# Policy Brief

# Enhancing Student Success in Undergraduate Education :
## Options, Strategies and choices

# Executive Summary

Higher education institutions in South Africa have come a long away in exploring institutional changes needed to successfully educate diverse students to live and excel in a complex and pluralistic university environment. To this end, some universities have conducted diversity-training workshops for senior managers, institutional culture audits, and introduced friendly student services and policies as well as academic support structures and strategies to enhance student experience, and steer student *epistemic success*. This particular policy brief deals with two interrelated questions: What context-sensitive options, strategies and choices exist to enhance student epistemic access in undergraduate education? What possibilities do they offer to mediate student experience positively taking into account the diverse institutional and social context of higher education in South Africa? Morrow (2009: 78) uses the concept of *epistemic access* to refer to "learning how to become a successful participant in the academic practice" of a tertiary institution, which requires an understanding of how the institution operates by the students, and the use of their own initiative and individual responsibility to enable them to gain entry into the academic practice and the practice of searching for and working with knowledge. It argues that, while it is the individual student who should be primarily responsible for gaining *epistemic access*, attention should be paid to the 'way an institution organizes learning opportunities and services' to enhance student experience (Chen et al, 2008: 340). The brief suggests a menu of options, strategies and choices to address this challenge.

**Key Policy Strategies**

- Increase selectivity
- Institutionalize support
- Rethink language
- Resource interventions
- Re-culture academics
- Prepare lecturers
- Engage learning
- Enculturate students
- Improve organization
- Partner schools

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# Background

In the last 17 years the South African higher education system has expanded considerably the size of its enrolments. While in 1980 there were 159 756 students enrolled in South African universities, in 1994 the total student enrolments in the system were 425 000, and in 2007 the total enrolment had grown to 761 000 students. The proportion of African student enrolments has also grown considerably, from 43% in 1998 to over 67% in 2011. In gender terms, the distribution of enrolments shows that women are entering higher education in larger numbers and that this is consistent with the proportion of women in the country's population. In addition, the end of apartheid has opened new opportunities that have resulted in an increasing influx of international students (from 12,557 to 60,856 in 2009) from both developed and developing countries, particularly the Southern African Development Community (SADC). The distribution of enrolments across disciplinary fields has about met the targets set in the National Plan for Higher Education (2001) of 40% Humanities and Social Sciences, 30% Science Engineering and Technology and 30% Business and Management.

However, overall the higher education system still reflects the legacy of apartheid when it comes to student (epistemic) access by 'race' group and socio-economic status, and when it comes to who among these students finish their degrees on time and with good marks. Students entering university do so from positions of extreme inequality, most obviously in schooling, but also in terms of financial and other resources. Our findings indicate that a lack of academic 'preparedness' of high school graduates is cited as one of the reasons why students fail or take longer to master degree requirements. Thus, from the point of view of epistemic access, very little has changed over the last 17 years in terms of the participation of black and socially and economically disadvantaged students in South African higher education.

Currently, a variety of student support strategies exist to address the throughput and retention problem. The following typology typifies emerging trends:

- *Sorting strategies*: Best fit recruiting; entry assessment and placement; academic advising; early warning alerts.

- *Student support strategies*: Child care; financial aid; wellness; security; personal counselling; housing; work study.

- *Connecting strategies*: Student activities; peer programs for learning and mentoring; orientation; faculty/student events; faculty advisors.

- *Teaching and learning improvement strategies*: Learning skills; tutoring; remedial education; skill-based curricula; formative assessments; incentives for completion.

- *Institutional transformation strategies*: building community/institutional culture; policy changes; curriculum changes; faculty development; incentives for schools to improve graduation rates and sanctions if they fail.

These strategies assume different modalities and mixes within the various universities, faculties and schools.

# Findings

1. Since the demise of apartheid, South African higher education has undergone considerable changes in the profile of staff and students and within its institutional environments. While these changes represent unprecedented formal access of students, particularly those from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, a major challenge remains the question of *epistemic access*, which impacts on issues of throughput, retention and success. Currently in South Africa, the question of formal access has been significantly addressed; it is the question of epistemic access that necessitates more attention.

2. All higher education institutions have expressed concerns with throughput, retention and student success for varied reasons, which include social, institutional and personal (staff and students) costs.

3. Given the legacy of apartheid and the dominance of English and Afrikaans as the languages of instruction, the study points to the primacy of language in the ways students negotiate access and experience success (and failure at a university). This is a problem at the heart of problems of access to knowledge and success for both black and white students, depending on their mother tongue. Current language policies adopted by some institutions, which make provision for a regional African language to be part of the language of instruction, seem doomed to remain merely symbolic in the short term.

4. All South African universities provide a varied mix of academic support programmes of various kinds (course bridging programmes, tutorials, research and writing workshops, etc.) focused on under-prepared students.

5. Depending on the university, the academic support dimension forms a greater or lesser part of the core teaching and student development activities.

6. The academic needs of students, and the degree of academic support, vary by faculty, discipline and department within all universities.

7. Given the nature of universities and their peculiar institutional histories, despite central policy that emphasizes coordinated governance, institutional responses to academic development support vary by faculty, department and individual lecturer. Two major trends stand out in these efforts: mainstreaming, integration of academic support into institutional strategies, plans and programmes of the university vis-à-vis ad hoc approach to academic support driven by individual initiative or isolated departmental efforts.

8. The study also highlights the power of residence culture and the power of the ethos of university administrative and support services in facilitating the transition from school to university, influencing student motivation and social integration. Residential life and social interaction between staff and students provide opportunities for tackling the deeply entrenched problems of racism, xenophobia, homophobia and sexual harassment on campuses.

9. The increasing importance of access to information as a critical variable in student's ability to navigate their way through a complex academic organization. Both administrators and students point to lack of crucial information on admissions, registration, and curriculum choices and pass requirements. The briefing in faculties and schools about formal requirements or the specific requirements for particular courses not always is adequate.

10. In addressing these challenges, most universities have accepted to learn from, and be guided in their policies by, research and the 'wisdom of practice' regarding academic development and for this purpose some have commissioned or put in place units dedicated to institutional research. The commitment to introspection is paying rewards in minimizing arbitrary responses, ad hoc and fragmented strategies.
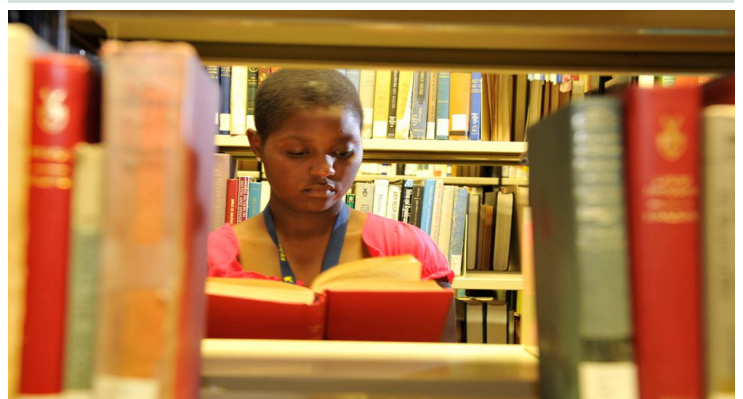
# Policy Recommendations

1. **Improve Selection and Admission Strategies**
reater precision and greater selectivity should be applied in the decisions about which students to admit to ensure that the focus is concentrated on those more likely to succeed in higher education.

2. **Institutionalize Support**
Student support for their academic progress will remain fragmented and ineffective unless such support is institutionalized within the full range of services (teaching, curriculum development, assessment design, student administration, campus planning etc) provided to all students

3. **Rethink language.**
The twin challenges of academic language and language of instruction (English) remains one of the most significant barriers to success, and one that universities must address in a systematic and sustained manner.

4. **.Resource interventions**
The provision of comprehensive, predictable and sustained resources to support academic development interventions has a direct impact on the chances of overcoming the huge distance between high school preparation and university success.

5. **Re-culture academics**
Changing the attitudes of university lecturers especially towards students from disadvantaged backgrounds is an important task that will have an impact on the orientation and success of undergraduates .

6. **Prepare Lecturers**
The preparation of university teachers for teaching in diverse and changing higher education contexts should no longer be optional; it is crucial to the success of undergraduate students.

7. **.Engage Learning**
Knowing how to teach in ways that engage, challenge and transform undergraduate student learning is a complex task for which university lecturers must specifically be prepared.

8. **Enculturate Students**
It is important that universities take time to teach students about, and to make explicit, the often hidden rules and routines of academic engagement within university environments.

9. **Improve Organization and Communication**
Universities must ensure that the organization, planning and delivery of teaching is systematic, accessible, predictable and well-communicated to at least ensure that this does not become an additional factor that inhibits undergraduate learning.

10. **Partner schools**
The notion that universities can simply wait for disadvantaged students to 'show up' is not enough; it is important to build long-term relationships with partnership schools to prepare targeted high school learners *in advance* for the rigours of university education

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# Acknowledgements

# About the Project