

**Remarks on the occasion of the Launch of the National Benchmark Test
Project and Standard Bank South Africa Partnership
at Irene Lodge, Pretoria on 24 March 2014
by
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Programme Director
Representative of Standard Bank South Africa
Dr Max Price, Vice-Chancellor, UCT
Dr Jeffrey Mabelebele, CEO, HESA
Leadership of Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED)
Officials of the National Benchmark Test Project
Distinguished guests
Ladies and gentlemen

Good evening.

It is my pleasure to say a few words this evening at this event to officially launch the funding partnership between Standard Bank South Africa and National Benchmark Tests (NBT) Project.

On behalf of HESA, I wish to express my gratitude to Standard Bank South Africa and the UCT Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED) for organising the cocktail event.

During the past 20 years, there have been significant changes in South African higher education and much has been achieved.

- There has been considerable growth – indeed more than a doubling - in enrolments at public universities;
- The enrolment of black and especially African and women students have grown, and black students (81%) and women students (58%) constitute the majority of undergraduate students;
- Despite the acknowledged difficulties in the school system concerning Mathematics and Physical Science, enrolments in Science, Engineering and Technology (SET) have been growing;
- Enrolments for doctoral degree studies have grown steadily; and
- Publication research outputs have grown (CHE's VitalStats, 2010).

A number of mechanisms have supported greater equity in higher education enrolments including alternative admissions tests to complement the national final secondary school examination; the recognition of prior learning to facilitate access for mature students; extended curriculum programmes for students that show potential, and a state-funded national student financial aid scheme.

Still, many challenges remain. While more African and Coloured students have gained access to Higher Education during the past 20 years, relatively few successfully complete their undergraduate studies. The high drop-out rate of students in Higher Education – particularly during the first year of their studies – is a well-known and disturbing fact. A recent CHE Task Team Report paints a very disturbing picture:

- Only about one in four students in contact institutions (that is, excluding UNISA) graduate in regulation time;
- Only 35% of the total intake, and 48% of contact students, graduate within five years;
- When allowance is made for students taking longer than five years to graduate or returning to the system after dropping out, an estimated 55% of the intake will never graduate;
- Access, success and completion rates continue to be racially skewed, with white completion rates being on average 50% higher than African rates".

The net result of the disparities in access and success is that under 5% of African and coloured youth are succeeding in any form of higher education.

At issues are the overall level of preparedness of our school leavers for higher education study and the preparedness of our universities and the extent to which appropriate academic programmes, academic development programmes, curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and institutional cultures and environments are in place.

The challenge is for our higher education system and universities to cater more effectively for the learning needs of students, and especially students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

In 2005, HESA commissioned the National Benchmark Test Project to respond to this challenge. There were four main objectives:

- To assess the entry-level academic and quantitative literacy and mathematics proficiency of students;
- To assess the relationship between higher education entry-level requirements and school-level exit outcomes;
- To provide a service to higher education institutions requiring additional information to assist in the placement of students in appropriate academic programmes; and
- To assist with curriculum development, particularly in relation to foundation courses.

We understood that a National Benchmark Test was critical, first for establishing in a more fine-grained way the proficiency of students entering universities (their level of preparedness and student under-preparedness if you like) and, second for effectively supporting students so that there are meaningful opportunities to succeed and greater success

The benefits of NBTs to our universities

Since its implementation, the National Benchmark Test has been assisting universities in identifying the education proficiency and needs of first-time entering students with a view to providing support where required. For an example the Academic literacy test assesses students' ability to:

- Understand and interpret conceptual and metaphorical language;
- Identify and track academic argument;
- Follow discourse structure in text;
- Make inferences about and extrapolate from what they read; and
- Understand the conventions of visual literacies, such as reading and interpreting graphs, flow charts and diagrams

All of these are important abilities for effective learning in higher education. Academic literacy is a prerequisite for success in higher education studies, and the tests allow the various universities to gauge the abilities of students and the levels of support that they require.

The second benefit derives from quantitative literacy tests which assess students' understanding of common quantitative terms, including reading and interpreting tables, graphs, charts, perform routine calculations and identify trends and patterns in familiar situations. Quantitative literacy, like academic literacy, is an important prerequisite for the success of students in universities.

Similarly, the test of Academic Mathematical proficiency is critical because mathematics remains a key gateway subjects for a number of degree and diploma qualifications in the Science, Engineering and Technology fields of study.

The partnership between Standard Bank South Africa and National Benchmark Test Project is most welcome, as it allows HESA and the university sector to expand the National Benchmark Test so that it can be written by a larger number of students. It then facilitates universities constructing curricula and other interventions to improve the students' academic and quantitative literacies; and academic mathematical proficiency.

The partnership will assist HESA to address the costs of writing the NBT tests. There has been some criticism about the cost of writing the tests, which does not enable students from poor socio-economic family backgrounds to derive benefits from the test. Some seem to think, without any evidence, that the levied cost is a way universities preserving privilege.

What fails to be appreciated is that real costs to students and the higher education system is not the NBTs, but the billions that the high failure rates cost universities and the Treasury. The NBTP has real possibilities of helping improve efficiency and success and through these equity and equality, quality and contributing to the development needs of South Africa.

HESA is committed to engaging with the Department of Higher Education and Training the possibility of the Teaching Development Grant being used to drive down further the costs to students for writing the tests.

The issues of high drop-out rates and poor throughput and success rates tend to evoke cynicism, demoralization and despair. We have to avoid these feelings. As Madiba wrote, 'there were many dark moments when my faith...was sorely tested, but I would not and could not give myself up to despair. That way lays defeat and death.' We must remain optimistic, keep our 'head pointed toward the sun, (our) feet moving forward.'

This partnership is important in assisting our universities to 'remain optimistic', to keep 'moving forward' in address the critical challenge of improving student success rates and enhancing the promise of higher education for our society.

In closing, on behalf of HESA, our sincere appreciation to Standard Bank South Africa for its funding support for the NBTP.