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Revised NBT standards aim to increase success at university
National Benchmark Tests Project workshops at UCT examine ways to reduce failure rate and help students achieve degrees and diplomas

The launch of new degree and diploma standards for the National Benchmark Tests (NBTs) will guide universities in two ways, according to experts at the University of Cape Town: the NBTs will more clearly identify applicants' likelihood of success in degree and diploma programmes, and they will highlight what additional steps a university must take to help prospective students achieve their degrees or diplomas.

Representatives from each of the country's 23 public universities met with a team led by Mr Robert Prince of the Centre for Higher Education Development at UCT, from 26 September to 2 October 2012. Together they determined the new NBT standards, which will take effect for the 2014 cohort of first-year students.

Prince, who is the Deputy Director of the Academic Development Programme at UCT, said the NBTs were not intended to replace the National Senior Certificate (NSC) scores but that each examination served an important purpose. He said: "The NSC is a measure of what a matriculant has learned in high school, while the NBT is a measure of how prepared that matriculant is for the demands of a university education."

Prince added: "The NBT will help identify the education gaps that will make a student more likely to struggle with the critical first year of university. With this knowledge, universities can prepare academic assistance strategies to prepare and develop students for a degree or diploma programme – whether it's a bridging programme for first-years, or augmented academic development interventions, or even the option of doing a three-year degree or diploma programme over four years, to ensure all first-year students have the foundational knowledge they need for their chosen field of study."

Prince said the focus in the higher education system since the early 1980s had been on opening access to higher education. "However, because so many new students enter university without the proper education foundation, the failure rate across the country has become unacceptable: as many as 50% of entering students drop out and 30% of them will do so in their first-year of study. So universities need to adopt strategies that will help ensure success in earning a degree or diploma."

The changes in NBT degree standards are:

Performance Levels	Academic Literacy		Quantitative Literacy		Mathematics	
	Maximum	Minimum	Maximum	Minimum	Maximum	Minimum
Proficient	100	(65) 64	100	(66) 70	100	(62) 68
Intermediate	(64)	(42)	(65)		(61)	(34)
	63	38	69	38	67	35
Basic	(41) 37	0	37	0	(33) 34	0

Scores are reported as a whole number percentage.

Degree standards set in May 2009 are in brackets. Standards that are unchanged will only have one figure.

The new degree benchmarks are expected to increase the proportion of students who require support, for example through extended degree programmes. Academics across the system are increasingly concerned about the level of preparation of students wishing to enter degree study; they believe these students will not be able cope with a degree in the minimum time and will require additional support.

The information provided through the National Benchmark Tests Project demonstrate that a) the schooling system does not adequately prepare students for the demands of higher education study; and b) as a result, current regular degree and diploma offerings are not able to address the needs of most students wishing to embark on higher education study.

The costs to students of taking the NBTs are currently R175 to take both the NBTs, and R100 for just one test, said Prince. "Given the value and nature of the project, additional sources of funding are being sought to ensure that the costs are kept as low as possible," he added.

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