# Student Access and Success:

Issues and Interventions in South African Universities

REPORT SUMMARY

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Student access to and success in university is a complex and multi-dimensional issue and has been the subject of a great deal of research over the past 30 years. It continues to be an issue of considerable research interest. This research, commissioned by Inyathelo: The South African Institute for Advancement and funded by the U.S. based Kresge Foundation, looked at access not only from the point of view of physical but also epistemological access. Success is viewed in the report as quality of graduate output, employability and personal growth.
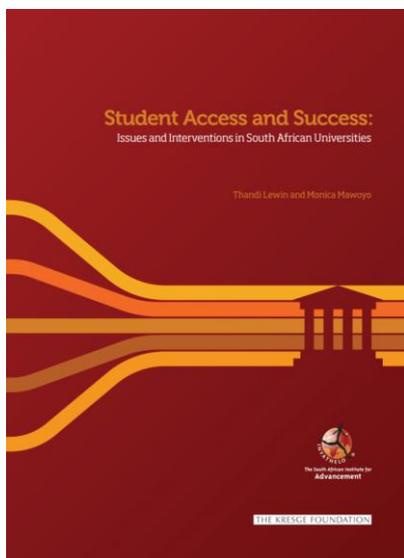
A Research Advisory Group comprising practitioners and researchers who are leaders in Academic Development (AD) had oversight on the research. A desktop review of Academic Development programmes at 22 universities provided the contextual data for the 30 interviews with heads of AD and institutional planning at 18 universities.

The emphasis in the report is on the broad field of work referred to as "Academic Development", which encompasses academic staff development, curriculum development and academic support programmes. The report therefore does not focus on all access and success initiatives at universities.

South Africa's low student success rates have been recognised as systemic and rooted in the schooling system. The 2012-2013 Annual Report of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) describes this as an articulation gap between schooling and universities, resulting in only about half of undergraduates entering universities completing their degrees at all. This is a matter of concern because the systemic performance is poor relative to other similar developing countries, and because so much talent is being wasted.

While universities cannot control all of the causes of this poor performance, there are many things that can be done to reduce the articulation gap.

There is, of course, no one solution to the current challenges of poor university student success rates. Solutions must also be understood as multi-dimensional.

The report presents a range of AD interventions designed to enhance student access and success. Overall, there is evidence of a substantial range of programmes and activities within institutions aimed at student success. Many, but not all of these programmes are linked to AD departments within universities. These are grouped into five major areas of work:

1. **Transition and entry:** centred on transition, admission and first-year experience.
2. **Social support:** clustered in programmes under the banners of psychosocial support and mentoring.
3. **Teaching and learning:** comprised of programmes that provide better learning opportunities. These include infrastructure improvement, extended curriculum programmes, supplemental instruction, tutoring, support for writing, literacy, and numeracy, and systems for early detection of students who are struggling academically.
4. **Research:** aimed at influencing evidence-based decision-making for improvement.
5. **Professional development:** centred on professional development including induction programmes, courses and workshops, and research support.

At the policy and system level some important shifts took place in 2013, which are likely to impact on student access and success issues. These include a report released by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) proposing undergraduate curriculum reform; changes to the Teaching Development Grants, part of the funding package universities receive from government; and changes to the quality assurance system led by the Higher Education Quality Council of the CHE in the form of a new Quality Enhancement Project focusing on teaching and learning in universities.

The core issue requiring attention within the university system is the quality and status of teaching and learning. This includes ensuring adequate staffing, resourcing and intellectual development of teaching and learning work; supporting the scholarship of teaching and learning; improving curriculum development skills and teaching practice skills; using technology to support teaching; and improving teaching infrastructure.

Though each institution is different in the attention and support it provides for teaching development, overall academic cultures continue to show a greater interest in research production than improvement of teaching. As one participant put it, what

is needed is greater "intentionality" when it comes to interventions that are aimed at improving student success.

Another key area for development is the use of data and institutional research to support teaching and curriculum development, and capacity needs to improve in this area, both at system and institutional level.

The numbers of students not succeeding in South African universities makes the focus on student success a mainstream issue, but curriculum change and improvement in teaching and learning are not yet mainstream issues.