

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Vincent Tinto's lectures: Catalysing a focus on student success in South Africa

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When I was appointed Director for Institutional Audits at the South African Council on Higher Education (CHE) in September 2012 a decision had already been taken that, after having completed one cycle of institutional audits, it would not immediately begin another cycle. Discussions with a variety of stakeholders had led to the conclusion that the most pressing need in higher education in South Africa was to improve the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning. However, it was not clear how that could best be done. Moreover, there was a sense of urgency. We could not wait another eight years, the time it had taken to complete all of the institutional audits, before we saw progress. Cohort data published by the CHE (2013) showed that only about half of the students entering universities were completing their programmes, despite the fact that few students even made it to university. (In 2011 the participation rate of 20 to 24 year olds was 17%.) South Africa needed to find a way to produce more high quality graduates to drive and support economic and social development.

During the last quarter of 2012, after many discussions and much reading about both national challenges and international trends, the way forward began to emerge. In line with increasing requirements for accountability internationally, it became clear that our focus needed to shift from inputs to outputs, from what universities did to what students achieved. The focus needed to be on student success and how to enhance it. That meant shifting our orientation as a directorate for institutional audits and that of higher education institutions from quality assurance to quality enhancement, that is, from ensuring that standards are met, to improving the standards that need to be met. This new direction was given substance through the formulation of the Quality Enhancement Project (QEP). The QEP provides a framework (CHE, 2014a) for improving student success, where student success is defined as “[e]nhanced student learning with a view to increasing the number of graduates with attributes that are personally, professionally and socially valuable”.

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By the end of 2012 a draft framework document for the QEP was widely circulated for discussion. But it was clear that the standard processes used in South Africa to formulate policies in higher education – sending out discussion documents, calling for feedback, perhaps holding a symposium – would not generate enough impetus for the radical change of mindset that would be needed to implement the QEP and implement it quickly. Moreover, the South African higher education sector was small, with only 23 public universities and a number of mostly small private institutions, and ideas tended to circulate round and round a rather closed system. And of course, most people are naturally resistant to change – fear of change evokes a thousand reasons for why something different cannot be done or will not work. We needed something that would inject fresh air into the system, something that would fire people’s imaginations about what was possible, an event that would get people excited, enough people to form a critical mass for change. That is why I contacted Vincent Tinto.

On 4 January 2013 I sent Vincent Tinto an email, outlining salient aspects of the state of the South African higher education system and the focus of the QEP and asking if, in principle, he might be willing to engage with us in some way. He replied immediately – in principle, yes. As I thought more about how he could help us, it became clear that what we needed was for him to speak to people in South Africa, preferably from all universities and from all walks of university life. That would mean conducting regional symposia, one each in Pretoria, Durban and Cape Town (later changed to Stellenbosch). On 15 January I asked if he would be willing to do that. After a few more emails, on 29 January we had a conversation via Skype. Very early on in the conversation, Vincent said, “I’ll do it. I’ll come”. About a month later we had agreed on dates for the symposia – the third week in August. In early June we sent out advance notice of the symposia. In our planning we imagined we might get a total of 600 people. In mid-July we sent out the call for registrations. The symposia were free but online registration was required, and was open for a limited period on a first-come, first-served basis. As registrations poured in we contacted the three venues to see if they could accommodate more people. In the end we had 820 registrations from all public and several private higher education institutions, ranging from vice-chancellors to deans, academics, and student affairs, academic development and support staff. The flood of registrations signalled that there was enormous interest in the topic of the symposia, “Conceptualising a coherent approach to student success”.

By the time of the symposia four focus areas for the first phase of the QEP had crystallised: enhancing academics as teachers; enhancing student support and development; enhancing the learning environment; and enhancing course and programme enrolment management (CHE, 2014b). In the months leading up to the symposia Vincent and I exchanged many emails and spoke several times on Skype in order to arrive at suitable topics for his presentations. During this same period the focus, form and direction of the QEP were evolving as a result of many conversations with individuals, the advisory committee, senior management members from a representative sample of universities, other CHE senior staff, the institutional audits committee and colleagues at the Quality

Assurance Agency Scotland. The topics we finally agreed on for the four regional symposia talks were thus the collaborative product of an extended, participatory process.

Vincent's talks were designed to serve a dual purpose: to expose a large South African audience to key features of his lifelong work on student success, and as a precursor to the implementation of the QEP, to catalyse a change in mindset. Through showing what is possible, what can and has worked, we hoped to energise and inspire people to believe that things can change for the better and to want to work to make that happen. The talks were deliberately not structured according to the four focus areas of the QEP, because that would not have done justice to the first purpose, but they did speak to a number of aspects of the focus areas.

The first talk provided the theoretical foundations of Vincent's work. This was important for us because we needed participants to know that there is a substantial body of scholarly work on student success, and that the actions and interventions that he would speak about later were theoretically grounded and supported by evidence. In other words, promoting student success is not about being "touchy-feely" – it is a serious academic activity. In the next three talks Vincent spoke about promoting student success through support services, at classroom level and at institutional level. In each case he clearly articulated a general principle and then gave specific examples of what works. For the South African context, where we so easily despair of ever making headway in overcoming our seemingly intractable problems, it was tremendously important to see examples of what can be done to make the situation better, especially for academically- and economically-disadvantaged first generation students. For many in the audience, it came as a surprise that there were so many students like that in the USA, the richest country in the world. But the "can do" attitude with which Vincent approached the challenge of helping such students succeed was inspiring and energising. Just what we needed.

As I have travelled around the country in the year since Vincent's visit, there are people at every university who attended one of his symposia. That means there is resonance with a core of people around the country when I freely draw on one of Vincent's key phrases, phrases that are becoming mantras for us for student success: "It's not about us, it's about the students", "Access without support is not opportunity," and, most important of all for improving our higher education system as a whole, "Student success does not arise by chance." Long-term, large-scale student success in South Africa will require sustained will, effort, commitment, courage and imagination, monitored and coordinated within coherent, collaborative endeavours at both institutional and national levels.

While there are obvious and extensive differences between South Africa's and America's context, history and demography, there are theoretically sound principles and exemplary interventions that are applicable in promoting student success in both countries, especially among less privileged students. In the years ahead we will need to build our own theories and models for student success in South Africa. But Vincent Tinto has provided us with a firm foundation on which to build. And through his inspirational presentations and interactions with hundreds of South Africans he has been a critical catalyst for change.

References

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