



Long-term solutions needed for South Africa's higher education

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Transforming the higher education sector in South Africa has a long way to go, although some ground is getting covered. Then there is the even bigger challenge of ensuring access and affordability for all.

The coronavirus pandemic has put into sharp focus the indispensability of blended approaches: blended learning and teaching approaches combine online lecturing with physical class-based classroom methods. Online platforms are the future, but technology needs to be available cheaply and it should be widely accessible.

South Africa's higher education landscape is characterised by three types of universities. Why can't all our universities be comprehensive universities instead of some being universities of technology and others so-called traditional universities?

Linked to this is the number of universities in South Africa. The population is expanding and the youth requires higher education. Of course, that education has to be relevant and useful. Obviously, it has to be good-quality education.

Improving the higher education sector will, however, not address some of the education-related challenges we face.

There is a view that the education system in South Africa does not generate the required output and there are high rates of dropout before matric, let alone the quality of our matriculants. Interventions around the technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions have not delivered expected results and many young people avoid these TVET institutions. In addition, some tertiary qualifications are just not in demand given the structure of the South African economy, let alone that the South African economy has not been performing well and it has been hit hard by the coronavirus.

These challenges, when combined with inefficiencies in government institutions that deal with youth development and entrepreneurship, compound the unemployment challenge. We know also that the world economy keeps changing fast and is increasingly becoming digitised. As a result, tech-related skills in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution are more important going forward.

The government should better implement some programmes to ameliorate the skills gap challenge. Since 2006, we have been talking about a wage subsidy programme. In 2013 it was enacted as the [Employment Tax Incentive Act](#), but we do not see results.

Incentivising employment, especially for the youth, can put a dent in unemployment. The private sector should play its part. Some people are suggesting that South Africa implements an apprenticeship system. The experience with internships should help better guide the apprenticeship programme that South Africa chooses. Again, uptake by the private sector is key.

The [White Paper on Post-School Education and Training](#) recommends, among other things, that “higher education programmes and modes of provision that are responsive to students’ needs and realities and which take into account their varying life and work contexts”. But the Fees Must Fall movement and similar initiatives confirm that universities are not fully responsive to the needs and realities of the students. The protests by students in our universities indicate that we still have a long way to go in resolving the challenges we face as society.

Central to our challenges is the need to get our economy right. We frequently talk about the restructuring of the South African economy but very little is done. It is no surprise that our economy fell apart when the coronavirus pandemic hit our shores.

Tough decisions need to be made regarding reprioritisation. Difficult questions should be confronted. Government must indeed lead, but all social partners, especially organised labour and business, must play their part. Youth unemployment and upskilling of the youth should be everyone’s responsibility.

The protests by students will continue as long as the society is not addressing the needs and realities of the students. This is not the responsibility of universities alone. There are political questions that we must answer. Do we need the provincial governments in their current shape; do we need these many senior government officials; do we need these many government departments; should we be always bailing out parastatals; don’t we need more comprehensive universities?

Even though there appear to be some improvements in government, or at least there were signs of some improvements before the coronavirus further disorganised the public sector, part of the problem seems to be whether the government has the right people to deliver on its mandate. Put differently, do we have the right people at the right places within government?

We might have to take a leaf from Vladimir Lenin’s [injunction](#), writing in March 1923 regarding the workers’ and peasants’ inspection as part of the state apparatus in the Soviet Union, that “we must follow the rule: better fewer, but better.”

It is high time that we reduce the size of the government at the top and in provinces. The time to train government officials so they can be fully effective is overdue. The proper reprioritisation within government and the budgeting that is cognisant to the needs of our society should help deal with challenges not only confronting the higher education sector but other important government functions.

Many people have been saying the coronavirus pandemic crisis should not go to waste; that a crisis can be turned into an opportunity. It is indeed a chance to get our society right, for the coronavirus pandemic has demonstrated how weak our government is and it has laid bare the failures of our society that have accumulated in the past ten years or so.

