



# TASK TEAM 2:

**A single Higher Certificate for  
Unisa**

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# 1 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In the South African School system, learners complete High School Education with one National Senior Certificate (NSC) designated differently, as follows, according to the learner's performance:

- NSC – Higher Certificate
- NSC - Diploma
- NSC – Degree

This means that school-leavers with a NSC – Degree qualify to study for university degrees or diplomas; those with a NSC-Diploma for university diplomas or higher certificates. Learners who complete with a NSC-Higher Certificate have access only to a Higher Certificate, an undergraduate qualification pegged at Level 5 of the Higher Education Qualifications Framework of 2007. This Certificate is made up of 120 credits, and, according to the HEQF (Government Gazette 2007 No.30353:19), "is an entry-level higher education qualification ... primarily vocational, or industry oriented. The qualification also serves to provide students with the basic introductory knowledge, cognitive and conceptual tools and practical techniques for further higher education studies in their chosen field of study. The knowledge emphasizes general principles and application. This qualification signifies that the student has attained a basic level of higher education knowledge and competence in a particular field or occupation and is capable of applying such knowledge and competence in an occupation or role in the workplace. The Higher Certificate typically includes a simulated work experience or work integrated learning (WIL) component"

The NSC-Higher Certificate school-leavers do not qualify to register directly for a National Diploma or for a first B-degree and are also excluded from gaining access to degrees and diplomas through the Senate's Discretionary Exemption route. This limitation affects, also, those learners who, prior to 2009, obtained the Senior Certificate without exemption.

## 2 THE TASK

In line with the ideal of Open Learning to broaden access to higher education, Task Team 2 was established to investigate the possibility for the university to offer a single Higher Certificate in order to allow school-leavers the opportunity, upon successful completion of the Higher Certificate, to proceed to an Advanced Certificate and then be absorbed into the mainstream university studies.

According to the requirements of the Unisa ODL project, "Task Team 2 will investigate the possibility to offer a single Higher Certificate which will serve the different Colleges with an alternative access route to Advanced Certificates, Diplomas and Degrees. The task team will advise the STLSC on

- The feasibility of offering a single Higher Certificate.
- The progression routes on completion of the Certificate.
- If feasible, a proposal for offering a general Higher Certificate or a college specific Higher Certificate.
- The structure/content of the Higher Certificate”.

### 3 THE PROCESS

Two formal meetings as well as some e-mail and telephone discussions were held and the following questions and statements tended to guide and mould the deliberations:

3.1. Currently the university offers two Higher Certificate programmes, namely:

- (i) The National Higher Certificate in ABET (Qualification code 97942)
- (ii) The National Higher Certificate in Accountancy (Qualification code HSACC)

3.2. Why should Unisa consider offering a Higher Certificate across the board?

- (i) How will the introduction of such a Higher Certificate impact on “the rampantly growing numbers of students” some of whom are already unfunded?
- (ii) How will this impact on the looming financial strain facing the university if the student numbers are encouraged to grow beyond the limits?
- (iii) Will the university’s already stretched human and infrastructural resources not crumble under further pressure of more students?

3.3. The Higher Certificate should be in line with the requirements of the NQF 2007 as follows:

- (i) NQF Exit Level 5
- (ii) Minimum total credits: 120
- (iii) Minimum credits at Level 5: 120
- (iv) Primarily *vocational or industry specific and provides basic introductory knowledge*

3.4. Given the level of preparedness of such school-leavers, how long will it take to complete the Higher Certificate, made up of 10 x 12 credit modules?

3.5. The possibility to offer the Higher Certificate should not be confused with the *Responsible Open Access Programme (ROAP)*; the latter is meant to focus on those potential students with an NSC-Degree and /or NSC-Diploma.

3.6. The structure and content of such a higher certificate will be finalised at the operational level. Whether this be a higher certificate with a strong vocational basis for students who do not wish to continue in higher education (but who would be able to do so on successful completion), or a higher certificate for students who want to continue in higher education

(but should they not, they have a NQF 5 qualification) will be decided by the college that provides the Higher Certificate

- 3.7. Should the structure of such a higher certificate include five generic modules (eg study skills, computer literacy, English reading skills, etc) and a pool of subject specific modules from which students can select any 5 offered by the five different colleges?
- 3.8 Where will students go to after successful completion of the higher certificate? How will they be credited and on what basis?
- 3.9 These students will need abundant and effective support in well-designed teaching and assessment learning methods. In the light of the fact that these students are already "at risk", will they be treated as "exceptional cases" whose 12 credit modules can be *year* modules instead of semester modules? Should the structure of this higher certificate be a mix of year and semester modules in order to provide optimal support but also to prepare students for the semester system used in Unisa's mainstream programmes?

## 4 OUTCOME OF DELIBERATIONS

The Task Team was unanimous against the suggestion of a **single** Higher Certificate for the entire university for numerous reasons including specific college needs and capacities, the structure and content of such a Certificate, as well as the all important internal coherence of the programme. Further, some colleges already do offer successful Higher Certificates which are vocational and thus provide the students with the skills, knowledge and competence desired for the chosen field or occupation.

The following outcome is therefore based on a thorough discussion on whether (or not) a Higher Certificate should be offered by any academic unit of the university:

### 4.1. ADVANTAGES

- (i) By offering a well-designed and focused Higher Certificate, access opportunities will be availed to students who really do have the ability to undertake university studies but, for whatever reason, never could.
- (ii) By offering a Higher Certificate Unisa's overall comprehensiveness will be enhanced.
- (iii) By studying for the Higher Certificate, students may be provided with the basic introductory knowledge, cognitive and conceptual tools and practical techniques for further higher education studies in their chosen field of study.
- (iv) Students qualifying with the Higher Certificate, who decide *not* to continue with diploma or degree studies, should have a qualification which will assist them to get employment, or to do their work better.

- (v) Students who qualify with the Higher Certificate shall have attained a basic level of higher education knowledge and competence in a particular field or occupation and will be capable of applying such knowledge and competence in an occupation or role in the workplace.
- (vi) With a number of international higher education providers entering the local market, there may be a need for Unisa to enter a new niche in order to “grow our own timber”. These institutions may enter on diploma, degree and postgraduate level.

## 4.2. DISADVANTAGES

- (i) At present, Unisa already has many unfunded students due to Unisa exceeding its enrollment targets. The introduction of the Higher Certificate will have adverse consequences on an already dire situation.
- (ii) NSFAS is already under pressure to provide for needy students. The increase in student numbers will also impact on the available funds for the whole pool of students.
- (iii) Should the WIL or simulated work experience be a *sine qua non* of such a Higher Certificate it will have extra implications for the departments offering the Higher Certificate, e.g. placing of students in places of work, providing clear outcomes and guidelines of what should be achieved and ensuring accreditation by an accredited assessor. The amount of credits the WIL or simulated work experience will carry will also impact on the total number of credits “available” for the rest of the curriculum.
- (iv) Providing students with articulation routes may result in the proliferation of new qualifications and this will be counter-productive for a university bent on rationalization of structures and offerings.

## 4.3. CHALLENGES

- (i) Unisa should ensure proper articulation between the envisaged Higher Certificate and existing qualifications. Should such articulation not be clearly planned and taken care of, the Higher Certificate may become a dead-end.
- (ii) The Higher Certificate will consist of a *minimum* of 10 modules of 12 credits each. The “programme coherence” *between* these modules should be ensured.
- (iii) Students in Grade 11 should be made aware of the possibility of studying at Unisa for a Higher Certificate in case they have a NSC (Higher Certificate).
- (iv) The curriculum of the Higher Certificate should be designed such that students do have a vocationally valid qualification should they decide not to continue with diploma or degree studies.

- (v) Will Unisa's already stressed systems be able to handle the influx of this cohort of students? Systemic lapses would have a profound impact on this group of students, even more so than on the other students.
- (vi) These students may need extra support. How will Unisa be able to provide this extra support? Will these students be compelled to attend tutorials? At present the appointment of tutors is in disarray and immensely frustrates the good intentions of many departments.
- (vii) How will these extra students impact on *lecturer: student* ratios?
- (viii) Developing the curriculum for these higher certificates will have to be a thorough investigative process involving *all* the systems at Unisa.

## 4 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 It is vital for the university to determine and communicate exactly where its focus and growth will make the most meaningful impact on the needs of the country. Thereafter, the impact to be made by the offering of such a Higher Certificate should be investigated.
- 4.2. The university needs to heed the warning from the CoL and HEQC Audits never to aspire to be everything for everyone.
- 4.3. A more integrated ODL strategic and implementation plan is imperative. This plan should ensure stabilized enrolments in accordance with the DoHE's targets as well as efficient and effective systems regarding staff procurement, the funding formula (ACHRAM), finalized and relevant PQMs, an appropriate tuition model and optimum learner support.
- 4.4. Colleges that have both the need and resources to introduce one or several Higher Certificates should be encouraged to do so.
  - The need could be based on the requirement to reach comprehensiveness targets.
  - With DISA's assistance, such colleges should establish the number of students who complete the NSC-Higher Certificate in order to get a sense of how many students potentially require university access via the Higher Certificate route.
  - The Higher Certificate should rather be a well-designed vocationally oriented self-sufficient product and not necessarily a means whose end is to avail access to diplomas and degrees.
  - Should the Higher Certificate serve as a means to further access to higher qualifications, the college(s) should ensure that such a Higher Certificate articulates into *existing* diplomas and degrees and that the need to proliferate programmes is eradicated.
  - They should confirm that financial support by, e.g. NFSAS, is available for students' registrations for the Higher Certificate.
- 4.5 In the context where many disciplines offered at Unisa do not require Work Integrated Learning, the description of the Higher Certificate by the HEQF, as a certificate that "typically includes a simulated work experience or work integrated learning (WIL) component" should be understood to



mean that WIL or simulated work experience is not necessarily a *sine qua non* of offering all the Higher Certificate at Unisa.

- 4.6 The Foundation Programme offered in CSET may provide crucial pointers with regard to the support of students identified as at risk and the success of the extra support they received.