

CONSTRAINTS AND ENABLERS OF ARTICULATION FROM FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING COLLEGES TO UNIVERSITIES: PERCEPTIONS FROM SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

To help shed more light on issues of student access through the articulation route, the authors conducted a study aiming to determine South African higher education stakeholders' perceptions of articulation enablers and constrains from the Further Education and Training (FET) sector to university. Using a qualitative research design, four purposively selected key informants from some Eastern Cape Province higher education institutions informed the study through in-depth interviews. Data were qualitatively analysed to discern themes and patterns. Respondents agreed that there was blurred policy on issues of articulation from FET to university. Few respondents were aware of the South African Qualifications Authority's (SAQA) current career development pathways and initiatives that enhance such articulation. Apparently, students were not aware of various articulation routes available in South Africa. Hence, they suggested a need to mount training and awareness workshops and professional teacher development initiatives on articulation from FET to university. Curriculum mapping is also suggested as a means of establishing relevance, correspondence and equivalence between FET and university curricula.

Key words: Articulation, collaboration, Technical Vocational Education and Training, Curriculum Mapping, higher education

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is premised on the notion that students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds of a region of South Africa, like most South African learners confront issues of higher education access. The massification of higher education space

and provision has witnessed invigorated interest in education and competition for university space by Matriculation graduates. Ex-Further Education Training (FET) (now called Technical and Vocational Education and Training Colleges - TVET) students wishing to

acquire a university qualification also compete with others for access. Moreover, on admission, students are confronted by academics ill-prepared to face educational transformational challenges such as articulation and access. Career guidance services in schools and universities have not helped matters in advising, particularly former FET/TVET graduates, on available enablers on vertical articulation into university. Moreover, little is documented on South African higher education stakeholders' perceptions of FET graduates' articulation constraints into higher education (Maringe, & Osman, 2016; Mayombe, 2017; Petersen, Kruss, McGrath, & Gastrow, 2016; Powell, & McGrath, 2013). It is with these issues in mind that the authors sort to shed light and add to the debates on higher education access and articulation using South Africa as a case in point.

2. BACKGROUND

The massification of education regarding increased space and provision has witnessed invigorated interest in education, as has the competition amongst Matriculation (Matric) graduates for available places in South African Higher Education Institutions (HEI) (CHE, 2016). This post-school education, just as secondary school education, is becoming a universal aspiration for the 'wandering scholars' (Steyn, 2009). Students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds confront issues of lack of access to Higher Education Institutions. On accessing such an education, students still confront issues of vertical and horizontal articulation. Moving from one Further Education and Training band to the next does not seem to be a smooth sailing affair for most students. While Rubie-Davies (2010)

demonstrated that students' expectations of their teachers are in certain instances misaligned, the scenario is, in the authors' opinion, exacerbated by a misaligned system; that which does not seem to support the student that wishes to pursue further studies. As such, ex- Further Education Training (FET) College students wishing to acquire university qualifications also compete with these regular graduates for access. Initially, Matric students or graduates prefer to go straight into university. Matriculation is the last level of South Africa's high school students learning prior their entry into higher education (Napier & Makura, 2013). Paradoxically, FET Colleges, though cheaper, and having lower entry requirements, seem to be an unattractive destination, probably due to the non-degree programmes they offer.

Research actually shows that students move from one institution to another on their way to acquiring a degree (De los Santos & Sutton, 2012) especially from a FET to a university. This binary system appears to pose some challenges for the learner that wishes to progress within the higher education system. The Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) system has elevated FET colleges into the Higher Education and Training (HET) band. However, the inclusion of FET Colleges in the HET band alongside the universities raises questions which have HEQSF alignment implications for FET colleges. The then existing binary system seemed to work against the aspirations of the students as each system worked independently. These institutional types had distinct mandates, academic cultures and governance differences that were not aligned. Carter, Coyle and Leslie (2011) propose credits

transfer and using learning outcomes that identify students' skills and knowledge. These outcomes would have to be pitched appropriately and aligned to the HEQSF if articulation is to be achieved. As such, non-degree work is perceived as less rigorous. The perception that FET College work is less onerous and rigorous resonates well with Jaschik's (2009) observation that there is an assumption that there is less rigour in College programmes. Matea (2013) advocates the establishment of formal skills development partnerships between colleges and the private sector to ease articulation and responsiveness issues.

On admission, university students are confronted by academics ill-prepared to face educational transformational challenges such as articulation and access. Such challenges manifest themselves in the quality of graduates from the various institutions. The ramifications of the above are noted by the DHET (2009) as confusion among the target group and difficulties in the recognition of achievements of students from different institutions constituting the FET College band. These problems are attributed to poor articulation between the HET and the FET bands, as well as the misalignment of the FET Colleges with both the school and the HET system. Career guidance services in schools and HEI have not helped matters in advising - particularly former FET graduates - on available enablers for possible vertical articulation into HEI. The DHET (2009) report laments about the lack of information and guidance for students who then must navigate their way through the education system and make decisions about work and higher education. Such students may not know,

off hand, the articulation prior to them joining particular HEI programmes.

Little is documented on South African Higher Education stakeholders' perceptions of constraints faced by FET graduates when articulating into HE. Ng'ethe, Subotzky and Afeti (2008: xvii) view articulation as referring to "mechanisms that enable student mobility within and among the institutions that comprise the tertiary system." They go on to mention these as including academic credit accumulation and transfer, recognition and equivalence of degrees, recognition of prior learning, et cetera. The above authors articulate on the drivers and inhibitors of articulation. They mention these as (1) demand for access, (2) national policy, (3) internal governance structures, and (4) industry and the labour market. Another issue that has a bearing on the articulation of FET Colleges to universities concerns the "transition routes that are less clear" (DHET 2009:29). Most American and European universities have in place models or templates for the evaluation of articulation agreements or Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) for subject areas and programmes (Hodge, Anderson, Kirsch, & Kelen, 2011; Lowe, 2010). Such models spell out the contents which articulation agreements between universities and colleges should contain. These include gaps between the curricula covered at each of the levels, redundancy in curriculum across the levels, gaps between what is taught and what is assessed, gaps in student performance expectations, teaching models, and grading structure (Paez, Byrnes, Blacker, Jackson, & Dwyer, 2011).

The overarching idea behind articulation is the seamless transition or progression for students across learning

outcomes, programmes, phases, and bands within the education system (Gultig, *et al* 2002; Petersen *et al* 2016). According to Scarborough (undated) articulation requires a system for co-operation in the planning, evaluation, and improvement of educational programmes. To this end, articulation agreements or links between TVET Colleges would enable the leverage of decision-making processes around selection and appropriate placement in the university (Watson, 2016). For these agreements to work, Nel (2013) suggests curriculum mapping as a methodology that would enable the design of articulation pathways in similar or associated fields of study between TVET Colleges and universities. The mapping exercise would accordingly enable the identification of strengths, gaps and overlaps in the curriculum; facilitate entry into, as well as credit towards a qualification; ensure clarity and transparency to all; enable the establishment of equivalence in terms of volume and complexity; and eliminate bias in the process of gaining access into the qualification. Paez, *et al* (2011) further suggest that mapping should be a “critical, non-negotiable and motivational basis for credit transfer agreements or arrangements”. If the articulation agreements are to work, and a curriculum mapping exercise is to be embraced by both TVET Colleges and universities, an important model of articulation would evolve there where institutions collaborate.

3. Collaboration: A Theoretical Framework

The issue of collaboration in higher education is very important in assisting students articulate from one institution to another. To collaborate is to cooperate, aid, join, collude, concert, and concur or to

get together. This coming together by organisations or a group of individuals can be for a positive purpose. Collaboration stems from a conscious endeavour by human beings to pursue an ideal regarded as an imperative in a social organisation (Kennedy, 2008). Subsequently, other social imperatives crop up, hence the need to address these as they arise. Collaboration is recognised as a cardinal aspect of teaching and research excellence. When people collaborate, they share a common goal. Collaboration in a higher education context is a must. Regrettably, universities for instance, confront multifaceted challenges that call for resolute responses from their ranks. This paper explains why collaboration between universities and TVET Colleges is an unavoidable imperative given the multiplicity of its perceived benefits to those students that wish to scale the academic heights.

Collaboration is not a new phenomenon (Solomon, Boud, Leontios, & Staron, 2001). The basis of collaboration is the family unit where the husband and wife cooperate to fend for their offspring. It is from this unit that the values of cooperative behaviours are inculcated. Consequently, the human self only exists in relationships to its surroundings and with other persons (van Rensburg, 2007). People are social beings and have a need to communicate and interact with other people (van Deventer & Kruger, 2005). Their desire to satisfy needs, such as Maslows’ hierarchy of needs, is a great motivating factor in the formation of groups (van Rensburg, 2007) because these needs are interlinked. In a broader context, cooperation between countries in various fields of endeavour such as defence, culture, health, and so on, is not a

recent phenomenon and has been found to work (Bourgeois, 1949). Hence, people often hear of ‘Memoranda of understanding’ and ‘Bilateral or multilateral agreements’. The need for social reforms has been found to promote collaboration (Tschannen-Moran, 2001).

In higher education, collaboration takes various forms. It could be between or among staff members, between institutions, staff-students, administration and the community at large. The purpose of collaboration in higher education is to create, share and disseminate knowledge and resources for the benefit of students, among other reasons. Researchers, for instance, create a means within which collaboration can occur (Tschannen-Moran, 2001) by networking on common areas of research interest and then publish articles from such groupings. Overly, collaboration is a term that has come to have very positive connotations (Solomon et al 2001). Some authors see these as the foundations of collaboration research (Barratt, 2004). Universities and Further Education Colleges seem to yearn for collaboration in order to present students with more articulation options.

However, collaboration has its own limitations too. Van Rensburg (2007) likens collaboration to communalism. The inverse is individualism, he contends. Both concepts are on a continuum and are perceived as desirable for society. Regrettably, the extreme positions are said to be undesirable (van Rensburg, 2007:62). Extreme individualism leads to poor relationships and extreme communalism (collaboration) leads to a lack of personal accountability (van Rensburg, 2007). The propensity towards individualism stems from lack of trust between collaborators. This normally happens when collaboration

ceases to benefit both parties and becomes a one sided affair whereby some participants just benefit without making any contributions to the issue at stake (reaping where one has not sown!). Barratt (2004) has argued that there is a fundamental lack of trust particularly among business partners. Beckett (2005) echoes this sentiment by positing that many people are keen to enter collaborations, but are concerned about issues of trust especially where the time to forge such a link is limited for the partners to learn about each other. They probably harbour ulterior motives or are bent on creating a parasitic relationship. Such issues were interrogated in seeking to explain the relationships between some HEI and FET colleges in the Eastern Cape region of South Africa. There is need to investigate such a link or trends since National governments the world over make budgetary allocations for academic endeavours at universities.

In order to achieve a seamless system, that enables articulation within institutions, there is need for “...the kind of collaboration that is intentional, self-forming, and based on values and goals, bringing together institutions, with limited competitive interaction...Collaboration necessitates thoughtful co-ordination to bring more value to each institution that is taken from each institution...” (Burns, Crow & Becker, 2015). Thus, TVET Colleges and universities should view themselves as equal partners that actively influence one another towards ensuring a smooth articulation. In this regard, collaboration is thought to be a useful theoretical lens that promises to reveal the perceptions around articulation arrangements. Through collaboration, well-meaning intentions of articulation

arrangements, which would not necessarily come out in articulation arrangements that are mandated by policy, with no meaningful goals and shared common values as the basis for their formation, would be flushed out.

4. METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative research design. Four key respondents (L1, L2, L3 and L4), one each from four conveniently selected institutions of Higher Learning (two HEI [XU and YU], and FET Colleges [AF and BF] respectively) in the Eastern Cape informed the study through in-depth interviews. The ethical protocols were outlined and adhered to hence the use of pseudonyms. Data were qualitatively analysed to discern themes and patterns, but guided by the research questions.

4.1. Objectives

- To determine Higher Education stakeholders' perceptions of articulation enablers and constraints for learners articulating from the FET sector into Higher Education Institutions.
- A secondary objective was to proffer solutions for the seemingly rocky route between FET and HEI, particularly in the South African context.

4.2. Research questions

- What perceptions are held by FET and HEI staff regarding the articulation of students from Further Education and Training Colleges to University?

- How can institutions enhance student articulation from FET Colleges to Universities?

5. RESULTS

5.1. Perceptions Held by FET and HEI Staff Regarding Articulation

Interview data from the four respondents showed congruency of opinion on certain aspects of articulation. With regards to policy, an official (L1) at a FET college (AF) revealed that there was no articulation policy she was aware of. She observed that FET colleges occupied a low status within the education sector. As such, most high school graduates aspired to go straight to university.

Most candidates distasted the vocational nature of FETs and went to them as a last resort. Officer L1 revealed that there had been on-going talks to find an articulation formula since about 2004. The respondent noted that articulating within the FET was possible. After acquiring the National Certificate in Vocational Studies (NCV) pegged at NQF 4, the graduate could move upwards. Respondent L2 based at institution BF revealed that most of their students at the institution enrolled for the three-year NCV (Matric equivalent). As such, universities were reportedly reluctant to take NCV graduates because the qualification was equal to Matric. Respondent L2 disclosed that the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University enrolled ex-FET graduates wishing to pursue an Agricultural diploma, but did not give full credit to prior learning. The respondents agreed that students face articulation challenges [stemming from a blurred policy issues on articulation from FET to Higher Education institutions].

Respective tertiary institutions in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa are reportedly having localised articulation agreements with sister institutions. The respondents revealed an apparent lack of awareness about policy provisions on articulation from FETs to HEIs, despite the availability of policy on this matter, particularly, those for the NCV and N4-N6 qualifications. The L4 respondent from the XU University revealed that FET bridging programmes that have no articulation considerations compound the factor of articulation between FETs and HEIs. The L2 official from AF also revealed that articulation agreements that are not formalised and reduced in writing, but are “gentlemen’s agreements” between the FET College lecturers concerned and co-ordinators of programmes in the universities concerned are problematic if a student wants to articulate to a programme in a university that has no articulation agreement with the FET College. Results show that respondents are agreed that there is competition for places at FETs and Universities. Respondent L3 and L4 opined that most ex-Matric graduates prefer taking the university route though this desire is regulated by one’s performance. *“With the rise in the Matric pass rate, we see a graduate fight for limited places in universities”* said L3. The articulation route available for those taking the FET route was blurred according to the respondents.

5.2. How institutions can enhance student articulation from FET colleges to universities

Related to the above finding is the issue of some colleges forming partnerships with universities. These partnerships are as a result of negotiations

among the partnering institutions and, in most cases, consideration is not given to substantive articulation issues such as the alignment, scope, depth, relevance and rigour of outcomes. The authors believe that the formalisation of agreements through MOUs and collaborations between institutions at programme and course levels would help dispel the perceptions that FET college programmes are less rigorous and pitched inappropriately. The apparent lack or absence of articulation in the form of specifications on the admission requirements for National Certificates (NCs) or National Technical Certificates (NTCs) in the university programmes in most university faculty prospectuses, calendars, or career information, and student academic advisory services constrains articulation in that university admissions personnel have no reference point when confronted with applicants from the FET Colleges.

The other articulation issue revealed concerned the crediting of students with FET College qualifications. In some instances, universities apply the recognition of prior learning (RPL) policy and “blanket credit” students for one semester, in some instances a year, particularly those with NQF level 6 qualifications. Respondent L3 revealed that in some instances, the students with FET College credits or qualifications are not credited at all. They simply gain admission into the university programmes despite having spent a year or two of post-matriculation studies. This is where the lamentation of FET college graduates is grounded. Almost all of the respondents concurred that they were not aware of the DHET (Department of Higher Education and Training) and SAQA (South African Qualifications Authority) current Career

Advice Services' initiative that could potentially enhance such articulation. As indicated above, the articulation routes available to the ex-FET graduands are not uniform. Some university students do foundation provisioning, whereas other FET College students are admitted into mainstream qualifications. Such admissions and registration guidelines for admitted students in the mainstream courses in the university programmes are based on one's Matric certificate (and not on an FET qualification).

The respondents revealed that there were *ad hoc* career guidance efforts by FETs and HEIs and lack of focus on articulation issues in most career guidance programmes. Respondent L1 professed ignorance of the existence of structured career guidance efforts at his institution (XU). "*I am not sure if our career development marketing during our career week cover issues of articulation*". Two other respondents, L3 and L4 indicated that they were unaware of institutional-based articulation efforts. Said L3 "*If these exist, I am not sure if they are well coordinated*". Respondents suggested a need to organise training and awareness workshops, and professional teacher development initiatives, focussing on advice towards articulation from FET Colleges to Higher Education Institutions. By constantly reviewing and aligning institutional policies that promote articulation it is assumed that this would facilitate articulation in developing contexts such as South Africa and elsewhere.

6. DISCUSSION

Our results reveal localised but congruent narratives saturated with unique perceptions regarding articulation from

technical colleges to university. Interview data showed convergence of opinion on certain aspects of articulation. Data revealed that no articulation policy was in place in some of the colleges. Powel and McGrath (2013) have advocated a need for such policies in higher education institutions. The respondents recognised the existence of articulation challenges faced by students, ostensibly from blurred policy-related issues. Hence Maringe and Osman's (2016) contention that transformation has not been fully embraced with the South African education policy framework. Some participants observed that FET colleges occupied a low status within the education sector. As such, most high school graduates aspired to go straight to university, where completion was stiff. Some universities were reportedly reluctant to take NCV graduates arguing that the qualification was equivalent to Matric. Bridging programmes were instituted to ease the articulation from FETs and HEIs and help dispel the negative perceptions held by employers especially in the private sector (Matea, 2013). Most respondents concurred that they were not aware of the DHET and SAQA current Career Advice Services' initiative that could potentially enhance such articulation.

On the issue regarding how institutions could enhance student articulation from FET colleges to universities, the study participants suggested the creation and formalisation of partnerships with universities. This could be through MOUs and collaborations between institutions at programme- and course levels (Mayombe, 2017). This would also help dispel the notions that FET college programmes are less rigorous

and pitched inappropriately. The study also revealed that articulation could be eased through crediting students with FET/TVET College qualifications for those with appropriate qualifications. Participants conceded that institutions had in place *ad hoc* career guidance programmes, though these lacked focus on articulation issues. They suggested that institutions needed to organise training and awareness workshops, and professional teacher development initiatives, focussing on advice towards articulation from FET Colleges to Higher Education Institutions. By constantly reviewing and aligning institutional policies (Maringe & Osman, 2016) that promote articulation it was assumed that this would facilitate articulation in developing contexts such as South Africa and similar areas. This is where the Collaborative model of articulation advocated by Kennedy (2008) comes in handy. In crafting such policy, educational administrators should avoid the temptation of what Bush (2014) calls “policy borrowing”, especially adopting Western models that are unsuitable particularly in African contexts. And, as Kennedy (2008) says, “there is no formula for successful collaboration, but success should be defined in terms of the original intent of the collaboration”.

7. CONCLUSION

On careful analysis of the findings, the paper concluded that perceptions about the rigour and the relevance of FET College programmes impedes articulation into the university programme and that conscious effort needs to go into sorting out the perceived misalignments between FET College and university programmes. There is a lack of awareness (among HEI academics) about the National policy on

the admission of NCVs and NTC students into the university programmes. Academics appear to hold blurred notions about the articulation routes within and between institutions. Career advisory centres/units do not necessarily extend their services to include articulation advice to both prospective students and admissions and registrations personnel. Such career efforts are *ad hoc* and do not appear to address articulation issues *per se*.

There is a lack of cooperation between the Universities and the FET Colleges on articulation issues, and hence the need for collaboration on substantive issues of alignment of programmes and articulation. Current institutional arrangements are not binding to similar institutions. There is implied ‘non-cooperation’ due to the absence of clear policies. The authors also concluded that issues of articulation need to be attended to holistically in respective institutions. This necessitates a collaborative arrangement between all the entities concerned such as admissions, registrations, academic development, career counselling, and the RPL units. The need to have a clear and common articulation policy that addresses articulation process at local and National level was felt. Such a National policy would offer guidelines on how to attend to articulation issues and help institutions take cues in the formulation of their institutional articulation policies.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

The universities’ admission policies and registration guidelines need to be strengthened and updated to include FET/TVET College qualifications, exit points and their university equivalences in the university programmes. Curriculum mapping should be adopted as a means of

establishing relevance, correspondence, and equivalence between FET and university programmes. Spelling out these articulation pathways would enable students who study FET College programmes to focus and energise their efforts and study with a view to articulating into the University programmes. On the issue of strengthening career guidance at institutions, it is recommended that the career counselling units should offer advice on articulation matters not only to FET College students who aspire to study university programmes, but also, to admissions and registration personnel so that FET College students not only access but also that they are placed appropriately in the university programmes. Collaboration on articulation issues between units within the university such as career counselling, admissions, registrations, academic development centres, and the RPL units need to be encouraged. This would ensure that articulation issues and their implication access and success are looked at holistically by all parties involved. These need to work together and with other institutions for the benefit of all students.

Moreover, collaborations between the Universities and the FET College registrars on articulation matters need to be promoted, and that articulation agreements between these institutions need to be formalised through Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) and formalised agreements at institutional and programmes levels. In this way issues of alignment, relevance, and rigour of outcomes could be attended to and programme levels shared so that articulation could be enabled. As such, universities and colleges need to work with

SAQA and other stakeholders in coming up with formal policies and arrangement that have legal clout.

This paper, therefore, implores institutions to engage in collaborative activities particularly on articulation in order to increase throughput rates. This paper proposes a collaboration model among HEIs if they are to justify the promulgation of policy and their social existence. Such policy on collaboration should be rooted in the South African educational context. The paper, therefore, challenges institutions of higher education to vigorously engage in collaborative initiatives and practices that are desirable and beneficial to the masses.

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