

SA GETS DUMB AND DUMBER

“OBE MUST GO BACK TO DRAWING BOARD”

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“VARSITY STUDENTS CAN’T READ”

THE shocking state of South Africa’s education system was laid bare in Parliament yesterday.

Most of the country’s first-year university students cannot read, write and comprehend, according to a report presented by education management body Higher Education SA to the portfolio committee on higher education.

The education body chairman, Theuns Eloff, told the committee the outcomes based curriculum has failed to produce competent pupils.

Eloff said: “As university managers we are concerned that the ability of learners from high school to read, comprehend and write is declining ... and they are bad spellers.”

He said universities that conducted competency tests in English and Afrikaans — the dominant languages of instruction — have reported a decline in standards.

Among the universities that participated in the study were Pretoria, Free State, North West and Rhodes.

Eloff told The Times: “One may say we must do the tests in indigenous languages, but we have always done it in the two languages for black students in the past as well and the outcome was a higher level of understanding then.

“One of the unintended consequences of the OBE [outcomes based education] is that we stopped having comprehension tests and reading and spelling.

“You don’t learn to spell and comprehend, and that is nonsense.”

Eloff’s remarks come hard on the heels of a recent report, compiled by a panel of educationists led by University of the Free State vice chancellor Jonathan Jansen, which concluded that the country’s schooling system was “dysfunctional”.

The panel reported that there was “confusion” among teachers about outcomes based education.

Professor George Euvrard, Dean of Education at Rhodes University, said he has noted with concern the competence levels of students arriving at varsity, and has found that many are “significantly unprepared”.

Euvrard said: "It's asking an enormous amount of lecturers. They are prepared to teach at a certain level and when they deal with students who [don't have basic skills] it can be quite frustrating."

He said the problems experienced by universities with first-year students was an indication of the need for the education department to go back to the drawing board.

"I agree there is a lower standard and students are less prepared. It probably suggests it [OBE] needs to be reworked," he said.

Euvrard said universities are having to extend their teaching programmes to ensure that students reach the standard required for entry into the work force.

"We spend time making up for the deficits," he said.

DA MP Wilmot James said university resources are being used to deal with under-prepared students and the result is that those resources are being diverted from where they should be.

James, a former University of Cape Town academic, said: "If we had a system where students in universities are qualified to be there in terms of skills and expertise, we would have a much better university system."

Eloff said the problem was compounded by the belief that the country's further education and training colleges are inferior. This, he said, has resulted in universities being flooded by students who otherwise would be in these colleges.

He said academic staff in most universities can no longer cope with the increasing numbers.

"So we have serious understaffing in some subjects. By and large we have too few staff members to cope, and this is aggravated by the fact that we now have more students who need more attention, and we are struggling," Eloff said.

In an apparent contradiction of recent calls for the broadening of access to higher education for the poor by Higher Education and Training Minister Blade Nzimande, Eloff said some universities were considering capping student numbers to improve the quality of teaching.

The growing numbers of students have made this impossible for lecturers, many of whom are expected to publish scholarly articles in areas of their expertise.

Higher Education SA's figures show that student enrolment has been growing by 6.6% a year since 1995, resulting in a current student population of about 800,000.

Eloff said the decline in university funding has hampered universities' ability to address shortages of staff.