Higher Education, University of the Free State, PO Box 4345, Bloemfontein 9300, South Africa

ABSTRACT Developments in the South African higher education system designed to establish employability as a prominent element in good quality higher education are reviewed. A case study was carried out in three universities in South Africa, one Historically White Afrikaans, another Historically White English and the third Historically Black University. For students, employability, in the sense of post-graduation employment rates, is an important indicator of quality. Faculty deans, in principle, share this notion, but the findings indicate that actions to enhance student employability are uneven and often lackadaisical. A more robust and proactive approach is encouraged if universities are to satisfy students’ expectations that a study programme should lead to some form of employment and, in so doing, defend themselves against competition from the technikon sector.

Introduction

During the last couple of years much emphasis has been put on the relationship between higher education and the world of work (Teichler, 1999, 2000; Kellermann & Sagmeister, 2000; Kivinen et al., 2000; Woodley & Brennan, 2000). In some instances, the ability of an institution to ensure employability has become an indicator of institutional quality and is depicted as a notion of quality. As the competition for more students is increasing, graduate employability has also become a marketing tool for academic programmes. Various research studies on graduate employment, particularly in Europe and the United Kingdom, suggest that international comparisons are risky (Paul et al., 2000) because the focus areas and methodologies differ between surveys. This difficulty is increased by the diversity that exists between various types of institutions, types and names of courses and programmes, different types of qualifications, modes of delivery and study. Teichler (2000, p. 141) appeals for ‘... more in-depth information, such as on the period of search and transition, the work assignment or the use of knowledge on the job’ before any international comparison can be made.

Yet there is an international concern about the relationship between higher education, employability and the world of work in general, although fundamental differences between developing and developed countries need to be taken into account. It is the aim of this paper to:

• discuss, briefly, some changing world views on the purposes of higher education, hence changed views of quality;
• provide an overview of developments in South African higher education and how it relates to the world of work and graduate employability;
describe a case study of students’ expectations on graduate employability and to compare that with their deans’ perceptions on the same issue.

Changing Views of Higher Education

The traditional role of universities, as institutions producing and disseminating knowledge, is challenged by more liberal thoughts on what universities in a post-modern world should do. Hibbs (1999, p. 10) is sceptical about previously-held ideas on higher education and alleges that ‘universities have outlived their purpose’ and predicts that universities ‘will not survive the acid test the free market will soon impose on them’. He further accuses universities of being ‘factories where prices are high, efficiencies low, and outcomes questionable’. More often universities are no longer viewed as the only type of institutions producing and disseminating knowledge.

In fairness, there have been changes in higher education that address some of those complaints (Gibbons, 1998; Brennan et al., 1999). There has been a move away from ‘mode 1’ pure knowledge to ‘mode 2’ knowledge with its greater concern for application and practices, along with a greater emphasis upon economic and social relevance. Universities seem to be undergoing a metamorphosis that could irrevocably change their long-standing nature, image, notion and traditions.

In the face of these fresh mandates it becomes a fine art to balance the pursuit of knowledge and truth for their own sakes with socially-constructed relevance, vocational training and multi-ideological requirements (Hay & Fourie, 2000) with the needs of the world of work. A further problem is that, according to Teichler (1999, p. 285), it is not clear what type of students the world of work really expects higher education to produce. There is acknowledgement of the demand for generic competencies, social skills, personality development, problem-solving skills, information-technology skills and lifelong-learning skills. However, it is not always clear what these terms signify, nor what their relative importance is, nor how they can be effectively encouraged (if, indeed, they can be encouraged), nor how they stand in comparison to specialist knowledge of high-demand subjects, such as microbiology, web design and electrical engineering. With few exceptions (Harvey et al., 1997) studies do not address the these underlying issues.

Other questions follow: do internationally recognised expectations (needs and demands) differ from expectations in developing countries in Africa and in particular South Africa? Should universities in developing countries try to negate the imperatives of the globalised work force? How can national imperatives be recognised while producing graduates who will be compatible with a wider world of work? This paper puts these large, important questions to one side. Recognising that the South African government wants higher education to contribute forcefully to graduate employability, it explores reactions on the ground, specifically at three universities in a sector facing strong challenges from the employability-focused technikons. The impression from a small-scale study is that the rhetoric may be appropriate but that there are significant areas in which these universities need to act to compete with the technikons and provide a quality education for students.

Changing Expectations of Higher Education in South Africa

Higher education in South Africa and some other developing countries is a force in national socio-economic development against a backdrop of oppression, ignorance and perpetual dependence. So, particular attention should be paid to the ability of the curriculum to equip students with sound knowledge and skills that are relevant to such countries’
needs and aspirations and to students’ individual growth as well. In South Africa, development strategies, which stress issues such as egalitarianism, rural development, and the eradication of ignorance, poverty and diseases, are most applicable. Such purposes give rise to a distinctive view of the nature of quality and of appropriate ways of embedding quality in teaching, learning, assessment and the curriculum (RSA DoE, 1995).

The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) emphasised skills over formal knowledge, taking a holistic view of the personal, social, and economic needs of the South African society (NCHE, 1996). The NQF endorses an outcomes-based approach towards education and training. This move is due to the growing concern about the effectiveness of traditional methods of teaching and training, which were content-based. Its purpose is to promote overall improvement in the level of skills of the workforce as a means to improve and promote the prospects of employees, the productivity in the workplace, self-employment and the provision of social services.

The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) is responsible for four things. First, developing the rules of the NQF and overseeing the implementation thereof. Second, formulating and publishing policies and criteria for the registration of bodies responsible for establishing education and training standards or qualifications. Third, defining criteria indicating different levels of achievement. Fourth, determining the format in which qualifications or unit standards have to be submitted for registration (RSA, 1995).

These new mandates for higher education have led to some uncertainty amongst higher education institutions. Universities and the traditionally more vocational and technical technikons are trying to do the same things by offering the same type of programmes. This is indicative of some crisis of identity related to their vision and mission. For universities, these are challenging times because they also face a crisis of recruitment. In 1994, 70% of tertiary students were enrolled at university; this has now dropped to 60%. Some universities experienced drops of up to 27% in enrolment between 1997 and 1998. Causes include fewer matriculation exemptions passes, a higher unemployment rate and limited access to funding. Competition from private tertiary institutions has also been a factor and the impact of AIDS is still questionable. Technikons are also drawing more students, as the technikon sector has a better reputation for links to the world of work, business and industry and the provision of learnership programmes. Technikons are becoming more popular as it is believed that they contribute more to the employability of their students than the universities.

Graduate Employment in South Africa

The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC, 2000) sent 8000 questionnaires to a stratified random sample of people who graduated between 1991 and 1995. More than half (59%) of the 1806 respondents (response rate = 23%) who tried to find employment after obtaining a degree did so immediately. However, as could be expected, not all groups were equally successful in their search for a first job. The most successful ones had studied medical sciences (91% success rate) and engineering (77%). Graduates in humanities and arts (34%), law (40%) and natural sciences (48%) were less successful in finding employment immediately after graduation. Two thirds (65%) of respondents graduating from the historically white universities found employment immediately as opposed to 28% of the respondents from the historically black universities. No major gender differences were found as 55% of the female respondents found employment immediately, as opposed to 63% of the males. Differences were found between population groups, only 28% of the
black graduates and 34% of the coloured graduates immediately found employment, as opposed to 56% of the Indian graduates and 67% of the white graduates.

What also emerged from this study is that a perception exists amongst the respondents that they are overqualified for their posts and some of the graduates felt that their jobs could be done by a person with a qualification lower than the one they held (HSRC, 2000, p. 44). Only 8% felt that the degree did not help at all in securing employment and only 5% were of the opinion that the content of their degree had no value at all for the job they were doing.

The extent that higher education is subsidised, the unemployment and under-employment of graduates, and particularly the dissatisfaction that accompanies it, signify a misallocation of society’s resources. They also signify some misuse of private resources and the students’ time and energy, always accepting that getting employment is not the only justification for study in higher education and is not always the main reason for it. However, the new mandates for higher education and the evidence of un- and under-employment give higher education a lot to do if it is to be seen to contribute considerably to the economic and social well-being of the country, particularly by enhancing graduate employability. For universities, facing strong competition from the technikons, these are pressing matters.

The Design of an Investigation of Higher Education and Employability

The overarching aim of the study of employability was to establish what expectations university students have of higher education in terms of their future employability and to determine whether the institutions they were studying at share the same perspectives. One of the specific objectives was to compare the views of faculty deans and learners in their faculties on the phenomena of quality and employability.

Three universities were purposely selected to represent major categories used to describe the public university sector in South Africa, namely, Historically White Afrikaans (HWA), Historically White English (HWE) and Historically Black University (HBU). The institutions vary in resources, academic status and efficiency. The HWE and HBU are in the Kwazulu–Natal province, which is a metropolitan and industrialised area. The HWA is in the city of Bloemfontein in the Free State province. The area is mainly agricultural and the industrial sector is relatively small.

Focus-group discussions and personal interviews were the main tools for data collection. They were judged appropriate because, as Sapp and Temaris (1993, p. 81) point out, ‘focus groups offer another technique for understanding the needs and opinions of the members of the university community by probing selected areas of special interest’. Informants are able to respond spontaneously to questions. Researchers are able to probe for more information. The physical presence enables researchers to observe and pick up gestures which supplement verbal utterances. These can be particularly useful for the interpretation of results. In each university, focus-group members were randomly selected from the faculties of economic and management sciences, natural sciences and human sciences, as these are traditionally the major faculty groupings of universities in South Africa. The final sample of 15 informants per university was balanced by race and gender.

Interviews were used with nine deans of faculties or their nominees because they ‘enable the researcher to explore complex issues in detail; they facilitate the personal engagement of the researcher in the collection of data; they allow the researcher to provide clarification, to probe and to prompt’ (Brown & Dowling, 1998, p. 72). Open-ended questions were used. Students and deans were asked to comment on the same issues and in some cases deans
were asked to respond to some issues that had surfaced in the student focus-group
discussions. They elicited faculty-specific information, provided a chance to ask ‘why and
how questions’ and they also allowed informants to volunteer additional information and
insights that had not been anticipated by the researchers.

The study had a developmental agenda: to help develop university policy and practice.
Insights obtained through these qualitative, lightly-structured methods provided a far
richer base for improvement initiatives than would have been the case with data from
fixed-response surveys (Arksey & Knight, 1999). For example, it was expected that student
responses would serve as feedback on the efficiency of whatever systems are in place for
the enhancement of the quality of provision (recognising that ‘quality’ implies attention to
student employability).

The Deans’ Perspective

Questions directed to deans were related to the relevance of the curriculum and the
faculties’ initiatives in ensuring employability of their graduates. The first requested them
to say whether their programmes had been redesigned to meet the requirements of the
SAQA/NQF. SAQA calls for a highly skilled person power and at the national level and
quality is associated with employability of graduates. Most programmes in higher edu-
cation are developed, as a matter of obligation, in conjunction with professional bodies and
Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) contribute to the quality of provision
in specific fields of study and help to align programmes to the requirements of the world
of work. Responses to this question were similar and positive in all nine cases. However,
it will be shown that redesign had not, at the time of the study, been sufficient in all cases
to help students into employment: those in engineering in Kwazulu–Natal could be
confident about their employability, whereas human science students in all three universi-
ties were pessimistic about their job prospects.

According to the deans, graduates from the faculties of natural sciences enjoy more
opportunities to connect with prospective employers. The trend is the same at all three
universities. A sizeable number of students hold bursaries mainly from electricity, oil and
IT companies. This offers them a chance to interact with potential employers and often
secures a job. Most of the bursaries are awarded on condition that the beneficiary commits
to serving or working for the sponsoring institution for a set period of time. Sometimes the
student works at the sponsoring institutions from the time the student starts receiving the
grant but often on completion. Incentives like these attract students and give universities
a sustainable competitive edge over their less innovative counterparts.

While one detects no serious problem of employability of graduates in the natural
sciences, it is important to highlight that companies are the ones that are forging forward
in establishing relationships with students. The trend seems to be that employers come to
recruit capable students with the assistance of the faculties. Other than that, there is very
little initiative coming from the faculties. They are still ‘laid back’ in this regard. The
question that remains to be answered is whether faculties realise how strong a marketing
device the employer–faculty–learner relationship is. What the researchers have deduced
from the employers’ endeavours to assist universities produce graduates in specific fields
is that, directly or indirectly, employers in South Africa relate quality to employability.

Deans responsible for economic and management sciences did not report that any formal
faculty structures existed for the purposes of connecting students to prospective employ-
ers. Such linkages as there were resulted from individual lecturers’ networks with the
labour market either from their earlier appointments in certain companies or because they
are full-time employees in industry and are lecturing part-time. They said that whether learners will get a job soon after graduation depended very much on the course of study. Some areas, such as information technology and accounting studies, give students a good chance in the employment terrain but others, even within these close-to-work faculties, have a lower exchange rate in the market place.

The employability picture is bleaker for graduates from the faculty of humanities. Commenting on learners’ chances of obtaining a job after graduation, deans said: ‘not anything significant’, ‘not with the current programmes’ and ‘not widespread within the faculty’. They realised that, so far, the programmes offered in their faculties are less demanded by employers and have a lower exchange rate in the market place, which puts students at a disadvantage. University funding for the faculties of humanities is yearly being reduced while funding for faculties that promise to produce more employable graduates is increased, so efforts are being made to turn the situation around. Innovative programmes like communication science and sport development are being introduced and strengthened.

No tracer studies are done to ascertain the employment patterns of these nine faculties’ graduates. A few students who happened to have a good relationship with one of the lecturers may come in to say where they are and what they are doing. Asked about their plans to affirm the employment statistics, the deans expressed the desire to conduct tracer studies but the financial stringency under which many South African universities operate relegates tracers to a low place on the universities’ priority lists. However, it is possible that, by not prioritising the graduate employability issue, universities are getting their priorities wrong in that the learners and their families put employability very high on their priorities list.

There are different systems in the three institutions for tackling the graduate unemployment. The HWE set up a tutor programme that is well under way. In this programme, capable senior students are given the responsibility of assisting their juniors with their studies. The HWA is due to launch a faculty fellowship programme in 2001. As part of the equity and redress activities, the project aims at empowering (by way of internships) black South Africans at masters and doctoral level to prepare them for employment, as academic staff at the university, on completing their studies.

Obviously, these endeavours are good news for students, but they are also likely to enhance the status of the concerned universities in the eyes of the stakeholders. However, as the programme director for law in HBU said, ‘university education is not only about employment, it’s about broadening one’s mind for the health of society’. Not only does there appear to be a need to enhance the contribution programmes make to employability but there is also a need to explore ways of doing it while preserving the educational and personal development traditions of higher education.

The Learners’ Perspective

The questions that directed students’ focus-group discussions were meant to illuminate the ‘client’ perspective and compare it to the providers’. Learners in all three institutions agreed with the deans that the practice-oriented nature of major programmes, especially in the faculties of natural science and economic and management sciences, and the wide scope of fields of study from which they can choose help prepare them for employment. Especially in these field they considered that ‘the curriculum is often updated to suit international trends’. That is important because an exodus of South African graduates to
other countries means that their employability can be related to whether they have taken courses that are recognised in the global employment market.

Students confirmed the limitations that were mentioned by deans about the faculties’ efforts to link students up with prospective employers. ‘They are trying but they could still do more’ and ‘it is getting better every year’ were some of the comments from learners. Although they appreciated the fact that some opportunities emerged from some faculties, learners wanted more and stronger linkages between universities and the world of work. Where they were not satisfied with arrangements they inferred that the universities valued them only in as far as they could reap financial benefits from students and that they were commercially reluctant to invest in better linkages with workplaces to enhance student employability.

Students from the engineering department (especially from the Kwazulu–Natal area) could say that employment was guaranteed for them and those from the economic and management sciences were also optimistic about their chances of obtaining a job. Differences arose when students were asked to estimate the time they could spend before getting employment. The engineering students were positive that it would be immediately after graduation, but a portion of the management students thought it could take up to 6 months and beyond. Another variable influencing the nature of responses was the geographical position of a university. Learners from the HWA, which is in an agricultural region, said that even with management qualifications, it would still be difficult to secure a place in the labour market.

Although they were in concert with others on the relevance of their study programmes, learners from the faculties of human sciences in all three universities were pessimistic about future employment opportunities. For them, ‘relevance’ may have been more a personal construct than an employability construct—they often said they enjoyed their studies but they were disheartened by the prospect of not getting the employment benefits of their investment in university education. This is partly due to the oversupply of humanities graduates, with the labour marked already saturated with them. This is even more true of black South Africans who in the past could only enrol in limited departments within the humanities. The changing face of the economy and the labour market is another contributory factor. The ever-changing technological advances call for people skilled in many ways but especially in the field of IT and related fields.

Conclusions

Students, irrespective of race and gender, agreed that employability is one of the greatest factors influencing their choices of courses of study. Some envisaged seeking employment nationally but others aspired to go abroad. The NQF is intended to improve the contribution higher education makes to student employability and the nine deans said that they had revised their programmes accordingly. They also shared the students’ concerns, although some also spoke of the importance of personal development and other higher education functions. However, there is a discrepancy between what the deans said was happening as a sign of the importance they attached to graduate employability and what was really happening. For example, there was an evident reluctance or scepticism on the faculties’ part to play a proactive role in ensuring that their graduates would either soon enter a graduate job or be able to become appropriately self-employed. So, although there seems to be consensus between deans and students on the importance of employability and its significance as a component of quality, there is a mismatch at the level of
implementation, where faculties have not committed the resources to ensure the employ-ability of their graduates.

The current policy demands in higher education are a welcome initiative in that they have been able to shake higher education to the economic and labour realities and needs of South Africa. The analysis has suggested that, with some reservations, deans accept the desirability of seeing the promotion of student employability as an indicator of quality in higher education. However, the evidence from the study suggests that:

- provision is geographically uneven;
- there is further unevenness by sector, with considerable cause for unease about the quality of education for humanities students, insofar as employability is concerned;
- faculties do not monitor graduates’ work destinations;
- curriculum reforms intended to enhance employability are patchy.

The students’ perception of quality as employability has tremendous implications for ongoing curriculum re-design in higher education; more so in South Africa at a time when universities are experiencing a decline in student enrolments. Current learners, it seems, ‘vote with their feet’ in favour of institutions that are likely to meet their expectations. Stronger, more formal ties, which prioritise student training needs between universities and the world of work, are evidently a way to go if universities should continue to exist in the wake of escalating competition with the technikon sector. The need for entrepreneurship training cannot be over-emphasised. To their advantage, faculties of economic and management sciences and natural sciences are building entrepreneurship courses into their programmes. Learners are satisfied with this initiative and are beginning to appreciate the fact that their aspirations for future employment are taken seriously by universities.

This, though, still leaves a problem. What is to be done about the humanities? Universities must have a commitment to the human study of human beings and it is a source of pleasure and intellectual development for many people. Yet there is here a real problem of employability. What is to be done to retain the essentially human aspects of the humanities while also establishing curricula that clearly contribute to graduate employability, to degrees with high exchange and use values in turbulent employment markets?

References


