

A STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK 2019 – 2021



Our Vision

To reduce rural poverty in South Africa by developing self-sustaining, ethically responsible graduates.

Our Mission

To offer motivated young South Africans from disadvantaged rural households the support and guidance they need to participate & succeed in higher education, sustain themselves and become ethically responsible and caring citizens.

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INTRODUCTION

This strategic framework was compiled through an initial consultative process undertaken in 2017 driven by the Director with REAP staff, some REAP Board members and a number of external higher education experts. It builds on Penny Morrell's detailed external programme evaluation of 2015/2016 which included the opinions of a broad range of key stakeholders, including REAP students, past and present.

It updates the version presented to the Board in December 2017, given the significant impact on organisation like REAP of state-funded 'free fees' for our beneficiaries. The key aspects of the strategy have been reviewed with all staff in the recent mid-year review held in early July 2018.

This is a framework not a plan. It will inform the annual operational plans and organisational resourcing and sustainability plans which will be developed as usual, taking into account relevant external and internal changes.

While the framework addresses strategic priorities for the next three years, we recognise that the relatively volatile external context in which we work means that factors may need to be reviewed from time to time to ensure that REAP is operating as effectively as possible and making the best contribution it can. This does not mean that there will be opportunistic exceptions so much as formal reviews of aspects as the need arises.

This framework covers:

1. Core mission and values
2. Contextual analysis / problem statement
3. Assumptions / risks
4. Theory of change
5. Key objectives
6. Modes of delivery: Proposed directions
7. Monitoring & Evaluation
8. Priorities for 2019 - 2021

1. CORE MISSION / VALUES

The Rural Education Access Programme (REAP) is an associate body of the Southern Africa Catholic Bishops Conference (SACBC). It evolved from the Catholic Education Aid Programme (CEAP) and was established in 2001. REAP is informed by Catholic values and is motivated by a passion for social justice.

The REAP constitution provides the framing for REAP's work and will continue to do so.

In re-understanding REAP's work in the context of changes over the last 16 years, however, we propose that some wording be updated to better reflect the work we now do – and which is proposed in this strategy. This will need to be done with the Board, perhaps once the strategy has been agreed to.

In the interim, we report on a proposed revised vision and mission, developed in consultation with staff. We understand that due process will need to be followed to make any constitutional changes, however – including Board discussion and adoption.

1.1 *Vision and mission*

Organisational visions and missions serve to align and direct organisational efforts. REAP's current core vision and mission – as approved in the December 2017 Board meeting - and values, are as follows.

Vision

To reduce rural poverty in South Africa by developing self-sustaining, ethically responsible graduates.

Mission

To offer motivated young South Africans from disadvantaged rural households the support and guidance they need to participate & succeed in higher education, sustain themselves and become ethically responsible & caring citizens.

1.2 *REAP culture and core values*

In keeping with the Catholic values we promote, REAP staff endeavour to work:

- with compassion
- with integrity
- with respect for diversity
- to nurture potential
- to produce work of good quality

Our ethos is:

- A community serving humanity.
- We believe in the work we do. We believe our work contributes to a better world.
- We enjoy our work.
- We are always polite to one another.
- We laugh a lot.
- We help each other but ensure everyone takes responsibility for their tasks.
- We raise our problems as soon as possible with the person/people concerned so problems can be quickly solved.
- If we do not know how to do something we ask someone who does.
- We share our information and skills.
- We do not bad mouth REAP or the staff and board of REAP.
- We communicate – we talk with one another.
- We do not waste. We are stewards of public resources given to support our mission. We utilise resources carefully and travel modestly without extravagance
- REAP is us so - we do not cheat REAP of time or resources; we care for REAP property (camera, car etc.) as if it were our own.

2. CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS / PROBLEM STATEMENT

This section examines the political and socio-economic landscapes in which we operate, as well as the relevant government policies and funding frameworks. In particular, we identify the significant shifts that have taken place since REAP began in 2001, which have required that we review the relevance / appropriateness of some of our programme interventions.

2.1 Rural poverty and marginalisation

Rural poverty and marginalisation remain acute and there is little evidence to indicate that standards of living, quality of basic education or employment opportunities for young people in rural areas have improved to any significant extent since 2001. Rural unemployment remains high, many schools remain seriously under-resourced and there is often a sense of hopelessness and low aspiration. Many still migrate to the urban areas in search of employment opportunities.

This affirms REAP's choice to continue to work with rural youth from resource-constrained households. There is no suggestion of a need to change this core target group.

2.2 Access to higher education for rural students from low-income families

There are nearly one million students attending public universities in South Africa, almost double the number in 1994, with the percentage of 'African' students now comprising 79%. Whilst there are no statistics on how many of these are rural-origin students, the situation has undoubtedly improved significantly since 2001 - and it seems safe to assume, supported by

anecdotal evidence, that a substantial number of these additional students originate from rural areas.

This will be addressed by our proposed shift in emphasis on how and where we recruit and select students (see section 6.1).

2.3 Student funding

The dramatic increase since 2001 of NSFAS funding for students at the public universities has meant that thousands more students from low-income families (we assume many of them rural) are able to access higher education.

Following the announcement on 16th December 2017 that there would be free higher education for the poor and missing in South Africa commencing in 2018, all first time entrants into higher education coming from households with income less than R350,000 p.a. have become eligible for free tuition fees and subsidised accommodation, meals and learning materials. Students who were already in the higher education system would also be eligible if they come from households with incomes less than R122,000 p.a. Historic student debt as at the end of 2017 would not be written off. In the Budget Statement of February 2018, a rise of 1% in Value Added Tax was announced, in large part to fund this increased public investment in higher education.

REAP welcomes this decision which means that, at least in theory, the financial barriers to access into higher education have been removed. Nonetheless, serious questions remain over the financial viability and sustainability of this policy, as well as the administrative capacity of NSFAS to deliver it. To date the signs have been far from encouraging. There have been serious shortcomings in terms of the accessibility and functionality of the NSFAS application process, long delays in confirming the funding status of those applicants, poor communication with institutions, and substantial delays in payment of allowances to students and fees to institutions. Mid way through the 2018 academic year, many students still did not know if they will be funded by NSFAS, and many of those who have been confirmed have not received their meals or books.

Significantly, however, the newly appointed Minister of Higher Education and those in DHET involved in developing the post-school policy for the country recognise that issues at NSFAS need to be addressed as a matter of urgency. It is therefore likely that there will continue to be shifts in the context until these arrangements finally settle.

2.4 National leadership

The appointment of Cyril Ramaphosa as President, and subsequently a new Minister for Higher Education, has breathed new optimism into the country and the sector in general. The new Ministry appears to have a strong grasp of the severity of the problems taking urgent steps to tackle them. Nonetheless very serious challenges remain.

2.5 NSFAS

The new CEO of NSFAS was appointed in August 2017 with a clear Board mandate to address serious operational shortcomings. However, to date it seems that there has been no discernible improvement in NSFAS' performance, in part due to the very late and unformed announcement of foundational changes to the system by the former President. NSFAS and DHET were unprepared and under-resourced for the task. But by NSFAS's own admission, the rollout of the student-centred model (SCM) was badly mishandled due to conceptual flaws, inadequate consultation with HEIs, IT systems failure and human capacity deficits. Subsequently the Board has been dissolved, an Administrator appointed and the CEO suspended. It remains to be seen whether this can substantively improve implementation.

The future of NSFAS was under a cloud following the release of the Ministerial Task Team report on the funding of poor and 'missing middle' students – which recommended that its operations be stripped away and transferred to a new entity under the umbrella of the Ikusasa Student Financial Aid Programme (ISFAP). The Heher Commission report made similar recommendations. While Dr Blade Nzimande was adamant that there would be no privatisation of NSFAS under his watch as Minister, it remains to be seen what will happen under the new Minister. Clearly the continued underperformance by NSFAS raises serious concerns and drastic steps to remedy this have now been taken. This may also include returning aspects of student finance administration to the institutions.

REAP had its NSF bursary funding severely cut in 2018, reduced to R23M from R32M in 2018. This left us with a large shortfall in funding for our continuing students, and also meant all our first years needed to be funded with NSFAS bursaries. On appeal to the Minister for Higher Education, REAP was awarded a supplementary grant by DHET to cover the shortfall.

2.6 Career information

Access to information in rural areas regarding higher education, funding options and suitable career guidance remains patchy, at best. Our regional reps reported that even though substantially more higher education options are available for rural youth than in 2001, many rural youth are still unaware of them and need considerable support in navigating their way through the system and making informed study choices. This is in slight contrast to findings

from the evaluation where students reported that there was increasing access to career information – offered by municipalities, their schools and universities – and that their friends were finding their way to universities.

2.7 Low completion rates

Given that financial barriers to access are now largely removed, the main problem now to be addressed, therefore, is that unacceptably low proportions of students actually complete their studies. This means they cannot contribute to breaking the cycle of poverty in which they, and their families, live. It is difficult to secure precise and up to date statistical data to assess how many black rural students from low income households graduate on a national level, but indications from CHE and DHET are it could be as low at 32% and no higher than 50%.¹

3. ASSUMPTIONS AND RISKS

3.1 Campus disruptions

While 2017 and 2018 have been quieter on more campuses than some forecast, this has not been the case everywhere and institutions like CPUT and WSU have experienced significant disruptions. Whilst the introduction of free higher education was obviously welcomed by students in principle, the huge problems with its implementation by NSFAS has catalysed student unrest on several campuses. REAP will continue to provide support for our students thus affected. While we will continue to condemn violence and vandalism, we will support student's rights to peaceful civic actions and expression.

3.2 Political instability

The Presidential elections scheduled for 2019 may of course change the whole political landscape again, with implications for higher education. The global economic climate is also volatile with threats of trade wars, which may in turn also impact the South African fiscus.

3.3 Donor funding stability

At the time of writing it appears that REAP's major donors will continue to support at similar levels in 2019. However, many donors are cautiously assessing the impact of recent funding policy decisions in higher education, and may decide upon changes in strategic direction in the medium term. This may have longer term implications for REAP.

¹ *Statistics on Post-School Education & Training in South Africa 2012*, Department of Higher Education & Training, Pretoria, 2014

4. REAP'S THEORY OF CHANGE

Although many more rural youth are accessing higher education than in 2001, completion rates in the country remain alarmingly low. There are many reasons for this but among them is the increasing articulation gap between schools and universities and insufficient structured support whilst at university. REAP has demonstrated over many years that a combination of sound student selection, financial security and psycho-social support and academic monitoring can have a positive impact on completion rates. We will be adding to this a more careful selection of courses / HEIs at which REAP students prove to be more likely to succeed.

Now that free higher education for the poor has been announced and is being implemented, REAP will make a difference to young rural people from financially disadvantaged households who we regard as being 'at risk' in the following ways: -

1. The first is by ensuring that they are **fully funded and have the tools they need to succeed**. Whilst the NSFAS bursary covers most of their core costs – tuition fees in full and most of their related costs like accommodation, books, meals and transport – it leaves certain shortfalls and it also often **not paid on time**. REAP seeks to bridge that gap with a supplementary bursary, ensuring that students have all their costs covered, that they have meals and books at the point they need them, and that they have a laptop computer.
2. The second way in which the REAP programme makes a difference is through **promoting their access to success**. Success can be undermined by a range of factors, from academic performance to psycho-social and family matters. Success implies both retention - that students do not leave prematurely – and academic success. REAP attends to both, by accompanying students through their entire undergraduate degrees, ensuring they access the academic support services that are available and offering *in loco parentis* support and direction through an approach that consciously promotes the development of their capacity to manage themselves.

We believe that this sustained support and development is crucial to ensuring, as far as possible, that these young people have a chance of obtaining an undergraduate degree. Without supporting efforts to success, access to a university is of no value – and, in fact, can be harmful.

We believe that by identifying academically able young people who matriculated from rural schools whose households have minimal financial resources, and by accompanying them throughout their higher education undergraduate studies with a structured support and development programme, REAP

- ensures that material needs are not an obstacle to retention;

- promotes retention through supporting them when they have psycho-social and academic difficulties; and
- promotes academic success.

Overall we believe the REAP programme tips some young people away from a cycle of poverty into different – and better – opportunities.

5. KEY OBJECTIVES

REAP's core objectives for 2019 – 2021 are as follows:

1. To recruit and select academically able young people who have matriculated from rural schools and who come from financially disadvantaged households
2. To offer support for our students at universities, and for courses, which optimise the possibility of success – both in terms of graduation and, ultimately, employment.
3. To ensure that we deploy the resources at our disposal in ways that make the biggest difference to the lives of young rural youth from financially disadvantaged households.
4. To accompany them throughout their courses of study, promoting their development into autonomous adulthood and their academic success through providing sustained individual psycho-social support as well as development opportunities.
5. To promote values and behaviour among students and staff of integrity, justice and a spirit of community serving humanity, in line with the Catholic values on which REAP is founded.
6. To promote their employability through the development of suitable skills.
7. To contribute to the sector more broadly, through sharing good practice and advocating on issues affecting both our students in particular and tertiary students in general.

6. MODES OF DELIVERY: PROPOSED DIRECTIONS

REAP realises its objectives through a range of modes of delivery, implemented within a set of strategic choices devised to optimise students access and success, the use of our resources and in recognition of prevailing contextual circumstances. These are also informed by our relatively small footprint, the labour-intensive nature of working with these at-risk students - and in recognition that that we can't be all things to all (young rural) people.

In outlining the ways, we will meet each objective from 2019 to 2021, we

- describe the area of activities generally; and
- address related issues, describe the choices made and the ways in which the work will be realised from 2019 to 2021.

6.1 Objective 1: To recruit and select academically able young people who have matriculated from rural schools and who come from financially disadvantaged households.

6.1.1 *Description of the work*

Selecting students who have a chance of succeeding in their selected course of study is the first aspect of ensuring success – which is crucial if REAP is to make a difference to these rural households.

REAP has historically recruited and selected students across the country in three ways:

- through ‘regional reps’, a centrally-supported network of individual volunteers, originally drawn from the Catholic community;
- through local partner NGOs who work with youth; and
- through selected universities at which there are financially unsupported rural youth.

6.1.2 *Issues, changes and strategic priorities for 2019 – 2021*

With the advent of free higher education from 2018, REAP will no longer offer core bursary funding and will provide supplementary bursaries only. This radically impacts the ‘product’ that our recruitment agents have to ‘sell’ to prospective rural students. Ultimately their funding eligibility is now determined by NSFAS.

As a result, a decision was taken earlier this year to close down the Regional Rep system. This has been done and from 2019, we will exclusively recruit students directly from 6 HEIs and no longer recruit directly from rural schools.

In 2016 REAP piloted the recruitment and selection of students directly from two HEIs - UWC and UKZN - to test the feasibility and success of this method. We found that these students participated satisfactorily in the REAP programme (without the ‘warm-up’ by the reps) and that their academic results were within REAP’s usual outcomes.

We will liaise with financial aid offices to identify eligible students and invite them to apply online. It will allow REAP to more accurately control intake numbers at particular HEIs, aligned with our local student support staff capacity. We will adopt the same selection criteria except that successful applicants must also have secured confirmed NSFAS funding. Recruiting in this way recognises that access is no longer REAP’s most pressing issue – and will become REAP’s way of recruiting with a significantly ‘lighter touch’.

Selection

REAP's selection process aims to be equitable and transparent with clearly communicated criteria. As this is an inexact art, however, REAP constantly strives to refine the criteria for selection and to reduce subjectivity – and will continue to do so during this three-year period.

Face-to-face interviews with short-listed candidates will take place at selected universities in February/March, conducted by local REAP programme teams.

As possible success begins with selection, in this period REAP will strive to refine the criteria for selecting students, in consultation with experts in the field. The criteria for selecting Engineering students remains an issue, for example – within REAP and in the universities themselves.

Career guidance

The decision to disband the Regional Reps and partners' recruitment network means that REAP will no longer be actively involved in delivering career guidance. We will rely on schools to do this, as well as encourage our former Reps to continue to do so in a voluntary personal capacity.

Whilst it is accepted that the quality of this service is less than optimal, the shift in REAP's strategic focus from access to success means that difficult choices must inevitably be made, and that REAP with its limited resources cannot address every shortfall in the wider system.

6.1.3 Summary

- REAP will no longer recruit directly from rural schools and has disbanded its volunteer recruitment network.
- REAP will recruit directly from only 6 HEIs in liaison with their Financial Aid Offices.
- Our selection criteria will remain the same, except that successful applicants must also have had their NSFAS bursary funding confirmed.
- Applicants will apply online.
- We will recruit increased numbers of new students.
- Local student support teams will conduct interviews on campus with shortlisted candidates in February/March.

6.2 Objective 2: To offer support for our students at universities, and for courses, which optimise the possibility of success

6.2.1 Description of the work

Choice of courses

REAP currently does not limit the choice of courses students may take. Where an applicant qualifies for a course of their choice and is accepted, REAP has supported them.

Choice of universities

REAP currently offers support to students at 16 HEIs:

Gauteng	UJ, Wits, TUT, UP, SMU
Western Cape	UWC, CPUT UCT, SU,
KwaZulu Natal	UKZN, DUT
Eastern Cape	NMMU, RU
Free State	UFS, CUT
North West	NWU (Mafikeng campus only)

The number of students supported at each vary from 7 to over 50 and the throughput rates (of the 2010 to 2012 cohorts) have been from 17% to 74%.

The questions are

- whether these are the most suitable courses and universities at which to support students with respect to optimising their possible success; and
- whether supporting them where there are poor throughput rates is a good use of our funding.
- Whether with additional academic support they could perform better.

A related question – addressed under 6.3 below, is whether working at so many universities is a good use of our staff resources.

6.2.2 Issues, changes and strategic priorities for 2019 – 2021

As REAP's aim is to optimise students' chances of success and of obtaining employment that shifts them out of cycles of poverty, we need to be as sure as we can be that they have the chance of succeeding at the university and in the course they are taking. In addition, it is an imprudent use of resources to support students where there is likely failure and dropout.

Choice of courses

The throughput rates of students doing professional courses – Law, Medicine and Engineering – are considerably lower than those doing more generic degrees. The 2015-16 evaluation reported the (relatively) low throughputs of the 2010 – 2012 cohort as being Law (32%), Engineering (33%) and Medical (39%) degrees. Of greatest concern are those doing Engineering – particularly at Wits – as this is a popular choice (seemingly encouraged by reps) and the numbers of students who fail is high, as are the lost costs of supporting them.

In contrast, the throughput rates of REAP students (2010 – 2012 cohorts) at Universities of Technology and of those doing diplomas were higher than our degree students at all universities except for UKZN and NMU. In addition, these institutions are arguably more hospitable and appropriate for many rural students.

Following the 2015-16 evaluation's recommendations that REAP selects where to support students on the basis of throughput data, in the period 2019 – 2021 we will seriously reduce our intake for Engineering degrees, while simultaneously

- researching where the best throughput is for this degree; and
- pointing students towards diplomas.

In addition, we are currently tracking another cohort (2012 intake) to add to the 2010 – 2012 findings – with a view to reducing support for other high risk courses.

We will actively explore offering a measure of enhanced academic support to supplement our existing psychosocial support and life skills training programme. This will mean increased focus on fewer courses (which will impact selection decisions) and closer collaboration with faculties.

Choice of universities

From 2019 REAP will only recruit new students at six universities - namely

- University of KwaZulu Natal
- University of Western Cape
- University of Johannesburg
- University of Free State
- Nelson Mandela University
- Central University of Technology

In deciding this a number of factors have been taken into account.

The HEI

- Throughput rates
- Hospitality to rural students (bridging the 'cultural gap')
- The quality of the academic programme, including the range of courses offered
- The availability of suitable accommodation
- The functionality of administration
- Does it already attract substantial bursary funding?

Reputation

- The recognition of qualifications and likelihood of employment
- What /where our donors will want to support

REAP considerations

- Distance and geographical accessibility for staff
- Expense – whether the more expensive HEIs are really worthwhile
- Retaining a national footprint
- Politics – whether we should work at more (rural) HBUs

In the six chosen universities, i.e. the cultural gap is not pronounced, there are academic support systems, and their qualifications tend to be sufficiently respectable. In addition, the throughput rates are good enough. These are, therefore, our first choices.

Historically Black Universities (HBUs)

But secondly, and alongside optimising throughput, REAP acknowledges the imperative of **working at some HBUs** (perhaps particularly at those that are more 'rural'²) where there are minimal cultural gaps but there may be less academic support infrastructure. In considering whether to work at some of these HEIs, we considered

- that being nearer home and in a linguistically less diverse context may facilitate some students' success (i.e. where the cultural gap is smaller); and
- that some universities / courses are more reputable than others (i.e. employment marketplace).

We also considered how we would staff this more remote work.

We will incrementally trial working at HBUs - initially at WSU (where the current non-funding pilot is taking place) and possibly University of Limpopo from 2020.

² This may also be more in keeping with our rural mandate as well as the agenda of our main donor, the National Skills Fund, regarding rural skills development – if graduates return to work there as a result of graduating from a local university.

In doing so, we will need to consider the implications for REAP of working at a university with minimal internal support structures – including academic support to which we refer students. On balance, however, our concern about frequent disruptions to the academic programme, poor accommodation options and administration, and a lack of referral services is offset by the importance of offering these students REAP's services, even though they may not be as comprehensive as can be provided at better-resourced institutions.

Continuing students

We will continue to support all our current students until completion of their studies, subject to satisfactory academic performance and programme compliance.

6.2.3 Summary

- In 2019 – 2021 REAP will explore the possibility of offering enhanced academic support to students at selected universities and in selected courses.
- We will reduce/stop recruiting students for some courses (particularly Engineering).
- We will only recruit new students at six HEIs with increased numbers.

6.3 Objective 3: To ensure that we deploy the resources at our disposal in ways that make the biggest difference to the lives of rural youth from financially disadvantaged households.

This section should be read alongside 6.2 above where proposals are made to be more selective about some courses and universities at which REAP supports students. Here the focus is on effective resource utilisation – of time and staff.

6.3.1 Description of the work

Currently 10 full time equivalent SDAs support approximately 480 students at 16 universities, across 30 campuses. This means that some SDAs support small numbers of students on a number of campuses which, in some instances, entails considerable travel. All REAP students are fully funded – and, as far as possible, housed in safe and comfortable accommodation conducive to study.

Sources of funds

In 2018 NSF/NSFAS made available R23M exclusively for rural students in higher education, this being a cut from R32M in 2017. As this allocation was insufficient to fund all our continuing students, in 2018 our first year students have been supported by NSFAS full cost bursaries.

The full support package provided to REAP students has been made possible through our corporate funding, which contributes both to partial bursaries and our programmatic and operational costs. While the NSFAS bursary administration has been an extremely onerous responsibility for REAP (and for which we receive minimal compensation from NSFAS), we have been able to leverage corporate funding for students' living expenses and support costs when donors knew that state resources have also been contributed. The combined funding package has been synergistic.

Given the advent in 2018 of state funded 'free' higher education for the poor, REAP now has the opportunity to convert all our students to full cost NSFAS bursaries and withdraw from our partnership with NSF. This means that all REAP students will receive the same funding (NSFAS bursary with REAP top ups) and that REAP will no longer be financially vulnerable to unexpected cuts in NSF funding, which are increasingly likely in the current fiscal environment.

6.3.2 Issues, changes and strategic priorities for 2019 – 2021

Spreading staff over too many locations is not an optimal use of resources. While this cannot be a factor on its own, when considered alongside other imperatives - like no longer supporting new students at HEIs where our throughputs are poor – it allows us to rationalise where we will work.

Reducing the number of institutions and optimising use of staff

In order to utilise each HEI's services and resources, SDAs are expected to have a comprehensive and up-to-date knowledge of what they offer students - its key personnel, course selection, administration and services. Some SDAs have been supporting small numbers of students at three or four institutions – all of whose infrastructures they are expected to know. Spreading SDAs across too many campuses both compromises the quality of what is possible and is not cost-efficient. This means working at fewer universities more intensively.

In 2019 - 2021 we will consolidate student cohorts so that ultimately SDAs work on a maximum of two campuses (unless they are geographically convenient/proximate and share central administrative and support services). They will support at least 15 students at each campus.

Working remotely

In the short term some programme staff will increasingly work at remote campuses. This could entail either

- travelling to the remote campuses; or
- being based at remote campuses.

Our proposal is that in 2019 - 2021

- we will continue to locate some staff in satellite offices on campuses where daily or overnight travel is not feasible (currently at Potsdam and Port Elizabeth) - with the aim of having a minimum of two SDAs in these remote sites; and
- where distances are relatively small (one to two hours' drive), staff will undertake short field trips from regional offices, as was done in the past. We will continue to support existing students in Grahamstown, Pretoria, Wellington, Stellenbosch and Mafikeng until they have graduated, but will do so with a much lighter touch.

Funding students

From 2019-2021 we will convert all REAP students to NSFAS bursaries, which cover tuition fees, accommodation, meals, books, learning materials and local transport. REAP will provide a supplementary bursary from donor funds which will include a stipend of around R6000p.a. per student, plus a laptop for first years.

In addition, we may need to pay top ups where the NSFAS funding is not sufficient. This may be necessary if NSFAS caps the amount available for continuing students – and thus may well apply to student currently on NSF bursaries who need to be converted.

The one exception is a pilot being undertaken at WSU at Buffalo City in 2018 and 2019 in which REAP is only offering support (but no funding) to NSFAS-funded students. Seeded in the 2015-16 evaluation, this was to prepare ourselves for a possible fee-free scenario, which would test the viability of our support programme with students in the absence of a funding relationship and the leverage that goes with it.

Organisational stability and financial sustainability

While volatile contextual factors are beyond REAP's control, internally REAP can influence organisational stability and financial sustainability. In 2019 – 2021, REAP will do the following

- ensure that REAP has a **diverse and secure funding base** as a basis for responsible budgeting, resource and financial planning and suitably resourced infrastructure;
- ensure effective **management of donor relations** including clear, timely and transparent reporting and regular communication;
- rationalise our staffing structure in the light of changes to the REAP student funding and recruitment models;
- ensure REAP has sound and transparent **financial systems** producing accurate and timely reports to both internal and external stakeholders;
- exercise sound **governance** with an active, engaged and suitably skilled Board, regularly holding management and staff to account for performance and stewardship of resources;
- adopt and implement sound **HR policies and practices**, including effective staff recruitment, induction, training & development, performance management, wellness and dispute resolution;
- promote and model Catholic values within the internal **organisational culture** and style of working together.

6.3.3 Summary

The proposals are that

- REAP converts all continuing students to NSFAS bursaries;
- REAP supplements students' incomes from donor funds with a stipend and a laptop;
- REAP supplements core NSFAS funding for senior students where caps are still applied.
- SDAs ultimately work at a maximum of two HEIs, where they have cohorts of more than 15 students; and
- the number of campuses/universities at which REAP works will be reduced to six.

We will optimise organisational stability and financial sustainability through good practice and a range of forward looking approaches.

6.4 Objective 4: To accompany them throughout their courses of study, promoting their development into autonomous adulthood and their academic success through providing sustained psycho-social and academic support as well as development opportunities.

One of REAP's core objectives is to ensure that rural students are supported holistically to maximise their chances of completion. Our structured support programme addresses many of

the needs of rural students, playing an *in loco parentis* / older sibling role, helping them manage the transition from school to university/rural to urban and living at home to living independently – and optimising the chances of their completing their courses of study. Whilst precise comparative data is difficult to secure, to the best of our knowledge this helps bring about significantly higher graduation rates and reduced drop out than the national average for that profile of students. This helps maximise the use of state funds.

REAP works with the services and staff at the universities at which we support students. These include health and psychological services, financial aid, and various forms of development offerings like workshop and career fairs.

In addition, REAP has recently increased its focus on the employability of our graduates. This is addressed in 6.6 below.

6.4.1 Support – accompaniment

Description of the work

REAP: -

- provides structured psycho-social support, academic monitoring and mentoring and collective learning opportunities to assist rural students effectively manage the transition into, and studying in, higher education; and
- collaborates closely with relevant institutional services to ensure more specialist support is made available as required to avoid duplication and to use our own resources effectively.

Issues, changes and strategic priorities for 2019 – 2021

The 2015-16 evaluation proposed that there was, indeed, a ‘lighter’ way of providing this support. SDAs implemented this ‘lighter’ model across the board in 2017/18, with first years receiving slightly more individual attention than continuing students. There are minimal reports of negative effects on students (although some were a little disconcerted by the reduced contact) and the staff found this ‘lighter’ approach acceptable. We will therefore continue to implement and further develop this over the next three years.

In the period 2019 – 2021 we will add another ‘lighter’ model: ‘REAP lite’ is a considerably reduced offering of individual support and has a lower requirement to attend development events. It is proposed that this be implemented for students

- doing courses in which support is built into the curriculum; and/or
- at universities where there are substantial support resources, enabling REAP to do more referral than provision of services; and/or
- where there are senior students who need less attention; and/or

- at campuses or HEIs where there are only a few students and which are far from a REAP office.

The following are identified for the first phase of this 'REAP lite' model

- CPUT (Wellington, Athlone and Mowbray)
- UKZN (Medical and Edgewood)
- SMU

The pilot at WSU is also a 'REAP lite' model and will provide us with opportunities to learn what works.

The final form of 'lightness' is through efficient resource utilisation – particularly avoiding duplicating the services offered by the universities. In the case of individual support, this is more often to do with services REAP does not offer – like in-depth or crisis counselling or health services. Accessing these services entails SDAs having to keep abreast of the services offered - which is one of the reasons for limiting the numbers of campuses on which they work.

Where these do not exist (e.g. at some HBUs) or are not appropriate, REAP will consider liaising with local services and NGOs, where they exist. Again this requires that SDAs remain alert to what is on offer.

Summary

A lighter touch in providing support will be continued and the 'REAP lite' model will be implemented where suitable.

In addition, university services will be accessed where available – and others sourced externally where this is not the case.

6.4.2 Development

Description of the work

While student development is intrinsic to the individual support model, REAP also offers a programme of events at which students learn collectively. The Student Development Programme (SDP) comprises topics relevant to each stage of a student's life at university – from life and study skills, to social and values-based issues, to optimising student's employability through offering skills and information about the world of work.

REAP offers workshops facilitated by SDAs or contracted outsiders supplemented wherever possible by suitable offerings provided by each HEI.

More recently there has been the development and initial implementation of the LMS (Learning Management System) platform which has an increased emphasis on employability (see below). While the LMS relied on self-study by students, supported by SDAs, it also increased the need for SDAs to design and facilitate workshops. This has been experienced as simply too intensive for staff and students alike and has been reviewed and made a supplementary rather than core component of the programme.

Issues, changes and strategic priorities for 2019 – 2021

A lighter curriculum has been developed that is more realistic for students and more manageable for SDAs. This will be offered by SDAs or through the university's student development offerings. Greater emphasis will be placed on the optimal use of suitable development opportunities on each campus to minimise duplication and use resources that already exist.

We have recently boosted our own capacity to offer aspects of the development programme by

- developing some core modules/materials centrally, drawing on existing resources; and
- supporting SDAs to develop baseline competence in facilitation as well as basic coaching skills to ensure that their interpersonal contacts are developmental.

Summary

While the development curriculum remains central to REAP's programme, this will be lightened and resourced in ways that are more manageable for both staff and students.

6.4.3. Academic support

REAP's main aim is to have rural students graduating and getting work. Limiting their risk of failing is what this new imperative is about. REAP remains committed to recruiting the same kinds of students – namely from rural schools and financially disadvantaged households (under R122 000 per annum) – but who are not necessarily academic high achievers. The shift to optimising success, then, is not in recruiting different students but in **selecting courses where success is more likely and which may lead to employment.**

Limiting risk

REAP has considerable data about student achievement - by university, by faculty/stream, by course and by type of qualification.

REAP has decided that from 2019 it will focus its support of newly recruited students in six **universities**³

- at which the throughput is good enough;
- which are well-enough resourced; and
- where the 'cultural gap' is less than at the more elite universities.

From 2019, REAP will recruit directly from these universities.

In doing so, the proposal is that REAP recruits only for the **courses/streams** where the throughput is good enough or for which REAP can ensure there is academic support available that might make the difference. In other words, we need to select courses for success for typical REAP students.

Academic support package

REAP has historically paid attention to academic success through

- regular debriefings by SDAs about academic outcomes;
- training students in academic-related competencies like time management and study skills;
- convening events for collective support and motivation before and after exams;
- referring students to existing systems which provide academic support; and
- providing Close Academic Monitoring for students whose results show they are at risk of failing.

The proposal is to intensify this from 2019-2021 by

- improving SDAs' ability to monitor academic progress and provide structured personal support;
- ensuring that referrals for accessing academic support are good enough and are monitored; and
- more purposefully co-ordinating the provision of actual academic support.

³ UJ, UKZN, NMU, UWC, UFS and CUT

Having a critical mass of students in only a few courses/streams at each university would enable REAP to co-ordinate/ facilitate academic support of sufficient substance - as some other bursary providers do.

REAP may explore partnering with service providers such as Elevate to offer generic study or academic writing skills interventions.

6.5 Objective 5: To promote values and behaviour among students and staff of integrity, justice and a spirit of community serving humanity, in line with the Catholic values on which REAP is founded.

6.5.1 Description of the work

REAP is founded in the Catholic values of a community serving humanity. As such, REAP staff and students are expected to behave in ways that give expression to this by

- modelling Catholic values in everything REAP does;
- encouraging active and responsible citizenship;
- ensuring all REAP students participate in structured and accountable community service; and
- encouraging REAP alumni to remain connected and to facilitate opportunities to 'give back'.

6.5.2 Issues, changes and strategic priorities for 2019 – 2021

In 2019 – 2021 an intentional focus on values will be re-invigorated – particularly within the national context in which ethics and values are increasingly found wanting. This may include partnering with entities such as the Council for the Advancement of the South African Constitution to educate our students with civic values and a commitment to justice.

6.5.3 Summary

In 2019 – 2021 we will re-invigorate an intentional focus on values through specific workshops, one-on-one interactions with SDAs, community service and general modelling.

6.6 Objective 6: To promote their employability through developing suitable skills and linkages.

6.6.1 Description of the work

Nationally, some graduates remain unemployed or under-employed – and there are anecdotal reports of REAP alumni battling to find appropriate employment. If REAP is to make a difference to rural youth and the households from which they come, our students should not

only graduate but also find appropriate employment. While this is not central to REAP's remit, we help to prepare them to secure employment - through personal development and facilitating connections to opportunities.

6.6.2 *Issues, changes and strategic priorities for 2018 – 2020*

The proposal is that we optimise the employability of REAP students by

- addressing personal development issues relevant to future employability through workshops and one-on-one coaching;
- developing REAP's alumni association - maintaining connection with graduates, encouraging networking, facilitating access to employment opportunities and career development resources; and
- collaborating closely with relevant institutional services to ensure more specialist support is made available as required to avoid duplication and use own resources effectively.

In 2019 – 2021 these elements will be reviewed with a view to creating a better balance between employability and other elements of the curriculum - as well as between effort and return.

6.6.3 *Summary*

While promoting employability is important, in 2019 – 2021 REAP will strive to bring this focus in line with other developmental initiatives so it does not overshadow them and the effort is worthwhile.

6.7 *Objective 7: To contribute to the tertiary student support sector more broadly, through sharing good practice and advocating on issues affecting our students.*

6.7.1 *Description of the work*

REAP has a proud history of researching our own practice through a range of tracking studies and of making these available to the sector – of which REAP is a respected member. In 2016 we held a series of symposia sharing practice based findings and this year catalysed the formation of a nationwide NPO bursary providers' forum which the REAP Director chairs. REAP, as part of the SACBC, has also been part of broader church based statements and campaigns on relevant justice issues.

REAP recognises that change at a systemic level is also essential if students' access and success are to be optimised.

6.7.2 Issues, changes and strategic priorities for 2019 – 2021

In 2019 – 2021, REAP will continue and, where possible, intensify its contributions in the sector. We will

- carry out high quality practice-based evaluation, reflection and research that can both inform internal programmatic decisions but also contribute more broadly to knowledge in the sector;
- continue to participate actively in the national NPO bursary providers' forum which meets quarterly;
- actively participate in relevant conferences, workshops and forums where REAP's experience can be shared and we can also learn from others; and
- identify issues of justice affecting our students for advocacy – both as REAP and as part of broader coalitions. This may include holding NSFAS to account for service delivery. The decision to convert all students to NSFAS bursaries will make this aspect more vital – and the fact that REAP will no longer be directly be funded by NSFAS means we can speak out more freely without fear of reprisals.

In addition, REAP will advocate for systemic changes that we believe will support the HEI system broadly to deliver high quality education to students. REAP's positioning as part of the Catholic network of social development agencies adds gravitas to this voice.

REAP will explore the possibility of establishing a research and advocacy unit, drawing upon our years of practice based learnings and credibility. This may involve being a more active commentator on issues affecting higher education students from low income backgrounds. This may also coincide with a revamped website and enhanced social media presence.

6.7.3 Summary

REAP will continue to reflect on and research its practice - and actively engage in the sector around systemic issues, where useful.

7. MEASURING IMPACT

Clearly we must have a means of assessing the impact and efficacy of this new strategic framework and its implementation. REAP has a long track record of rigorous monitoring & evaluation and we are committed to maintaining and enhancing this. REAP has invested heavily in recent years in the development of a customised database and accurate and timely data entry is a key performance indicator for all programme staff. This will take several forms: -

- Year on year academic results analysis disaggregated by gender, year of study, course, institution, type of qualification.
- Periodic cohort studies tracking graduation rates and employment outcomes
- Qualitative evaluations with students as to the impact of our student support & development interventions
- Periodic external programme evaluations
- Rigorous staff performance management processes
- Annual external financial audits
- Annual national team weeks including detailed programme review and redesign where necessary.

8. PRIORITIES for 2019 - 2021

In summary the priorities for 2019 – 2021, are

- to convert all REAP students to NSFAS bursaries, supplemented by a stipend and laptop (for first years) from REAP donor funds;
- to monitor and manage any volatility in the sector – including on campuses and in NSF/NSFAS funding arrangements - such that REAP continues to realise its objectives;
- to shift the emphasis within recruitment from working with reps to accessing students directly from HEIs;
- to reduce the number of institutions and campuses at which we work with a view to in optimising student throughput and to use our staff resources more effectively – and;
- to explore the inclusion of some HBUs in the selection of HEIs at which we work;
- to offer support – and therefore only recruit - for courses at which there is a reasonable likelihood of success;
- to explore the provision of targeted academic support, in close consultation and collaboration with carefully selected faculties;
- to monitor the effectiveness of having staff in remote campus-based offices;
- to continue to lighten our touch in both student support and development;
- to actively review the impact and effectiveness of our employability initiatives;
- to more proactively model, emphasise and inculcate REAP values with our students;
- to enhance our research and advocacy presence on issues affecting both our students and those from similar situations facing similar issues.



REAP
RURAL EDUCATION ACCESS PROGRAMME

