

## **Saleem's Response to CHET Questions**

### **If you were the new Minister, what would you think is the single biggest challenge facing higher education in the next five years?**

To (re)theorise and clarify the scope, structure and landscape of higher education. This includes the purposes and roles of universities vis-à-vis further education and training colleges and other post-secondary institutions.

On the one hand, there is a growing demand for higher education. On the other hand, the *National Plan for Higher Education* set the target of a 20% participation rate by 2011/2016. If this target is to be achieved, an estimated 100 000 additional students have to be incorporated within higher education, in a context in which the capacities of public universities are already stretched. Furthermore, there is a pressing need for increasing the output of high quality graduates. All of these issues mean that it is important to give considered attention to the structure of higher education and the spectrum of institutions that are required in relation to economic and social development needs.

### **If you were an institutional leader, what would you think is the biggest challenge facing higher education institutions in the next five years?**

Judging by drop-out, throughput and graduation rates a substantial improvement in equity of opportunity and outcomes for black students remains to be achieved. Contact undergraduate success rates should, according to the Department of Education (DoE), be 80% "if reasonable graduation rates are to be achieved". Instead they range from 59% to 87% with an average of 75%. White student success rates in 2005 were 85%, while African student rates were 70%. The DoE's target for throughput rates "is a minimum of 20% which would imply a final cohort graduation rate of about 65%" (ibid.). Instead, throughput rates for 2000-2004 were between 13% and 14%, and the cohort graduation rate was 45% in 2004, with an overall drop-out rate of 45%.

A recent study notes that "the major racial disparities in completion rates in undergraduate programmes, together with the particularly high attrition rates of black students across the board, have the effect of negating much of the growth in black access that has been achieved. Taking account of the black participation rate, the overall attrition rate of over 50% and the below-average black completion rates, it can be concluded that the sector is catering successfully for under 5% of the black (and coloured) age-group".

The conclusions are clear: "this has central significance for development as well as social inclusion", and "equity of outcomes is the overarching challenge". Clearly, if higher education institutions "are to contribute to a more equitable South African society, then access and success must be improved for black (and particularly black working class) students who, by virtue of their previous experiences, have not been inducted into dominant ways of constructing knowledge".

In the light of unacceptably poor current pass and graduation rates and high drop-out rates, the enhancement of the academic capabilities of universities, and specifically academics, to ensure equity of opportunity and outcome, especially for students of working-class and rural poor social origins, is an urgent and important task.