How do we take ownership of the national education agenda?

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Since the democratisation of South Africa in 1994, significant strides have been made to address the South African education system so that it addressed the legacy challenges that it faced from Apartheid.

And while Government has immeasurably changed the education landscape, there are current challenges that need to be addressed if South Africa wants to solve some of the social and economic problems that the country currently faces.

"We need to be aware of the challenges that are inherent in the system and address them in order to take ownership of the education agenda," says Professor Zaheer Hamid, director of the Mancosa School of Education.

Adequate preparation

Higher education institutions are the final preparation stage that students need to go through before they enter into the job market. Commenting on the challenges that higher education faces, Prof Hamid says that higher education institutions are facing challenges that are associated with lack of preparation.

"Mancosa's experience is that not enough is being done at all levels of education (from foundation phase to secondary education) to ensure that learners who move from one level to another are adequately prepared for the demands of that level. This encompasses cognitive development as well as emotional development. As a result, the success of the next phase of a student's education is compromised as a result of that student not being ready," says Prof Hamid.

He adds that another part of this challenge that there is not enough focus being placed on preparing learners for the demands of university in terms of independent work, time management as well as the ability to cope with competing priorities.

Access is a problem

The second biggest challenge that is defining the current educational agenda is the lack of access to education.

"It is no secret that space is significantly limited when it comes to higher education institutions, particularly public universities. And if a university is basing entry on a points system, they will take students that are on the higher end of the spectrum of the points system leaving those who just make the cut having to resort to their second, third or fourth choice careers," says Prof Hamid.

He adds that another massive challenge facing students is funding. "Education is expensive. And because universities are located in urban areas, students are often required to leave their homes and their province in order to attend university. Apart from the financial aspect of this, moving a learner away from their support system to a completely foreign environment is a massive disrupter. More needs to be done to increase access to education across the spectrum," says Prof Hamid.

Understanding students

The third major challenge defining the education agenda is that most higher education institutions are tempted to view their student population as a homogenous unit.

"This is a significant challenge," says Prof Hamid, "we need to realise that education does not occur in a vacuum. Universities need to develop an acute understanding of who their students are, where they come from, and the social context that brought them to that university."

Addressing these challenges

A lot of work needs to be done at every level of education to address these challenges.

In order to take ownership of the education agenda, we need to ensure that all learners are adequately prepared for the next level of their educational journey before they are moved up from one grade to another.

"We then need to realise that education does not take place in a vacuum and that we need to have a proper understanding of every student that we take in. We then need to look at what that student needs to succeed. It is important to note that academic success is not only left to the student's cognitive ability. We need to look at financial support, academic guidance, emotional guidance, etc," says Prof Hamid.

He adds that the next step is to then develop educational solutions that are fit for purpose and are designed to ensure student success.

The final part of this taking ownership of this challenge is that all stakeholders in the country need to work towards a common goal when it comes to education.

"Without Government, the private sector and civil society working cohesively, we end up with the situation that we find ourselves in today where a lot of funds and a lot of effort is being used in unintegrated way. South Africa does very well

when it comes to producing qualified teachers. Yet, unemployability in this sector is a major problem. And this is a product of teachers being qualified in a certain subject while there is a demand for qualified teachers in another subject. The other challenge is that there is a massive concentration of teachers in urban areas but very few teachers in rural areas. Government needs to highlight this and make teaching in rural areas and communities an attractive option for teachers.

Breaking the mould

Being at the coalface of these challenges, Prof Hamid feels that Mancosa is breaking the mould when it comes to addressing these challenges.

"Access to education and making this education affordable to students has always driven Mancosa and will always be a driver at the institution. Second, we have a good understanding of who our students are and what bought them to us. Third, we try to align our courses to qualify students in the demands of the labour market. Employers are looking for 21st century soft skills that are transferable. We are highly cognisant of the fact that a qualification on its own does not make a person employable. If a student wants to be a success in what I call the hyper competitive labour market they need transferable skills," says Prof Hamid.

This is the model that we need to use when we go about taking ownership of the educational agenda.

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