Responses to the CHE Task Team's Proposal for Undergraduate Curriculum Reform

June 2014

Introduction

In 2013 the Council on Higher Education (CHE) released for discussion a report compiled by a Task Team it had commissioned to consider potential reform of the undergraduate curriculum structure of South African higher education. The Task Team had been asked to undertake an investigation to determine the extent and causes of the poor throughput rates that currently exist, and to propose potential solutions to improve both graduate output and graduate outcomes.

The Task Team on Undergraduate Curriculum Structure's report, *"A proposal for undergraduate curriculum reform in South Africa: the case for a flexible curriculum structure"*, released in August 2013, was widely discussed in the radio, print and television media. A national seminar was held in September 2013, attended by some 200 stakeholders. It was also discussed at individual higher education institutions in workshops facilitated by members of the Task Team or the CHE, and in internal institutional structures. Formal comment was elicited from all stakeholders, including professional and student bodies. Submissions were received by 13 December 2013 from 22 universities, (as well as a joint response from Higher Education South Africa (HESA)), 9 other stakeholder bodies, and 10 individuals. This report presents an analysis of the consolidated responses and is being released for information purposes.

The Task Team's proposal in short

The Task Team proposes that the current structure of 3 and 4-year undergraduate degrees and diplomas be extended by 120 credits as the norm in order to provide more curriculum time and space for the development of foundational concepts and content, whether these be at the first level or spread throughout the curriculum to provide support for difficult curriculum transitions. The extra credits are to be funded accordingly. It also proposes that a flexible curriculum be introduced to allow students who are sufficiently well prepared not to need those credits, to take a shorter route to the same exit level of a degree or diploma.

The Task Team undertook empirical data analysis of the performance of the 2005 and 2006 cohorts of students, and found that:

- Only about a quarter of a cohort of students graduate in regulation time from three-year diplomas and three and four-year degrees (based on 2005/6 cohorts)
- Racial disparities are evident. For example, only 20% of African or Coloured students graduate from a 3-year degree in regulation time, while the figure for white students is 43%
- No group is performing well. More than a third of the best performing group, that is white students in contact universities, fail to graduate within five years.
- Attrition is very high – at the end of the regulation time for all three qualification types, more students have been lost to failure and dropout than have graduated – more than twice as many in the case of African and diploma students. Of the overall 2006 undergraduate cohort, five years after entering a three-year programme, only 35% of the cohort had graduated (less than half of the contact students).
- Broad comparisons with cohorts of 2000 and 2005 indicate that the performance patterns are consistent and persistent.

Given the confirmation of the existence of unsustainably poor throughput rates, the Task Team then undertook a reflective analysis of interventions such as extended curriculum programmes introduced for a minority of students over the last few decades and their successes or failures in addressing the problem. This analysis informed its proposal that a systemic intervention in curriculum structure is a necessary (if not sufficient) condition for the improvement of throughput rates.

Central to the argument of the Task Team is that the majority of students who complete a qualification (and roughly half do not complete at all) currently take longer than the formal regulation time to do so. The implications of this are that many students are following curricula that have become distorted in that they are carrying courses from previous years in an unplanned manner, and this, in addition to current curricula being based on inaccurate assumptions about their preparedness, results in less than ideal conditions for the achievement of success. While the Task Team acknowledges that the reasons for less than adequate graduate output and outcomes are complex, multifaceted and diverse, and that not all of them are in the gift of the higher education sector to influence to any great extent, it concentrated on the essence of its brief by analysing those factors that do indeed lie within the control of higher education.

The Task Team argues that there exists an articulation gap between school and undergraduate study in higher education, which manifests itself in curricula based on inappropriate assumptions about students' prior knowledge and understanding, learning pathways that are inflexible and curricula that do not take account of students' preparedness to bridge the transitions between different phases of undergraduate study. The Task Team's report argues strongly that the parameters of the current undergraduate curriculum structure are not enabling the main goals of higher education to be fully achieved and that the current curriculum norms are not appropriate for contemporary South African conditions.

Given an analysis that locates a major factor influencing poor graduate outputs and outcomes in systemic conditions, the proposal for improvement put forward is for a change in conditions at that level. The report puts forward a case that, with extra curriculum space in which to include educational interventions such as foundation level courses to increase students' preparedness to manage the academic work required to achieve the exit levels set for particular qualification types, or extra courses designed to assist with bridging difficult transitions that occur at different stages of undergraduate study, more students will have a fair chance of graduating than is currently the case. The report argues for a complete redesign of the main undergraduate qualification types to establish a new norm for formal completion of four years for undergraduate diplomas and degrees that currently are designed for a regulation completion time of three years, and five years for professional undergraduate degrees that are currently designed for four years' study. At the same time, the report recognises that levels of underpreparedness differ, and the proposal makes allowance for flexibility in curricula such that students who are well-enough prepared to complete in less than then new formal time, will have an opportunity to do so.

The Task Team's report includes five curriculum exemplars in different fields developed by groups of experts to examine the practicality of extending the curriculum and providing flexible curriculum pathways. Although each of the groups took different approaches to curriculum design, the exemplars illustrate how such a proposal might be realised in practice.

Lengthening the curriculum would have cost implications. In order to calculate the additional funding that would be required, the Task Team's report uses current cohort flows as a basis against which to model improved flows resulting from the introduction of the flexible structure, and to translate these into subsidy and other costs (including the NSFAS). The projections presented indicate that the flexible curriculum structure would produce 28% (about 15,000) more graduates than the status quo from the same intake cohort, at an additional subsidy cost of 16%. To produce the same increase in graduate output without changing the curriculum structure, based on current cohort flows, substantially larger student intakes and state subsidy would be needed. A realistic alternative scenario is projected to require 37% more entering students and more than double the additional subsidy needed than for the flexible structure. The Task Team thus argues that its proposal is educationally sound, practically feasible, and financially more efficient than the current scenario in the long term.

The CHE Task Team's proposal is arguing for the application of interventions that have hitherto been available and funded only for a minority (maximum 15%) of students to become the norm for the majority that needs them. In essence, it is arguing for 120 extra funded credits for the vast majority of students. In modelling what an extended curriculum would cost in subsidy terms overall, it took the system as a whole as its unit of analysis, and included all fields covered in the major undergraduate qualification types. The financial analysis shows what the maximum possible costs would be if all qualifications were extended at one time. Implementation is, however, a different matter. Here the Task Team proposes only that an extended curriculum structure should be adopted by all institutions to avoid potential institutional competition and further inequities arising between institutions, and that a national structure be established to plan, assist and direct appropriate funding to the implementation process. The Task Team is ambitious in envisaging that the

implementation process would last about five years, and though it does not favour a phased-in implementation process, its recommendations are sufficiently broad not to preclude sector-wide adoption of the proposals in successive programme areas. In other words, the Task Team is strong on suggesting that all institutions adopt the extended curriculum, but not necessarily that implementation would apply to all programmes at once, or even that all programmes need to be extended.

A. Responses from the higher education institutions

The public universities

1. Processes followed

The responses from 22 public universities were, in most cases, compiled after an extensive internal consultation process, involving faculties, student bodies, committees, executive groups and teaching and learning specialists. As an example, one describes an extensive consultation process in which all staff and students were consulted, and the proposal was debated in the SRC, faculty and department structures, by the relevant Deans, and at a special university seminar, and through the submission of written reports to the executive. Another describes discussion at a number of university forums and workshops and in senior management groups.

Such responses were perhaps the most detailed and thorough, and were characterised by the presentation of a range of opinions and concerns, which added to their richness. Some others did not detail the process undergone to inform their institutional response and it was not clear therefore to what extent they reflected the diversity of opinion in their institutions rather than the author's individual opinion on the matter. As these were formal submissions, however, they were all regarded as institutional responses. In general, and taking into account that in a few cases, the institutional submissions reflected a diversity of opinions – positive and negative - the most common overall response (17) was "in-principle" support, with reservations. There were four institutions that did not support the Task Team's proposals, although in the case of two of the institutions, this was not clear-cut as their narratives suggested some qualification to their position.

The HESA submission which provides a sectoral response has a somewhat different reading of the institutional responses, stating that the proposal is not supported and that many counter proposals were presented. In our reading, however, there was an overall recognition of the problem of poor throughput rates and broad support for the proposal, albeit with a number of considered reservations and concerns expressed, which are discussed in this report. The discussion of particular issues, questions of clarity, reservations, suggestions, cautions and concerns should thus be read in the context of overall support in principle for the proposal by all but 4 of the institutions.

The HESA submission contextualises the institutional submissions, noting three factors that may have influenced their responses, and which complicate the presentation of a single sector view. These are: differentiation in terms of a typology; the average educational preparedness of the

student body; and differences in institutional resource bases. Certainly, in terms of the first, that is whether the institution is a "traditional university", "a university of technology" or a "comprehensive university" with different priorities and academic offerings, is to some extent discernible in the responses, though they are by no means clear-cut commonalities within the types. In this report the responses are not grouped according to type, but where there are commonalities these are pointed out. Similarly, in terms of the second, in which diversity applies to different extents of educational under-preparedness in the student body, and the third, that is, the differing resource bases of institutions, there was little consistency in responses from institutions with similar characteristics or circumstances, but where this does appear to be relevant it is alluded to in the text. All of these factors will, however, have had some influence on an institution's response.

2. The problem acknowledged

The public universities' responses displayed an almost universal acknowledgement of the problem of poor throughput rates in undergraduate education in South Africa, and endorsed the report's detailed findings in this regard. The Task Team's work was in general "welcomed" and "applauded", and praised for the rigour of the research undertaken to support its case. While there was agreement across the board that current national throughput rates are unacceptable, a few institutions indicated that this was not a problem at their institution as their throughput rates were better than the national average. This view, in two instances, resulted in the institution not supporting the Task Team's proposals. However, in contrast, one institution whose throughput rates are significantly better than the national average, argued that these were still unsatisfactory, and hence it expressed support for the proposal. It is worth noting that the institutional throughput rates for the 2006 cohort for three-years degrees after 6 years, just as one example, ranged from 35% to 67% - the best performer is thus still losing a third of a cohort.

A research-intensive university confirmed the problem in their throughput rates in general undergraduate degrees, but was less convinced that their professional four-year degrees exhibited the same level of poor throughput. Indeed, a number of institutions urged a distinction to be made between the three-year degrees and the four-year professional ones in any proposal that may be taken forward. Another research-intensive institution, that currently enjoys somewhat better throughput rates than the national average, recognised that its planned growth strategy would in all likelihood affect throughputs negatively and that it would thus also need an extended curriculum. One institution was hopeful that more recent cohorts, such as that of 2013, may perform better since a range of combined interventions to improve teaching and learning only took root post-2006 (the cohort under discussion in the report) – in essence, it believed that the problem may already have been alleviated, although it is too soon to tell.

Despite the variety of particular opinions noted here, it is nevertheless clear from the responses that there is a shared conviction that the current throughput rates can no longer be sustained. In summary, of the four responses that did NOT support the proposal, the overriding reason in each case respectively was that 1) while the higher education system exhibited a problem with respect to throughput rates, the institution in question reportedly did not and institutional variation across the

system would be exacerbated by the implementation of the proposal; 2) that radical curriculum reform is not necessary and not an appropriate response to the problem as defined (though the principle of support for foundational provision spread across the degree was supported), 3) that the problem is better located and dealt with at school level and that 4) the particular model advocated, i.e. an extended curriculum, was not the most effective means of addressing the problem.

3. Responsibility for the problem

While the majority of the responses agree with the report's positing of an articulation gap between school and higher education as a structural contributing factor to poor throughput rates, some institutions are not convinced that the problem has been correctly analysed, or its contributory causes sufficiently investigated.

A number of responses locate the cause of the problem in a weak schooling sector and suggest that it is there that most effort needs to be made to address the gap. Some express a concern that if higher education takes on the burden of dealing with the issue, it is tacitly endorsing continued poor quality in other sectors, as in "what are we saying to the schooling sector? We shouldn't lower our expectations", or a worry that the "expectation of dysfunctional schools will become embedded". Other responses found that it is not appropriate to "envisage radical change at universities and no real change elsewhere, when it is the schools and colleges that need the greater degree of change", and that higher education has a moral responsibility to "send clear signals to the basic education sector that there is a limit to what can be achieved with significant numbers of grossly underprepared students…". Others pleaded for an integrated approach and a combined response from higher education and basic education. The implication of a few responses was thus that the responsibility to address the problem does not lie with higher education, though some supporters of the proposal nevertheless argued for engagement between the DHET and DBE about the transition from high school to university. There was also an argument for a major focus on maths education at school level, otherwise despite the reform, there would not be enough well-prepared students to achieve success in higher education. Others were more sanguine about higher education's responsibility in this regard. An institution in which there was reportedly widespread support for the proposal noted agreement among its members that higher education cannot wait for systemic problems at school level to be fixed"; another that the proposal as presented is "a necessary systemic response to a systemic problem – but also a feasible one", and another expressly agrees that higher education has a responsibility in this area. In general, despite the views expressed above, there was overall agreement that a problem exists, and that higher education needs to play a major role in its potential resolution.

4. The nature of the problem

While the majority of the responding institutions recognised in the Task Team's report a "brave" proposal that "deserves to be taken seriously", there was some concern expressed by a few that not all the possible contributing factors to poor throughput rates had been sufficiently taken into account in the proposal presented. The reading of the proposal in such views was that academic

underpreparedness had been identified as the *only* contributory factor to the situation, and they believed that that was open to contestation. One suggested that more work needed to be undertaken in analysing whether and to what extent the lack of student funding plays a significant role in student dropout, and a few others that other factors also needed to be considered, among them, socio-economic factors, movement between programmes, poor career guidance, family pressures and students' levels of motivation. Some also pointed to the need to look at the interplay of factors affecting teaching and learning – the enhancement of the way the curriculum is delivered and the teaching abilities of academics in particular – to find alternative solutions. For those two or three that disagreed with the argument in the Task Team's report that academic underpreparedness as a result of a systemic disjuncture between schooling and higher education is the main contributory factor, defining the problem somewhat differently (e.g. the assumption that most dropouts are caused by a lack of funding) implies a different solution to the problem.

5. Alternative solutions suggested

Among the alternatives suggested were keeping the current structure but making use of a summer/winter school to provide foundational support, mentorship or life coaching, extending current extended curriculum programmes, adding university preparedness programmes either at university or at school; the introduction of a generic one-year foundational qualification (a Higher Certificate) to be undertaken prior to a degree or diploma (in one version of this, the Higher Certificate would be taught at universities; in one or two others, these were envisaged to be offered in the FET sector). A further alternative favoured by an institution that was not in favour of the proposal presented was a "combined interventions" model, that is, more first-year support, extended orientation, tutorials, smaller classes and a summer or winter school (this on the assumption that the proposal presented is limited to one model of intervention only, i.e. the addition of an additional calendar year). Another suggested that the focus should be on the use of more blended learning, and that the model of extra curriculum time for foundational provision would have been more suitable twenty years ago. A few that supported the proposal suggested seeing a combination of systemic interventions together i.e. the Teaching Development Grants of the DHET, the Quality Enhancement Programme of the CHE, and the extended curriculum as a holistic response to the problem.

There were no responses that disputed that the majority of students can be considered to be academically underprepared (though one did contest whether the alleged lack of contextual knowledge is accurate). What was at issue for some was whether academic underpreparedness was the *only* factor leading to poor throughput rates – one strongly suggested that more emphasis needed to be placed on the difficulties academic staff may be experiencing in teaching a new generation of students and a number of others suggested that a major focus on pedagogy and support for good teaching without requiring a major curriculum reform effort may be enough.

6. Reasons for supporting the proposal in principle

The reasons for the "in-principle" support of the Task Team's proposal by the majority of institutions that responded included their positive experience of current extended curriculum programmes in which they had found students in such programmes tended to perform better [3], that it would allow the inclusion of foundational support without overburdening the core curriculum [1], that the majority of learners are indeed underprepared and need the extra space and time, with support, to be able to perform better [7]. Others welcomed the proposal, with the rider that it would work best where it was seen as a "catalyst for change" which led to "fundamental curriculum reform that transcends structural change" – in other words, where the opportunity was taken to revise the curriculum as a whole rather than simply add foundational courses to it. Most of the positive responses appreciated the flexibility aspect of the Task Team's proposal i.e. that students could be placed in different programmes according to their level of preparedness (though there were concerns about how that would work in practice – see below), and that it would be possible to implement a model in which conceptual understanding is developed throughout the curriculum and not just in an initial year. Two institutions were already implementing an extended curriculum; one was institution-wide and included an aspect of general education in all degrees and diplomas, while the other was across all programmes in a specific Faculty.

7. Conceptual and curriculum issues

There were several questions relating to the concept of extra or extended curriculum. Some questioned the idea that extra curriculum would improve throughput as extended curriculum programmes cannot be "upscaled", and others wondered how academic literacy and language would help with hierarchical knowledge that is missing. Some questioned whether an extra year is enough time to develop language functionality; whether it is not better to enhance graduate attributes from primary and secondary levels; whether a four-year curriculum would be enough to deal with the fact of increasing numbers of students, or whether it would not be better to rework existing curricula.

A related issue was the nature and purpose of the extra credits and a perceived tension between remediation and enhancement. For some there was too little detail in the proposal about the possibility of using the extra funding for enhancement and that it appeared that it was to be only for foundational courses, in which case an opportunity had been missed to "reimagine the undergraduate educational base". That institution argued that students on the accelerated track would not be incentivised to do additional breadth courses, and that "breadth is not ancillary, but essential". Similarly, another argued that the problem in the proposal is the implicit "deficit paradigm" ("why is there an irreducible core?") and that not just foundational elements were needed, but the "patent limitations in the existing curriculum needed to be addressed to result in curriculum enrichment and a radical shift in pedagogy." It was also pointed out by another institution that low throughput and quality are two different problems and it was unrealistic to expect this reform effort to have beneficial effects in relation to both.

A contrary concern was that if enhancement were included, those on the 3-year track may have a lesser degree, or not benefit from courses on citizenship, extra languages etc. In short, these responses questioned whether it was feasible to consider both purposes – support and enhancement – in the 120 credits, both conceptually and operationally, and favoured focusing on foundational material.

On the other hand, some institutions found that it would be important to be realistic about prospective students such that the provision of foundational support was absolutely necessary, and that it would be crucial that institutions used the extra curriculum space for that purpose and not for the introduction of more content into the programmes. While recognising that extra curriculum space would not on its own alleviate all factors leading to poor throughput rates, the reasons for which are complex, it "had the potential to make a difference if taken seriously by all roleplayers". Innovative curriculum design and improved teaching were also necessary. Indeed, a number of responses stressed the need for curriculum reform and good curriculum design, particularly if the notion of flexibility was to be given full expression.

8. The potential implications of two 'streams'

There was a deeply-felt concern on the part of a substantial number of institutions that an unintended consequence of implementing the proposal to have a four-year degree or diploma as the norm, as well as an "accelerated" track that could be completed in three years, would be the deepening of inequities in the higher education system. The apparent assumption behind these anxieties is that the student composition on different tracks would most likely reflect race differences, and thus produce a "culturally based educational apartheid". As examples, one response felt that the proposal was addressing inequity in "white" institutions and not predominantly black ones and that "the majority of white students… will be the majority going through the flexible route", and another that "cohorts would be divided into a three-year white performing and privileged [group] and a slower non-performing [black] cohort that will perpetuate existing inequalities in the system and in individual universities". A further such view was that a higher proportion of white and privately educated students would get into the accelerated stream such that race and class could become major issues.

There were cautions about creating an "elite cohort", of "ghettoization", of "stigma and stereotyping", and potentially unfair discrimination on the part of employers based on whether students had taken the longer or the shorter route.

In similar vein, some responses extrapolated this concern to the institutional level, fearing that the proposal will widen the gap between resourced and under-resourced institutions, and that "some institutions would have predominantly 'accelerated' courses while others will become 'bedrock' ones."

Another argued (on the apparent assumption that placement would take place before admission), that "exemption offers" will influence enrolments and choices. There was a worry expressed that some institutions would be "exempting" the vast majority. (Interestingly, there was only one

institution that said that in the short-term, most of their students might be doing the shorter track but that this would change in the light of their enrolment planning). Implicit in these responses was a belief that disaggregated throughput rates would indicate much better cohort flows at historically white institutions than the national averages used in the report.

While there was enthusiasm on the part of some institutions that the proposal envisaged that institutions would be able to design their curricula or adopt different models of an extended curriculum as in the different approaches in the exemplars in the Task Team's report, others found this to be an area of concern. Some expressed strong support for respecting the autonomy of institutions and liked the "flexibility of institutions to design their programmes in accordance with their particular student profiles and institutional mission" and that "institutions can be as innovative or conservative as they can, or wish to be". Some were, however, concerned about the extent of autonomy and worried that this would not address perceived uneven quality across institutions and might encourage elitism at some.

9. Implementation concerns regarding two 'streams'

There were many questions of clarity and some concerns regarding the placement processes and mechanisms to determine the exemption of credits for entering students. Among the questions of clarification were: whether this was envisaged to be done at a national or an institutional level; whether it was possible to predict the 27% that would graduate in regulation time (as in the 2006 cohort figures); whether current placement tests, such as NBTs, would be used (and what the cost implications were); whether it would be possible to place students only after some exposure, perhaps a semester, to the disciplines; whether the first semester could be used for a series of foundational modules where after students could be placed on a 3½ or 4-year track, making use of a summer school; whether assessment would take into account subjects students had not done at school; whether they would be assessed in each discipline, or through generic tests of aptitude… Most submissions indicated that the processes used to place students would be very challenging logistically and would place a heavy burden on staff to administer. Many recognised that 'screening mechanisms' would need to be effective and rigorous, and that the assessment mechanisms would be large-scale and not akin to conventional RPL (though some did understand this to be an RPL process which would be problematic in terms of the accreditation criterion that not more than 10% of a cohort should be admitted on the basis of RPL).

Apart from questions relating to selection and placement mechanisms, there were comments pointing out that there would be major timetable ramifications that would be challenging to manage. There were also related questions about movement between streams as in "what if a student fails support modules – can they continue with the mainstream programme?"; "what if a student needs only 3 of 5 foundational modules – would they still need to do an extra year?"; that a variety in curriculum tracks will not enable progression without removing other curriculum obstacles such as prerequisites, co-requisites and the like; that if there were "general" modules then the implication was that ALL students would need to take them, making the curriculum even longer.

In short, a major area of concern relating to the proposal for a flexible and extended curriculum was that of the implementation implications of having an accelerated route – the mechanisms of placement, the timetable management and the curriculum design allowing for students to move between streams.

10. Funding

For a number of institutions, whether or not the proposal in whatever form should be implemented was dependent on a commitment from government that the requisite funding would be provided. Clarity was requested about whether additional staff members would be funded, whether there would be a transitional fund to support the "huge" curriculum changes and students in the "pipeline", whether the subsidy for the extra 120 credits as proposed would be enough to cover tutorials, peer mentoring and other support mechanisms, whether funding would be provided "up-front" rather than be based on historical data.

There were some worries about how the allocation of funding would work for different institutions, as the financial modelling undertaken as part of the Task Team's report was at system level and appeared to be directed to the National Treasury. In addition, there were concerns about the perceived current underfunding of higher education, and how extended programmes could be funded in addition to improving that situation. Some found the financial modelling undertaken to be impressive and convincing, but worried that the implications for student fees and costs to parents for the extra time had not been taken into account. Others worried about the implications for NSFAS – that students would need to be funded for longer - and also that the number of students that could be funded by a university itself would be reduced. There were issues mentioned in relation to the impact on students; possible longer times to repay loans, more student debt, and potentially more student dropouts for financial reasons which would be counter-productive to the purpose of the extended curriculum. In the light of current student protests regarding NSFAS funding, one institution pointed out that it would take considerable political will to implement a proposal that had implications for student funding, and another that student bodies were likely to object so that much work would need to be undertaken to manage the "attitudinal dimension".

A particular funding-related issue was a plea from a few institutions not to use the Teaching Development Grant for the purpose of extending the curriculum, as that supports the development of capacity, and the improvement of teaching and learning would be integral to the success of changes in curriculum structure, and that other aspects, such as the development of ICTs for teaching and learning also needed to be supported.

11. Staff capacity

Perhaps the most serious concern in relation to the implementation of the proposal was the pressure that it would add to existing staff members, and the difficulty in finding additional staff members to deal with the extra workload. With respect to existing staff members, it was felt that it may impact on efforts to improve credentials and on research output if more teaching, and

specialised teaching at that, were required. The lack of staff members with the appropriate expertise to develop curricula and with the skills to pay attention to teaching methodologies and student support was seen as a major stumbling block by many respondents, and it was pointed out that staff development takes time. It was also mentioned that it will be difficult to find more staff in scarce skills areas such as Engineering. In addition, there was some concern around whether and to what extent there would be funding for growth in staff numbers, though some welcomed the recommendations in the report that capacity would need to be increased. An allied issue was staff motivation to undertake extensive curriculum reform – some wondered why staff would take this on when the rewards are mostly for research work; others found it would be difficult to overcome reluctance and inertia, particularly in the light of many new demands having been made of them in a constantly changing environment. Whether there is enough capacity in the system as a whole to undertake the implementation properly, or even to support it at a national level, was seriously in question.

12. Infrastructure

The potential impact of the implementation of an extended curriculum on physical resources – laboratories, teaching venues, IT infrastructure and residences, that are already taxed – was raised as a major concern in a number of responses. On the assumption that repeat modules would be necessary to provide flexibility, it was believed that the timetable, examination timetables and venues would be impacted upon, possibly in ways that could be expensive. Although the Task Team's report had acknowledged this, it was felt by some that more analysis was needed of the infrastructural implications for institutions.

13. Implementation processes

There were two themes in the responses relating to the potential implementation of the proposal: the timing of it, and the extent of it. With respect to timing, many suggested a phased implementation, arguing that that would be less disruptive in the system than a change in all degrees and diplomas at once. It was felt important to pilot an extended curriculum in specific areas before introducing it more widely. There was a specific concern that appeared to be shared by some of the Universities of Technology in particular, that curriculum development that was taking place to align programmes with the HEQSF, particularly in light of the phasing out of the BTech, was already having a major impact on institutional capacity and human resources, and it would be difficult to take on more. It was felt that what could be regarded as another major curriculum renewal intervention might result in further destabilisation of the sector and staff demoralisation. (On the other hand, one UoT welcomed the proposal as a further catalyst to their curriculum renewal process and would welcome it sooner rather than later). Phased implementation appeared to be envisaged with respect to programme areas, not institutions, in order not to have a situation in which a 3-year BSc was offered at one institution and a 4-year at another.

With respect to extent, as mentioned earlier, some argued that the proposal should be implemented only in those fields in which the throughputs were poor, and that in degrees where the throughputs

were better (e.g. Health Sciences) these should be left alone. There were concerns that some of the four-year degrees, such as the BEd, would be considered unattractive for prospective students if offered over 5 years, and that some professions would be negatively affected by longer degree duration and higher student debt.

14. Accreditation

There were a few concerns and clarity sought relating to accreditation; on the one hand some would be happy not to have to go through another comprehensive accreditation process, particularly as they are still busy with HEQSF alignment, while on the other some argue for external accountability through a national review process of new curricula undertaken by the CHE, using a criterion-based approach. Whether accreditation processes would be the same for all institutions (would some get self-accreditation status and others not?) was an issue in one instance.

Conclusion

From the higher education institutions' submissions, it is evident that there is broad support for the proposal of the Task Team, with some serious reservations relating to the funding, the logistical implications of two streams – a norm and an accelerated route, the added pressure on infrastructure, and most of all, on the academic staff willingness and capacity to implement it. There were strong calls for a phased implementation process, in the interests of not destabilising the system, and in piloting whether an extended curriculum structure indeed results in greater access with success before changing the entire system. There appeared to be agreement that the funding of an extra 120 credits would assist in the provision of support for students that are underprepared, whether this is implemented in the form of foundation courses, or additional courses in the degree, or a completely revised curriculum, as circumstances permit.

B. Responses from organisations

Responses to the proposal were received from the Association of Private Providers of Education, Training and Development (APPETD), the Engineering Council of South Africa (ECSA), the Centre for Educational Policy Development (CEPD), the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA), the Rural Education Access Programme (REAP), the South African Committee of Health Sciences Deans (SACOHSD), the Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training (Umalusi), the School of Health Sciences at UKZN, and the Youth League of the African National Congress (ANCYL).

The APPETD response focused largely on the concern that the financial reasons for student attrition had not been sufficiently addressed in the Task Team's report, contending that most students leave higher education for financial reasons, and saw that as a reason to question whether a proposal focusing on curriculum was therefore an appropriate solution to the problem. In addition, the

organisation was concerned that the problem of poor throughput rates was not shared in the private sector as according to its members, their throughput rates range from 60%-85% (although there were no hard data on the private sector presented to support this), and thought that the interests of private providers had largely been ignored. While agreeing that an articulation gap does exist between the secondary schools and higher education, the organisation viewed the potential solutions lying in a restructuring of financial aid, better career guidance, a review of the admissions criteria ensuring that schools produce students with a realistic level of preparedness, and the addressing of underpreparedness either before potential students leave school (a 13th or post-matric year) or through a dedicated year of study at a pre-tertiary level.

As the only response from a professional body, ECSA's response outlines its own initiatives to provide a systematic basis for addressing the problem of throughput and increasing the number of engineering graduates to meet the demands of the country. It reported that various forms of extended and foundational programmes were already in place in some universities, but noted that the success of these was negatively influenced by the fact that the extended programmes were offered at some institutions and not all, such that students chose the shorter versions of the programme. ECSA notes that some of its members participated in the development of the engineering curriculum exemplars in the Task Team's report. While feedback from the engineering community indicated general support for the notion of extending engineering programmes as presented in the Task Team's report, the submission also noted a number of specific concerns. Among these were the worry that bursary providers may not be prepared to fund an extra year; that the proposal focuses mainly on curriculum reform while it is equally important to focus on improving pedagogy, the first-year experience and the affective factors that affect success. Some of the concerns echo those of the public institutions – the impact on staff, and the need to undertake placement in a rigorous and fair way through nationally-driven mechanisms (e.g. NBTs) that could be difficult to implement. Despite these concerns, ECSA recognises that fundamental rather than cosmetic change needs to be made and approves of the Task Team proposal's approach to introduce developmental courses at key transition points throughout the curriculum in a "structured, coherent and integrated programme that meets the needs of the majority of students".

The CEPD's response finds that the "gift of time" in the Task Team's proposal for extending undergraduate degrees and diploma can make a difference to the "ploddingly slow" throughput rate in higher education, but notes that, in addition, ongoing support, the improvement of facilities and attention to pedagogical feedback will be equally important. The response argues that the articulation gap may not be a sufficient explanation of why students fail to graduate but that other factors such as socio-economic conditions also play a role. Crucial to the success, thus, of the extended degree structure is the pedagogical development that will be needed to assist in overcoming that articulation gap, and it is unclear whether there is sufficient staff capacity to ensure that this happens. The CEPD is also concerned that the notion of flexibility may not necessarily result in all students having access to the philosophical underpinnings of their disciplines if some are on a shorter track.

HELTASA's response, prepared by 21 people from 12 universities, finds in the Task Team's proposal a thoughtful and cogent argument for curriculum reform that accords with its goals and mission. The

response, however, reiterates many of the same concerns regarding implementation that were evident in many of the universities' responses: that attention also needed to be paid to other factors such as finances, accommodation, food and transport, as well as academic issues; that the notion of an accelerated route could lead to increasing the divide between advantaged institutions or students and disadvantaged ones if not implemented and monitored carefully; a concern for "curriculation fatigue" in the UoTs in particular; that there may not be sufficient capacity to implement the proposal; and that implementation should follow more analysis of current extended curriculum programmes and proceed slowly through piloting in particular areas. The submission concludes that there is no doubt something needs to be done, and while it supports the idea of an extended curriculum, other enhancement interventions (which are not precluded by the proposal) also need to be followed.

The Rural Education Access Programme, which provides individualised support to learners from all provinces to access higher education and to succeed in their studies, welcomes and endorses the recommendations of the Task Team, but notes that effective support is a vital factor in managing the transition to higher education and that HEIs will need to expand their capacity in this regard, and offers its assistance in this venture.

The Committee of Health Sciences Deans (SACOHSD) endorses the flexible approach, but feels that programmes that meet or exceed the national norms of access, retention, throughput and success should retain their current curriculum structure. It proposes that all existing undergraduate programmes be subjected to curriculum review with the aim of integrating academic development with a focus on pedagogy to address the proposed curriculum enhancement. It also points to the need to consider more carefully the infrastructural and assessment costs of the proposed extended curriculum in implementation, and recommends that the DHET engages with the DBE to address the under-preparedness of secondary school students. Similarly, the School of Health Sciences at UKZN endorses the need for interventions to increase the number of graduates, but argues that programmes that meet or exceed the national norms of throughput should retain the current curriculum structure but re-curriculate to integrate academic development with a focus on improved pedagogy.

Umalusi's response indicates that there are currently studies and discussions underway around the possible raising of the pass requirements for the Bachelor's pass of the NSC. It also notes that the first Grade 12 cohort following the new CAPS curriculum will be examined in 2014, and given that it will take some time to gauge its impact, it may be prudent not to implement the Task Team's proposal in its entirety, or immediately. Umalusi finds that the current problems of students' underpreparedness may be a result of teachers' practices having been driven by the examination processes i.e. focused on practising past papers, rather than implementing the approved curriculum documents, and notes there are plans for the introduction of innovative assessment processes and improvement in the quality of and standards of examinations. While it agrees with the Task Team's proposal on the whole, it cautions that it needs to be implemented with care and be mindful of all the resource and support-related implications, and suggests that more collaborative work needs to be undertaken by the DBE, the DHET, Umalusi and the CHE in understanding better the role of the NSC and NCV and addressing the challenges in the education continuum.

C. Responses from individuals

The ten individual responses ranged from short inputs from members of the public to longer engagements by particular academics or students. Of the latter, one was concerned about the measurement parameters used to indicate the success of students in Extended Curriculum Programmes (as used in Chapter 5 of the Task Team's report) and suggested alternative methods; another thought that while the proposal had a lot of merit, they had misgivings about introducing it across the sector and favoured an A-level system as an alternative – A-levels envisaged to be undertaken in the college sector. A further contribution suggested a range of smaller interventions – extra classes per week, more "how to study" classes, more financial incentives to pass etc. One was concerned that the curriculum exemplar for a BCom looked very much like the current situation, and thought it would be better not to add 120 credits but to extend the existing 360 credits over four years to reduce the workload. A parent stated that s/he would not want to pay for another year of a poor education process "with demoralised academic staff and bureaucratic and hostile administration processes"; three lamented a "dumbed down school curriculum" and located the problem firmly there, and one or two simply found the Task Team's proposal to be a good idea.

Overall conclusion

The discussion document of the CHE Task Team reports on research undertaken to investigate the poor throughput rates in higher education, and argues for a particular proposal at a systemic level to begin to address the issue. It also models the financial implications at system level to indicate that the proposal is feasible, and investigated what an extended curriculum might look like through the development of particular exemplars. As a document, its purpose was to put an idea on the table for discussion in the sector and more broadly, and to convince the major role-players – the institutions and government in particular – that this is a proposal worth investigating further for potential implementation. The proposal has now been discussed widely, and from the above, it can be seen that there is general in-principle support for the idea, but considerable trepidation about the magnitude of change required and the sheer effort and will that will be needed to implement it fully such that it results in the desired outcomes. Despite the suggestions about alternatives, however, there are no other clear proposals on the table that have not already been attempted to various extents, and certainly none that would be precluded by this proposal. Indeed, many of the suggestions, such as paying attention to improving pedagogy, increasing use of information technology, using a winter or a summer school, introducing an introductory semester to university study and so on are necessary in any event and would strengthen this proposal. The question is whether they would be sufficient, without a major systemic intervention, to bring about improvement on the scale that is needed. The research undertaken by the Task Team has shown that the poor throughput rates are not a recent phenomenon, and that little that has so far been attempted has shifted them to any great degree. There are a number of new factors that may influence them in the future – a new school-leaving examination whose impact has yet to be seen as

the first cohort is the 2009 one; the introduction of funding for foundation courses since 2004; the Teaching Development Grants and the Quality Enhancement Programme. Apart from the NSC, however, these are interventions that apply at the institutional level and are dependent for their success on individual institutional initiative. The Task Team's report essentially argues for 120 credits of extra funding for undergraduate qualifications, to be used for supporting the teaching and learning process and providing the majority of students (who are currently not succeeding in the current regulation time) with better opportunities to succeed. It can thus be viewed as a structural change that will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the educational process, and therefore provide better conditions in which the QEP and TDGs can be implemented and together achieve greater success in producing more and better graduates.

From the above responses from institutions, organisations and individuals, it is evident that there is general agreement that poor throughput rates need to be addressed, that the higher education sector should play a large role in doing so, and that the proposal for an extended and flexible curriculum is supported in principle by the majority of respondents. There are, however, many questions and reservations expressed about the proposal itself – whether it is indeed the best way of addressing the problem – and about the sector's appetite and readiness to engage on such a fundamental restructuring of the system.

HESA groups its recommendations into two main areas; the need for more clarity on the fundamentals of the proposal and how it would work in practice, and those that argue for a "gradual, tested approach" to implementation. HESA recommends greater clarity be provided around a) the proposed establishment of some form of central expertise to support the implementation process, b) the potential role of the envisaged National Recruitment and Placement Centre (NRPC) of the DHET with respect to student placement c) the relationship between the various national teaching and learning initiatives (QEP of the CHE, the Teaching Development Grants and the extended curriculum proposal) d) the viability of other approaches such as lengthening the academic year, use of Open Education Resources etc. e) the timetabling and logistical implications f) accreditation implications. With respect to the approach to implementation, it recommends a) some form of piloting, possibly in selected subject areas or qualifications b) taking time to develop effective professional staff development and capacity building initiatives c) developing institutional rewards systems for curriculum development work and d) developing systems, procedures and expertise in the area of placement.

The CHE will take these recommendations and the issues raised into account in its further deliberations, formulation of advice and proposed research projects.