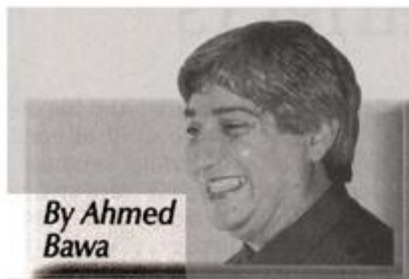


Storm in a campus is only the beginning

Creative solutions will have to be found for institutions of higher learning to cope with the demand for tertiary education



By Ahmed Bawa

SOUTH Africa's higher education does not know it yet, but a storm is rising on the horizon and it will drive powerful pressures on our existing universities.

Applications for study at universities in KwaZulu-Natal are channelled through the Central Applications Office (CAO) and for 2011 there were 57 000 applications for study at the Durban University of Technology (DUT) alone.

If one adds to this the number of students who walked on to campus to ask for spaces to study, this figure goes up to about 70 000 – for just 5 500 spaces that are available every year for first-entry students at DUT. The pressure for places to study is a very powerful storm coming down the line.

Since 1994, we have tried to manage the demands for post-school education by looking at the existing system of public institutions and understanding how to improve their effectiveness and efficiency. The mergers between institutions have been one aspect of this exercise, but this kind of tinkering is unlikely to help.

We face a very difficult set of objective conditions – a school system that continues to fail the educational needs of our young, but at the same time generates a very substantial growth in the number of young people completing secondary school with an ever-growing expectation for places in higher education.

It is time for us to start thinking about higher education provision in a different way. Instead of starting with what we have in terms of capacity, we should be asking: what do we need as a society? This will produce new thinking.

Nations that have grappled with the issues of economic growth, development and the creation of more equal societies – Brazil, India, China, South Korea – have much to teach us.

One of these is that we must increase the participation rate in post-school education. Between 1995 and 2011 there has been very little progress. No more than 17 per cent of 18 to 24-year-olds have ac-

cess to some form of higher education. In South Korea this figure is way beyond 95 percent.

Rejigging the existing system is not going to help. Here is why. The most expensive part of post-school education is university. In addition to high-level, high-quality education, universities are expected to perform high-quality research. This makes them expensive. Yet, in South Africa, most students that enter post-school education are in universities.

The annual intake into our 23 universities is about three times the intake into our Further Education and Training (FET) colleges – the old technical colleges – the places where artisans, technicians, nurses, agricultural extension specialists are trained. This situation is hopelessly skewed.

So what can we do? Let's look at solutions for KwaZulu-Natal. Let's imagine the following. We create a single, contiguous, post-school education system – a mega-university made up of the public universities and the FET, nursing and agricultural colleges.

For the model to work this requires some large changes.

First, imagine that this will be a federal university in which the existing and new institutions will maintain their identity and where institutional governance will be maintained at the institutional level. The mega-university will create the conditions for the post-school education system.

The question is, what would these conditions be? First, it requires a massive expansion of the college sector – increasing its capacity eightfold, say, so that the intake into the college sector becomes the dominant form of entry into the mega-university.

This is not an unusual model in many parts of the world. Students enter this sector either to attain



What if the all the public universities, technikons and colleges in KwaZulu-Natal merged to form a mega university? Professor Ahmed Bawa, vice-chancellor at the Durban University of Technology, says such out-of-the-box thinking is needed to address the storm brewing as a result of the huge number of high school pupils unable to enter tertiary education every year.

vocational qualifications and skills, or as a means to taking a cheaper, more local route into university education. And sometimes it is because students leaving school are not fully sure what it is they want to study.

This route does not lock them into a particular strand at this stage.

Second, the mega-university will ensure proper articulation upwards and downwards so that students who enter the college sector can find their way into the universities on the basis of performance and vice versa.

This articulation requires the creation of a properly connected ladder of qualifications allowing students to migrate through a post-school system, assuming they have

performed at appropriate levels.

Third, to succeed we must have what we might call the articulation of the curriculum. Every student that enters a college or a university must be offered a curriculum that has a general education component over the first two years of study.

All students in the mega-university will do formative education elements – mathematics (up to introductory calculus, say), history and philosophy, language and literature, "citizenship courses" and so on.

These will include writing courses and communication courses, for example, so that we also build the capacity of students for the workplace. The other component of the curriculum becomes institution-specific – we can think of institutions for the training of

technicians, tourism specialists, artists and the like.

This will have other very significant impacts. It will expose young people who are anxious to obtain vocational education to the broader world of ideas and knowledge so that they are also given the opportunity to become lifelong learners – and so they may grow intellectually throughout their working lives.

These general education elements picked up over two years in a college will ensure that students who wish to proceed into diploma and degree studies at the higher education institutions will have the general education requirements to help them succeed in the higher education environment.

There are big challenges: how can we build an expanded system

when it is so difficult to recruit qualified staff now? And can we afford such a system? I am convinced that we can find solutions to these as long as we build a model that is driven by an imagination that grows out of the objective conditions that we find ourselves in.

What about the university sector? Here we can think of some wonderful new innovations.

We can build a properly differentiated provincial system where the universities in the region complement each other by design – we can build a KZN approach to the research and teaching programmes for the sugar industry, or the biotechnology industry, or the maritime industry, or the arts and design industry.

In such a system, students will

be able to take courses in any of the institutions even though they are registered at a particular one. Where masters and doctoral programmes are offered, we can draw on the best academics in the mega-university to participate in these.

What about a single postgraduate college where all masters and doctoral programmes in KZN are managed and where academics can be recruited from across the mega-university? There are myriad opportunities.

Perhaps the key question is why should we develop a mega-university as a way to capture the key elements of this model.

First, it is to build the status of the college sector, to assure young people and their parents that their entrance into one of the colleges is an entry into the mega-university, into one of the best institutions in the country, into a powerful research and teaching institution – into the world of science and the humanities, into the world of knowledge, into the world of vocational education and so on. This is crucial if we are to address the issue of increasing the participation rate of 18- to 24-year-olds in post-school education.

Second, it is an approach that allows the creation of a properly differentiated system that covers the higher education needs of the province (and the nation).

This is a vital step in helping us to conceive of a post-school education system that coherently meets the research and education needs of our nascent but complex democracy and our globalising economy – at the same time as focusing on the challenges of local development.

Third, it is the one way that KZN can become the engine for building a conceptual framework for post-school education that directly and coherently addresses the issues of equity and development. We need a system that can grow to meet our equity needs, but we need the correct mix of academic programmes that are necessary for development. This would be a game-changer.

● Professor Ahmed Bawa is vice-chancellor of DUT