

SOUTH AFRICA: Universities ponder four-year degrees

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A government-led drive to open the doors of South African universities to poor students not only places strain on the national budget, it is also set to put greater pressure on academics and institutions to embrace changing curricula and improve their knowledge about education and alternative approaches to teaching and learning.

Higher education does not have the option of raising academic entry criteria as a means of attracting larger numbers of students more likely to succeed. That is because the sub-standard school system is unlikely to produce more well-prepared students in the short to medium-term.

So the sector is taking a hard look at introducing a four-year undergraduate degree aimed at stemming a formidable tide of drop-outs - involving more than 70% of students on state-funded financial aid - and raising graduate numbers among disadvantaged students.

Rather than simply giving students more time to cover the same material, the proposed new degree is likely to involve significant changes to the ways teaching and learning happens, said Dr Judy Backhouse, director of advice and monitoring at the statutory advisory Council for Higher Education (CHE).

"The bigger impact [will be] on changing curricula and improving the knowledge that lecturers have about education and alternative approaches to teaching and learning," Backhouse said.

The council is working on advice to the Minister of Higher Education and Training about the possibility of four-year degrees. Currently general bachelor degrees are three years (some professional degrees are longer), although many students take longer to complete.

Backhouse said that while the new degree could possibly be construed as an interim measure, it would nevertheless constitute a major change that would be complex and time-consuming to implement and to reverse.

The initial request to the CHE for an analysis of the feasibility of four-year degrees came from former Education Minister Naledi Pandor. Quoting Professor Cheryl de la Rey, then CHE Chief Executive, *University World News* **reported** in January last year the investigation into the extended degree was proceeding slowly because the issues were more complex than expected.

Theo Bhengu, senior manager of advocacy and stakeholder engagement at the vice-chancellors' association Higher Education South Africa (Hesa), told *University World News* the four-year degree issue was raised at the higher education summit in Cape Town earlier this month.

Bhengu said the view was expressed that the research must be completed as soon as possible "so that it gives clear direction on academic support mechanisms needed in higher education".

He said Hesa was of the "firm view that students should be given access to higher education and that higher education institutions should deal with under-preparedness".

Backhouse confirmed the investigation was ongoing and would be completed by the end of 2010 at the earliest. Until then, the CHE would not be in a position to express an opinion.

"We have completed a review of research in this area and we are in the process of initiating working groups that will put together exemplar curricula for some programmes. This will help us to get a more concrete idea of what a four-year curriculum would look like and provide a basis for further discussion," she said.

The Department of Higher Education and Training would then have to decide whether to act on the advice, how and in what time frames.

Backhouse said the council was examining the feasibility of applying the four-year degree to all general bachelor degrees at all public universities. The possibility of giving some students the option of completing the degree in three years via an accelerated route was also being explored.

While the views of universities on the proposal have not been formally solicited, debate within institutions, most or all of which have in-house initiatives that provide academic support to disadvantaged students, is nevertheless taking place.

Deputy vice-chancellor for teaching and learning at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Professor Renuka Vithal, said the four-year degree issue had been referred to faculties for discussion at May's senate meeting after which an institutional position would be formulated.

Professor Elizabeth de Kadt, Executive Director of academic development and support at the University of Johannesburg, said understanding of the need for the extended degree was growing. "We are certainly doing our best to promote such an understanding," she said.

De Kadt said the ability of the degree to raise success rates would depend on how it was conceptualised and would involve a rethink of the curriculum as a whole rather than merely fitting in more content or proceeding as before.

She said it was necessary to move away from the idea that it was the responsibility of academic

development staff to "fix" problems encountered by students in the first year, and have things continue as before.

"Rather, a rethink of the curriculum as a whole is required, based on the needs of students (based on research), and on pedagogical and curricular approaches which have been shown to be productive - for instance, within the extended curricula which have been running for many years now."

De Kadt said there was a need for widespread recognition that the majority of students needed additional development and for a shift away from discrete academic development modules towards integrating academic development, literacy and learning skills into core modules.

She said a four-year programme that was well-developed on sound principles might allow the majority of existing academic support programmes to be integrated into a range of coherent curricula, with flexibility to meet the needs of different faculties.

"But it is still likely there would still be some 'blockages' at more senior levels, which might need dedicated attention," she said.

While the CHE investigation is looking into the cost implications for students who spend an extra year at university, Backhouse said these were unlikely to be significantly higher because many students currently already take more than three years to complete their degree.

Ministerial spokesman Ranjeni Munusamy said the department had no position yet on the four-year degree and was awaiting the outcome of the council research process.