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Overview of the South African Education System

Introduction

History of the South African education system

Before 1994, the South African education system was structured on apartheid policies with separate schools, further education and training colleges and higher education institutions for different race, ethnic and language groups. There were separate education departments for different races for example, Bantu Education for the Blacks, Indian Education system for Indians and White Education system for the whites. These differentiated education systems resulted in disparities in terms of funding, governance and access.

The legacies of the apartheid government are still evident even today, when one looks at infrastructure of the formerly advantaged schools, institutions of higher learning, further education and training Colleges as compared to the formerly disadvantaged institutions particularly, the institutions of the Blacks in the former homelands. There were also discrepancies when it comes to the quality of teachers in schools, curriculum, and conditions of service of educators to mention few. Like in the schooling system, higher education also was characterized by gross discrepancies in the participation rates of students from different population groups, indefensible imbalances in the ratios of black and female staff compared to white and males, and equally untenable disparities between historically black and historically white institutions in terms of facilities and capabilities.¹

These gross discrepancies translated to the output produced from the former advantaged white institutions and the one produced at the former disadvantaged black institutions where the curriculum was meant to produce an inferior citizen who will be subservient to the white master.

However, the advent of democracy marked a new beginning in the education system of the country. One of the key challenges that faced the democratic government after 1994 was to redress the past inequalities that were created by the apartheid government policies and transform the whole education system to serve a new social order. As a result a single unified and coherent national education system came into existence after the reforms introduced by the new government when it took office in 1994. The education system was then organized and managed by one national department called the Department of Education under one Minister and in the provinces, particularly for the schooling system and further education and training sector. The dawn of the fourth Parliament came with it the split of the Department of Education into two: the Department of Basic Education which deals with the

¹ Department of Education 1997



schooling system from Grade R to 12, and adult literacy programmes, and the Department of Higher Education and Training which is responsible for the post-school education and training.

Basic Education

In South Africa, schooling is compulsory for children aged 7-15 (or attendance in Grades 1 to 9). Basic education is divided into four phases, namely, Foundation phase incorporating grades R to 3, Intermediate phase incorporating grades 4 to 6, Senior phase incorporating grades 7 to 9 and Further Education and training (FET) incorporating grades 10 to 12.² In 2009, there were 25 906 ordinary schools in South Africa, and of the total number of schools in the country 1 207 were independent schools. There were 12 227 963 learners in the country as a whole and of the 12 227 963 learners, 393 447 (3,2 percent) were in independent schools. The country had a total of 413 067 educators in ordinary schools in 2009. From the total number of educators in the country, 25 230 (6,1 percent) were employed in the independent school sector.³ In 2009, females and males learners were almost equally represented in ordinary schools in South Africa (females 49,8 percent and males 50,2 percent).

The South African education is designed in a way that gives learners alternatives from as early as Grade 10. After passing Grade 9, learners have options to continue with secondary school education or branch to further education and training college sector where they will pursue occupation-oriented qualification. From further education and training colleges, learners also have a choice of furthering their studies with universities of technologies. However, most parents and learners are still obsessed with obtaining Matric/ Grade 12 of which many do not succeed in obtaining it. Unfortunately further education and training sector is still regarded as a sector for those who are not academically fit.

Further Education and Training

The Department of Higher Education in South Africa has a constitutional obligation to make FET progressively available to all the citizens of the country. FET institutions were restructured and transformed to provide flexible training in scarce skills areas, with flexible delivery modes, a diverse learner profile which reflects young and mature adults. These institutions are meant to provide programmes that are market-relevant and cost effective. The further education and training sector had also undergone transformation⁴, in order to transform them from racially-divided into a coherent system that would address the vocational education and training needs of a democratic and developmental South Africa in the 21st Century.⁵ In the period from 2002-2006 saw the consolidation of the merger process,

² Department of Basic Education, 2011

³ Department of Basic Education, 2010

⁴ Formerly known as technical colleges

⁵ Department of Higher Education and Training, 2011



this resulted in the amalgamation of the 152 colleges into 50 further education and training colleges. This system is a significant locus of delivery of vocational and continuing education and training with strong links to industry, in order to meet critical skills shortages. These colleges offer National Qualification Framework level 4 programmes and below. They offer both the National Certificate (Vocational) and the N-courses. In terms of public further education and training colleges, the enrolments as of July 2011 were estimated at above 400 000. There is still more work to be done in terms of making the colleges institutions of choice among parents and learners.

Higher Education institutions

The reforms that took place in South African education system in order to redress the past imbalances and injustices created by the apartheid government included among other things, the reconfiguration of higher education landscape. Before the reconfiguration of the higher education landscape, South Africa had 36 public higher education institutions (which included 21 traditional universities which offer theoretically-oriented university degrees and 15 technikons which offer career-oriented programmes). One of the reconfiguration measures was the merger and the incorporation of universities which started in 2004. The merger process resulted in the 36 institutions of higher learning reduced to 23 institutions. From the 23, 11 are traditional universities that continue to offer theoretically-oriented programmes, six “comprehensive” universities which resulted from the merging of a traditional university and a technikon or unmerged traditional university adding career-oriented programmes as those offered by technikons to the traditional programmes in the arts and science disciplines. The objectives of this particular merger are:

- To strengthen research in vocational, technikon-type program
- To give students a wider range of programs with different entry requirements and to increase access to technical education throughout the country especially in rural areas where there is currently little provision.
- To facilitate students mobility between programs and to remove the barriers to further education.

The third type of institutions created by the reconfiguration is universities of technology which are six in number. These types of institutions have as their foundation the former technikons which built a solid reputation in providing career-oriented programmes. The institutions are further divided in terms of size from large, medium and small, where in large universities have enrolments of 30 000 and above, medium ones have enrolments of 20 000 and above and the small ones with enrolments below 20 000.⁶ The public higher education institutions have enrolments estimated at above 800 000. The higher education is provided by both the public higher education institutions together with the registered and accredited private higher institutions. They both offer undergraduate and post-graduate qualifications. South Africa

⁶ Centre for Higher Education Transformation, 2010



also has public nursing and agricultural colleges which are managed under their respective departments (Department of Health and Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries). At the beginning of 201 there were 394 active nursing education institutions (public and private) providing a total of 1285 nursing programmes.⁷ As of the 18 February 2011, there were also 87 registered and 27 provisionally registered private higher education institutions.⁸

In 2009, 837 779 students were enrolled in public higher education institutions, and of these 316 349 were enrolled in distance education programmes. 78,6 percent of students enrolled were Black (Black African, Coloured and Indian/Asian), while 57,1 percent were female. The majority of students (43,5 percent) were enrolled in humanities related programmes, that is education, humanities and social sciences, as compared to 28,3 percent and 28,2 percent in science, engineering and technology and business-related programmes respectively.⁹ In terms of graduation numbers, the public higher education institutions produced 144 852 graduates and diplomats in 2009. Of the 144 852 students who completed qualifications in 2009, 75,1 percent (108 769) obtained undergraduate degree or diplomas. There were only 492 (6,6 percent) master's and doctoral graduates in 2009.

There are statutory bodies that provide quality assurance and certification. For the schooling system and further education and training there is UMALUSI which was established under the General and Further Education and Training Act, 2001 and Council on Higher Education (CHE) established by the Higher Education Act, 101 of 1997. The CHE is the quality council for higher education and advises the Minister of Higher Education and Training on all higher education issues and is also responsible for quality assurance and promotion through the higher education quality committee (HEQC).

Budget spend on education

Education and skills development are the first priority in government expenditure allocations, boosted over the medium-term expenditure framework period through additional allocations for further education colleges, student financial aid assistance; school infrastructure and learner support material.¹⁰ Education in South Africa continues to receive the biggest share of the country's budget with an allocation of R189 billion to the Department of Basic Education and Higher Education and Training for the 2011/12 financial year¹¹, R24 billion more than what it received in the 2010/11 financial year. Of the total education budget, tertiary education received R26 billion (6.8 percent), Basic Education R145,5 billion (10.6 percent), Further Education and Training and Adult Education R6,2 billion (6.7 percent) and Education administration received a total of R11,7 billion (7.9 percent).

⁷ South African Nursing Council, 2011

⁸ Council on Higher Education, 2011

⁹ Department of Basic Education, 2010

¹⁰ Department of National treasury, 2011

¹¹ Ibid



One of the intentions and the highlights of the 2011 Budget allocation pertaining to education are to expand FET College sector and university enrolment, skills development and extension of learnership.

Conclusion

Unlike in the past, our current education system is governed and funded as a single national coordinated system not characterized by the fragmentation, inequality and inefficiency which were the legacy of the past. Some of the biggest achievements to date are that we are meeting the millennium development goal number 2 in terms of access to basic education, reducing poverty where in the government has introduced the no fee schools to enable the children of poor to access education and also nutritional scheme in schools which provides learners to at least one meal per day which resulted in improved learner retention particularly in primary schools. There are African students particularly more female learners in higher education.¹² Though there are more female students in institutions of higher learning, the challenge is that they are still under represented in scarce and critical trades and professions which previously were meant for male students.

However, the above mentioned achievements do not mean that the current system is not without challenges. Though the government has done much, unfortunately the provision of education particularly for the previously disadvantaged students continues to be shaped by South Africa's socio-economic realities, reflected in class and racial inequalities. Poor quality of education especially in the schooling system is a call for concern which the Department of Education is dealing with it. There still exist infrastructural challenges particularly in the formerly black institutions and many schools around the country, for example teaching and learning classrooms, computer laboratories, libraries, students' residences etc. Enrolment growth in institutions of higher learning is not matched by growth in infrastructure

The higher education data reveal that high numbers of students who enter the higher education system do not graduate in the minimum time, and most drop out or discontinue their studies along the way. The reasons for this high dropout rate ranges from the poor readiness of learners especially from disadvantaged rural areas, poor quality of secondary education and socio-economic conditions. Institutions are burdened with the teaching of under-prepared students and the burden is further fuelled by the financial demands and the provisions of resources to institutions to deal with the learning needs of under-prepared students. There is still a long way to go to eradicate all the legacies of the past.

¹² Nzimande, 2010



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