

A Collaborative Process for Widening Access for TVET College Students to a Health Sciences Faculty at a University in the Western Cape

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Abstract

To address South Africa's history of inequality in educational opportunities, access to education, and programme completion, it is necessary to implement measures that widen access to higher education for previously excluded individuals. Alternate access to higher education through recognition of prior learning, and the success of this practice, has been reported by many South African higher education institutions. An area associated with alternate access that has not enjoyed the same degree of success and empirical recognition, is the seamless transition and successful completion of students from a Technical Vocational Education and Training college to a higher education institution.

The aim of this paper is to present the process for opening access for Technical Vocational Education and Training students to the Bachelor of Nursing Extended Curricula Programme through the collaboration between the Community and Health Sciences Faculty at a university and a Technical Vocational Education and Training College. The processes include negotiation, collaboration, curriculum alignment, selection and registration that were undertaken to widen access for these students to higher education. The process of opening access was found to be a viable approach to ensure student access and success. The outcome could provide a reliable pathway for future candidates from similar backgrounds to articulate from the colleges into higher education institutions.

Keywords: alternate access, higher education, nursing extended curriculum programme, post school education, technical and vocational education and training



1. Introduction

South Africa has a history of inequality in education for people of colour (Waghid & Davids, 2022) with challenges of access and completion of programmes, which have been documented in different educational contexts (Wilson-Strydom, 2017). This is not surprising, given that the Gini coefficient for South Africa was 0.67 in 2018 (Sulla et al., 2022), making it the most unequal out of 164 countries in the World Bank's global poverty database. Post 1994 saw the formulation of several policies aimed at redressing racial inequity in education (Mouton et al., 2013). The White Paper on Post-School Education and Training recognised the need to increase access to post-school education by reducing the barriers that affect access and success (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013). In this regard, the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997, as amended, states that “the admission policy of a public higher education institution must provide appropriate measures for the redress of past inequalities and may not unfairly discriminate in any way” (Government of South Africa, 1997, p. 29). This legislation establishes the minimum criteria for admission to higher certificate, diploma, and degree programs, requiring a National Senior Certificate at Level 4 on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). However, there has been growing emphasis on the need to bridge the gap between Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and university education in South Africa.

The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), recognising the importance of widening access for students to further their education, gazetted the Articulation Policy for the Post-School Education and Training system in South Africa (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2017). The policy proposed the establishment of an enabling environment to ensure that:

- i.) articulation occurs within and between the three NQF Sub-Frameworks;
- ii.) institutions work together to develop learning and work pathways;
- iii.) support is provided for learners as they follow their individual learning and work pathways.

Articulation refers to the process of connection between qualifications and/or part-qualifications to allow for the horizontal/lateral, vertical and diagonal movement of learners through the formal education and training system. In this paper the focus is on vertical articulation, which is articulation between NQF levels within and across the NQF sub-framework (Umalusi Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training, 2023).

Articulation is a major focus in education, however, there are known transitioning barriers. To address these, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), the oversight body of the NQF, established the SAQA-Durban University of Technology (DUT) research partnership for developing an understanding of the enablers of student transitioning between TVET Colleges and higher education institutions (HEIs) and beyond, and to investigate successful transitioning models. A national articulation

baseline survey was conducted between August and December 2016, and all 50 (100%) TVET Colleges and 25 (98%) of the 26 HEIs completed the survey (South African Qualifications Authority, 2018).

Interesting results from the survey relevant to this paper indicate an understanding of articulation between public HEIs and TVET Colleges. However, there appears to be less awareness of the need for institutions to be flexible in supporting learners during their transition, as proposed in the Articulation Policy for the Post-School Education and Training system in South Africa. (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2017). A third (17) of the TVET Colleges claimed to have existing formal articulation arrangements and half (25) claimed to be participating in informal arrangements for this process. Just under half (11) of the HEIs are participating in formal articulation arrangements and six are involved in informal initiatives. At least three relatively large-scale province-wide articulation arrangements were identified through the survey, and are seen by participants as being successful and replicable. The survey confirmed that the good practice models identified relied on an established articulation office, as opposed to an incumbent officer (South African Qualifications Authority, 2018).

Over half (28) of the colleges and just under a third (8) of the HEIs track learners, however, the information currently being tracked in the survey differs across institutions. It was suggested that articulation reporting guidelines were needed to facilitate common understandings and requirements around tracking and consistent articulation (South African Qualifications Authority, 2018).

TVET colleges have played an important part within the South African education system, providing training for a wide range of technical and vocational careers. The establishment of TVET colleges has aimed to address unemployment and skills shortages in South Africa by equipping students with relevant skills for the job market. However, historically, TVET colleges in South Africa have faced challenges associated with lack of funding and infrastructure, and the misconception about the quality of education offered at the colleges.

After completion of their training, there have been limited pathways for TVET students to transition into university education. This has had implications for the student's personal and professional advancement. With South Africa's need for a skilled and educated workforce to drive economic growth and development, it is imperative that the challenges faced by TVET colleges and the barriers that hinder TVET students' access to university education be addressed.

Much has been written about alternate access through recognition of prior learning (RPL) and its successes at many South African higher education institutions (Frick & Albertyn, 2011). However, the seamless alternate access from TVET colleges to HEIs has not enjoyed the same degree of success and acceptance, despite being highlighted in the White Paper for Post-School education and training (Department of Higher

Education and Training, 2013). Recognising this need, a Community and Health Sciences faculty at a university in the Western Cape embraced the opportunity to collaborate with a TVET college to facilitate alternate access for students into an undergraduate nursing programme.

2. Background

The National Certificate Vocational (NCV), at NQF level 4 on the South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF), was introduced by TVET colleges in 2007 (Keevy, 2013). The Council for Quality Assurance in General Education and Further Training, known as Umalusi, states that the NVC enables students to acquire the necessary knowledge, practical skills, applied competence and understanding required for employment in a particular occupation or trade, or class of occupations or trades, or for entrance into Higher Education. This provides learning experiences in situations contextually relevant to the particular vocational area in which the programme is situated (Umalusi Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training, 2013). The NVC and the National Senior Certificate, also referred to as a matric certificate in South Africa, which allows for post school education, are both at NQF level 4.

Previously, access to institutions of higher learning has predominantly focused on students attaining a Bachelor's (Umalusi) pass in matric (Grade 12) with observed patterns of access and success at higher education institutions dependent on matric results (Van Broekhuizen et al., 2017). Groener and Andrews (2019) provided theoretical insights into how TVET students exercise agency and overcome barriers to accessing higher education institutions.

Despite structural barriers, such as admission point scores below the minimum required for university entry, students pursued education at TVET colleges with the goal of enhancing their chances of acceptance into universities after completing their TVET programmes. Archer (2023) also argued that agents usually navigate their way around a situation to seek second best outcomes when confronted by constraints.

While the process of seeking alternate access is acceptable and TVET colleges may prepare students with knowledge and practical skills for entry into higher education, this has been difficult “as universities rarely accept a probable articulation” (Sebola, 2022). Sebola (2022) refers to probable articulation being the mechanism that enables student mobility within and among tertiary institutions such as academic credit accumulation and transfer, recognition and equivalence of degrees, recognition of prior learning.

3. A Collaborative Process for Widening Access from TVET College to University

The South African Government advocated for universities to recognise the qualifications of TVET colleges and to establish an articulation process to enrol TVET graduates into advanced levels of study at higher education institutions. In the Western Cape, a Health Sciences Faculty at a university envisioned a collaborative project to create an articulation pathway for TVET college students who had completed a National Certificate Vocational in the General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-framework to university programmes in the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-framework. This aligned with the National Development Plan Targets for 2030.

There is a paucity of literature on the effectiveness and efficiency of the articulation of TVET college health science applicants to an undergraduate nursing extended curriculum programme offered at a higher education institution. This paper describes the context, process and outcome of the collaboration, based on records on the student enrolment information management system, and the reflections of the staff involved in the selections process in the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences and the School of Nursing. The selection process at the university is overseen by the Faculty Manager who reports to the university management on selection targets. The Faculty Manager, Director of the School of Nursing, the School Division Head in charge of selections, and the administrator who manages the selection process in the School of Nursing were involved in setting up the collaboration with the TVET College.

4. Aim

The aim of this paper is to discuss the collaborative process for widening access for TVET students to the Bachelor of Nursing Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) as an alternate access route to higher education.

5. Significance

Providing opportunities for TVET students with a background in science to access university education has potential to address existing inequities in South Africa. Widening access will promote inclusivity, diversity, social justice, and allow TVET students to contribute to a more equitable and skilled workforce. Educational and social justice reform has potential for dismantling systemic obstacles for TVET students to achieve their personal and professional goals.

6. The Context

In 2015, the DHET convened a meeting with stakeholders from the four higher education institutions and three colleges in the Cape Metropolitan region, to discuss possibilities for articulation of graduates from TVET programmes to higher education.

The School of Nursing and the Department of Social Work in the Community and Health Sciences at the university offer an Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) in the undergraduate programmes. In nursing, this policy allows students who do not meet the minimum admission requirements for the four-year mainstream Bachelor of Nursing programme, to be accepted into the ECP five-year programme if they fall short of one admission point in Mathematics, Maths Literacy or Life Sciences. The ECP in nursing enables the students to complete the first year of the mainstream programme over two years, with extensive academic support as prescribed by the Department of Higher Education and Training (2019). The purpose of an ECP is to ensure that under prepared and unprepared students are supported towards academic success. ECP is developmental and provides sound academic support additional to the coursework prescribed for the mainstream programme. The existence of the ECP in nursing was considered a viable access route for TVET graduates.

7. The Process

The process of widening access for TVET students included negotiation and collaboration with various stakeholders, curriculum alignment, and consideration of selection and registration.

7.1 Collaborative Negotiation Process

Negotiation occurred at three levels. At macro level, DHET spearheaded the process of bringing together key stakeholders in the Western Cape to discuss possibilities of articulation. The Programme Manager of the TVET College presented their Primary Health level 2- 4 National Certificate Vocational, 3-year programme as a qualification suitable for students' access to a Bachelor of Nursing programme. Several relevant policies and education legislation were consulted to guide the discussions. The stakeholder agreed that there was an articulation possibility, supported by legislation, and therefore collaboration between the TVET College and the Health Sciences Faculty at the university was established.

At the meso level, the School of Nursing and Faculty office, in consultation with the university management reviewed the selection targets to accommodate students from TVET Colleges for entry to the Bachelor of Nursing ECP according to the DHET criteria set. Admission targets for new first time entering (FTE) students, at the university referred to in this paper, include only students from TVET colleges. On a micro level, the School of Nursing assessed all TVET student transcripts to establish whether the expected learning to successfully pursue the Bachelor of Nursing ECP had been achieved.

The negotiations were successful and culminated in the endorsement of the admission of students from TVET colleges into the ECP by the Director of the School of Nursing, the Director of Quality Assurance in the Institutional Planning Office, and the Faculty Manager on behalf of the Faculty office.

7.2 Curriculum Alignment Process

The primary aim was to open access for students with a TVET Primary Health programme qualification, at NQF level 4, to pursue a career in health sciences, specifically the Bachelor of Nursing. These students had not been previously considered as they were regarded as not meeting the minimum entry requirements of a Bachelor of Nursing programme. Academics in the School of Nursing reviewed the relevance of the TVET Primary Health qualification to the Bachelor of Nursing programme minimum entry requirements. In addition, specific admission requirements as detailed in the Government Gazette No.42092 - Minimum Admission Requirements for Higher Certificate, Diploma and Degree Programmes Requiring a National Certificate (Vocational) at Level 4 of the National Qualifications Framework, were considered (Government of South Africa, 2018). The following modules of the Primary Health Programme were regarded as relevant to the Bachelor of Nursing Programme: Human Body and Mind, Public Health, Community Oriented Primary Care and The South African Health Care System.

After the curriculum alignment process a decision was made to accept students from TVET colleges if they met the minimum admission requirement to a Bachelor's Degree programme which is:

A National Certificate (Vocational) Level 4, issued by Council for General and Further Education and Training. In addition, a student must (a) achieve at 50% in three fundamental subjects, including the language of learning and teaching in the higher education institution, (b) achieve at least 60% in four vocational subjects, chosen from the NC (V) Level 4 Subjects (Government of South Africa, 2018).

7.3 Selection and registration process

The application process for NC(V) Primary Health students opened during 2016 for the academic year 2017. Qualifying applicants were identified manually from the large pool of applicants for the Bachelor of Nursing programme, and a list of potential students was compiled. The School of Nursing is accredited by the South African Nursing Council for an intake of 50 ECP students. Therefore, as the initial selection of TVET students was treated as a pilot, only two TVET students were selected (4% of the ECP intake of 50 per annum).

The selection process, including making an offer of acceptance to the applicant and receiving their acceptance, followed the university's standard procedures. Upon acceptance of the offer, the student enrolment management system automatically generated a student number thereby allowing the student to register for the ECP programme at the start of the registration period. This process was repeated in 2017 to 2020, where two qualifying TVET graduates were accepted into the ECP each year. Careful monitoring of the students' inspired confidence in the process, resulting in an increase in the targets, which was increased to 10% (5 of 50) from 2021 to 2023 as indicated in Table 1 below.

7.4 Support and Outcome

Academic support in the ECP includes computer literacy, academic writing skills, time and stress management, library orientation, values clarification and orientation to the university's learner management system, iKamva. An additional measure to enhance success is that teaching and learning time for modules in the ECP is double the notional learning hours per module credits. In addition, as mentioned earlier, the students in the ECP complete the 120 credit of the first year of the mainstream programme over two years – 60 credits per year. A tutor programme, funded by the university, is also in place for students who may need additional support in certain modules. Tutors are senior peers who play a significant role in supporting students in their learning. Student progress and general wellbeing and adaptation to university are monitored by the lecturers and clinical facilitators. Dedicated lecturers are employed through DHET funding, to teach on the ECP. Reports are sent to the Faculty Teaching and Learning Committee to report on the ECP academic support and student progress. The committee provides feedback on the reports and recommends additional measures as identified.

Data regarding successful promotion from first to fifth-year level of the ECP was gathered for each cohort enrolled from 2017 to 2023 (Table 1). This data, collected from the university's student enrolment management information system, comprised the student's year of registration, promotion and completion / graduation.

The first two students admitted from the TVET college into the nursing ECP programme commenced the programme in 2017 and completed in minimum time (5 years), successfully graduating with a Bachelor in Nursing in December 2021 (Table 1). Although one student was unsuccessful in 2018, this did not deter the practice of taking in students from TVET Colleges. TVET students' academic performance gave the Faculty and the School of Nursing confidence to increase the intake of students in 2022.

It is noteworthy that Table 1 shows student promotion in each year, but does not highlight that in the first and second year of the ECP the students register for modules totalling 60 credits each year. The completion and graduation of the first two students demonstrated the potential for ongoing success of this initiative which supports the initiative outlined in Government Gazette Vol. 642 (2018) which states:

Currently, institutional admission policies must accommodate alternative entry routes equivalent to the National Senior Certificate or the NCV (Level 4). This includes assessing an adult student's capacity to benefit from a particular program through Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) or other means. This document does not otherwise specify such alternative routes. The above also supports the implementation of alternate access routes through a revised minimum admission requirement for NVC at NQF level 4.

1 **Table 1:** 2017 – 2023 intake of NC (V) Primary Health TVET College Students

Student	2017 (Year Level 1)	2018 (Year Level 2)	2019 (Year Level 3)	2020 (Year Level 4)	2021 (Year Level 5)	2022	2023	Summary
1	Registered/Promoted	Promoted	Promoted	Promoted	Final Year (Graduated)			Completed in record time
2	Registered/Promoted	Promoted	Promoted	Promoted	Final Year Graduated			Completed in record time
3		Registered/Failed	Promoted	Promoted	Promoted	4th Year	5 th Year Registration	If successful will complete in 2023
4		Registered/Promoted	Promoted	Promoted	Promoted	5th Year	Repeat 5 th Year	Failed one module. If successful will complete in 2023

Student	2017 (Year Level 1)	2018 (Year Level 2)	2019 (Year Level 3)	2020 (Year Level 4)	2021 (Year Level 5)	2022	2023	Summary
5			Registered/Promoted	Promoted	Promoted	4th Year	5 th Year registration	If successful will complete in 2023
6			Registered/Promoted	Promoted	Promoted	4th Year	5 th Year registration	If successful will complete in 2023
7				Registered/Promoted	Failed	2 nd year	3 rd Year	Progressing well
8				Registered/Promoted	Promoted	3 rd Year	4 th year	Progressing well
9					Registered /promoted	2 nd Year	3 rd Year	Progressing well

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Student	2017 (Year Level 1)	2018 (Year Level 2)	2019 (Year Level 3)	2020 (Year Level 4)	2021 (Year Level 5)	2022	2023	Summary
10					Registered/pr omoted	2 nd Year	3 rd Year	Progressing well
11					Registered/ Promoted	2 nd Year	3 rd Year	Progressing well
12						Registered/ Promoted	2 nd Year	Progressing well
13						Registered/ Promoted	2 nd Year	Progressing well
14						Registered/ Promoted	2 nd Year	Progressing well

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Student	2017 (Year Level 1)	2018 (Year Level 2)	2019 (Year Level 3)	2020 (Year Level 4)	2021 (Year Level 5)	2022	2023	Summary
15						Registered/ Promoted	2 nd Year	Progressing well
16						Registered/ Promoted	2 nd Year	Progressing well
17							Registered	Progressing well
18							Registered	Progressing well
19							Registered	Progressing well

Student	2017 (Year Level 1)	2018 (Year Level 2)	2019 (Year Level 3)	2020 (Year Level 4)	2021 (Year Level 5)	2022	2023	Summary
20							Registered	Progressing well

8. Staff Insights Regarding the Collaboration Between the TVET College and University

Anecdotal reports by stakeholders alluded to the success of the above efforts, appreciated by the leadership, academics, and administrators of both institutions:

I am currently working as a lecturer at [name]College, [location], and one of the primary health lecturers. I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for taking in so many of our TVET students over the past years. Last year, we had our first 2 students completing their BCur - Bachelor of Nursing at [university], of which we are so proud of. Their future started with you, so I just want to thank you for giving them the opportunity. (TVET Lecturer)

9. Lessons learnt

Several lessons can be gleaned from the 2016 National Articulation Baseline Survey (South African Qualifications Authority, 2017) which are relevant for this collaborative process. Enabling mechanisms identified in the survey included the need to:

- develop collaborative relationships by both HEIs and TVET colleges to develop a common understanding of qualifications and programmes offered within and across institutions
- align TVET curricula and programmes to the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) to facilitate articulation
- provide advice early to learners on the subject requirements for specific HEQSF aligned programmes (South African Qualifications Authority, 2017).

Another mechanism proposed was the establishment, commitment and implementation of formal articulation agreements such as Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) or Memoranda of Agreement (MoA) and strong support for RPL processes to be in place (South African Qualifications Authority, 2018).

More enablers include the adoption of inclusive admission criteria such as admission by HEIs of learners with N4-6 and NCV4 as well as with National Senior Certificate (NSC) qualifications, providing Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) access and admission of learners over the age of 23 who do not hold an NQF Level 4 qualification. An important recommendation in the national survey was to establish articulation champions – dedicated articulation offices with mechanisms and necessary resources - to support this function. This would capacitate institutions.

Collaboration between the TVET College and the university has resulted in the successful implementation of several of the enabling mechanisms proposed in the National Articulation Baseline Survey. However, lessons learnt throughout this collaboration between the selected TVET college and the School of Nursing is that timeous selection of qualifying applicants is important to ensure the viability of the

collaboration and to redress the past inequities. Further, active engagement during the orientation at the TVET college to ensure that potential applicants select the correct modules if they envision further studies in nursing at HEIs is essential. The allocation of human resources such as lecturers, clinical facilitators, and administrative staff on permanent contracts at the HEI is important to create stability in the ECP. Additionally, academic support with monitoring and evaluation of the support is imperative to the success of TVET students accepted into university level programmes. Finally, continuous tracking of student performance and implementation of additional support measures, where needed, is imperative.

10. Way Forward

Despite several gains made, there is still much to be done to strengthen and formalise the collaboration to ensure maximum benefits for those students who are unable to access higher education through conventional routes. The collaboration between the TVET College and the HEI must be formalised through an MOU or MOA. Although the relevance of TVET subjects to the entry requirements for the Bachelor of Nursing program has been assessed, further detailed work is needed to align programs across institutions for a smoother articulation process. While the HEI has partially widened access through the recognition of TVET qualifications, additional investigation is needed into RPL and the admission of learners over the age of 23 who do not hold an NQF Level 4 qualification. The university's RPL unit and the School of Nursing have established an RPL process. However, this process does not specifically address RPL for TVET candidates. While age exemptions are considered, individuals without an NQF Level 4 qualification have not yet been admitted through RPL. This remains an area for further investigation. A limited number of academic staff and administrative officers in the college and the university spearheaded the process to facilitate higher education access for TVET students. As recommended, officers should become articulation champions within faculties and institutions through broader engagement and training by SAQA.

11. Conclusion

The success of this collaboration has contributed to stronger bilateral relationships between TVET colleges and higher education institutions, opening the door for other University programmes, such as Social Work ECP, to consider this alternate access route. The collaborative, consultative processes, with clear minimum criteria and consistent application, have contributed to the desired outcome and offer a pathway for other Higher Education Institutions. Further research needs to be conducted to do a comparative analysis of the performance of the students from TVET colleges with that of students entering the programme through other routes, such as RPL or based on their school leaving results.

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