

# CHE Task Team's proposal for a flexible undergraduate curriculum structure

Ian Scott

CHE Seminar: 17 September 2013

# The challenge addressed

- The need to substantially improve graduate production in terms of number, quality, attributes, and equity of distribution
  - for economic, social and cultural development
  - for revitalising the education system as a whole
  - to minimise the unsustainable wastage of talent that is occurring

# The proposal

- A flexible curriculum structure with
  - duration increased by a year as the **norm** for current 3- and 4-year qualifications (with an additional funding unit and 120 HEQSF credits)
  - provision for completion in less than the standard time (allowing for exemption from learning already achieved)
  - maintaining existing exit standards
- Found to be a feasible and affordable means of improving graduate output and outcomes
  - and more cost-effective than the current structure

# The case

- Unsustainably poor performance in higher education
- No prospect of sufficient pre-tertiary improvement to allow higher education to continue with business-as-usual
- Why a focus on curriculum structure?
  - as a necessary condition for substantial improvement
- What are the resource implications?

# Problem identification: Performance patterns

- Participation low in relation to comparator countries, and racially skewed
  - student intake must have high potential to succeed
- Yet performance stays stubbornly poor
  - 27% of contact students graduating in regulation time
  - half of the intake will never graduate
  - only 5% of African and coloured *youth* succeeding in higher education
- A low-participation, high-attrition system
  - pointing clearly to **systemic** problems
  - affecting the majority of the current and future intake

## Accounting for the performance patterns

- Recognising the significance of material and affective factors
  - however, concluding that faults in the educational process are at the heart of the matter
- Student underpreparedness widely seen as the key factor
  - but underpreparedness is relative
  - thus better expressed as a discontinuity between prior learning and what higher education expects
- Given that education is a continuum, what sectors of the system will be able to play the major role in addressing this challenge?

## Prospects for the pre-tertiary sectors

- To operate effectively within existing structures, higher education would need around 100,000 additional entrants who are well-prepared **for current curricula**
- School and FET College sectors
  - overwhelming evidence: effectively no prospect of meeting this need
- Therefore clear choice for higher education:
  - accept status quo or act on factors that are within its control to address existing underpreparedness systemically

# Why focus on curriculum structure?

A critical area for positive and practicable change

- Curriculum structure represents the **framework** for all we do in teaching and learning
  - and is either enabling or constraining
- Current curriculum structures adopted nearly a century ago
  - based on a small, privileged and homogeneous student body
  - need now to decisively take account of the needs of the majority
  - hence need to keep what is positive – including strong exit standards – but change elements that are no longer appropriate and are impeding student learning
- Who is benefiting from the status quo?



# Why focus on curriculum structure?

No room now for essential changes

- No curriculum space, or funding, within current curricula to enable the key educational challenges to be met
  - the secondary–higher education articulation gap
  - key forms of provision – such as language development and quantitative literacy – that are essential for enabling learning
  - key transitions within curricula for which students are differentially prepared
  - the need for curriculum enhancement: from increasing breadth to key graduate attributes
- Therefore:

‘The structural obstacles to substantially improving student learning and graduate output cannot be addressed effectively without **increasing the normal duration** of the core undergraduate degrees and diplomas’

# Why focus on curriculum structure?

## Addressing diversity

- The final major challenge is dealing with diversity and inequality in students' educational background
  - traditional one-size-fits-all structure cannot be effective for such diversity
  - so moving from one rigid structure to another would not address diversity and inequality
- Hence the importance of a **flexible structure** that allows for differentials in starting points, progression paths and thus duration
  - but not in exit standards and outcomes

# Critical assessment of the proposal

- Task Team has examined the implications of the proposal for
  - academic standards
  - institutional autonomy
  - system growth
  - capacity to reduce individual and institutional inequalities

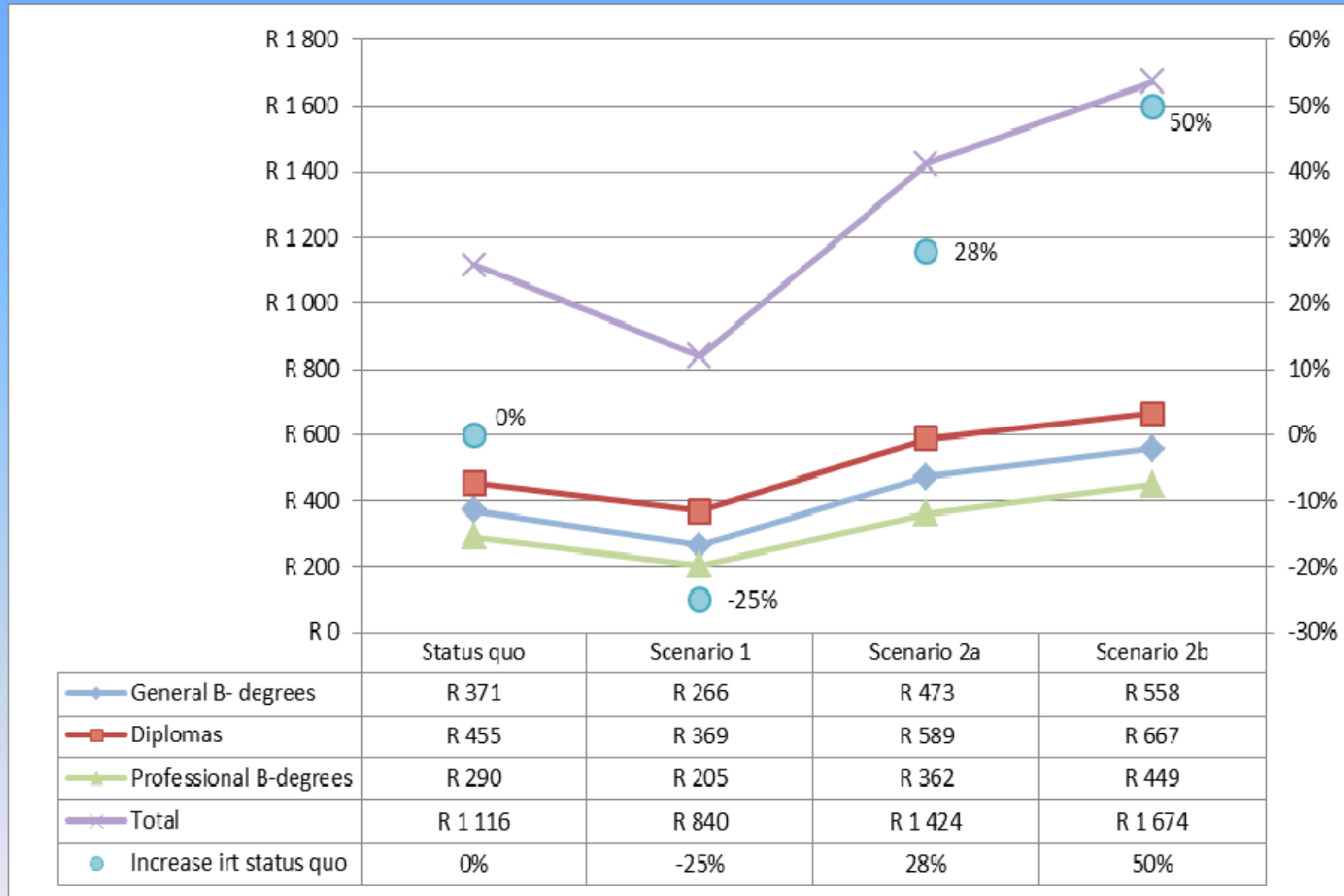
It has identified no significant drawbacks but rather some important advantages.

- Special attention given to financial projections – for state, institutions and students – and staffing implications

## Financial projections: All 3- and 4-year qualifications

- Cost per graduate
  - Scenario 1(the proposal): 10% less than status quo
  - Scenario 2b (increasing intake): 20% more than Scenario 1
- In steady state, average **annual additional subsidy** required for Scenario 1 is **5.3%** of comparable subsidy amount for 2012
- Over a full cohort period, total **additional cost** of Scenario 2b over Scenario 1 **for each cohort** is approximately R1.8 billion

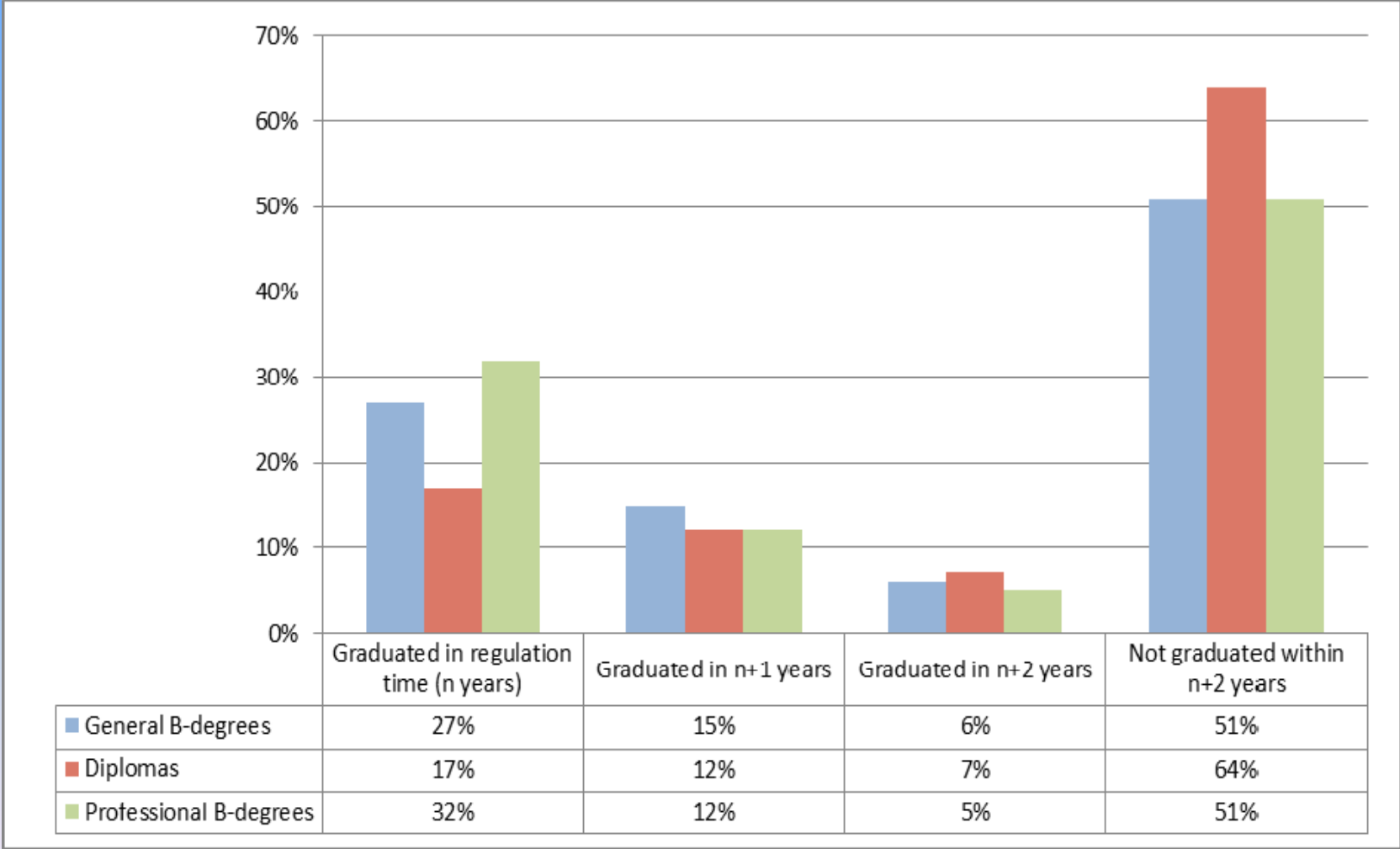
# Unproductive use of subsidy per cohort (in R millions)



## Costs to the students

- The student body would on average have the same outlay for higher education as is the case now.
- It is likely that some students would have a higher outlay, for reasons such as incorrect placement
- However, a greater number would pay less or, more importantly, achieve a qualification rather than dropping out and losing their investment

# Time to graduate (2005 cohort excluding UNISA)



## Academic staff resources

- The growth scenarios would all generate enough additional subsidy to enable current student-staff ratios to be maintained
  - Scenario 1 would require only 14% more funding to achieve this
  - whereas Scenario 2b would require nearly treble the increase



## Overall conclusion on affordability

- Implementing the new structure would be financially viable, and would constitute the most resource-efficient way of achieving substantial graduate growth.

# Implementation: Needs and mechanisms

- Institutional responsibilities
  - curriculum and course design
  - development and implementation of educationally sound placement policy and mechanisms
  - continuing development of effective T&L approaches and student and staff support systems
- A dedicated **transition unit** for a specified period, to provide leadership, co-ordination and support for the process
  - with a temporary transition fund to support implementation
- Professional development
  - use of Teaching Development Grant
  - a small national unit for 5 years to guide and mobilise resources

# Relationship between curriculum reform and other means of improving student success

- Full recognition of importance of pedagogical effort, innovation through educational technology, and affective and material support
  - but an enabling curriculum framework is a necessary condition for effective deployment of all these measures
  - also critical to have a viable funding basis for the additional forms of provision needed to support core learning
- Analytical and empirical indications that structural curriculum reform will make a difference in itself

## The issue of duration

- The key consideration is not the number of years *per se* but **time on task**
  - perhaps better expressed as 'curriculum space'
- Time/space parameters must be determined by a realistic starting level and the required exit level and standards
  - much variation in parameters internationally
  - our parameters should be set in accordance with our own realities
- In practice, however it may be arranged, a 'year' of additional formal learning is needed to enable the majority of the student body to reach the required exit level
  - as shown in the performance patterns

# What would the curricula look like?

- The goals of the new structure can be achieved in different ways in different programmes
  - the curriculum exemplars commissioned played a key role in concretely demonstrating the issues and possibilities
- Key common elements
  - realistic assumptions about students' prior learning, at entry level and in major transitions within the curriculum
  - focus on providing for the knowledge and skills students most need
  - smooth progression paths
  - integrating skills and literacies into disciplinary learning wherever possible, but including developmental and enhancement courses where appropriate
  - allowing for flexibility through exemptions at subject level

## Just more of the same?

- In institutional interests to improve student performance by making positive use of the additional time and funding
- Also, not possible for institutions to simply spread out what they are doing now over an extra year
  - need to account for the additional SAQA and HEMIS credits or sacrifice the funding
  - quality assurance through the accreditation process
  - requirement for rigorous and transparent criteria for exemption from any course credits
- Preventing manipulation for marketing purposes
  - the same stipulations, reinforced by enrolment planning, will stand in the way of marketing approaches that would act against the goals of improving student learning and equity of outcomes

# Negative effects of the flexible curriculum on equity and representivity?

- At institutional level
  - no change in current requirements for equity and transformation
- Composition of the new first-year courses
  - no group is doing well in the current system (>1/3 of white students not graduating in n+2 years), so all groups will be represented in the new first-year courses
- Composition of the intake qualifying for exemptions
  - nationally, there will be more African than white students in this group, and the proportions will increasingly reflect the population
- But the over-riding goal should be equity of outcomes
  - which the flexible curriculum is projected to deliver through improving student success and representivity through to graduation