

SOUTH AFRICA**Reinventing the curriculum for today's students****Suellen Shay****03 June 2016 University World News Global Edition Issue 416**

Pathways to increase access to universities offer a limited vision for equity. To achieve social change, leaders need to look beyond widening access towards greater equity within the university, ensuring that the curriculum reflects the diversity and needs of the growing number of non-traditional students. It has become common in discussions about higher education and equity to draw on the metaphor of 'pathways'. This metaphor has usefully focused attention on access: the gap between school and university, the articulation between and across different tiers of the system and a range of barriers faced by students from traditionally underrepresented communities.



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However, the metaphor, like all metaphors, is limited; in particular it might limit the vision for what equity requires: the focus is on getting students in, suggesting the 'landscape' or 'terrain' of the undergraduate trajectory is fine and that it is simply the pathways into and through that need strengthening for particular minority groups.

Transformational leadership requires a vision of equity that is more expansive than 'enabling pathways'.

First, the good news: it is clear that the focus on access has borne some fruit. There has been a global expansion of higher education.

Though much of this growth is the result of a demographic bulge, it has been supported by significant national and institutional investment in strengthening those 'pathways' between schooling and higher education, reviewing admissions policies and ensuring a smoother transition into university level study through interventions, such as curriculum advice, mentoring, bridging courses and financial aid.

One example of this good news story is South Africa: in the past 20 years the number of students enrolled in higher education has more than doubled. The participation rate has increased from 15% in 2003 to nearly 20% by 2013. Not only has access been widened to the previously excluded but retention has also improved, in part as a result of the kinds of initiatives listed above.

Persisting inequality

The bad news is that when this global growth is disaggregated by global region, country, race, ethnicity, gender, disability and field of study – the patterns of inequality persist.

Brazil's growth has been described as 'expansion without equity'. A recent book on Australian higher education reviews 20 years of its equity policy. [A Fair Chance for All](#) concludes that while there have been gains in equity of access for some groups, the same cannot be said for equity of outcomes.

In South Africa, the growth gains of post-1994 have not translated into graduations and employment. It has been a 'skewed' and even a 'stalled' revolution, as David Cooper argued in a July 2015 paper in *Higher Education Quarterly*. Unless the 'pathway' leads to successful completion, it is not equity – it is failure, it is more debt, all of which can lead to growing alienation and disaffection among underrepresented communities.

While keeping an eye on access, the real focus needs to shift to what it takes to ensure that those who have been given access also have a reasonable chance of succeeding. This vision of equity moves beyond 'pathways' to the wider landscape and its opportunities and obstacles.

We need to understand the role the institution itself plays in shaping the student experience – who thrives, who survives and who fails. There are, of course, many reasons for these different experiences and not all are under our control.

But transformational leaders will commit to understanding those over which they do have control. This may require, for example, a close look at course student performance data. What are the race, gender, language, socio-economic status profiles of the thrivers/survivors/failures? Are there any discernible patterns?

This kind of data-informed curriculum review shifts the focus of equity beyond access and even beyond bridging or gateway courses to the heart of the curriculum. For whom is this curriculum working and why?

The rise of the non-traditional student

This way of thinking about equity and the reform required often leads to concern from some quarters about the risk of 'dumbing-down', of 'lowering standards'. Quite the contrary. This kind of curriculum review is likely to strengthen quality.

The reality is that the 'traditional' student – middle class, 18-22 year old, white, English-speaking from a good public school – is a global shrinking minority.

Instead there is a rapidly increasing population of 'non-traditional' students who may be working or lower middle class, older with dependants, who by necessity of circumstances will take longer to complete, who will not live on campus, who might be multilingual but not mother-tongue speakers in the medium of instruction, may already have work experience and are likely to shift careers multiple times.

The 'non-traditional' student brings rich and diverse sets of resources (as well as gaps). It is for this reason across the globe there have been calls for substantial reform of the undergraduate curriculum. Future-oriented transformational leaders need to be asking, not 'are our students prepared for our curriculum?', but rather, 'is our curriculum prepared for our students?' And also, 'is our curriculum preparing our graduates for uncertain futures?'

'Pathways' offer a limited vision for equity. Transformational leadership needs a vision of equity that is about re-designing, restructuring and re-landscaping the terrain to ensure a more appropriate higher education for all.

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