



**Advice to the Minister of Higher Education  
and Training on the Reform of the  
Undergraduate Curriculum in Higher  
Education**

**December 2014**

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 South Africa has a pressing need for more graduates with the knowledge and high-level skills necessary to take forward all forms of social and economic development. It also needs more graduates to build up the education system itself by providing a new generation of teachers, college lecturers, academics and education leaders. This is acknowledged in the *National Development Plan (2011)* and the *White Paper on Post-School Education and Training: Building an Effective, Expanded and Integrated Post-School System (2013)*.
- 1.2 Much progress has been made in the last twenty years towards achieving greater access to higher education and an increase in South Africa's graduate output. However, there still exist major shortcomings in terms of overall numbers, the skewed demographic profile of the graduate complement and the proportion of the student body that succeeds. Too few higher education students in undergraduate programmes succeed in completing a programme in the time for which it was designed – on average only 27% - and too few complete at all. That approximately half the students who enter higher education do not complete a qualification means that a key strategic national objective, that is, to produce enough graduates who are well-prepared for the changing demands of society and the economy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, remains unfulfilled. It is also unacceptably costly in both human and financial terms.
- 1.3 It is against this background that the Council on Higher Education (CHE) in 2012 established a Task Team to investigate the desirability and feasibility of introducing systemic reform in the curriculum of the major undergraduate qualifications, that is, three- and four-year degrees, and three-year diplomas.
  - 1.3.1 The Council's decision was prompted by a concern that the poor performance patterns that characterise higher education, that is, high rates of failure, repetition of courses and student drop-out, have not only proved to be persistent, but also resistant to the multiple efforts to improve them that have been undertaken since the early 1980s.
  - 1.3.2 It was also informed by a widely-held and longstanding view that this lack of change insufficiently takes account of the needs of a growing student body and has resulted in a so-called 'articulation gap' between the demands of higher education and the preparedness of school-leavers to pursue academic study.
- 1.4 The need to address the articulation gap through the restructuring of undergraduate qualifications is not a new idea. It has been central to

the policy discourse in higher education in the past twenty years. It was first mooted in *Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* in 1997; taken up by the CHE's "Size and Shape" Task Team in its report, *Towards a New Higher Education Landscape: Meeting the Equity, Quality and Social Development Imperatives of South Africa in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in 2000*; supported in the *National Plan for Higher Education* in 2001 and in the *Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions* in 2008; highlighted by the Minister of Higher Education and Training at the Higher Education Summit in 2010 and re-iterated in the *White Paper on Post-School Education and Training: Building an Effective, Expanded and Integrated Post-School System* in 2013.

- 1.4.1 However, despite the widespread recognition of the need to investigate the restructuring of undergraduate qualifications to address the articulation gap from 1997 onwards, this did not eventuate, largely because of a concern that, in the context of the wide-ranging policy changes in higher education post-1994, which included the restructuring of the institutional landscape in the early to mid-2000s, there was a danger of policy overload, with adverse consequences for institutional stability.
- 1.4.2 The restructuring is now consolidated, and the alignment of the programme offerings in higher education on one common qualifications framework, the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF), from the many that preceded it, is nearing completion.
- 1.5 The brief of the Task Team was to analyse and investigate the problem of the articulation gap, and to put forward a proposal to alleviate it through curriculum restructuring that was both educationally sound and practically feasible and would contribute to improving the effectiveness and the efficiency of the educational process in higher education.
  - 1.5.1 The Task Team's investigation was extensive. It comprised:
    - the carrying out of a series of cohort studies to establish the extent of the problem of poor throughput and graduation rates;
    - analysis of the nature and reasons for the existence of an articulation gap;
    - evaluation of existing models of extended curricula introduced to address the articulation gap to ascertain their effectiveness, including principles and lessons to inform the development of the Task Team's proposal;
    - the development of curriculum exemplars by groups of experts in 5 main qualifications (BSc, BCom, BEng, DipEng and BA/BSocSc) to test the feasibility of the proposal in practice, and
    - financial modelling of the potential subsidy implications at system level to assess the affordability of the proposal.

- 1.6 The Task Team's report, *A proposal for undergraduate curriculum reform in South Africa: The case for a flexible curriculum structure*, was published in August 2013 for comment and consultation. The Council indicated that the outcome of the consultation would inform the Council's advice to the Minister of Higher Education and Training on the desirability and feasibility of restructuring undergraduate qualifications.

## **2. The Rationale for the Task Team's Proposal**

- 2.1 The Task Team argues that there is a link between graduate output and aspects of a country's well-being, i.e. economic development and technical skills supply, social cohesion, cultural growth and the maturation of democracy. Its analysis showed that poor performance in teaching and learning is a key challenge confronting the higher education system and is an obstacle to achieving national targets for graduate output. Chief among the concerns are the current low student success and throughput rates, leading to low absolute numbers of graduates - often with inappropriate attributes for the contemporary world - and a distribution of graduates that is skewed along racial lines.
- 2.2 The Task Team recognised that performance is influenced by many factors such as the quality of schooling and socio-economic conditions, and that the reasons for student dropout are various and include affective factors and funding issues. It focused, however, on factors within the higher education sector's control that could make a difference to the output and outcomes of higher education.
- 2.3 The Task Team's investigation concluded that the extent of poor performance indicates a systemic problem that cuts across the sector, rather than one that can be explained by factors affecting individuals. It therefore demands a systemic solution.
  - 2.3.1 It further confirmed the view that there exists an articulation gap between schooling and higher education that affects a large proportion of the higher education intake and which affects their chances of success. The current curriculum structure, having been designed a long time ago to suit the needs of an homogenous minority, has not since adapted substantially to changed conditions in South Africa to meet the needs of equity and development, to increase system performance and to enhance graduate quality.
- 2.4 The reasons for students not completing in the current regulation time are various, but include failure in specific modules and the need to repeat courses, inability to study full-time for a variety of personal or financial reasons, and, in the main, academic under-preparedness.
  - 2.4.1 Given academic under-preparedness, the time and space parameters of the existing curriculum structure constrain rather than facilitate learning and promote student success. The Task Team's argument

relates curriculum space or room to the formal time allocated to the achievement of a qualification, and for which it is designed and funded. While time does not necessarily translate into learning unless constructive use is made of the time allocated, the current reality is that the great majority of South African undergraduate students do not complete their degrees or diplomas in the formal or 'regulation' time. The data indicate that many who do complete are following curricula in an unplanned way, carrying repeat modules into the following year. This suggests that curricula designed and planned to extend over extra time would be more appropriate for the majority of students.

### **3. The Task Team's Proposal**

3.1 The Task Team's proposal is to create extra curriculum space in the undergraduate curriculum as the most effective means of addressing the articulation gap.

3.1.1 Central to the Task Team's argument is that in the current undergraduate curriculum structure there is little curriculum space and time in which to address widespread student under-preparedness for higher education study, both at entry level and at certain transitions between different stages of undergraduate study.

3.2.2 There is thus a need to create extra curriculum space through the redesign of the undergraduate curriculum structure for 360-credit and 480-credit qualifications. The extra curriculum space required is the equivalent of 120 credits, which should be funded as the norm. In practice, this equates to establishing a new norm for the formal completion of a qualification; for current three-year qualifications this would become four years; for current four-year qualifications, this would become five years.

3.2.3 The creation of extra curriculum space would allow for the development of a curriculum based on more realistic assumptions about the diverse levels of student preparedness, and enable development work to assist with overcoming the articulation gap and the bridging of transitions between different stages of undergraduate study, to be incorporated into the curriculum. The additional curriculum space should be utilised to ensure realistic starting points and progression paths, and to introduce valuable forms of curriculum enhancement, rather than for the introduction of additional curriculum content.

3.3 The new norm would thus be an extended qualification; however, recognising that levels of under-preparedness differ, the Task Team argues for flexibility in entry-levels to enable well-prepared students to be exempted from some or all of the 120 additional credits and thus to be able to complete in less than the proposed new formal time. The data indicate that just under a third of an entering cohort is currently able to complete their studies in the current regulation time.

- 3.4 The Task Team emphasises the importance of maintaining or improving exit-level standards and proposes that, while there may be different paths to achieving a qualification, the exit outcomes should be the same for all pathways followed.

#### **4. The Task Team's Modelling of the Implementation Implications of the Proposal**

- 4.1 The effect of the Task Team's proposal for an extra 120 credits as the norm for the main undergraduate qualifications was modelled according to current throughput flows and on conservative assumptions. While improving the quality of teaching and addressing student funding issues would assist in increasing throughput rates, the modelling showed that a change in the curriculum structure would benefit the majority of students and influence graduate output significantly. In terms of the modelling, the system currently produces 21 000 graduates from an intake of 42 000 (2010 numbers). With a flexible and extended curriculum, the system could produce 28 000 graduates from the intake of the same size.

- 4.2 In terms of subsidy implications, the Task Team modelled three scenarios to achieve greater graduate output. It found that without a change in the curriculum, and at current throughput rates, to produce 28 000 graduates would require an intake of 53 000 instead of 42 000.

- 4.3 In terms of subsidy efficiency, it found that the unit cost per student would be lower were the extended curriculum to be introduced, in comparison with increasing the intake and leaving the curriculum parameters unchanged.

- 4.3.1 With a changed curriculum, the system could produce 28% more graduates with a 16% increase in subsidy. In contrast, to produce 28% more graduates through increasing the student intake would require a 38% increase in subsidy. In addition, implementing an extended curriculum would result in a 25% less unproductive use of subsidy than is currently the case (see Proposal, Figure 10, p.137).

- 4.4 The Task Team also modelled the implications in terms of academic staffing and concluded that, if current student: staff ratios were to be maintained, to increase graduate output through the introduction of an extended curriculum for all undergraduate qualifications would require 14% additional subsidy, as opposed to 41% if the same increase in output were to be achieved through increasing student intake (see Proposal, Table 15, p. 145).

#### **5. Consultation Process**

- 5.1 The Task Team's proposal was released for comment and consultation in August 2013. The consultation process included the following:

- The Task Team presented the outcomes of the investigation prior to the release of the report to the Higher Education South Africa (HESA) Board in mid-2013.
- A national seminar to discuss the report was held in September 2013 and attended by some 200 stakeholders.
- A formal invitation was issued for written comment from stakeholders to be submitted by the end of November 2013. Forty-two submissions were received in total, 22 of which were submitted by public higher education institutions. A joint response was submitted by HESA, and submissions were also made by 9 stakeholder bodies and 10 individuals.
- Workshop presentations were made by members of the Task Team and/or the CHE at the invitation of individual higher education institutions.
- A presentation was made to the HESA Teaching and Learning Strategy Group.
- Editorial pieces were written in the media and a number of radio and TV interviews held.

5.1.1 A summary of the stakeholder responses, *Responses to the CHE Task Team's Proposal for Undergraduate Curriculum Reform*, which provides an analysis of the consolidated responses, was released for information purposes in June 2014 (copy attached).

## **6. Institutional and Stakeholder Responses**

6.1 As indicated in 5.2 above, just over half of the submissions received were from public higher education institutions. As public higher education institutions account for close to 90% of student enrolments in higher education, and given that there is significant overlap between the issues raised by public higher education institutions and other stakeholders, the brief outline of stakeholder responses below focuses on their responses in the main.

6.2 The challenge of poor throughput and drop-out rates in higher education, and that these are unacceptable, is universally acknowledged. In line with this, 18 of the 22 public higher education institutions that made submissions support the Task Team's proposal for curriculum reform "in-principle".

6.2.1 However, the "in-principle" support does not necessarily translate into agreement with the Task Team's analysis of the underlying problem and the contributory causes. In this regard, the following issues were raised by several institutions – though not all these issues were shared ones:

- The articulation gap is a problem of the school system and improving the quality of schooling should be the main focus of reform efforts to address under-preparedness in higher education.

- Academic under-preparedness is not the only contributory factor for poor throughput and drop-out rates. There are various other factors such as the social, economic and cultural backgrounds of students, the lack of student funding, poor career guidance, family pressures and students' levels of motivation.
- There is an interplay of factors other than curriculum structure that affect teaching and learning, in particular, pedagogy and the teaching abilities of academics.

6.2.2 In addition, many of the public higher education institutions that support the Task Team's proposal "in-principle", raised a number of concerns – both principled and practical, regarding the implications for implementation. These include the following:

- The adequacy of an extra 120 credits to address a complex range of knowledge gaps, including academic literacy, language functionality and hierarchical knowledge gaps.
- The difficulty of resolving the tension between utilising the extra 120 credits to provide both foundational knowledge and curriculum enhancement/enrichment in terms of breadth. A related concern was that students on a shorter track may not have enrichment courses included in their studies .
- The potential unintended consequence of reproducing existing inequalities – social, cultural, economic and racial - as a result of a flexible curriculum structure that changes the norm in terms of formal time but also allows an "accelerated" track enabling those students who qualify to complete in lesser time. In short, the concern is that the majority of white students will be enrolled in the "accelerated" track and as they are predominantly in the historically white institutions, it will continue to reproduce the institutional inequalities characteristic of apartheid higher education.
- The difficulty of developing appropriate selection and placement processes and mechanisms that would be put in place to determine on which track a student is to be placed.
- The time-tabling, workload and staffing implications of introducing a flexible and extended curriculum.
- The lack of expertise in curriculum development and teaching methodologies among academic staff.
- The infrastructural implications of a flexible curriculum structure in terms of laboratories, teaching venues, IT resources and residences.
- The funding implications of a flexible curriculum structure, in particular, the commitment on the part of government to provide the requisite funding.
- The implementation implications in terms of timing and extent. It was argued that implementation should be phased in, starting with a pilot process in specific qualifications. It was also felt that some professional qualifications, which are highly selective and



in which throughput rates are above the national average, should be excluded.

6.3 The four institutions that do not support the Task Team's proposal advanced differing reasons, among them the following:

- While poor throughput and drop-out rates were acknowledged to be a national problem, the institutions concerned considered their throughput rates to be better than the national average.
- Radical curriculum reform was not necessary and not an appropriate response to the problem as defined (although the principle of foundational provision across the undergraduate diploma/degree was supported). Alternatives proposed include the provision of foundational support through summer/winter schools; mentorship and/or life coaching; the introduction of a generic one-year foundational qualification (a Higher Certificate); greater use of blended learning; and "combined interventions", that is, more first-year support, extended orientation, tutorials, smaller classes and winter/summer schools.
- The problem is located at the school level and should be addressed there.

## **7. Council's Consideration of the Institutional and Stakeholder Responses**

7.1 The Council welcomes the acknowledgement from institutions and other stakeholders that current poor throughput and drop-out rates are unacceptable.

7.2 The Council agrees with the Task Team that the articulation gap between school and higher education and academic under-preparedness is the key to understanding and addressing poor throughput and drop-out rates. The Council does not, however, agree with the view advanced by some stakeholders that the articulation gap is a problem only of the school system and that improving the quality of schooling should be the main focus of reform efforts to address under-preparedness in higher education. The Council supports the Task Team's view that the articulation gap is a problem of both the school and the higher education systems, and that it is the responsibility of higher education institutions to ensure that students enrolled are provided with the wherewithal to successfully complete their studies. Given the social and educational realities of South African society, this is necessary if higher education is to contribute to social and economic development. Furthermore, poor throughput and graduation rates affect all students – both black and white, as reflected in the fact that 42% of African and 33% of white students drop out of all three and four-year qualifications at contact institutions by the end of regulation time (see Proposal, p. 43). This suggests, disparities in terms of race notwithstanding, that the articulation gap cannot be reduced solely to the problem of poor schooling in township and rural schools.

- 7.3 The Council agrees with the institutional responses that academic under-preparedness is one of a range of factors that contribute to poor throughput and drop-out rates. The Council would like to point out that this is recognised by the Task Team. However, Council accepts the Task Team’s argument that, while the other factors should not be underplayed and need to be addressed, their impact would be limited if the key systemic factor is not addressed first, namely, changing the parameters of curriculum structure and learning pathways and the assumptions that underpin the curriculum.
- 7.4 The Council agrees with the Task Team that the curriculum structure in higher education is a “systemic variable affecting student performance” and is central to addressing the articulation gap. In line with this, the Council supports the Task Team’s proposal, as outlined in Section 2. above, that addressing the articulation gap requires a new and redesigned curriculum structure which provides for additional curriculum space – an additional 120 credits - that is flexible in terms of completion time and which maintains or improves exit level standards.
- 7.5 The Council thus does not agree with the view of a few institutions that radical curriculum reform is not necessary and that the challenge of poor throughput and drop-out rates can be addressed solely through alternative interventions. Some of the interventions proposed are currently in place, such as summer/winter schools, mentorships, blended learning and combined interventions. The Council is firmly of the view that the systemic nature of the problem requires systemic reform. This is not to suggest that the alternatives identified are inappropriate. On the contrary, in the Council’s view, these can, and should, be integrated into a new and redesigned curriculum structure as proposed by the Task Team. Thus, for example, summer/winter schools could be used to enable students to complete undergraduate diploma/degree programmes, including the additional 120 credits, in less time than the new norm. The same end result could be arrived at through re-thinking the duration of the academic year, that is, increasing the duration of the academic year through a trimester system, for example, into which the additional 120 credits across the different stages of the curriculum could be incorporated. In short, the model on which institutions base their use of the additional 120 credits would be an institutional decision within proposed guidelines, and a variety of possibilities and options exist.
- 7.5.1 Further, the Council does not agree with institutions that do not support the Task Team’s proposal that poor throughput and drop-out rates, while a national problem, were not applicable to them as their throughput rates were better than the national average. There are five institutions that perform above the national average in relation to throughput and drop-out rates, and which generally also have higher than average admissions requirements. At these institutions, between 60%-67% of students graduate with a three-year degree within 6 years

(i.e. 2 or 3 years longer than regulation time), compared with the national average of 40%. That after 6 years only two-thirds of an intake at these institutions has succeeded, and that a third has dropped out, is a performance pattern that could, and should, be improved upon.

- 7.6 The Council notes the concerns raised regarding the adequacy of an extra 120 credits to address a complex range of knowledge gaps, including academic literacy, language functionality and hierarchical knowledge gaps. In the Council's view it is precisely this complexity that requires a fundamental redesign of the curriculum structure in a manner that spreads the additional 120 credits across the different stages of the curriculum rather than simply as an add-on foundational year. The exemplar curricula developed as part of the Task Team study are suggestive of the ways in which this complexity can be addressed through the additional curriculum space afforded by the Task Team proposal.
- 7.7 The Council recognises the concerns regarding the issues relating to the balance between foundational knowledge and enhancement or enrichment and differential curriculum access linked to different tracks. As far as balance is concerned, the Council agrees with the Task Team that the translation of the principle that both foundational knowledge and enhancement or enrichment need to be addressed can only be resolved in practice at the institutional level in terms of the design of the curriculum, which will vary according to different fields of study.
- 7.7.1 In terms of differential access, in the Council's view there is nothing precluding institutions from providing enhancement or enrichment courses to students in the accelerated track through summer/winter schools and/or increasing the duration of the academic year.
- 7.8 The Council recognises, and is cognisant of, the sensitivities that underpin the concerns regarding the potential unintended consequence of reproducing existing inequalities as a result of a flexible curriculum structure based on at least two learning pathways. However, while it is necessary to guard against any potential unintended consequences, in the Council's view the danger of reproducing existing inequalities has been addressed by the Task Team, which argues that its proposal must be implemented by all institutions, both public and private. Furthermore, as indicated in 7.2 above, poor throughput and graduation rates affect all students, both black and white. Thus students from all groups will stand to benefit from the Task Team's proposal.
- 7.8.1 The Council agrees with the Task Team, however, that "there is a danger of unintended adverse consequences if the flexible curriculum structure is not introduced in all institutions in a disciplined and responsible way, respecting the central purpose of the reform and its national importance. In particular, exploitation of the flexibility of the structure – for example, for institutional marketing or student

recruitment purposes that do not put the students' interests first – would clearly act against the integrity and effectiveness of the system. It is therefore necessary for regulations to be formulated to ensure that all higher education institutions fully implement the new structure. The private higher education sector must be required to introduce the structure in the same way as the public institutions, just as the HEQSF and similar policies have had to be followed by all.” (see Proposal, p. 151)

7.9 The Council is acutely aware of the importance of the concerns raised regarding the implementation of the Task Team's proposal. This goes beyond the issue of affordability, as the Task Team recognised. However, as the Task Team points out, it was beyond its remit to develop detailed implementation plans. It has identified the key aspects that would need to be considered and which would have to be the subject of a detailed planning process if the Task Team's proposal is to be implemented.

## 8. The Council's Response to the Task Team's Proposal

8.1 The Council agrees that the key challenge facing higher education is to improve performance patterns and thus student success through improving teaching and learning. This requires addressing the articulation gap, which is a systemic challenge and cuts across the racial divides in the student body, as indicated in 7.2 above.

8.2 The Council finds it unacceptable that some 50% of students leave higher education without a qualification, and that less than 30% graduate in regulation time. It not only results in an indefensible waste of scarce financial resources but, more importantly, it results in untold and immeasurable damage to the self-esteem of individual students. It also has an adverse impact on the economy and society in terms of the knowledge and skills required for social and economic development.

8.2.1 The higher education system must address the social, economic and cultural realities of South African society if it is to ensure that increased access is to be matched by increased success. This is not the case as reflected by the “revolving door” syndrome, which indicates that the higher education system and its underlying curriculum framework and structure currently serves only a minority of students. This cannot continue.

8.3 The Council agrees that the policy commitment to increased access to higher education cannot be realised in the context of scarce resources unless the effectiveness and efficiency of the higher education system is enhanced in terms of producing more graduates in regulation time. A better throughput rate would enable more students to enter higher education without putting additional pressures on financial and infrastructural resources.

- 8.4 The Task Team’s proposal is a radical departure in that for the first time the challenge of teaching and learning is addressed from the perspective of the majority. The proposal that a revised undergraduate curriculum structure should become the norm addresses the stigma that was previously attached to academic support and development programmes, including extended curriculum programmes, which were perceived to be based on a “deficit” model targeting African students. It also means taking to scale interventions that hitherto have benefited at most 15% of an intake of students.
- 8.7 Accordingly, the Council supports the Task Team’s proposal for a flexible and extended curriculum structure. In the Council’s view, the reform of the undergraduate curriculum is long overdue, and with the benefit of hindsight, it should have been pursued in the early 2000s based on the suggestion in the CHE’s *Size and Shape* report. The Council is convinced that it cannot be delayed any longer.
- 8.8 In the Council’s view, the issue is not whether the flexible curriculum structure should be introduced, but rather when it should be introduced and under what conditions. This is critical to avoid instability in the higher education system, especially given:
- The large-scale systemic change that took place in the mid-2000s with the restructuring of the institutional landscape, which has only recently been consolidated.
  - The current alignment of academic programmes with the requirements of the revised Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQSF).
  - The need to build capacity in curriculum design and development.
  - The need for detailed planning to address the wide-range of implementation issues and concerns raised by institutions, discussed above.

## **9. The Council’s Recommendations and Advice**

- 9.1 The Council recommends that the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) adopts the proposal for a flexible and extended curriculum, as put forward by the Task Team, as the guiding vision for reform of the structural parameters of the undergraduate curriculum in higher education.
- 9.2 It recommends further that to be fully effective and to avoid creating further disparities in the system, such reform should apply to all institutions of higher education, both public and private.
- 9.2.1 Regulations will need to be formulated to ensure that all higher education institutions implement the new structure.

- 9.3 The Council recommends that the reform should in principle apply to all undergraduate qualifications that currently carry a minimum of 360 or 480 credits, except where the cohort throughput rates for a particular qualification offered across the higher education sector indicate that an extended curriculum is not a necessity.
- 9.4 The reform process should be adopted as a national project to be led by the DHET, with support from associated stakeholder bodies, such as HESA and the CHE.
- 9.5 While the vision encompasses the full implementation of a flexible and extended curriculum across all undergraduate qualifications, except where the cohort throughput rates for a particular qualification indicate that an extended curriculum is not a necessity, the Council is firmly of the view that implementation should proceed in a cautious and carefully-planned manner to avoid extensive disruptions in the higher education sector. The Council thus advises that the introduction of the flexible and extended curriculum structure, as proposed by the Task Team, be phased-in over a medium-to-long-term planning horizon.
- 9.6 The Council therefore recommends that the first phase should comprise a national pilot process, wherein only one or two carefully selected qualifications are redesigned as extended offerings as the norm, with flexible pathways included. The purpose of the pilot would be to test the feasibility of the introduction of a flexible and extended curriculum and to gauge the extent of implementation barriers that will need to be overcome in taking the reform to scale.
- 9.6.1 Given the principle that reform in the structure of the undergraduate curriculum should be undertaken by all higher education institutions without exception, the pilot process would need to apply to all institutions that offer the qualification/s selected.
- 9.6.2 An independent evaluation of the pilot process should be undertaken before embarking on a second phase in which the reform is extended to other selected qualifications.
- 9.7 The criteria for the selection of one or more qualifications for the pilot phase should include:
- The existence of experience in the provision of the qualification as an extended curriculum programme in more than one institution such that existing expertise can be drawn upon to inform the development of the pilot and associated processes.
  - The potential for generalisation of the curriculum development process to other qualifications. For this reason, a formative degree may be preferable to a highly structured professional qualification.
  - The least likelihood of diverting curriculum development attention from other necessary processes, for example,

alignment with the HEQSF. For this reason, a diploma offered at Universities of Technology (UoTs) would not be a preferred option for a pilot given the impact of the revised HEQSF on their qualifications.

9.8 In preparation for undertaking a pilot process, the Council recommends that prior processes be undertaken, including:

- A consultation process with the higher education sector and stakeholders to identify and select an appropriate qualification for the pilot process. The consultation process should include the relevant Deans, disciplinary and curriculum experts.
- The modelling of financial, enrolment and staffing implications for individual institutions for both the pilot process and for general implementation (the current modelling has only been undertaken at system level and assumes all undergraduate qualifications will be extended);
- Research into and development of potential placement mechanisms that could be utilised in the implementation of a flexible and extended curriculum; and
- The development of an appropriate national implementation plan.

9.9 To support the introduction of an extended and flexible curriculum, the following are necessary:

- A revision to the funding formula to enable an extra 120 credits to be funded in the pilot qualification in the first instance, and in further qualifications according to the plan to be developed;
- An agreed accreditation process with the HEQC that facilitates the introduction of extended curricula in the selected qualification/s;
- The clarification and alignment of national initiatives in the teaching and learning arena e.g. the DHET's Teaching Development Grants and the Quality Enhancement Project of the CHE to support the project;
- The establishment of a non-permanent national support unit for the development of capacity in curriculum development and support and guidance for implementation, similar to the erstwhile Merger Support Unit of the then Department of Education.

9.10 As capacity and expertise in curriculum development is currently limited, the Council advises that collaborative processes between institutions be encouraged and facilitated at a national level.

9.11 Given the magnitude of the reform proposed and the potential for negative perceptions regarding its rationale, the Council recommends that a national advocacy and communication strategy be carried out prior to the commencement of the implementation of the pilot phase, as well as during each successive implementation phase.

- 9.12 The Council advises that the process of planning for a pilot implementation of the proposed flexible and extended curriculum structure commence as soon as possible.

## 10. Conclusion

- 10.1 Higher education has a vital role to play in contributing to the reconstruction and development of all aspects - social, cultural, economic and political - of South African society. A key element of this is to equip graduates with the personal, professional and social attributes that are necessary for participating in, and engaging with, the broader society both locally and globally. As the Task Team report states:

“Graduates are required for their disciplinary and professional expertise and for creating jobs, and there are key elements of development that cannot be achieved without them. However, the need for more people with advanced knowledge and competencies, as well as an informed understanding of the contemporary world, goes beyond the demands of economic development and technical skills shortages into all key areas of the country’s well-being, including social cohesion, cultural growth and the maturation of South Africa’s democracy through responsible citizenship” (p.32).

- 10.2 However, higher education is failing in its basic mission to produce the graduates required for the reconstruction and development of South African society. It is failing because, of the 18% of 20 to 24-year olds who are enrolled in higher education, which is low in comparison with other middle income countries, roughly half drop-out without obtaining a qualification. The *National Plan for Higher Education* (NPHE) indicated that increasing the participation rate in higher education is dependent on “improving the efficiency of the higher education system through increasing graduate outputs”. This has not been achieved. In the 13 years since the release of the NPHE and despite a range of interventions, including support for expanding extended degree programmes and teaching development grants, the challenge of poor throughput and graduation rates in higher education remains. It is a challenge that needs to be faced head-on if higher education is to contribute to giving effect to the vision of expanding access, increasing success, improving quality and enhancing diversity that is contained in the *White Paper on Post-School Education and Training* and in the *National Development Plan*.
- 10.3 The introduction of a flexible and extended curriculum structure to narrow the articulation gap is both educationally sound and affordable. It is a necessary condition for maximising the benefits that complementary interventions, such as improving the quality of teaching and learning, improving the schooling system, increasing financial aid, and utilising more weeks in the academic year might bring.



- 10.4 The Council is of the view that the Task Team's proposal provides a bold and radical intervention that would contribute to improving throughput and graduation rates. To implement it will require leadership, energy, planning, and communication. Considerable investment will need to be made in increasing the academic staff complement and building capacity in the system to realise the developmental possibilities that a flexible and extended curriculum provides. The case for curriculum renewal is, however, compelling and the need urgent. The conditions need to be created for all students to have the opportunity to realise their aspirations to graduate, and to improve the health, quality and efficiency of the higher education sector. Not implementing curriculum reform as proposed would effectively be condoning the failure of more than half the South African student population and accepting that higher education's contribution to reaching national goals and furthering prosperity is only half as good as it could be.
- 10.5 The reform of the undergraduate curriculum is long overdue and requires all the stakeholders in higher education to come together and focus their collective energies on ensuring that the higher education system realises its unfulfilled potential in producing graduates who, consistent with the non-racial, non-sexist and democratic values enshrined in the Constitution, can contribute to the reconstruction and development of South African society.