

The evidence for access, mobility and progression in the pathway outcomes of previously disadvantaged students

Cosser Michael, *Human Sciences Research Council, South Africa*

## **Introduction**

The South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF) has, as two of its five objectives, to “Facilitate access to, and mobility and progression within education, training and career paths” and to “Accelerate the redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment opportunities (RSA, 1995: Section 2). This paper explores, through an investigation of the pathways into and through higher education (HE) of the cohort of students who were in Grade 12 in South Africa in 2005, whether these objectives in combination had been achieved a decade after the promulgation of the SAQA Act.

Building upon a technique devised by Robinson (2004), the paper establishes a typology of the pathways of those students who were surveyed in 2005 (Cosser, 2009) and who enrolled in a HE institution between 2006 and 2010. The typology provides a tool for classifying pathways that can be replicated in other national HE systems and offers a means of ascertaining the extent to which the two NQF objectives cited above have been realised.

## **Review of the literature**

A review of the two sets of literature with a bearing on the topic – student pathways and the impact of the NQF on student access, mobility and progression – is undertaken.

The literature on the factors shaping student pathways points to three major sets of influence: whether students are first-generation entrants to HE (Chen, 2005); what subjects and subject clusters they chose for study at school (Thomson, 2005; Maringe, 2006); and what students’ SES was prior to their entry into HE (Lamb & Ball, 1999; Brooks, 2003; Maloney, 2004; Schoon, 2006). Three dichotomies between high- and low-SES students emerge from the literature: in subject choices; in expectation of proceeding to HE, by age; and in realism of educational aspirations.

By combining education and training at every level of the education and training systems (Ensor, 2003; Wheelahan, 2010) and by promoting the notion that the NQF would open up access to HE and increase mobility and progression through the education system *for all* (Young, 2003), the NQF has raised expectations which for the poor remain unattainable.

## **Conceptual framework**

The paper is premised on an understanding that one can ascertain the extent to which the NQF objectives of access, mobility, progression and redress have been realised in the HE system in South Africa through an investigation of the pathways of students from school into and through HE. The key variable here is SES – whether access, mobility and progression in

combination with redress are equally available to students from high, middle and low socio-economic backgrounds.

## **Method**

A typology derived from a technique devised by Robinson (2004) is the means to obtaining a profile of student pathways. While Robinson's technique is limited to one five-year undergraduate degree programme in which all students were enrolled in the same year (1994), however, the typology developed in this paper allows for a more systemic analysis – an investigation of the pathways of students who were in high school in the same year (2005) into and through various HE study programmes between 2006 and 2010.

Since SES is the key variable, the SES of each student in the profile is obtained, its cross-tabulation with the profile of student pathways serving to confirm whether the NQF has indeed promoted student redress through facilitating access, mobility, and progression for previously disadvantaged students.

## **Findings**

### *Technical description and analysis of pathways*

This section provides a technical description of the HE pathways of the 2005 Grade 12 cohort of students (n = 1,910) between 2006 and 2010, showing the profile of student entry into, progress through, and exit from the HE system. Each of the five digits of a five-digit code indicates a student's main activity in each of the five years under investigation (2006 through 2010). Analysis of the data reveals that: the majority of students (65 per cent of the cohort) entered HE for the first time in 2006; the majority of students (61 per cent) had not completed within the five-year period (2006-2010); most students (42 per cent of those who completed) achieved their first qualification in 4 years (the limitations of the model are addressed here); and a significant proportion of the students who appeared to have dropped out of the HE system had in fact stopped out.

### *From technical description to conceptual typology*

From the technical description and attendant analysis of student pathways a conceptual typology is developed that describes the patterns of student mobility in the South African HE system. The following diagram illustrates the elements and dynamics of the typology.

## Student behaviours

Timing of entry into  
higher education

Progression through  
higher education

Five-year higher  
education  
outcome

*Source: Author*

### **Figure : Conceptual mapping of student choice behaviour in higher education**

A division of the student cohort into these eight behavioural pathways and one non-pathway (D: students who enrolled for the first time in 2010) reveals that 32 per cent of students pursued the IUC pathway, 21 per cent IBN, 14 per cent DUN, 12 per cent IUN, 11 per cent DBN, 7 per cent DUC, 4 per cent D, fewer than 1 per cent IBC, and no students DBC.

### **Discussion**

Two key findings are highlighted. The first is the completion rate of students (only 44 per cent completed a qualification programme within the 2006 to 2010 period) – for which SES is shown to be the key determinant. This completion rate, identical to that calculated for South Africa by the Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2009), is compared with UK and US completion rates (Pfeffer & Goldrick-Rab, 2011; DeAngelo, Franke, Hurtado, Pryor & Tran, 2011). The second is that HE completers for the most part study uninterruptedly – a finding that has key policy implications for HE retention.

### **Conclusion**

The paper concludes, from the available evidence, that the NQF objectives of promoting redress and facilitating access, mobility and progression have been partially realised. The ways in which this conclusion is arrived at are spelled out.

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