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Challenges that constrain the realisation of a fully articulated higher education system in South Africa

Abstract:

Articulation is one of the new educational concepts introduced in South Africa when the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) was adopted over two decades ago. Within the South African context, articulation is driven by the transformational imperative, intent upon redressing unfair discrimination in education, training and employment opportunities through facilitating access to, mobility and progression within education, training and career paths. Articulation is not only beneficial to students, but to institutions too, as it provides an effective means of facilitating equity under conditions of inter-institutional and intra-institutional differentiation; promotes greater inter-disciplinary programme linkages across institutions; promotes academic collaboration within and between institutions; and improves internal institutional efficiency along with the possibility of increasing student numbers.

The paper unpacks articulation within the context of the government's vision of a single, integrated, coordinated and fully articulated national higher education system, which does not have dead end qualifications, and which facilitates vertical and/or horizontal movements of students within and between institutions. Using the government policy for promoting articulation within the post-school education and training system as a point of reference, the paper looks at the key challenges that constrain the realisation of the intended outcomes of the policy. The paper recommends that substantive attention has to be given to improving academic preparedness of students, and more importantly school-based learners; designing and implementing other interventions for addressing the articulation gap, besides the ineffective extended curriculum programmes; implementing initiatives to increase parity of esteem among institutions; and eliminating hierarchies and dichotomies within institutional types. All role players who have been assigned responsibilities by the government's policy on the promotion of articulation within the post-school education and training, need to be empowered in terms of human capacity and financial resources so that they should be able to discharge their responsibilities effectively.

Keywords and key terms: articulation, articulation gap, community colleges, national qualifications framework, policy, technical and vocational education and training, transformation, university, university of technology

Introduction

The vision of the government, as it pertains to post-apartheid higher education, is to have a single, integrated, coordinated and fully articulated national higher education system, which does not have dead end qualifications, and which facilitates vertical and/or horizontal movements of students within and between institutions (NCHE, 1996; DoE, 1997). In the main, this entails ensuring that curricula are designed to permit articulation between succeeding National Qualification Framework (NQF) levels, removing barriers of access to learning programmes, and facilitating access through alternative routes such as the recognition of prior learning (RPL).

Articulation is beneficial to both students and institutions. For students, it implies improved access and freedom of movement; lower rates of drop-out or failure without recognition, in the form of credits, for the number of courses or modules passed; increased programme choice; the possibility of non-traditional learning experiences being credited towards a degree; the possibility of moving between institutions in accordance with aspirations; and opportunities to pursue lifelong learning through the flexible accumulation of credits over a long or short period of time. For institutions, articulation provides an effective means of facilitating equity under conditions of inter-institutional and intra-institutional differentiation; the possibility of greater inter-disciplinary programme linkage across institutions; reducing rates of student repetition and attrition; reducing curriculum duplication or overlap; promoting academic collaboration; and improving internal institutional efficiency along with the possibility of increasing student numbers (Harris, 1996).

It is important to note that in the South African context, as elsewhere on the African continent, articulation is a fairly recent concept. The convergence of articulation with the imperatives of transformation and democratisation has positioned it as a highly desirable and laudable process of widening student mobility and access. However, this same convergence has added complexities in not only facilitating academic pathways, but also in navigating these pathways through what remains disparate and binary higher education institutions. As a result, the realisation of a fully articulated higher education system in South Africa, remains elusive.

This paper looks at the key challenges that constrain the realisation of the highly desired fully articulated higher education system in South Africa, and makes recommendations on how those challenges could be addressed.

Unpacking articulation

Articulation in an educational context is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon which has different meanings and connotations. Popular among such meanings is that it involves formalised and regulated procedures and processes, which facilitate smooth student flow across programmes within and between different institutions (Harris, 1996). The NQFPedia (SAQA, 2014), on the other hand, defines articulation as the 'process of forming possibilities of connection between qualifications and/or part qualifications, to allow for the vertical, lateral and diagonal movement of learners through the formal education and training system and its linkages with the world of work'. Articulation can therefore be understood as a means of widening student access and participation through eradicating any blockages or barriers and developing and facilitating smooth mobility within and across higher education institutions.

Within the South African context, articulation is driven by a transformational imperative, whose main objective is to bring about redress to the apartheid legacy of unfair discrimination in both education and employment opportunities. As such,

it adopts an added dimension beyond that of mere vertical or horizontal student mobility, and has to be understood as a reform measure necessary for the democratisation of higher education spaces, discourses and outcomes.

According to the Articulation Policy for the Post-School Education and Training System of South Africa (DHET, 2017), articulation can be understood in three different ways namely systemic, specific and articulation that addresses individual learning pathways. Systemic articulation is based on legislation, policies and various other official elements linked to and supportive of, learning and work pathways. Specific articulation, also known as articulation in practice, involves the structuring or aligning of qualifications to enable progression in practice through mechanisms such as formal and informal institutional memoranda of agreement (MoAs) or memoranda of understanding (MoUs). The third type of articulation is transitional, involving individual learner pathways as they progress and as they are supported in their learning and workplaces. This involves eliminating the barriers that individuals encounter as they move between the different elements of learning pathways, and providing the support needed for that transition. The support can be in the form of career development advice, mentoring and coaching in the workplace.

Government policy for promoting articulation

The government published The Articulation Policy for the Post-School Education and Training System of South Africa in 2017 as a tool for promoting articulation. The intention of the policy was to create an enabling environment which ensures that articulation happens within and between the three qualifications sub-frameworks across all levels of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), namely, the General and Further Education and Training Sub-Framework (GFETQSF), the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF), and the Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF); as well as within and between qualifications and learning programmes offered by education and training institutions. The policy also sought to promote that institutions work together to develop learning and work pathways; and
that support is provided for learners as they follow their individual learning and work pathways.

The scope of the area of influence of the policy includes all public and private HEIs, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges, community education and training (CET) colleges, private colleges and workplace training centres and skills development centres. These are institutions established, accredited and/or registered in terms of the Higher Education Act, the Continuing Education and Training Act, and the Skills Development Act. Regional qualifications frameworks and bilateral agreements between countries for the recognition of qualifications conferred in countries that are parties to such agreements, are also part of the extended scope of the policy.

Geared towards addressing the deeply embedded inequalities and exclusionary practices, which remain a part of South African society, the policy is based on 22 principles which include meeting the needs of the economy; addressing ongoing lifelong learning, unemployment and inequality; establishing systemic flexibility; ensuring equity and inclusiveness; valuing learning outcomes achieved through different routes equally; ensuring credible and fair procedures and practices for validating learning; awarding credit transfer based on similarity; and standardising admission requirements for similar pathways.

Notwithstanding the commendable principles of the policy, and also its criticality to transformational redress in higher education, so far, the implementation of the policy has not made tangible progress towards realising its desired outcomes. Part of the explanation of this failure lies in the

philosophy that underpins policy formulation. As Ball (1993) contends, policies are not meant to tell people what to do; rather, they are supposed to simply create circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do, are narrowed. Ball (1993) further contends that it is the development and execution of policy implementation plans that determine the success and/or failure of any particular policy to achieve its intended outcomes. In relation to the Articulation Policy the DHET put itself as the driver for its implementation, and yet it did not have the capacity to do so, at least in the NQF Directorate, which was the structure that championed the formulation and crafting of the policy. In addition, there were some overlaps in the roles and responsibilities assigned to different role players such as the DHET, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), the Quality Councils (QCs) – the Council on Higher Education (CHE), the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) and Umalusi – and institutions. Furthermore, no additional resources were provided to the role players to cater for the added responsibilities of translating the policy text into actionable programmes of implementation. All these factors hamstrung the implementation of the policy and contributed to the poor progress made so far towards achieving the intended policy outcomes.

Challenges that constrain articulation

One of the key challenges that constrain articulation between the school system and higher education is the disjuncture in the regulatory frameworks between the two systems. For instance, the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations, which are run jointly by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and Umalusi, have three levels of passes, namely Bachelor, Diploma and Higher Certification. Ostensibly, candidates who obtain Bachelor-level passes qualify to enrol for degree programmes at universities; those who obtain Diploma-level passes qualify to enrol for diploma programmes in universities of technology and Technical and Vocational Training (TVET) colleges; and those who obtain Higher-Certificate-level passes qualify to enrol for higher certificate programmes in higher education institutions and TVET colleges. However, when the candidates present their National Senior Certificates to higher education institutions in support of their applications for admission, they quickly realise that the higher education institutions have their own admission criteria which are not consistent with the pass levels (Bachelor's, Diploma and Higher Certificate) on their NSCs. The euphoria of students, which accompany the release of the NSC examination results in January every year, is often quickly dampened by the stark realisation that there are gaps between what the NSC purports to provide as a qualification, and what it actually does for students in relation to access to higher education. There is no correlation between the passes on NSCs and the requirements for admission to higher education institutions.

Compounding the misalignment between access to higher education and the various levels of passes in the NSC examinations, is that access is also often confused with participation. Gaining access to a higher education institution is just one aspect of transitioning to higher education. Successful entry does not equate to successful participation. Students often find themselves underprepared or unprepared academically – which, in turn, is exacerbated, at times, by institutional alienation and financial impediments. As noted by Case, Marshall and Grayson (2013:1), the level of preparation of first-year students for university studies has long been a concern, with the interface between school and higher education often characterised in terms of a discontinuity or 'articulation gap'. According to Case, Marshall, McKenna and Mogashana (2018:3), this supports the argument 'that the forms of knowledge and associated literacy practices that are valued in the academy are those of privileged groups in society,

and that the university mainly serves to prop up this privilege'. A report tabled by the Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2013) revealed poor student throughput and low retention. Only 30% of students registered for a three-year degree, managed to complete the studies towards their degrees within the stipulated three years, with 56% graduating within a five-year period.

Scott (2018:10) explains that, since 2004, the primary systemic response of the government to the unpreparedness and under-preparedness of students, has been to fund extended curriculum programmes, 'which are designed to provide foundational learning and alternative pathways through the curriculum, based on realistic assumptions about students' prior learning.' However, a major shortcoming of this strategy has been that resource allocation has, thus far, restricted the reach of extended curriculum programmes to under 15% of the student intake, with only modest growth in the prospect over the next decade. This means that students in 'mainstream' curricula are left without access to foundational and extended provision, even though analysis has indicated that a substantial proportion of these have a high probability of failing because of the articulation gap.

Scott (2018:11) reports that, while continuing its support for extended curriculum programmes, the DHET has invested the bulk of its mainstream educational development resources in funding a range of concurrent support interventions (via the Teaching Development Grant and now the University Capacity Development Programme). By implication, the DHET has decided that concurrent support is the only academic intervention needed to deal with obstacles to learning faced by mainstream students, including structural ones arising from the curriculum framework. Scott (2018:11) explains further, thus:

This flies in the face of longstanding experience and analysis pointing to the ineffectiveness of concurrent support as the primary means of addressing systemic faults such as articulation failure and under-development of academic literacies. The ineffectiveness comes from the anomaly – possibly futility – of expecting students to master preparatory knowledge during a course which assumes that knowledge to be already in place. Concurrent support must therefore be used as a complement to, but not a substitute for, effective structural design – or, for that matter, for appropriate curriculum orientation and content. The DHET's decision can be seen as an example of assuming that intervention in one dimension (in this case Delivery) can overcome major faults in another (Structure). Such an incorrect assumption is likely to be costly, in that the resources directed into concurrent support will not be effectively used, and more importantly the articulation problems among mainstream students will not be resolved and the current poor performance patterns will persist.

A challenge regarding articulation from the TVET sector to higher education is mainly rooted in the current state of the TVET sector itself. Despite injections of large sums of funding into TVET colleges - R1.9 million in 2006, R2.5 million in 2012, and an additional R17.4 billion in 2013 - the state of the TVET sector remains deeply problematic (Badenhorst & Radile, 2018). It has not delivered on the expectation of becoming institutions of choice geared towards assisting in alleviating the plight of skills shortages in South Africa. According to Badenhorst and Radile (2018:93), the most pressing concerns regarding the sector are that of poor management, which fails to offer proper instructional guidance to lecturers and students; and inadequately qualified lecturers, who are equally unprepared to teach. Moreover, the current combination of programmes and qualifications in the sector is complex to administer; frowned upon by the business sector; difficult for students and parents to understand; and often poorly quality assured. There is little articulation between the layers of structures of management, administration, lecturing staff and students, which evidently adds to the institutional

challenge of dealing with inadequate performance of students. With such poor state of the sector, it is unsurprising that higher education institutions do not have high regard for certificates or subject credits obtained by students from the TVET sector. This, in turn, constrains articulation from the TVET to the higher education sector.

Other primary barriers to articulation exist at institutional levels. For example, according to Ng'ethe, Subotzky and Afeti (2008: xviii), 'the mobility of staff and students between university and non-university tertiary institutions suffers from a lack of cooperation and absence of dialogue between the two institutional groups.' In fact, there is an unhealthy rivalry between universities and other PSET institutions, such as TVET colleges. In South Africa, this rivalry is intensified by the deeply embedded political histories, which have meant that some universities ' historically advantaged', and others are 'historically disadvantaged'. Prior to 1994, the differentiated PSET system comprised 26 public universities, 15 technikons (polytechnics), 120 colleges of education, 24 nursing and 11 agricultural colleges, all of which differed in terms of quality of academic provision, adequacy of infrastructure and facilities, and the level of state investment and funding (HESA, 2014:9). With the advent of constitutional democracy in 1994, and the subsequent publication of the government's White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (DHET 2013), the PSET system has been reconfigured and redefined as a single, national integrated and co-ordinated system that would ensure high responsiveness to the needs of individual citizens and of employees in both public and private sectors, as well as responsiveness to the broader societal and developmental objectives. Currently, the PSET system comprises 26 public universities, 50 public TVET colleges, community colleges, sector education and training authorities (SETAs), and regulatory bodies responsible for quality and quality assurance – SAQA and the QCs.

Despite notions of a 'single, integrated and national co-ordinated PSET system', the reality on the ground is that the PSET system remains highly differentiated, which means that it continues to comprise a blend of training colleges, technical/vocational institutes, polytechnic-type institutions and universities. Ng'ethe et al. (2008: 21), opine that within the differentiated system, there are two opposing tendencies: 'one towards the traditional university type through academic drift and driven by aspirations for higher status, and the other towards institutional differentiation and diversity to accommodate a wider market. The latter includes vocational drift in universities in order to capture more of the lucrative short-term training market.' A lack of policy clarity regarding the appropriate boundaries between universities of technologies or polytechnics, and traditional and comprehensive universities, in terms of their missions, purpose, curricula and programmes, has allowed the two-way drift to proceed unencumbered. This binary divide, and the particularly narrow interpretation of university of technology training within this, tends to inhibit debate on important issues such as equity, access, mobility and the relationship between education and training in general.

Ng'ethe et al (2008:24), further opine that the overall public perception is that the university of technology or polytechnic education is of inferior status to traditional and comprehensive university education. This perception is based on public misunderstanding of the orientation and philosophy of the university of technology or polytechnic education vis-à-vis traditional or comprehensive university education; the perception that entry requirements to universities of technology or polytechnics are in general less rigorous, making it easier to obtain admission to universities of technology or polytechnics compared to traditional or comprehensive universities; lack of clearly defined institutional mandates of the universities of technology; inadequate human and material resources for effective teaching and learning in the universities

of technology; ill-defined articulation and credit transfer mechanisms between universities of technology and other universities; and the absence of academic dialogue between universities of technologies and the other universities.

As acknowledged by Higher Education South Africa (HESA), now known as Universities South Africa (USAf), a new, differentiated higher education institutional landscape has not adequately and justifiably addressed the past inequities, more specifically as they relate to the educational, material, financial and geographical elements of the (white) advantaged and the (black) disadvantaged. There is continued under-development of institutional capacities in historically black institutions; and inadequate state support for the historically black institutions to equalize the quality of undergraduate provision, both of which compromise their ability to facilitate equity of opportunity and outcomes such as providing access to the rural poor and working class black students (HESA, 2014:11).

This view is corroborated by the PSET White Paper (DHET, 2013) which states that while the leading universities in the country are internationally respected, the historically black universities continue to face severe financial, human, infrastructure and other resource constraints. Universities of technology are in some instances experiencing mission drift, losing focus on their mission of producing technicians, technologists and other mid-level skills at undergraduate level. According to Ng'ethe et al (2008), graduates of universities of technology seeking 'academic progression' into the university system often encounter a void in which there are no clearly defined articulation pathways to follow, the level to which they are admitted being dependent on the course they wish to pursue and the regulations of the particular university to which they are applying. Worse still, credit transfer mechanisms rarely exist between similar programmes between universities of technology, let alone between universities of technology and traditional or comprehensive universities; and this is a major barrier to the articulation of many African higher education systems. Some universities do not even recognize any prior learning or skills acquired at the universities of technology level in their admission requirements. Where it exists, articulation between universities of technology and traditional or comprehensive universities, it is generally seen as a one-way street between the 'lower' university of technology qualifications and the 'higher' traditional or comprehensive university ones.

Similarly, there are less satisfactory levels of articulation between public and private higher education institutions. The reasons include that the quality of education in private higher education institutions is generally low. There is also insufficient evidence to suggest that private higher education institutions are particularly responsive to the socio-economic needs of the country. Instead, they apparently exist for their private gain and purpose. The fact that most private higher education institutions are located within economic hubs of the country only serve to render credence to the perception that their primary raison d'être is to chase money, and not to respond to the skills development needs of the country. Furthermore, despite the predominance of a vocational orientation among the offerings, it is noteworthy that with the exception of information, communication and technology (ICT), and to a minor extent business administration, none of the programme offerings private higher education institutions respond to the explicit skills needs of the country, especially in relation to science, engineering and technology.

Possible considerations to improve articulation

As a foundational point of departure, substantive attention has to be given to the academic preparedness of students, and more importantly school-based learners. One cannot attempt to address issues of student mobility and widening

access if basic learning competencies and skills are not in place. Numerous studies and systemic tests confirm that South African learners are not competitive in terms of literacy and numeracy. For example, according to the 2016 PIRLS (Literacy Low International Benchmark) report, 78% of South African grade 4 children cannot read for meaning in any language. Stated differently, 78% of grade 4 learners could not locate and retrieve explicitly stated information or make straightforward inferences about events and reasons for actions (PIRLS, 2016, p. 55). In 2011, 3% of grade 4 learners reached the High International Benchmark; in 2016, only 2% of learners reached this benchmark (PIRLS, 2016, p. 58). As students enter higher education institutions they are not only required to read with comprehension, but they are also required to decode – that is, the ability to translate and interpret written signs and symbols, regardless of the academic programme they follow. Without the critical skills of reading with comprehension and decoding, the negative performance of students will persist. In this regard, articulation cannot be remiss of the impediments with which students currently access higher education, and, therefore, has to be as cognisant of curriculum design and content as it is with systemic and specific functions. As contended by Fisher and Scott (2011:11), 'given high attrition rates, extended time-to-degree patterns, and low graduation rates, expanding access to higher education without addressing the articulation gap (and thus significantly improving graduation rates) will not efficiently increase graduate outcomes.' There is seemingly no point in having an articulation policy focused on formal requirements and agreements within the education and training system, when the students, who constitute the system are unprepared for the system. The argument to improve the academic preparedness of students by raising the quality of school learning (Fisher & Scott, 2011), cannot be emphasised enough.

In addition to interventions to address the articulation gap between the school and higher education systems, renewed considerations have to be given to concurrent support interventions, which are currently focused on the extended curriculum programmes within higher education institutions. Concurrent support can only work when prerequisite knowledge is already in place. In the absence of adequate academic preparedness at the school system level, concurrent support will not address issues of academic underperformance. Moreover, concurrent support deals with the symptoms of student unpreparedness, rather than the origin – which resides in primary and secondary schooling. If anything, the gaps encountered in articulation need to be used in the argument for greater attention and resources at school level.

The apparent or perceived hierarchy of PSET institutions, from traditional universities at the apex of the pyramid to TVET and/or community colleges at the base, is a serious structural obstacle to articulation. This is exacerbated by the reality of having 'advantaged' and 'disadvantaged' dichotomies within each institutional type. It is essential that dialogues take place between and among different institutional types focusing on issues of student preparedness, credit transfer, as well as teaching and learning. There are as many concerns about the quality of teaching and learning at schools as there are at TVET colleges. While the types of silos put in place through an apartheid system have been addressed partly in terms of mergers of particular universities with former technikons, not enough attention has been given to facilitating human engagement in these regards. Certain universities, by virtue of their historical establishment, continue to carry more currency than others, and unless concerted efforts for inter-institutional dialogue and improvement in teaching and student supervision, are made, matters relating to human development will continue to lag behind.

As discussed earlier, in terms of the national policy (DHET, 2017), articulation, as a means of widening student access, is driven by a

transformational imperative. In this sense, the notion of widening access is understood as a process of transformation. Widening access, however, should not be seen as simply increasing student numbers. It should rather involve both increasing student number and improving the learning processes so that students might contribute to a learning society – one which is imperative for a democracy. The question that should be asked is, what good might come from increasing student numbers when they are, in any case, not reaching their full potential? If the higher education system in South Africa is to transform, then what is needed are students, who are equipped and awakened to think for themselves; who are able to deliberate and reflect upon their own learning. The more students are simply passed through the system, the more transformation is undermined, and the more democracy is weakened.

In terms of effective implementation of the government's policy on articulation within the PSET system, due consideration should be given towards ensuring that all role players that are assigned responsibilities by the policy have adequate human and financial resources, as well as institutional capacities to discharge their responsibilities most effectively.

Conclusion

It is clear from the foregoing discussion in this paper that articulation, principally as the mobility of students vertically and horizontally, has, thus far, not progressed at levels envisaged by the Articulation Policy (DHET, 2017). Also apparent is that attempts at remedying the 'articulation' gap have centred on stop-gap or concurrent interventions (such as extended curriculum programmes) – with scant consideration for coherence, comprehensiveness, or substantive improvement in student success and equity of outcomes (Scott, 2018). Furthermore, the articulation gap indicates that the pool of candidates that are academically prepared for higher education is much smaller than the number of students who meet the statutory requirements for admission. This has important implications for the effectiveness of the pipeline from the school system to higher education, and hence for the possibility of successful and efficient growth. The levels of articulation between different types of higher education institutions, including between universities and universities of technology, public and private higher education institution, and TVET colleges and higher education institutions, is still not at satisfactory levels.

Investing in effecting improvements in the school system, extending to schools the programmes aimed at addressing the articulation gap, encouraging dialogue between and among different institutional types, and improving epistemic access, are some considerations that are put forward to assist overcome the challenges that constrain the realisation of a fully articulated higher education system.

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