ID 010: Enhancing Institutional Relationships in the Context of the South African National Qualifications Framework: Policy in Practice

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Abstract

Democratic South Africa inherited a racially segregated, unequal education and training system. The South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF) was the means chosen to integrate this system. The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) oversees the implementation and further development of the NQF. There is now one system in the country, designed to enable the lifelong learning of individuals, and to contribute to the socio-economic development of the country as a whole. The concepts of 'learning pathways' and 'articulation' are central for learner transitioning and lifelong learning in this context.

This paper describes how the idea of articulation can be understood, and the types of institutional relationships and 'relational agency' needed to support articulation. It focuses on the role of research partnerships in building communities of practice and relational agency in general. The paper draws on the findings from the SAQA - Durban University of Technology (DUT) Partnership Research, including a National Articulation Baseline Study and two case studies, to describe successful models for learner transitioning between Technical and Vocational (TVET) colleges and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), between different HEIs, and into workplaces, in ways which enable epistemic justice.

Introduction and background

Democratic South Africa inherited a racially segregated, unequal education and training system. The South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF) was the means chosen to integrate this system and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) oversees the implementation and further development of the NQF. There is now one system in the country, designed to enable the lifelong learning of individuals, and to contribute to the socio-economic development of the country as a whole. The concepts of 'learning pathways' and 'articulation' are central for learner transitioning and lifelong learning in the NQF context in South Africa.

The recently gazetted Articulation Policy of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) for the PSET system in South Africa (RSA, 2017) provides the principles and over-arching guidelines to support the implementation of credible approaches to articulation within PSET and between PSET and workplaces. It outlines the roles and responsibilities of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), SAQA, the Quality Councils, education and training providers, and professional bodies. The Policy creates an enabling environment to ensure *inter alia* that:

- articulation occurs within and between the three NQF Sub-Frameworks;
- institutions work together to develop learning and work pathways; and
- support is provided for learners as they follow their individual learning and work pathways (RSA, 2017)

One of the key objectives of the NQF is to facilitate access, articulation, mobility and progression between qualifications (Mukora, 2008). Articulation (within and across) the institutional and qualification landscape is a

national imperative that has featured regularly in Higher Education legislation. Although the goal of strengthening relationships between education and training institutions and between these institutions and workplaces is clearly laid out in the White Paper on Post School Education and Training (MHET, 2013), optimal, seamless implementation of legislative imperatives still needs to be engendered by institutions and workplaces.

SAQA has conducted or commissioned research and published documents on matters related to the development and implementation of the NQF and from research commissioned through previous partnerships on articulation, gaps have been revealed in the understanding of articulation and learning pathways. Attempts to re-establish articulation between the TVET Colleges and UoTs and between both of these types of institution and workplaces, has been challenging and inefficacious. There are however a number of articulation arrangements amongst TVET colleges, UoTs and workplaces that are being implemented effectively. The current SAQA-Durban University of Technology (DUT) research partnership is established to examine the mitigating factors that promote such successful articulated learning pathways where these exist.

This paper describes how the idea of articulation can be understood, and the types of institutional relationships and 'relational agency' needed to support articulation. It touches on the role of research partnerships in building communities of practice and relational agency in general, and makes reference to some of the findings from a SAQA-Durban University of Technology (DUT) Partnership Research initiative in particular.

Conceptualisations of articulation
From a previous research partnership between SAQA and Rhodes on *Learning pathways for sustainable development*, it was found that in the South African NQF context, articulation is currently understood in at least three ways (Lotz-Sisitka 2015).

- First, articulation can be understood broadly, as **systemic articulation** or 'joined up' qualifications and various other elements aligned to and supporting learning pathways. Systemic articulation is based on legislation and the steering mechanisms available to the state, such as planning and funding in the education and training system.

- Secondly, **specific articulation** is based on the formal and informal agreements within the system for education and training – between institutions – as guided by policies, accreditation principles, and mechanisms like Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) or Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs).

- Third, articulation exists through **addressing boundary-*making* practices and the supporting boundary-*crossing* practices** as individuals encounter 'boundary zones' between the different elements of learning pathways, and adopt boundary-crossing practices in their transitioning along their pathways (Lotz-Sisitka & Ramsarup, Forthcoming [a] & [b]). This support includes reducing the gap between learning pathway-related policy development and implementation; strengthening specific pathways and enhancing opportunities to access and progress along these pathways; the quality of education and training; Flexible Learning and Teaching Provision (FLTP) (Walters, 2015[a] & [b]); appropriate and timely career development advice, and the various types of support for learning needed in workplaces, amongst other aspects.

Articulation and relational agency

Relationship-building within and between the different parts of TVET colleges and HEIs, including UoTs require deliberate effort. This necessitates that the design, methodology/approach of the research sustains the relationship building process. In the SAQA-DUT research project, aimed at investigating the enablers of learner transitioning between TVET colleges and HEIs, relational agency is the main theoretical framework. It provides guidelines for how constructive, cooperative relationships within and between TVET Colleges and UoTs can be formed, maintained and sustained for student transitioning. Relational agency is an important ingredient for articulation. The study assesses the extent to which motives of the institutions, staff and students promote or hinder articulation, integration, and joint work. Edwards' (2010; 2014) concept of 'relational agency' is useful for understanding and strengthening relationships. Four ideas are central to relational agency (Op.Cit.). The first is that *relational expertise* involves additional knowledge and skills over and above specialised core expertise. Second, relational expertise involves understanding and engaging with the motives of others. It allows the expertise (resources) offered by others to be surfaced and used. Third, relational expertise can be useful vertically (in authority hierarchies), but it is also relevant for horizontal collaboration across institutions, communities, and practices. Lastly, relational expertise respects history, but is focussed on the common knowledge created through shared understanding of the different motives of those collaborating, and going forward together.

The SAQA-DUT research partnership

SAQA enters into research partnerships that support NQF policy development and implementation. The partnerships enable both the development of NQF research capacity, and the direct use of research in NQF policy development and implementation.

The research partnership between SAQA and DUT formed in March 2016 seeks to identify, analyse and document good practice models and relationships for learner transitioning between TVET colleges and HEIs; between TVET colleges or HEIs, and workplaces. The research project entitled *Developing an understanding of the enablers of student transitioning between TVET Colleges and Higher Education Institutions* intends to build upon the work carried out in previous SAQA projects. This project intends to address gaps in the understanding of articulation and learning pathways, specifically to improve articulation between the TVET Colleges and UoTs and to understand the factors that promote such successful articulated learning pathways where they exist. The study attempts to understand how to build collaborative/cooperative relationships between TVET Colleges and UoTs which will enable, enhance and promote successful articulation and integrated College-University learning pathways. The research question asked is: *How can collaborative relationships between TVET Colleges and UoTs be developed, which will enable, enhance, and promote student transitioning between TVET Colleges and HEI?*

As part of the research methodology, three types of articulation scenarios were identified: a) *developed* articulation scenarios with established structures, processes and transitioning students; b) *emerging* articulation scenarios where structures and processes are in the process of being established and c) *latent* articulation scenarios which did not develop, or ceased to exist. The case study method is used and two in-depth case studies allocated to each of the scenarios (developed, emerging and latent) make up a total of six cases which investigate specific issues in relation to the main research question. The research project currently comprises of two Doctoral and four Masters students. In this paper we present the two case studies from the developed scenario. The first study is at the Master's level and examines the management of articulation

between a TVET College and a UoT in the Hospitality discipline. This case study proposes participatory management as an enabler of articulation between the TVET college and UoT.

The second study at the Doctoral level explores the articulation processes between TVET Colleges and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the field of engineering. It examines the challenges faced by the TVET Colleges, as well as some of the issues facing students wishing to articulate from TVETs to HEIs. Epistemic injustice is used as a lens that, together with other allied theories, forms the framework guiding the enquiry.

A National Articulation Baseline Survey was conducted in August 2016 involving all 26 public HEIs and all 50 public TVET colleges in South Africa. The aim was to explore the existence and nature of articulation initiatives. Response rates of 98% and 100% respectively, were achieved. A brief summary of the findings shows the usefulness of the three-way understandings of articulation, and the concepts of scenarios and relational agency.

Summary Findings: National Articulation Baseline Survey

Understandings of articulation

It was found that across the public HEI and TVET college sectors there is relatively high awareness of *systemic articulation* (linked up qualifications and other elements that make up learning pathways in the system) and *specific articulation* (institutional/specific arrangements to enable articulation between particular programmes/qualifications/ learning and work. There was less understanding of the need for institutions to be flexible in their support of learners as they transition along their particular *individual pathways*.

Existing articulation initiatives

All of the TVET colleges in the study reported engagement in some articulation activities, and over two thirds of the HEIs did so (Lortan *et al.*, 2017). At least three relatively large-scale articulation arrangements were found (*ibid*). All three were developed in response to provincial needs; and all three involved the provincial governments concerned and a range of learning institutions (as well as other entities in some cases). In addition to the provincial models, a number of effective *specific* articulation arrangements were reported, with each appearing to be anchored around a single institution. Some colleges provided evidence of multiple articulation arrangements, and several HEIs reported articulation agreements with a number of colleges. These arrangements effectively create boundary-crossing zones.

Developed, emerging and latent articulation scenarios found

Although respondents were deliberately not asked to categorise their articulation initiatives, their responses enabled the research team to categorise the initiatives in terms of these three articulation scenarios.

Eight of the articulation initiatives reported by the HEIs were categorised as *developed*. One of these included a UoT, four TVET colleges, the Provincial Education Department, and articulation between vocational qualifications and university degrees. More than 8000 learners had transitioned successfully in this example.

The second *developed* articulation initiative reported by an HEI involved a traditional rural university, TVET colleges, a Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) and a Provincial Education Department; and vertical articulation between specific qualifications. In this example, the role of the SETA as a broker of boundary-crossing practices between the different elements of learning pathways in the NQF is exemplified. The learning pathways traversed the workplace, an HEI and a TVET college. The boundary-crossing practices adopted in transitioning along this pathway included the deliberate development of opportunities for access to and progression along these pathways, and to some degree, Flexible Learning and Teaching Provision (FLTP)/.

A third example of a *developed* articulation scenario reported by an HEI involved a comprehensive university and a number of agreements with colleges for transitioning between specific qualifications. In this instance, a Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) constituted the boundary-crossing mechanism, designed to address the boundary zone that comprised particular NQF Level 5 qualifications as well as the intersection of the three NQF Sub-Frameworks making up the NQF in South Africa.

The TVET colleges reported eight instances of *developed* articulation scenarios. Two colleges described arrangements involving college programmes and one or more HEI; one, agreements involving the college qualifications and entry to trade tests/artisan training. In these instances there were MoA. In one college, a workplace initiative was mediated through a formal agreement with a SETA; in another there was a formal arrangement with a dedicated Artisan Training and Development Centre. Another college reported successful articulation between occupational qualifications, and between the qualifications and employment. Here articulation was achieved through cognate curricula, supplemented with a SETA learnership.

In all, 38 instances of *emerging* articulation scenarios, and 20 instances of *latent* scenarios, were found. These are not discussed in this paper. Institutional perceptions of their own articulation successes, or otherwise, were also obtained.

The next section presents the two case studies from the developed scenario as mentioned above.

Case Study 1: Participatory Management and Articulation

Effective management arrangements are considered as a significant enabler of articulation within and between educational institutions and between institutions and the workplace.

This case study focused on articulation management systems and assumed that participatory management would be an enabler of College-UoT transitioning. The case involved articulation between a private TVET college and a UoT to enable learning pathways for a Hospitality Management qualification. Participatory management, for the purposes of this study referred to an open form of management where employees were actively involved in institutions' decision-making processes, and where senior managers sought strong relationships with employees, and welcomed innovative ideas and inputs from them (Guyot, 2011). In this case the employees were the lecturers, who dealt directly with learners at the institutions of learning in the sample.

Research Methodology

The research design was an in-depth case study. The sample constituted six individuals from the private college: the Chief Executive Officer/Director, a Senior Lecturer, Manager and three Lecturers. It included five individuals from the UoT, namely, a Senior Manager, an Executive Dean, a Head of Department, and two lecturers. An interview schedule with four pre-determined themes was used for data collection. The themes covered conceptualisations of articulation; curriculum development; management systems and participatory management. Data analysis was thematic. The findings of the study will contribute towards the development of a participatory management framework, proposed as an enabler of articulation.

Findings

Understandings of articulation

The six college respondents viewed articulation as being movement between NQF levels, based on learner achievement of the prerequisites. Four of the UoT responses mirrored the college responses, adding the view

of articulation as student movements between HEIs. The fifth UoT respondent described articulation as access from one qualification to another, and from one institution to another, along 'well-defined learning pathways'. These responses reflect articulation as being 'systemic' and 'specific'.

Views around management style within the institutions
Regarding existing management systems *within* the two institutions, five of the College respondents described the management style as being 'collaborative'; one thought it 'top-down' although staff opinions on issues 'were sought', as was participation in operational matters. The UoT responses described a top-down style, which varied somewhat depending on the leadership in departments.

Views around management style and articulation between the institutions
Regarding the management of articulation *between* the two institutions, three of the college responses described the style as co-operative and collaborative, saying that regular consultation and the involvement of moderators from the UoT helped the process. The other three indicated that the style differed according to UoT departments, and that there had been some communication challenges. One UoT response described the way of working between the two institutions as collaborative and participatory. Two were unsure, and one indicated varied interpretations of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU).

The general college perspective was that there was a strong over-arching collaborative management process between the institutions. The main enabler of articulation was the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), which made it possible for college staff to negotiate with the heads of faculties/ departments at the UoT. The other strong enabler was the nature of the National Accredited Technical Education Diploma (NATED) vocational learning programme offered at the college, which was aligned with, and prepared learners for, the three-year Diploma courses offered at the UoT. The UoT respondents noted the ability to work with the College staff in spite of disagreements. There was 'no dictation': both sets of role-players made inputs in curriculum development.

Reported challenges to articulation
The College respondents noted a number of articulation-related challenges, including the outdated NATED curriculum; insufficient in-house control of the qualifications; poor communication and awareness of articulation (the College-UoT partnership had not been communicated systematically); and lack of communication between the different authority levels within UoT departments.

UoT responses noted that articulation often fell within the remits of individuals, whose departure from the institution then adversely affected the initiative. There were no specific ways of dealing with articulation, rather interactions with the college were fragmented; and there was confusion between the MoU and Memorandum of Agreement (MoA). Credits were not awarded for modules or subjects at the college. The UoT was seen as being 'superior'.

Understandings of participatory management
The college respondents saw participatory management as involving collaborative relationships which would protect all stakeholders and not be one-sided, and in which staff would be involved in the management decision-making processes. The view was that there would be an 'open door policy' which would smooth the process of articulation.

The UoT responses noted that in participatory management, consultation was a prerequisite and replaced the approach of 'one person signing the dotted line'. Learners would be at the core. Management would be

collaborative, and structured to ensure feedback as part of the accountability process. It was described as 'a contingency management approach'. Whoever was involved had to be part of the project from its beginning, and contribute to shaping the project.

Views around current implementation of participatory management
The majority of respondents from both the college and the UoT stated that participatory management was currently being implemented between the two institutions, as evidenced by the regular meetings held, and access to people at various levels in the institutions. All agreed that participatory management had the potential to be an enabler of articulation. One asserted that this management style could enable the coming together of minds from different backgrounds. College respondents noted that the articulation MoUs needed to be detailed and clear, to outline what could be achieved in the collaborative relationships, and that participants needed in-depth knowledge of the rules. Respondents from both institutions noted the importance of managers from both institutions involved in articulation processes to cooperate and work together collaboratively.

Principles towards Participatory Management Framework for Articulation
The following principles were identified from Case Study 1 findings, for a participatory management framework to guide inter-institutional articulation:

- Relationship-building and maintenance, including extensive communication;
- Clear systems and formal agreements;
- The values of integrity, accountability, equality, responsibility, honesty and trust;
- The attributes of being open, honest and 'thinking out of the box';
- Learner-centredness;
- Inclusive, participatory, firm, actionable decision-making; and
- Participatory management to include with risk and change management.

Analytical note on the findings in Case Study 1
The summary of the main findings in Case Study 1 highlight the importance of relationship-building in articulation initiatives. They point to the importance of engaging with the motives of others, and 'relational agency' (Edwards, 2014). Building and maintaining relationships stand out as significant enablers of articulation. Relationships thus need to be given priority consideration in articulation processes. However, there were contradictions in the responses, regarding the extent to which participatory management is said to be taking place between the institutions, and the nature and extent of articulation challenges experienced. These contradictions highlighted that individuals' and the relationships that they have with management within their own institutions, and with those in the outside institution, influence experiences of articulation processes and their understanding of participatory management.

Case Study 2: Understanding articulation of engineering students between TVET colleges and higher education institutions
This case study dealt with the articulation between engineering programmes in TVET and HEIs in three of South Africa's nine provinces and was limited to three disciplines, namely Electrical, Electronic and Mechanical Engineering. Three HEIs were chosen to include a traditional university, a university of technology, and a comprehensive university in the sample.

The notion of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2012; Icaza & Vázquez, 2013; Keet, 2014; Restrepo,

2014) served as the lens through which a participatory action research (PAR) framework was used to guide the enquiry. The research question sought to explore understandings of articulation, and how collaborative TVET college-HEI relationships could be developed to promote student transitioning in engineering programmes.

Epistemic justice

To conduct epistemic practices as fairly and rationally as possible, it is necessary to understand the factors likely to affect them negatively (Fricker, 2008). Fricker (2007) describes two dysfunctions prevalent in epistemic practices, namely 'testimonial injustice' and 'hermeneutical injustice'.

Testimonial injustice relates to the unfair diminishment of a speaker's capacity, as a source of knowledge, due to an identity prejudice held by the listener. This prejudice becomes an impediment to the full and accurate transmission of knowledge from the speaker to the listener. Structural prejudice is where, for example, members of certain groups may simply not be asked their opinions as they are deemed invalid (Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2012). *Hermeneutical injustice* relates to the inability of individuals to express their experiences or knowledge claims, owing to a lacuna in the collective understanding.

When there is recognition of the power imbalances inherent in the production and recognition of knowledge, not only the validity of a speaker's testimony must be questioned, but more importantly the truthfulness of the interpretation thereof (LeBlanc & Kinsella, 2016; Medina, 2012). Social struggles such as post-colonial contestations have been described as 'epistemic struggles', 'epistemic justice' or 'epistemic othering' (Icaza & Vázquez, 2013; Keet, 2014; Restrepo, 2014). Keet (2014) further highlights epistemic injustice in the formation of academic disciplines. While these ideas are seldom used in Engineering Education, they were drawn on for sampling and analysis in the present research.

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

The participatory action research (PAR) participant/practitioner is actively involved in the co-construction of knowledge (Kindon et al, 2008). In Case Study 2, PAR was used to provide a framework to enhance collaboration between the colleges and HEIs in the sample.

Preliminary findings

The participatory approach elicited the following preliminary findings in the first phase of the data collection process:

Traditional University Context

Representatives of Mechanical and Electrical Engineering Departments in a traditional university were interviewed. It was found that articulation issues had low priority, and the numbers of students transitioning from TVET colleges were very small. The interviewees were unfamiliar with some of the articulation pathways in the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF), but the Higher Certificate (HC) offered by colleges in partnership with HEIs for the purposes of articulation was discussed; interviewees were supportive of the HC pathway. Handbooks did not show learning pathways, although the university formally partners with a UoT to provide practical training for its Electrical Engineering students. Understandings of articulation were limited and suggested 'systemic' and 'specific' views.

TVET College Context

The Head of Department (HOD) of Engineering Programmes was interviewed, and was found to lack awareness of changes to the HEQSF and how these could affect student transitioning into HEI. The older NATED courses

was seen as providing a solid foundation for articulation into UoTs, despite the broadening of qualifications offered at TVET colleges; the Higher Certificate as part of an articulation pathway was seen as a good idea. There was little engagement with students around articulation issues, and no working partnerships or articulation activities.

UoT Context

Selected staff (HoDs and/or the person responsible for student selection) in the Electrical, Industrial, and Mechanical Engineering Departments) of a UoT were interviewed. Responses showed limited understanding of articulation. Most handbooks did not show the articulation possibilities for holders of TVET qualifications; this information was available in leaflets for distribution to prospective students. The interviewees thought that a significant number of students articulated into the UoT via the NATED programmes, but were not aware of any who had transitioned from the relatively new National Certificate: Vocational (NCV) qualifications. Interviewees had mixed opinions as to whether TVET students performed more or less well than those entering with National Senior Certificate (NSC) (school) qualifications. Little attention was given to articulation during curriculum discussions at the UoT, although staff supported articulation via the Higher Certificate.

Analytical Note on Preliminary Findings of Case Study 2
A key emerging issue in the preliminary findings from Case Study 2 was the limited engagement around articulation. Explicitly, articulation was said to have low priority. It was present implicitly however, such as in discussions around the lack of Physical Science in the NCV, which hindered student transitioning, and the Higher Certificate as a viable transitioning option.

Criteria for Successful Articulation Models for Learner Transitioning
The following six sets of enablers or boundary-crossing mechanisms for articulation were identified on the basis of the findings of the National Articulation Baseline Survey (Lortan et al, 2017) and revealed in some of the summary findings of the two case studies (Maistry, 2017 and Graham, 2017).

- The *development of collaborative relationships* in order to (1) *understand* qualifications/ programmes/ learners across institutions; (2) *develop respect* for the motives of the different institutions and the purposes of the different offerings of learning; (3) *design and align* curricula and programmes to facilitate transitioning; and (4) *advocate* different learning pathways and *advise* learners at early and key points, as to what they need to do to open learning pathways.

- The *roles played by entities other than* the public HEIs and TVET colleges were significant. These other entities included private colleges, NGOs, provincial structures, and employers. The *provision of sufficient work placement opportunities* was of critical importance, as were hubs for *entrepreneurship* and *'intra-preneurship'* (enabling training for, and carrying out, entrepreneurship within companies).

- The *establishment, commitment to, and implementation of, formal articulation agreements* – in the form of MoUs or MoAs, Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) arrangements, place reservation, RPL and other inclusive admission mechanisms.

- The *quality of teaching and learning, and learner achievement levels* – where the quality of provision include a range of types of learner support, and the scaffolding of the content of learning within and between learning offerings.

- *Career development advice* from the very early stages of learning pathways.

- *Articulation focussed on particular learning pathways/fields/transition points.*

Concluding comments

The conceptualisation of articulation as 'systemic articulation', 'specific articulation' and 'supporting individuals and institutions as they navigate and cross boundaries in learning and work pathways', is useful on two counts. It helps to describe the different types of articulation underway across the system for learning and work in South Africa. It also provides a range of tools for education and training providers, employers and other role players, for developing and supporting learning pathways and lifelong learning.

As shown in the case studies, relationship-building is central to effective articulation processes and arrangements. Edwards' (2010; 2014) concept of relational agency, and related tools, are useful in the strengthening of working relationships in the different types of partnerships needed in a lifelong learning system. The various role-players need to work as a collective to build trusting relational agency to identify barriers and create boundary crossing zones within which effective boundary-crossing practices can take place. Going forward, the key enablers of the developed articulation models need to be identified and described in more detail, and documented. Articulation champions are needed, and need to be supported. There is also a need for 'national learning events' for the sharing of information and building communities of articulation practice. A systematic focus on particular learning pathways and transition points would be useful, as would the requirement to report on articulation developments, and systematic reporting criteria.

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