Capstone Assessment

According to Branson, ‘Universities in South Africa receive direct government funding through subsidies that are linked to research, student enrolment and student graduation rates’ (2023). These subsidies are provided by the government to reduce the cost of education for students and to ensure a great quality of higher education. The subsidy value is largely determined by how many students graduate and how many years it takes them to graduate. If a student takes longer than the expected duration to finish a degree and graduate, no subsidy would be paid to the university. This essay argues that, while the current funding model for South African universities aims to encourage accountability and efficiency, it can lead to a decline in educational quality as institutions may lower academic standards to meet subsidy criteria. The essay will look at the negative consequences of this funding model and solutions on how to deal with them.

Firstly, one of the negative consequences this funding model could have on the quality of education is universities lowering academic standards to ensure higher graduation rates within the expected duration due to the pressure to of meet the subsidy criteria. Pressure on subsidies might result in universities prioritizing meeting the subsidy criteria more than maintaining academic standards. An example of an action that could take place because of the subsidy pressure is making course rigor lower than it should be to maximize the number of students that pass. As a result, when the graduates enter the workforce, they will be underprepared, which will affect their performance, thereby affecting the reputation of their former university.

In addition, making course rigor lower than it should be, would result in poor critical thinking skills amongst the students. The university’s objective would be to have more students passing and graduating in due time; however, the students might find themselves lacking the depth of the understanding necessary to excel in their professional fields, as they enter the workforce they would most probably find it hard excelling in their jobs as they would have pursued their degree through a watered-down curriculum. I will use Computer Science as an example as it is one of my modules, reducing course rigor for such a critical thinking demanding course would be detrimental on the student themselves as they would lack the comprehensive knowledge and skills that the course has to offer. They would, however, graduate and meet other fully well-equipped graduates with a higher depth and understanding of programming, thereby leading to long-term implications for the students as well as harming the university’s reputation due to the decline in the quality of graduates.

Several strategies can be implemented to deal with these negative consequences, Firstly, having accreditation bodies that help clarify that the course rigor is not lower than it should be, thereby ensuring that universities meet high academic standards. According to Textiles (2024), ‘An Accreditation Body authorizes Certification Bodies to certify a product or process according to a specific standard’. These bodies would help assess the difficulty of the work being given to the students, thereby ensuring students receive high quality education from the university.

Secondly, engaging in peer reviews where institutions evaluate each other’s academic programs and standards. According to (University of Pretoria), ‘For the latter, the intention is to evaluate and assess someone's teaching practice (i.e., judging it according to set criteria) to arrive at a collective judgement’. This would increase the quality of education as the external feedback from other universities would highlight areas needing improvement in the course content and highlight rigorous practices.

On the other hand, having academic support systems at universities such as tutoring, mentoring, counselling sessions can assist students within their degrees without lowering academic standards. In addition, having support for at-risk students would help them to stay on track and graduate in due time, for example, at University of Cape Town, if a student is struggling to pass their course, they would be added to the Educational Development Unit program, which would provide them with the support they require, with more one on one assistance. This would allow students to graduate with the comprehensive knowledge they require for their degrees. By investing in these student support systems, universities can maximize graduation rates without compromising academic rigor.

In conclusion, while this funding model aims to encourage accountability and efficiency, it can also result in negative consequences on the quality of education as universities strive to meet the subsidy criteria. The pressure of meeting the subsidy criteria can lead to practices that will lower the quality of education and compromise academic rigor. By implementing an evaluation system such as accredited bodies, peer reviews as well as having an academic support system to assist the students, this would avoid these negative consequences and ensure the value of degrees is maintained, thereby allowing graduates to more prepared as they enter the workforce with the comprehensive knowledge and skills that they require.

Reference

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