FORUM
TRANSFORMING THE UNDERGRADUATE
TEACHING OF THEOLOGY AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

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The Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies is an integral part of the University of South Africa. Together with the rest of the university, it needs to transform and reposition itself in relation to the fast-changing African context, the new South African Constitution, the Higher Education Act, the economic challenges of globalisation, and the dawning of a third millennium.

These broader changes in society confront us with a triple challenge: the need for curriculum reform, to come in line with the outcomes based philosophy of the National Department of Education; the need to eliminate overlaps and duplication between disciplines, in order to produce cost-effective and attractive outcomes-based degree programmes; and the need to make ends meet with a shrinking budget, due to falling student numbers in Biblical Studies (as a result of developments in primary and secondary education). These challenges call for a comprehensive approach, since they are intimately related.

A programme of transformation is currently in progress within the Faculty that includes at least three major elements: the transformation of tuition through modularisation; the rationalisation of the number of our courses; and the restructuring of the faculty. Within this article, attention is concentrated on modularisation. Something needs to be said, however, concerning rationalisation and faculty restructuring, since they impinge directly on the discussion related to the creation of modules, programmes and, perhaps, schools.

Rationalisation and Restructuring

The rationalisation of our courses has become necessary for a number of reasons. The first, as pointed out in detail below with respect to
modularisation and the development of programmes, relates to our attempt to transform the BTh into a qualification that is more flexible, relevant and related to specific needs within the South African community. The second, more pragmatic, relates to financial considerations. At a time when university management is putting pressure on departments to reduce the number of small courses they offer, we have decided to rationalise our modules in an academically sound manner, rather than being dictated to by market forces or arbitrary calculations.

If we changed all our existing BTh half-courses into modules, we would offer 64 modules. However, by eliminating overlaps between existing half-courses and by fitting our seven disciplines into four tracks, we have reduced the number of modules on offer for the BTh degree from 64 to 48 (12 modules per track). This rationalisation (from 64 to 48 modules) represents a 25% reduction in the number of modules offered for the BTh degree. This is an attempt to ensure that all our modules have enrolments above the stipulated minimum levels (40 at 1st level; 30 at 2nd level, 20 at 3rd level). We reserve the right to add modules to our programmes again in future in the light of the needs of the different programmes, if that can be justified in terms of our student numbers and staffing position.

With regard to the matter of restructuring, both at faculty and university level, a number of possibilities are being considered. A year or so ago, the discussion centred on whether the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies ought to dissolve as an independent faculty and become a sub-faculty within the Faculty of Arts or whether it should remain a small, but independent, faculty. More recent discussions have focused on the question whether faculties as such should be done away with and replaced by smaller units such as Schools. For us the key question is whether our faculty should become one or two such schools.

These deliberations are complicated by a number of external factors such as government funding, negotiations within the rest of the university, and the emphasis on outcomes-based education. A matter closer to home is the positioning of the Department of Religious Studies. At the end of 1998, this department took the decision to move from the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies to the Faculty of Arts. If Unisa follows the example of some other universities in the country to adopt a more decentralised and flexible Schools structure, does this mean that something like a School of Religion and Theology or sim-