FLEXIBLE LEARNING PATHWAYS: THE NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK BACKBONE

Report for the IIEP-UNESCO Research

'SDG4: Planning for flexible learning pathways in higher education'

Heidi Bolton, Liapeng Matsau, Ronel Blom

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*The views and opinions expressed in this research report are not necessarily the views of UNESCO, IIEP-UNESCO or SAQA.

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List of abbreviations

ACQF	African Continental Qualifications Framework
AET	Adult Education and Training
APP	Annual Performance Plan
AQP	Assessment Quality Partner
AQVN	African Qualifications Verification Network
BTech	Bachelor of Technology
CACH	Central Application Clearing House
CAT	Credit Accumulation and Transfer
CDS	Career Development Services
CEP	Community Expert Practitioner
CET	Community Education and Training
CETC	Community Education and Training College
CHE	Council on Higher Education
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DoE	Department of Education
DoL	Department of Labour
DPME	Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation
DQP	Development Quality Partner
DUT	Durban University of Technology
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ECP	Extended Curriculum Programme
FLP	Flexible Learning Pathway
FLTP	Flexible Learning and Teaching Provision
FTE	Full-Time Equivalent
FPS	Faculty Points Score
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GENFET	General and Further Education and Training
GETC	General Education and Training Certificate
GFETQSF	General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEMIS	Higher Education Management Information System
HEQCIS	Higher Education Quality Committee Information System
HEQSF	Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework
IIEP	International Institute for Educational Planning
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
LLL	Lifelong Learning
MIS	Management Information System

MoA	Memorandum of Agreement
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MTEF	Medium-Term Expenditure Framework
MTSF	Medium-Term Strategic Framework
NASCA	National Senior Certificate for Adults
NATED	National Accredited Technical Education Diploma
NBT	National Benchmark Test
NCAP	National Career Advice Portal
NCV	National Certificate: Vocational
ND	National Diploma
NDP	National Development Plan
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NLRD	National Learners' Records Database
NPPSET	National Plan for the White Paper on Post-School Education and Training
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NSA	National Skills Authority
NSC	National Senior Certificate
NSDS	National Skills Development Strategy
NSFAS	National Student Funding Aid Scheme
OQSF	Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework
PDC	Portfolio Development Course
pHEI	Private Higher Education Institution
PLP	Pre-Vocational Learning Programme
PQM	Programme Qualification Mix
PSET	Post-School Education and Training
QA	Quality Assurance
QCTO	Quality Council for Trades and Occupations
QDF	Quality Development Facilitators
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
RQF	Regional Qualifications Framework
RSA	Republic of South Africa
SA	South Africa
SABC	South African Broadcasting Corporation
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SASSA	South African Social Security Agency
SATN	South African Technology Network
SDP	Skills Development Provider
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SETA	Sector Education and Training Authority
SI	Supplemental Instruction
STATSSA	Statistics South Africa
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Education
TAP	Tests for Access and Placement
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training

UMALUSI	Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNISA	University of South Africa
UoT	University of Technology
WPS	Weighted Points Score

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Executive summary

Following the end of *apartheid*, South Africa inherited a racially segregated, unequal education and training system and country. Different types of learning did not enjoy parity of esteem and many qualifications were not linked to learning pathways. Transforming the post-school system was essential in the new democracy. The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) was the means chosen to integrate the education and training system – including the higher education system – and align this system with the values in the new Constitution (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1996). The objectives of the NQF are to facilitate access to, and mobility and progression in, education and training and career paths; accelerate redress, and enhance quality and transparency – for the benefit of individual learners and social and economic development at large (RSA, 2008). The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) is mandated to oversee the implementation and further development of the NQF, and to coordinate the three NQF Sub-Frameworks: the General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework (GFETQSF), the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) and the Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF).

There has been progress towards achieving the NQF objectives, especially regarding access, redress, quality and transparency (Bolton et al., 2017; Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation [DPME], 2018; SAQA, 2017a, 2018 and 2019b). Long-term research and development reveals extensive Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) practices (Cooper and Ralphs, 2016; SAQA, 2011a, 2014c, 2017a, 2018, 2019b, 2020a) and some Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) (SAQA, forthcoming [a]). A National Articulation Baseline Study (SAQA, 2018; SAQA-Durban University of Technology [DUT], 2020) shows articulation initiatives that exist between Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Colleges and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). SAQA partnership research and development have included understanding and supporting learning-and-work pathways for sustainable development and other emerging fields (Lotz-Sisitka, 2015; SAQA, 2017b) and an investigation into the student needs for, and the development of, flexible learning and teaching practices (FLTP) in higher education (Walters, 2015a; 2015b).

Policies for the coordination and funding of RPL nationally (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2016a) and articulation (DHET, 2017a), and the NQF policy suite (SAQA, 2012a, 2012b, 2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014b, 2016a, 2017c, 2017e, 2020b and 2020c), together with the Quality Council counterpart policies, support flexible learning pathways (FLPs).

Since the establishment of the NQF, qualifications, to be registered on the NQF, must be located in articulated learning pathways and must provide for RPL. Professional bodies must provide RPL routes to their professional designations. To study further or work in the country on the basis of foreign qualifications held, requires submitting these qualifications to SAQA for evaluation for authenticity and allocation to a South African NQF level. SAQA supports refugees and asylum-seekers following such pathways. There is currently a national initiative to strengthen learning pathways, sector by sector (SAQA, 2020d).

The increased demand for higher education globally has resulted in the diversification not just of types of higher education institutions and course offerings, but also that of the student cohorts. The IIEP-UNESCO research project was a result of the growing need to respond to changing student bodies and needs. Internationally, factors such as growing immigrant populations, the movement of students and workers, increasing proportions of mature students, working students, and increasing trends of 'stopping in to study, stopping out, and stopping in again' (Walters, 2015a; 2015b), have necessitated the need for more flexible and student-centred learning pathways.

The South African case study explores key enabling national policies and institutional practices for FLPs. In this case study, learning-and-work pathways – or 'articulation' – are understood in at least three ways, as being 'systemic', 'specific' and 'individual' (Lotz-Sisitka, 2015; DHET, 2017a; SAQA, 2018; SAQA-DUT, 2020). Systemic learning pathways comprise 'joined-up' qualifications and/or part-qualifications, professional designations, and other elements that are part of the official system. Specific articulation comprises arrangements such as RPL, CAT, Memoranda of Understanding (MoU), Memoranda of Agreement (MoA) and others that support systemic articulation. Individual learning pathways are in turn supported by flexible responsive systems that enable students to navigate and transition across barriers that they encounter. FLPs comprise a collection of policies, structures and practices aimed at broadening access, redress and progression in the system for learning and work.

In line with UNESCO's eight-country study of FLPs in higher education, the South African research team analysed over 30 policies and instruments that support FLPs nationally, and conducted 51 interviews with 80 key representatives across a national department, the NQF authority, the higher education quality assurance (QA) body, professional bodies, and further individuals recommended by the selected entities. Interviews were also conducted with the leadership, and selected managers, students and alumni in a public university, a University of Technology (UoT), and a private HEI (pHEI) included on the basis of their known FLP practices.

The findings of the study confirm deep awareness and developments relating to the extensive structural and legislative frameworks for FLPs in the country. The respondents elaborated innovative practices regarding RPL and other forms of alternative admission; CAT; MoA and MoU for articulated learning pathways; Extended Curriculum Programmes (ECPs); 'Supplemental Instruction' (SI); a number of peer-support structures and mentoring programmes; the provision of distance and/or blended learning or e-learning in a variety of forms; supportive infrastructure and timetabling such as part-time, after-hours, weekend and block-release course offerings; the practice of offering particular qualifications as bridges to further learning, and national and institutional Career Development Services (CDS) as well as other ways of providing FLPs and FLTP. The researchers also found what they describe as 'flexible provision mind-sets'.

The main NQF partners – the national departments, NQF authority and QA bodies have oversight responsibilities, and there are further coordinating structures at the national and institutional levels. Over 20 sets of tools were found that support the provision and use of FLPs in the country. Three key instruments in these sets comprised the criteria and processes for registering qualifications and part-qualifications on the NQF; institutional accreditation to offer learning programmes in HEIs, and recognising professional bodies and their professional designations. FLP data and the tracking of learning pathways were also key. National department planning and funding mechanisms are major articulation enablers; many respondents noted that funding was insufficient. NQF research aids the understanding and development of NQF theory, knowledge, developments and practices.

FLPs in the past viewed as 'alternative', are now widely seen as being 'mainstream' practices. Respondents across the interviews noted that from 1994 (democracy), there have been strong foci on equity, redress and the implementation of RPL; and enhancing access, progression, quality and transparency. Under the NQF Act (RSA, 2008), the initial focus on access deepened to foci on epistemological access, learning pathways, articulation and learner transitioning. Respondents commented on the importance of focusing on diversity and equality; student access, support and success; and accommodating changing student demographics including working students. Barriers to epistemological, linguistic and geographic access were raised as challenges.

Respondents pointed to some contradictions between aspects of the national policies for RPL, CAT, articulation and funding – noting the need to streamline these aspects. It was found that RPL for access is widely accepted and implemented; RPL for credit, and CAT, while also found, were implemented less often. The reported challenges regarding CAT included 'the differences in quality' of offerings across institutions, and the complexity and time-consuming nature of mapping offerings from one institution, to those in another. While all HEIs in the country – public and

private – are obliged to develop and implement policies and processes for FLPs (access, alternative access and articulation) – the study revealed different institutional cultures, all of which showed widened access and student support in different ways.

In South Africa, there is monitoring of the different aspects of FLPs in Post-School Education and Training (PSET) by the national department, the NQF authority, and the three QA bodies. There is also monitoring in the form of research and development at the national level, which illuminate and enable key dimensions.

Seven recommendations were developed based on the South African case study. The **first** is to engage around and ensure, the full alignment of policies and practices at national level. The **second** is to enhance further, systemic articulation in increasing numbers of sectors. The **third** is to continue and increase efforts to integrate public and private higher education. The **fourth** and **fifth** are the further documentation and dissemination of successful FLP initiatives. The **sixth** is to revisit the national funding formula for HEIs in order to deepen the implementation of FLPs and FLTP. The **seventh** is to develop further at national level, the reporting and data specifications for FLPs. The study will be disseminated to NQF partners and stakeholders, with a view to enhancing understandings and the implementation of, FLPs and FLTP.

Chapter 1. Introduction

During *apartheid*, Post-School Education and Training (PSET) was characterised by systemic fragmentation. The higher education sector comprised universities, technical colleges (technikons) and professional colleges, each of which was divided along racial lines. This had implications in terms of access as well as outcomes. The fragmented and unequal nature that characterised the PSET system during *apartheid* was replaced with a focus on system integration in the post 1994 democratic system.

1.1. Transforming the higher education system

The end of *apartheid* provided the political impetus for critical engagement with the education and training sector. Democratic South Africa inherited a racially segregated, unequal education and training system. Different types of learning did not enjoy parity of esteem; and many qualifications were not linked to learning pathways. Transforming the post-school system was thus central to the democratising process. Part of this development included the moves towards a single integrated higher education system, with equality of access, redress, progression, quality and transparency imperatives[1]. Higher education is not seen in isolation – it is an integral part of PSET, all education and training for those who have completed school, as well as those who did not complete school, and those who never attended school (DHET, 2013). The White Paper for PSET (DHET, 2013) sets out a vision for an integrated education and training system outside of school – although schooling qualifications are expected to articulate into PSET. One of the main tools for achieving this integrated system was the establishment of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in the country. The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) was established by the SAQA Act No. 58 of 1995 (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1995) and mandated to oversee the implementation and further development of the NQF. Since 2008, has coordinated the three articulated NQF Sub-Frameworks – the General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework (GFETQSF), the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) and the Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF) (RSA, 2008). The NQF continues to frame the system for education, training, development and work in the country, and to enable lifelong learning for the "full personal development of each learner and the social and economic development of the nation at large" (Ibid.: Clause 5:2).

[1] Equity in South Africa is linked to the race-based groups identified under the *apartheid* regime, for the purposes of redress. It is also linked to household income – in higher education, student funding support is linked to 'the lower third', 'the middle third' and the 'upper third' in terms of household income.

Much has been achieved regarding systemic redress, access, progression, quality and transparency in the context of the NQF. There is a major current focus, clearly expressed in the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (PSET) (DHET, 2013), and its National Plan for PSET (NPPSET) (DHET, 2019) on articulation – the extent to which learners can move into and through higher education institutions (HEIs) and to work. However, while some of the barriers have been addressed, there remain known transitioning barriers for learners. SAQA set up the SAQA-Durban University of Technology (DUT) Research Partnership for developing an understanding of the enablers of student transitioning between Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Colleges and HEIs and beyond, to investigate successful transitioning models that address the barriers. This work led to a National Articulation Baseline Study (SAQA, 2018), seven in-depth case studies, and developmental work to build articulation 'on the ground'. This study followed extensive Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) policy development, implementation, and research (SAQA, 2011a; 2013a; 2014c; 2016a; 2017a; 2017d; 2018; 2019b; 2019e; 2020a), as well as research and development that focused on learning pathways (Lotz-Sisitka, 2015; SAQA, 2017b) and Flexible Learning and Teaching Provision (FLTP) (Walters, 2015a; 2015b).

Learning pathways in the country, often referred to as 'articulation', are understood in at least three ways, as being 'systemic', 'specific' and 'individual' (Lotz-Sisitka, 2015; DHET, 2017a; SAQA, 2018). *Systemic* learning pathways comprise 'joined-up' qualifications and/or part-qualifications, professional designations, and other elements that are part of the official system. *Specific* articulation comprises inter-institutional arrangements, such as RPL, CAT, Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) and/or Memoranda of Agreement (MoA) that support systemic articulation. *Individual* learning pathways are supported by flexible responsive systems that enable students to navigate and transition across barriers that they encounter. FLPs comprise a collection of policies, structures and practices aimed at broadening access, redress and progression in the system for learning and work.

Showcasing SAQA's articulation research (SAQA, 2018) led to the publication of *SAQA Bulletin 2018(1): Articulation Initiatives* (SAQA, 2019a; SAQA-DUT, 2020), and a SAQA-led national initiative *Strengthening Learning pathways in Community Development, Early Childhood Development, and Engineering*, from September 2018 (SAQA, 2020d). This initiative is underway and will extend to other sectors.

Extensive related research and development over the past two decades has highlighted innovative implementation initiatives as well as challenges: while access has broadened, the

deep success (epistemological access/ throughput) of designated population groups needs to be enhanced in some instances. The IIEP-UNESCO research into FLPs offered an opportunity to investigate South Africa's policy and implementation of RPL, articulation, and learner support together, under the umbrella of 'system flexibility'. The 'FLP' framing provided a broad lens through which to view and understand the implementation of various policies and practices at the national government and institutional levels. Using this umbrella concept was in line with SAQA-led FLTP and articulation work and provided an opportunity to explore specific practices that included and also went beyond RPL, CAT and articulation, to consider the flexibility of the system and learner support, as a whole. It enabled deepening the understanding of policy implementation as well as providing a means to address the sometimes uneven implementation of system flexibility (DPME, 2018; SAQA, 2018).

1.2. Research objectives

The focus of the project was to deepen understandings of the implementation of key policies and practices for redress, access, progression/ articulation, learner support and system flexibility in general in South Africa, and to develop advice based on the research, for the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology and the NQF partners – towards the further development and enhancement of flexible access and progression for diverse students.

1.3. Focus and scope of the study

The South African case study focuses on four dimensions, addressed through an analysis of the relevant policies and interviews with the national and institutional stakeholders investigated:

1. support in policy intentions and evidence of, flexible practices that support lifelong learning;
2. support in policy intentions and evidence of, practices that support articulated learning-and-work pathways;
3. support in policy intentions and evidence of, practices for RPL; and
4. an analysis of how lifelong learning policy and practices and those for articulated learning-and-work pathways, and RPL, contribute to FLPs.

1.4. Methodology

The over-arching research design of the South African case study was that of multiple cases. The research explored flexible learning policies and practices at the national and institutional levels. National and institution-level legislation and policies were reviewed, and key national

and institutional officials and students were interviewed. The HEI sample comprised one public HEI, one University of Technology (UoT) and one private HEI (pHEI). The analysis sought to triangulate the data obtained from these sources.

1.5. Summary of data sources

In summary, the following categories of documents were reviewed for the study in terms of FLPs: those of the national department, NQF authority, higher education QA body, and the HEIs in the sample. Key outputs from the research and development work of the NQF authority were also considered. Data from these sources were triangulated with the data from interviews with key officials in the national department, NQF authority, higher education QA body and the three HEIs selected, and the focus groups with students and alumni in these HEIs.

1.6. Report structure

This report has five substantive chapters. Chapter 1 comprises the Introduction, which sets out the rationale for and objectives of the research, and briefly outlines its methodology. Chapter 2 provides the context for FLPs in higher education in South Africa – it describes the higher education system in the country including its size, institutional types, and steering mechanisms, as well as equity groups. Chapter 2 also covers the NQF/qualification structure in the country. Chapter 3 describes the system-level policies, instruments, research, and approaches that support FLPs in South Africa, as well as drawing on the national interviews to sketch the views of the various national role-players. Chapter 4 elaborates on the institutional practices that support FLPs in the three HEIs studied. This chapter draws on the institutional interview data, sketching key elements with interviewee quotations and references to the policies, instruments and research that support their work. Chapter 5 provides a comparative analysis of the policies and practices for FLPs in South Africa. It draws on Chapters 3 and 4 to highlight the affordances and limitations of the policies, and how these have been implemented in the three HEIs in the study. It ends with closing comments and recommendations.

Chapter 2. Flexible learning pathways in South Africa

This chapter provides an overview of the South African higher education system and its FLPs. It includes a sketch of the form and character of this part of the PSET system, with particular emphasis on the funding allocations, qualification structures, admission requirements, and modalities of delivery. The chapter closes with a short discussion on the particular challenges that affect equity groups in HEIs in the country.

The current PSET system needs to be understood in the context of the particular historical and political realities that shaped its present form (DoE, 1997). Badat (2015:176) for example captures the link: "colonialism and *apartheid*, social, political and economic discrimination, and inequalities of a class, 'race', gender, institutional and spatial nature all profoundly shaped South African higher education, establishing patterns of systemic inclusion, exclusion and marginalisation of particular social classes and groups".

2.1. South African higher education context

Democratic South Africa inherited, in 1994, 36 public HEIs comprising 21 universities and 15 Technikons and colleges (Raju, 2006). Each was for the exclusive use of one of the four racial groups: African, Coloured, Indian and White. In the immediate post-*apartheid* period, it has been noted that the attempts to de-racialise higher education led to a deepening of the inequality between 'historically White' and 'historically Black' institutions, for example: "while the historically advantaged white universities and technikons consolidated their positions as leading HEIs in the country, the historically disadvantaged Black institutions were plagued by crises and were losing students in massive numbers" (Raju, 2006:3). A period of rationalisation and restructuring ensued in the early 2000s in response to these patterns: "36 institutions merged into 23 institutions: 11 traditional Universities, six Universities of Technology and six Comprehensive Universities. The Comprehensive Universities were formed through mergers between Universities and Technikons and provide both theoretical and technical or vocational programmes" (Branson et al., 2015: 43). A decade and a half later there were 26 HEIs, "differentiated into eleven general academic Universities; nine Comprehensive Universities and six Universities of Technology" (DHET, 2017b). It is possible to obtain degrees from all three types of HEIs, while diplomas and certificates are attained through HEIs and colleges.

However, the more integrated and streamlined system alone would not lead to the envisaged efficiency and equality in the system; further information in this regard follows. The legacy of inequality necessitated FLPs; aspects such as RPL, CAT, articulation, career advice and learner

support grew from the need to redress past inequalities, and continue to have a social justice thrust.

Higher education in South Africa is seen as both a site of and tool for transformation, as noted by the QA body, "Higher education has immense potential to contribute to the consolidation of democracy and social justice, and the growth and development of the economy" (CHE, 2010a:10; CHE, 2000). The South African government has identified higher education as being central to social and economic growth. The National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, the country's overarching long-term strategic plan, aims to attain a decent standard of living for all South Africans by 2030 through the elimination of poverty and reduction of inequality. Quality education and skills development are identified as some of the core elements for achieving these goals. By 2030, South Africa needs an education system with:

- an expanding higher education sector that contributes to rising incomes, higher productivity and the shift to a more knowledge-intensive economy; and
- a wider system of innovation that links universities, science councils and other research and development role players, with priority areas of the economy (NDP, 2012:38).

A Medium-Term Strategic Framework (MTSF) was developed to support the realisation of the NDP. MTSF Outcome 5, 'A skilled and capable workforce that supports an inclusive growth path', has four sub-outcomes[2]:

1. developing a credible institutional mechanism for the labour market and skills planning;
2. increasing access and success in programmes leading to intermediate and high-level learning;
3. increasing access to, and the efficiency of, high-level occupationally directed programmes in needed areas; and
4. increasing access to occupationally directed programmes in the areas needed, and thereby expanding the availability of intermediate-level skills with a special focus on artisan skills.

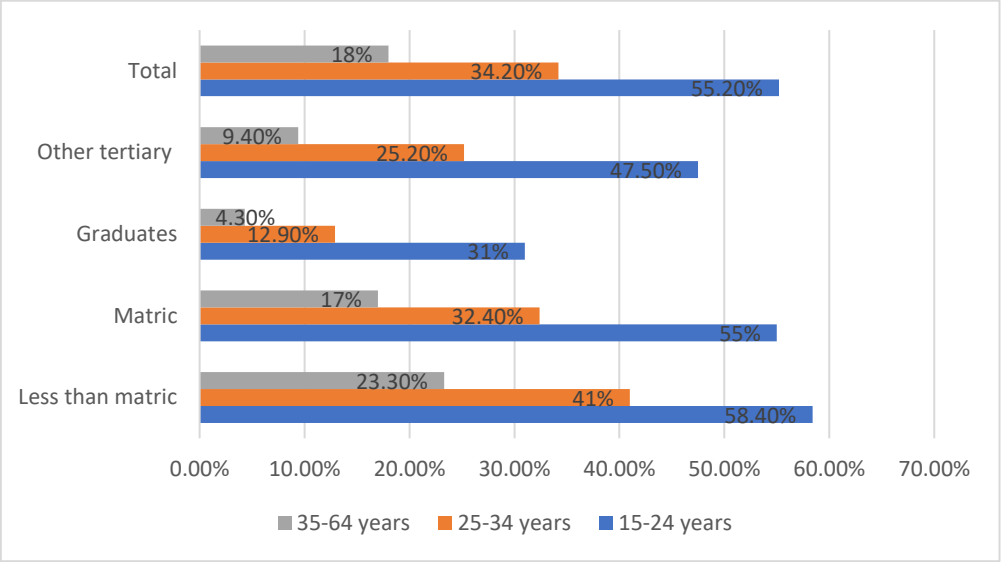
The PSET landscape needs to be seen in relation to the broader social and economic context in which it operates. South Africa is considered to be a middle-income country by the World Bank

[2] The term 'inclusive growth path' refers to addressing the distorted patterns of ownership in the economy.

(2020). It is, however, a country marred by social and economic inequality[3]. It has a dual economy – the Gini Coefficient was 0.63 in 2015 – having increased from 0.61 in 1996 (Ibid.). "High inequality is perpetuated by a legacy of exclusion and the nature of economic growth, which is not pro-poor and does not generate sufficient jobs" (Ibid.). In 2015, the 'richest 10%' of the population held just over 70% of the net wealth, while the 'bottom 60%' held 7% of this wealth (Ibid.). The PSET system continues to be seen as a vehicle towards greater economic growth and reducing the inequality gap.

As a result of the sluggish economy, unemployment has grown steadily in recent years; it is currently 30.1% (STATSSA, 2020). Figure 1 below shows that young people between the ages of 15 and 24 have the highest levels of unemployment regardless of educational attainment.

Figure 1. Unemployment rates by levels of education, 2020



Source: STATSSA (2020). See Annexure A for detailed figures.

This context needs to be kept in mind when considering the flexibility of the higher education system in the country.

2.2. South African National Qualifications Framework

The National Qualification Framework (NQF) in South Africa comprises three differentiated and articulated NQF Sub-Frameworks – the General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework (GFETQSF), the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF), and the Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF). The

[3] This inequality is linked to SAQA's *apartheid* past, which privileged some population groups and disadvantaged others. Current social class realities do not however map exactly to racial categories.

Council on Higher Education (CHE) oversees the HEQSF; the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) the OQSF, and Umalusi, the GFETQSF. SAQA coordinates the three NQF Sub-Frameworks. Table 1 shows a representation of the South African NQF with its constituent qualifications.

Table 1. Representation of the South African NQF

Level	Sub-Frameworks and qualification types			
10	**HEQSF (CHE)**	Doctoral Degree	*	**OQSF (QCTO)**
9		Master's Degree	*	
8		Bachelor Honours Degree Professional Degree Postgraduate Diploma	Occupational Certificate	
7		Bachelor's Degree Advanced Diploma	Occupational Certificate	
6		Diploma Advanced Certificate	Occupational Certificate	
5		Higher Certificate	Occupational Certificate	
4	**GFETQSF (Umalusi)**	National Certificate	Occupational Certificate	
3		Intermediate Certificate	Occupational Certificate	
2		Elementary certificate	Occupational Certificate	
1		General Certificate	Occupational Certificate	
**Where the development of an occupational qualification is needed at these levels, the developers should contact SAQA, the CHE and the QCTO.*				

Source: SAQA slide.

Moves are underway, in the interests of enhancing articulation (learning pathways) and parity of esteem, to re-name the Occupational Certificates to mirror the qualifications in the 'academic' stream as follows:

- General Occupational Certificate (NQF Level 1);
- Elementary Occupational Certificate (NQF Level 2);
- Intermediate Occupational Certificate (NQF Level 3);
- National Occupational Certificate (NQF Level 4);
- Higher Occupational Certificate (NQF Level 5);
- Occupational Diploma (NQF Level 6);
- Advanced Occupational Diploma (NQF Level 7);
- Specialised Occupational Diploma (NQF Level 8).

2.2.1. Post-School Education and Training (PSET) sector

In South Africa, at the broadest level, the education and training system comprises Basic Education and Post-School Education and Training (PSET). Basic Education refers to schooling, regardless of the number of years at school. PSET refers to all education and training after school, regardless of the point at which a learner has left school and whether or not a learner has attended school at all. PSET comprises a number of sectors, namely:

- *Higher Education* – offered in three types of public HEIs – Universities, Universities of Technology (UoTs), Comprehensive Universities – and private HEIs (Higher Education qualifications lie between NQF Levels 5 and 10, inclusive);
- *Technical and Vocational Education and Training* (TVET) – offered in public TVET Colleges and private colleges (TVET qualifications lie between NQF Levels 1 and 5);
- *Community Education and Training* (CET) – offered in public CET Colleges (CET qualifications are below NQF Level 1 and between NQF Levels 1 and 4);
- *Adult Education and Training* (AET) – in the process of being replaced by CET (covered qualifications below and at NQF Level 1);
- *Skills Development* – for Trades and Occupations – offered by Skills Development Providers (SDPs) (qualifications between NQF Levels 1 and 8).

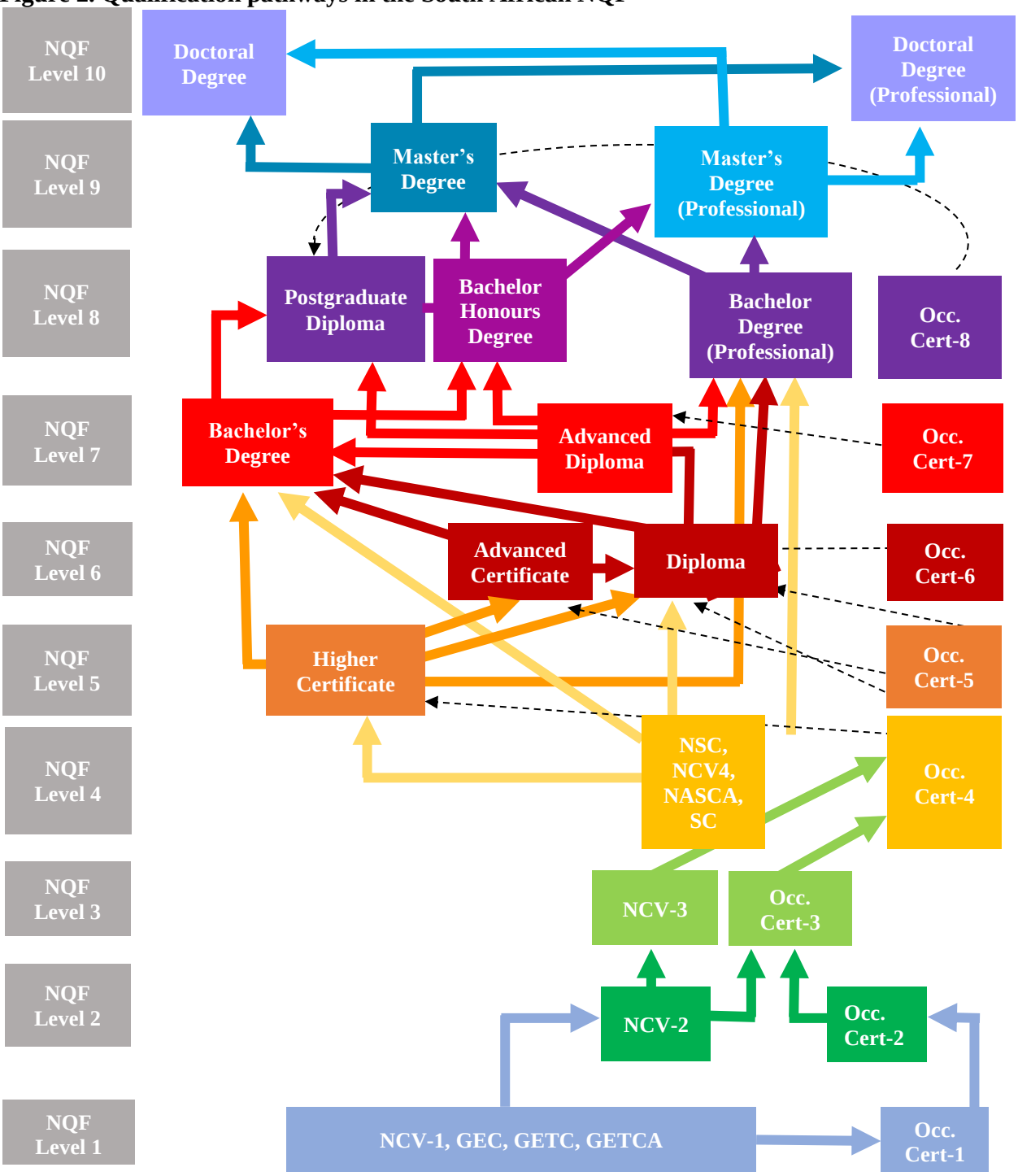
2.2.2. Articulation

In transitioning between the pre-democracy system to the new education and training system in the context of the NQF in South Africa, sectors and sub-sectors were each in turn transformed into their new forms, with new institutional and qualification types. In the context of the NQF, articulation is a key concept: lifelong learners need to be able to transition into qualifications, through their studies, and into workplaces. Professional development is also key in these pathways. Articulation in higher education is enabled and supported by the national department's articulation policy (DHET, 2017a) and national policies for RPL and CAT (SAQA, 2013a, 2016a, 2019e; CHE, 2016b).

In some cases, articulation is between the 'legacy' (old) qualifications and new ones; in other cases articulation is between different new qualifications. The ways in which articulation is 'systemic' (deliberately designed, official), 'specific' (inter-institutional and/or through RPL, CAT, MoU, MoA, etcetera) and 'individual' (involving flexible individual learner support) are described in Section 1.2 above. Articulation possibilities in the system as a whole, are shown

in Figure 2, in relation to the different South African NQF levels. Drawing on the conceptualisations of articulation in Figure 2, the solid lines between qualifications indicate 'systemic' articulation. The dotted lines indicate 'specific' articulation. The different colours are used to reflect the different NQF levels.

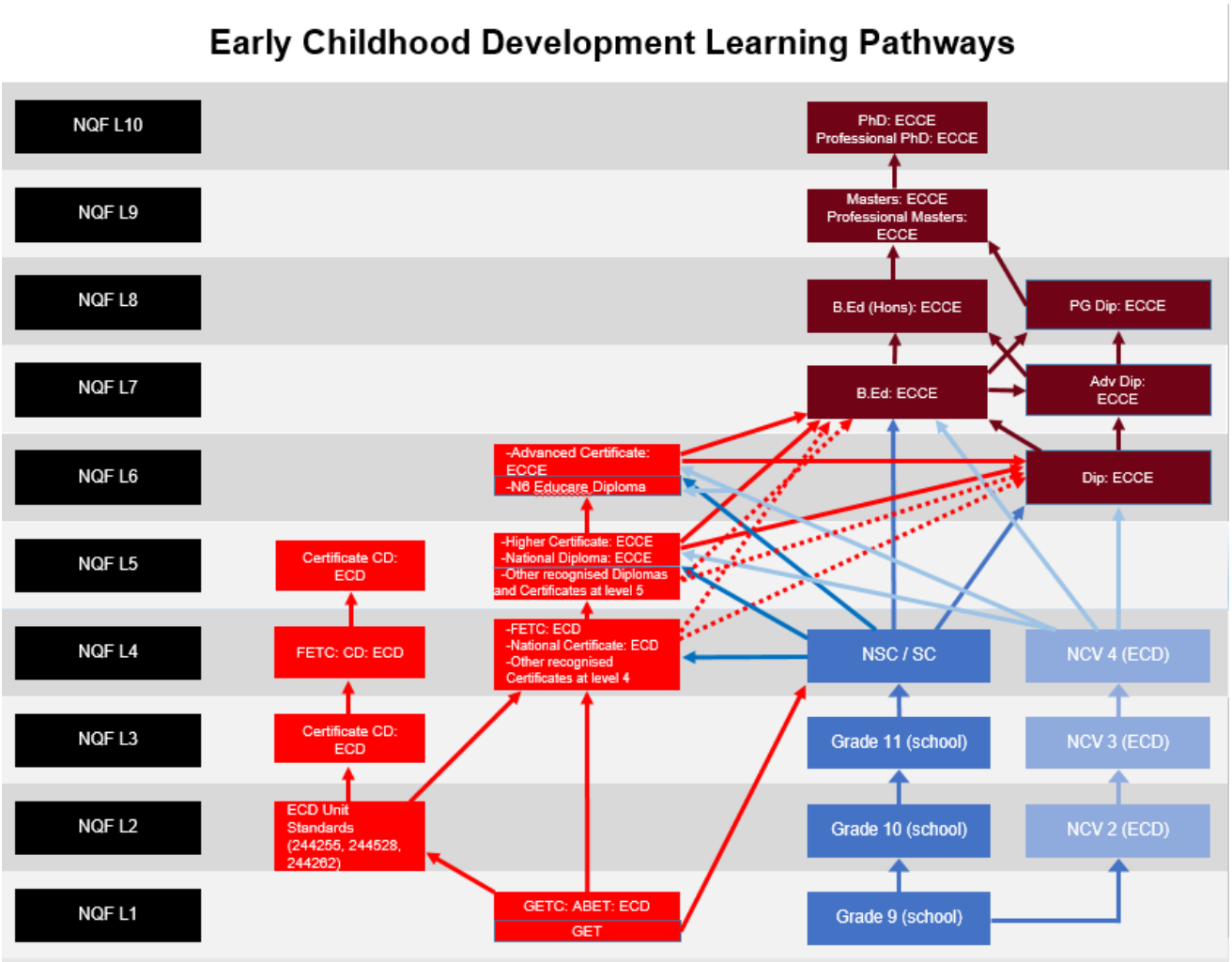
Figure 2. Qualification pathways in the South African NQF



Key: GEC - General Education Certificate; GETC - General Education and Training Certificate; GETCA - General Education and Training Certificate for Adults; NCV - National Certificate: Vocational; NASCA - National Senior Certificate for Adults; NSC - National Senior Certificate; Occ.Cert - Occupational Certificate; SC - Senior Certificate (legacy qualification).

Figure 3 shows an example of articulation in one sector – Early Childhood Development (ECD). The black squares represent the South African NQF levels; the bright red squares, qualifications and articulation in the OQSF context; the blue squares, those in the GFETQSF context and the dark red squares, those in the HEQSF context. The solid lines indicate systemic articulation; the dotted lines show the need for specific articulation. What is not shown, is how HEIs differ regarding admission requirements, and how these differences can create barriers to access. The availability of student places is shaped by enrolment plans and capacity constraints, and can limit access.

Figure 2. Map of learning pathways in Early Childhood Development



Source: SAQA (2020d).

Key: ABET - Adult Basic Education and Training (legacy); Adv.Dip - Advanced Diploma; BEd - Bachelor of Education; Hons - Honours Degree; CD -Community Development; ECD- Early Childhood Development; Dip - Diploma; ECCE - Early Childhood Care and Education; GET - General Education and Training (Basic Education/ School Grades 1-9); GETC - General Education and Training Certificate; NCV - National Certificate: Vocational; ND - National Diploma (legacy); NSC - National Senior Certificate; PG Dip - Postgraduate Diploma; PhD - doctoral degree; SC - Senior Certificate (legacy); Unit Standard (legacy).

2.2.3. Entrance requirements

Entrance requirements differ for the different higher education qualifications. Generally – the traditional route is that – HEIs require completion of the National Senior Certificate (NSC)[4] with a 'Bachelor's pass' (particular achievement levels in specific school subjects; university endorsement) as well as further university discipline-specific admissions requirements.

In addition to these requirements, prospective students usually need to complete National Benchmark Tests (NBTs) in academic literacy as well as language and Mathematical competences. The NBTs were introduced by several HEIs in 2005, to assess the readiness of the prospective students to commence university studies. The tests were arguably at least partly a response to the 'new' outcomes-based schooling curricula introduced in the young democracy in the context of the NQF, and to the increasing diversity of the student body.

The requirements to access Diploma and Certificate studies are generally less stringent. Articulation possibilities are shown in Figures 2 and 3, and by implication, the types of entrance requirements needed.

The NQF Level 4 National Certificate: Vocational (NCV)[5], National Accredited Technical Education Diploma (NATED) qualifications[6] and Higher Certificates at NQF Level 5 are viewed as 'bridging qualifications' into higher education studies. HEIs have embraced the Higher Certificates in particular, to enhance articulation into degree studies (SAQA, 2018). Although the NCV qualifications are officially university entry qualifications, there has been little take-up in this regard. The NATED qualifications have long bridged into tertiary-level studies at Universities of Technology.

TVET Colleges are more accessible PSET entities than are HEIs. Learners can apply upon the completion of school Grades 9, 10, 11 or 12 for studies towards the NATED, NCV and other qualifications offered at the Colleges – with or without university endorsement or fewer limitations based on secondary school subject choice or performance.

Both RPL and CAT are encouraged as means to admission and progression – RPL is encouraged for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, and CAT, for the

[4] Secondary school-leaving qualification.
[5] The NCV Level 2, 3 and 4 qualifications have been offered since 2007 – they comprise the fundamentals plus vocational subjects and can be completed at secondary schools and TVET Colleges.
[6] The NATED qualifications are older offerings that do not fit easily into the NQF levels; a process is currently underway to 'map' NATED qualifications onto the newer Occupational Certificates. NATED qualifications are offered at TVET Colleges.

recognition of formal learning completed or partly completed in contexts other than those that learners are seeking to access. In the higher education context, there is frequent reference to 'the 50% clause', whereby RPL and/or CAT cannot be used to grant any learner exemption from 50% or more, of the modules/courses required for any qualification; a person must obtain 50% of a qualification at the awarding institution (CHE, 2016b). The argument generally advanced for the use of this clause, is that it is necessary for the maintenance of quality standards. While this clause is highly contested – it does not feature in national department or NQF authority RPL policy. A recent survey (SAQA, forthcoming [a]) showed that around two thirds of public and private HEIs support the 50% clause; around a sixth of private HEIs oppose it and the remainder responded that they should be given the institutional autonomy to decide regarding the 50% rule, in each instance.

Mapping of the South African NQF to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) levels is shown in Table 2. This table shows higher education offerings at NQF Levels 5 to 10 (ISCED Levels 4 to 8) and the entry requirements at each level.

Table 2. Mapping ISCED and NQF levels, qualifications and minimum requirements

NQF Level	Qualification*	Minimum requirements**
ISCED 4 - Post-secondary non-tertiary education		
Level 5	Higher Certificate	National Senior Certificate National Certificate: Vocational National Senior Certificate for Adults
ISCED 5 - Short cycle tertiary/ Practically based/ Occupationally specific		
Level 6	Advanced Certificate Diploma	National Senior Certificate National Certificate: Vocational National Senior Certificate for Adults
ISCED 6 - Bachelor's degree or equivalent tertiary education level		
Level 7	Advanced Diploma Bachelor's Degree	National Senior Certificate National Certificate: Vocational National Senior Certificate for Adults
Level 8	Postgraduate Diploma Bachelor's Degree (Professional) Bachelor Honours Degree	Bachelor's Degree Advanced Diploma
ISCED 7 - Master's degree or equivalent tertiary education level		
Level 9	Master's Degree Master's Degree (Professional)	Postgraduate Diploma Bachelor Honours Degree Bachelor's Degree (Professional)
ISCED 8 - Doctoral degree or equivalent tertiary education level		
Level 10	Doctoral Degree Doctoral Degree (Professional)	Master's Degree Master's Degree (Professional)
** There are also OQSF qualifications)* *** With appropriate subject combinations and levels of achievement (or RPL option)*		

2.3. Size and character of higher education

2.3.1. Post-School Education and Training (PSET) institutions

In South Africa as at July 2020 there are 26 public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), 99 registered private HEIs (pHEIs), 50 public Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Colleges, 332 registered private colleges and nine Community Education and Training (CET) colleges – together these make up the PSET entities.

Higher education is an integral part of PSET in South Africa. In total, there are 516 PSET institutions, of which the public sector comprises 85 entities (i.e. 26 HEIs, 50 TVET Colleges and nine CET Colleges). While higher education in South Africa covers NQF levels 5-10 (ISCED levels 4-8), the very use of the term PSET recognises the fact that the system is striving towards greater integration and articulation between its constituent sectors.

2.3.2. Enrolment in public and private PSET entities

Over 2.2 million enrolments were recorded across public and private PSET institutions in 2018[7], with the higher education sector enrolling 1.2 million students. Enrolments in public institutions reached 1 842 987 in 2018 (81.5% of the total enrolments), while the private PSET sector accounted for 18.5% (417 735 of total enrolments) (DHET, 2018). Table 3 shows an overview of the PSET institutions and student enrolments in 2018.

Table 3. Overview of PSET institutions and enrolments in 2018

Information categories	HEIs			Colleges				Total PSET
	Public	Private	Total	TVET	CET	Private	Total	
Institutions	26	124	150	50	9	299	358	508
Enrolled students	1,085,568	197,898	1,283,466	657,133	100,286	219,837	977,256	2,260,722

Source: DHET (2018).

In 2018, there were 1.2 million students enrolled at public and private HEIs, with the majority (1 085 568) in public institutions and 197 898 students in their private counterparts. The target in the National Development Plan (NDP) is 1.6 million enrolments by 2030 (NDP 2030:319).

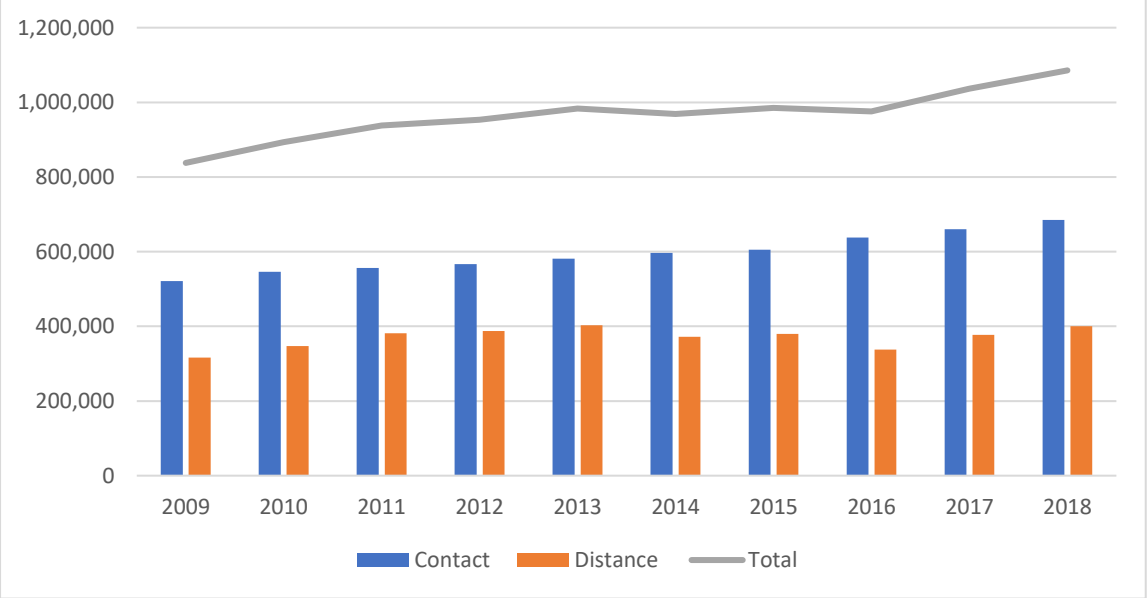
The enrolment in public TVET Colleges reached 657 133 in 2018, which was 4.5% (30 895) lower than in 2017. The NDP indicates that the enrolment in TVET Colleges should reach 2.5 million by 2030; this enrolment target is ambitious. The sector faces deeply entrenched beliefs

[7] PSET comprises all education and training after school, regardless of the year in which a learner leaves school. These data cover public HEIs, TVET Colleges and Community Colleges, and all private colleges.

from prospective students and parents alike that degree-granting institutions hold the key to economic and social mobility. TVET Colleges are thus often not the first choice entities for PSET. The number of students enrolled in private colleges in 2018 was 219 837, 17% (32 492) higher than that in 2017 (DHET, 2018).

The distribution of students in PSET in South Africa is generally referred to as an 'inverted pyramid'; in many countries, this pattern is the other way around with more enrolments in colleges than in HEIs. Figure 4 shows enrolments in public HEIs between 2009 and 2018; during this time there was a 22% increase in enrolments in this sub-sector. The numbers of enrolments its private sector counterpart grew at faster rates.

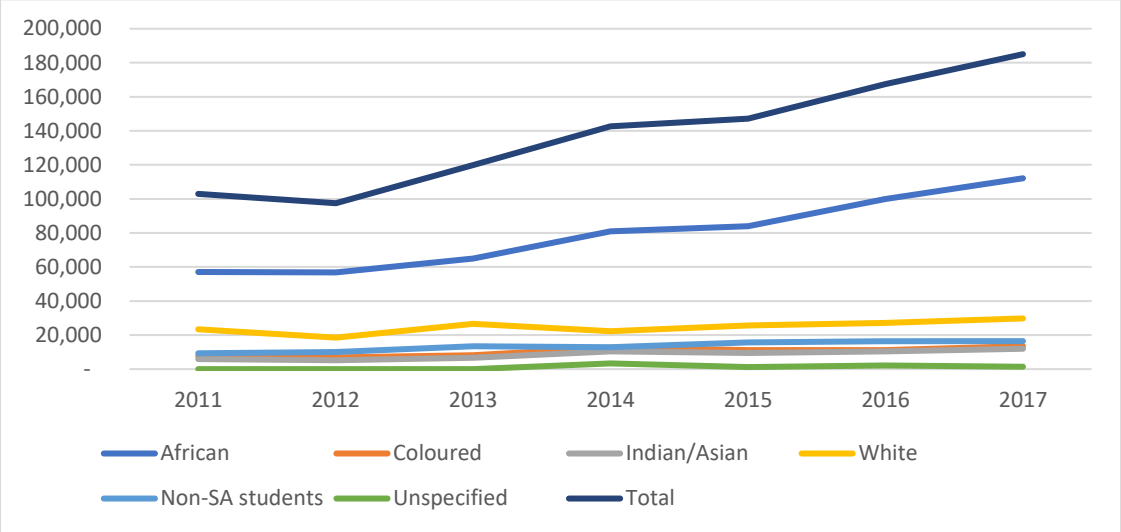
Figure 3. Numbers of students enrolled in public HEIs, 2009 - 2018



Source: DHET (2018). See Annexure A for detailed figures.

Figure 5 below shows learner enrolments in private HEIs. Several explanations could be offered for the overall increase in enrolments in the private HEI sector: (1) the increased instability in public HEIs in the past five years due to student protests has steered applicants towards the more stable private HEIs; (2) the limited number of places in public HEIs relative to the number of applicants means that the spill-over goes to private HEIs, and (3) there are more stringent admissions criteria in public HEIs and many applicants are not accepted into these entities.

Figure 4. Enrolments in private HEIs by population group, 2011 - 2017



Source: DHET (2016c). See Annexure A for detailed figures.

2.4. Equity groups and trends

Equity and redress in the PSET system continue to be national priorities in South Africa. The estimated total population count in South Africa in mid-2019 was 58,775,022 (STATSSA, 2019).

2.4.1. Population group

The pre-democracy population group categorisations of 'African', 'Coloured', 'Indian/Asian' and 'White' are used for the purposes of redress in the country. The term 'Black' is also used strategically and politically to include African, Coloured, Indian, and Asian people, towards redress. In higher education, data are collected for African, Coloured, Indian/Asian and White students respectively, for equity purposes.

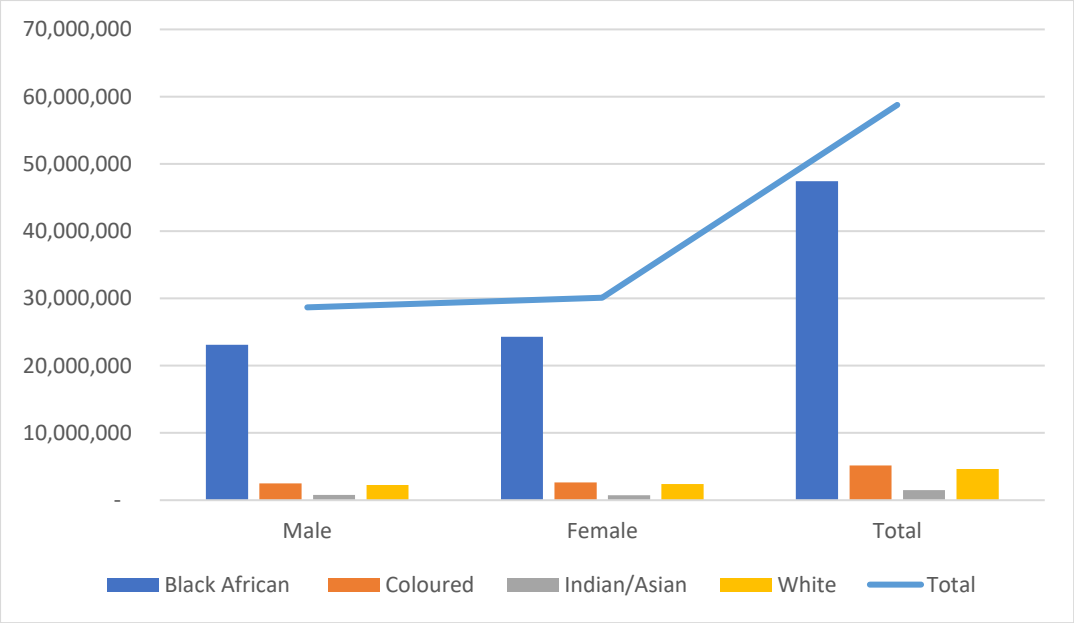
2.4.2. Gender

Population group is only one axis along which equity is a concern in South African higher education. Gender, disability and social class are also of great importance. On the surface, the female enrolment and graduation rates in South African higher education disguise the particular challenges that women face in the country's education institutions. Despite being well documented in academic literature (Gordon and Collins, 2013), the 'Fees Must Fall' movement shone light on the challenges faced by women in HEIs. The prevalence of rape and gender-based violence both within and outside the HEIs emerged as a critical factor shaping the experiences of women.

2.4.3. Some population group and gender trends in higher education

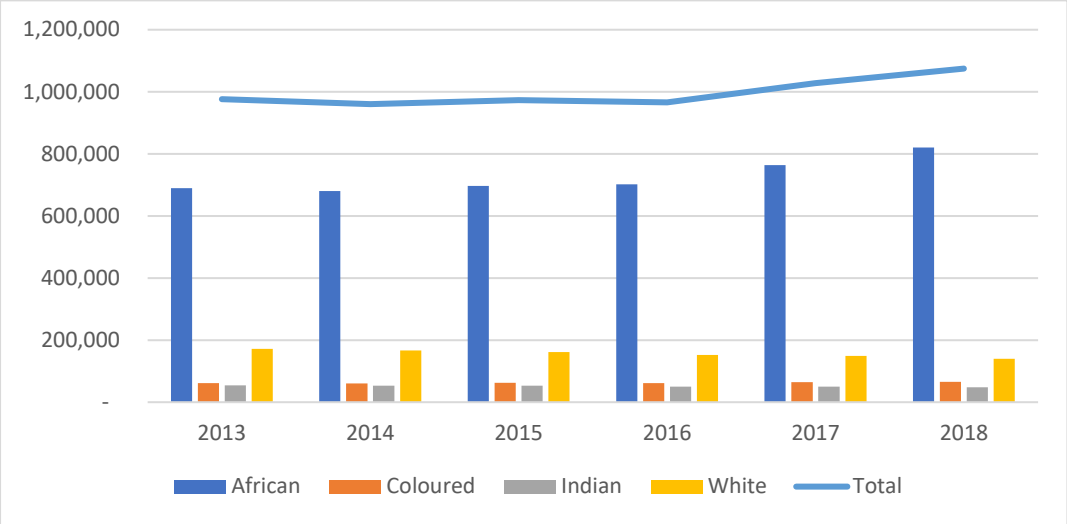
The higher education QA body produces '*VitalStats*' publications annually – a series of examples drawn from the latest *VitalStats* publication (CHE, 2020b) and elsewhere are presented in this sub-section to illustrate the types of data collected, analysed and disseminated. The examples are drawn from the Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS); there is a separate data system – the Higher Education Quality Committee Information System (HEQCIS) – for private HEI data. Figure 6 shows the mid-year estimates of the different population groups by gender, for 2019, while Figures 7 and 8 respectively show enrolment in higher education by population group and gender. These figures show trends in the desired directions.

Figure 5. Mid-year population estimates for South Africa by population group and gender, 2018



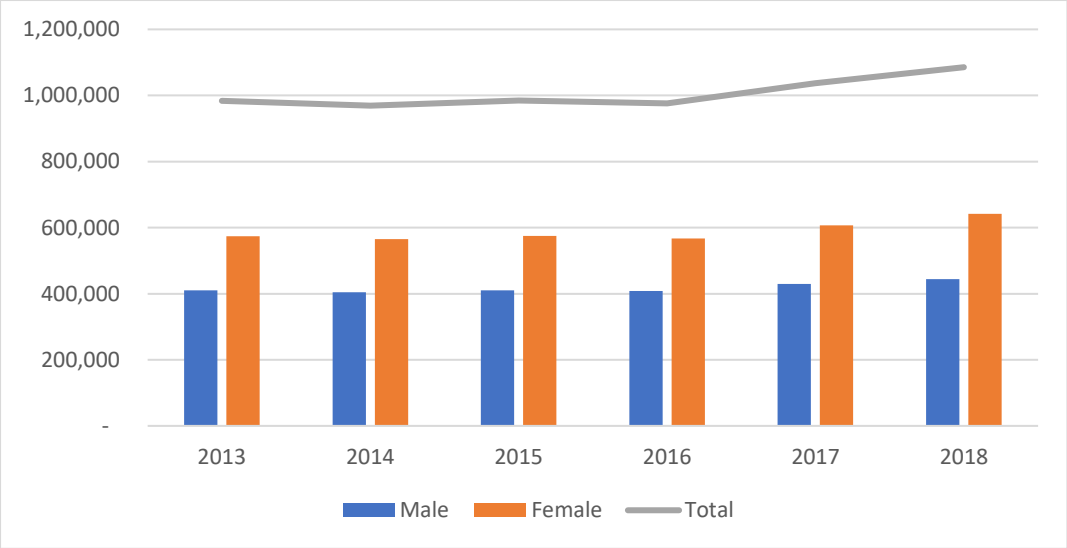
Source: Statistics South Africa (2019). See Annexure A for detailed figures.

Figure 6. Student enrolments in public HEIs by population group, 2013 - 2018



Source: CHE (2020b)[8]*. See Annexure A for detailed figures.*

Figure 7. Student enrolments in public HEIs by gender, 2013 – 2018



Source: CHE (2020b). See Annexure A for detailed figures.

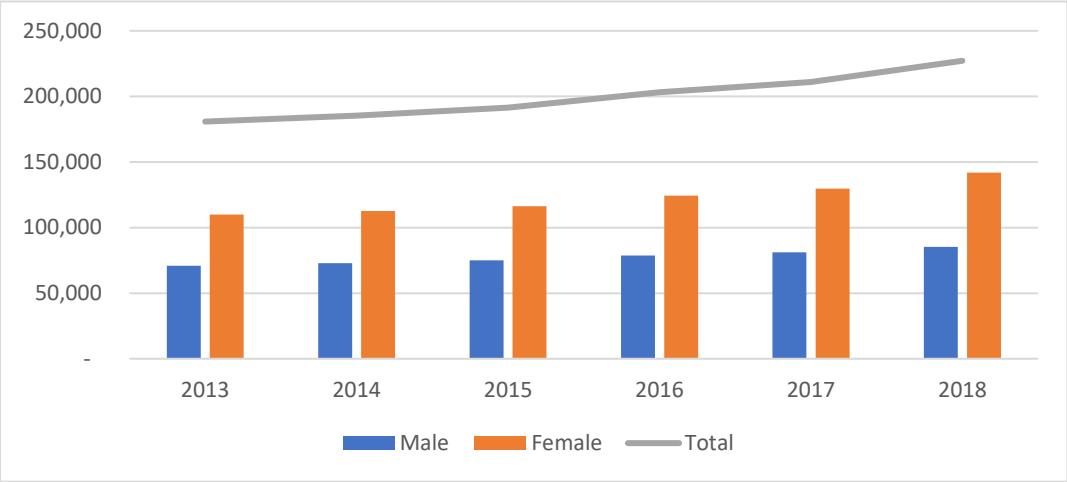
Great strides were made in the past two decades in terms of enrolling equity groups in higher education – the successes are seen in terms of increased enrolment numbers amongst the equity groups. Figures 7 and 8 show examples of these successes. Figure 6 shows that in the population of the country, there are roughly similar percentages of men and women across all

[8]The categories for population group and gender in this section of the report, are applied as in the Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS) in South Africa. The 'unknown' category is not displayed, but not omitted so rounded off percentages may not always add up to 100%. The most recent HEMIS data in this section were extracted by DHET in November 2019.

population groups. However Figure 8 shows that female students in HEIs outnumber their male counterparts, a pattern that mirrors the global trend.

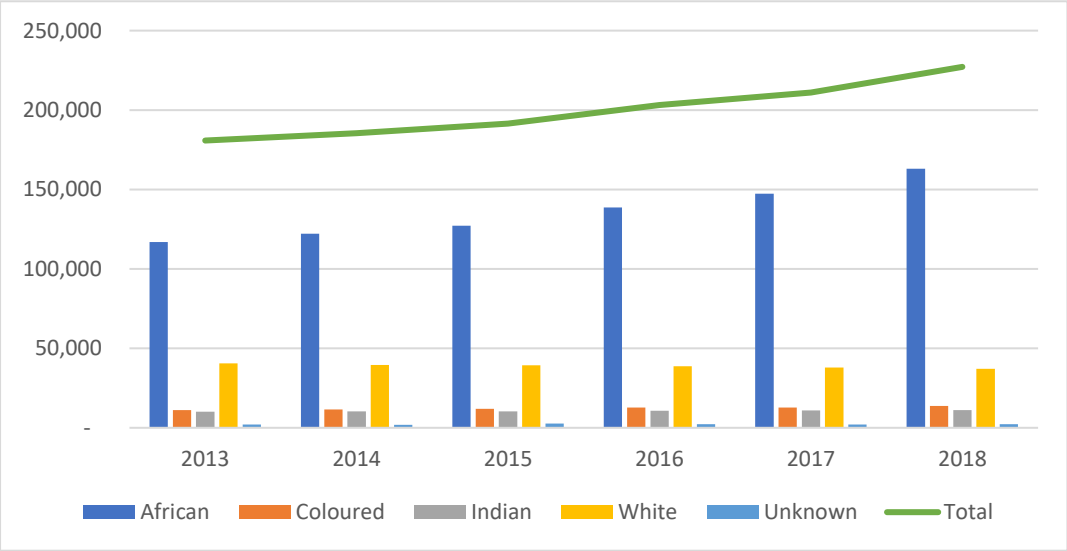
While compelling, these equity group enrolment increases do not tell the full story of these students in the system. Figure 9 shows that the rate of completion of female students is higher than that of their male counterparts – this trend has been increasing for over a decade. Figure 10 shows that the rate of completion of African students in particular is cause for concern and taints the gains made towards equity and redress thus far. While the *enrolment* patterns show trends in the desired directions, the following figures show varied *enrolment*-and-*graduation* patterns that indicate the achievements to date as well as further developments needed.

Figure 8. Graduations in public HEIs by gender, 2013 – 2018



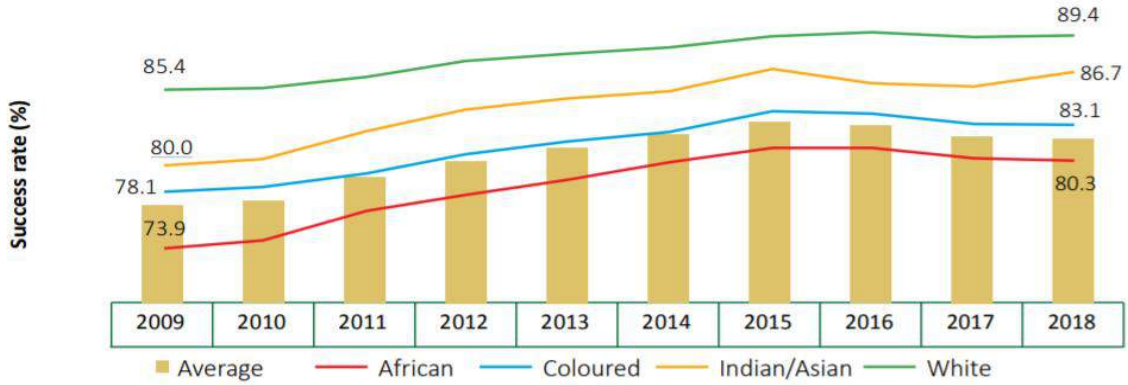
Source: CHE (2020b). See Annexure A for detailed figures.

Figure 9. Graduations in public HEIs by population group, 2013 – 2018



Source: CHE (2020b). See Annexure A for detailed figures.

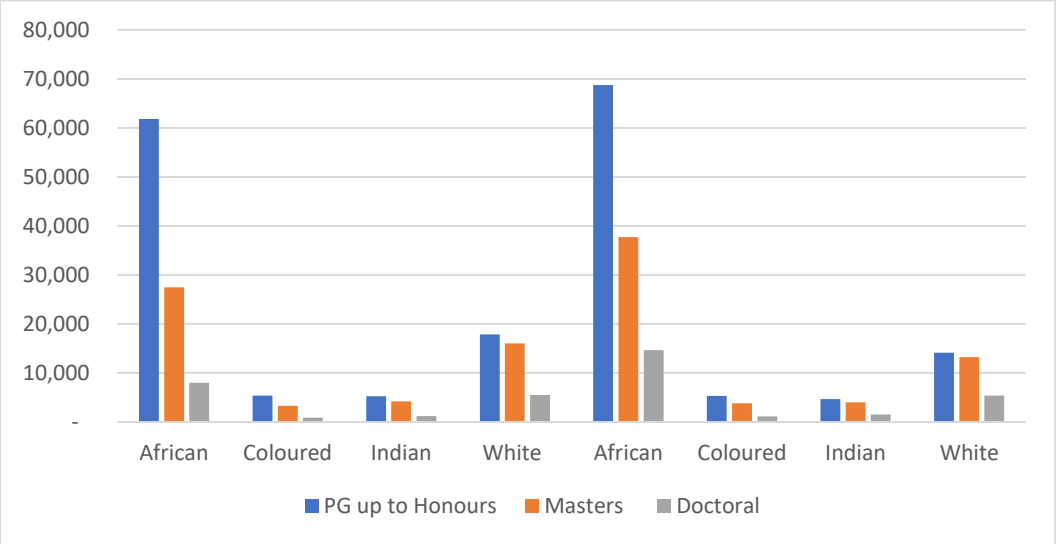
Figure 10. Undergraduate success rates in public HEIs for contact programmes, 2009 - 2018



Source: DHET (2018).

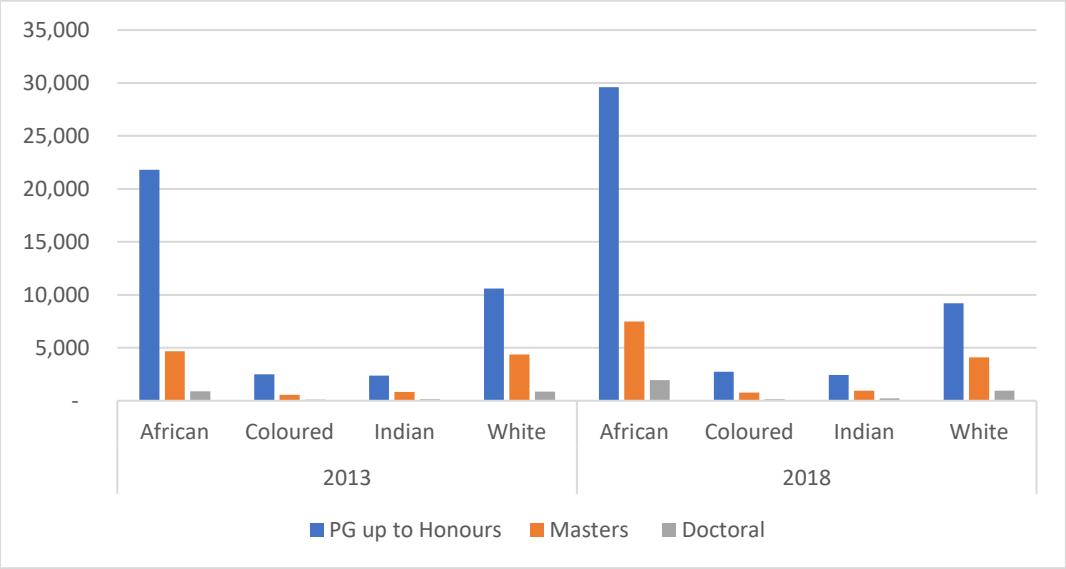
Figure 11 shows the uneven success rates in public HEIs, with the success rates of White, Indian/Asian and Coloured students being higher than the national average (89.4%, 86.7% and 83.1% respectively), with that of African students below the average (80.3%) (DHET, 2019:21). Two possible reasons can be offered. Firstly, African students entering university are often under-prepared academically; this is a well-documented issue. Secondly, many of these students who are already at a 'deficit', face additional challenges around financial and social support that further negatively impact on their ability to succeed. Figures 12 and 13 show enrollment and graduation rates in postgraduate programmes by population group.

Figure 11. Postgraduate enrolments in public HEIs by population group, 2013 and 2018



Source: CHE (2020b). See Annexure A for detailed figures.

Figure 12. Postgraduate qualifications awarded in public HEIs by population group, 2013 and 2018



Source: CHE (2020b). See Annexure A for detailed figures.

Figure 12 shows that over the five-year period 2013-2018, there was a considerable increase in the enrolment of African learners in postgraduate studies; a slight increase for Coloured learners; a slight decrease for Indian learners, and a considerable decrease for White learners. The graduation numbers in Figure 13 show a slightly different picture: there are proportionally higher percentages of Indian and White learners graduating across the two periods. These patterns still reflect the relative privelege under apartheid[9]. While the equity patterns are closer to the desired trends regarding enrolment, the graduation patterns have some way to go.

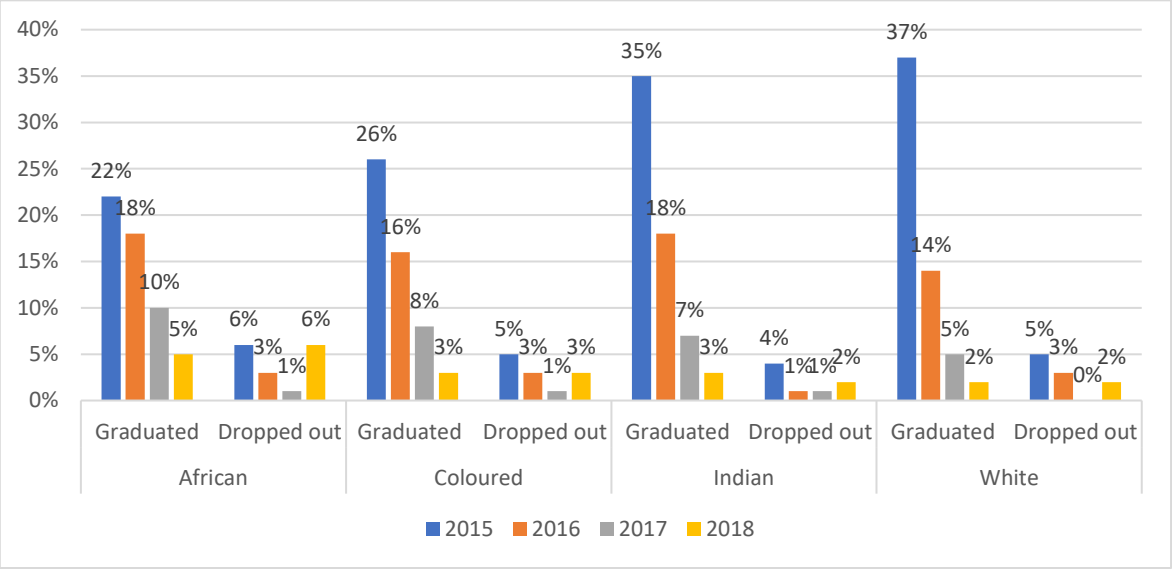
Equity trends are also considered annually in terms of enrolment and graduation patterns, for each of the different types of qualitications in the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework; and for different modes of delivery. Figures 14 and 15 are examples of the analyses of throughput rates by population group. The percentage throughput rates reflect the numbers graduating at regulation time, and each year thereafter. For the cohort of learners enrolling in 2013, the ideal completion times for these qualifications would be three years (completion in 2015). Figures 14 and 15 still reflect the throughput[10] patterns of pre-democracy privilege but to a lesser extent than was the case in previous years (e.g., CHE, 2011b; 2014; 2018) The population differences in the throughput rates are more pronounced for the three-year degree

[9] There was different legislation for different population groups.

[10] The University of South Africa (UNISA) is the only public HEI that operates in completely distance mode. UNISA has over 420,000 students, making it far larger than any other HEI in the country with over ten times the numbers of students to the next largest HEI. For this reason, its data are usually shown separately to avoid skewing the trends.

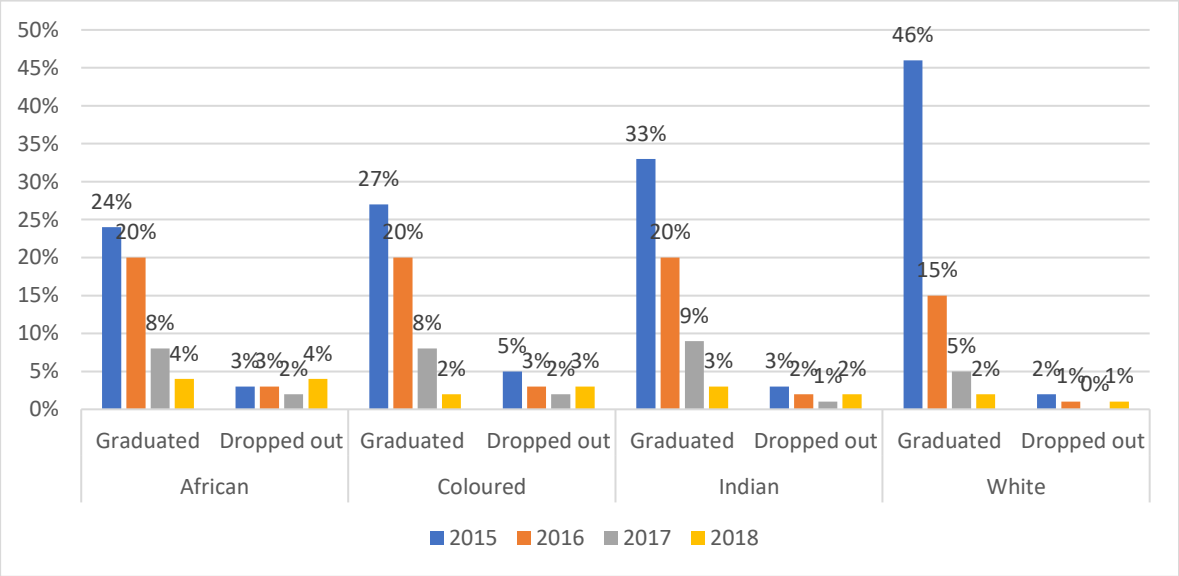
(Figure 15) than for the 360-credit diploma (Figure 14). Such differences are also visible in postgraduate studies like honours, master's and doctoral degrees (CHE, 2020b), although these too are lessening slowly over time. There are funding initiatives to address these challenges.

Figure 13. Throughput rates by population group for 360-credit diplomas with first year of enrolment in 2013 (public HEIs excluding UNISA) – non-accumulative



Source: CHE (2020b). See Annexure A for detailed figures.

Figure 14. Throughput rates by population group for three-year degrees with first year of enrolment in 2013 (public HEIs excluding UNISA) – non-accumulative

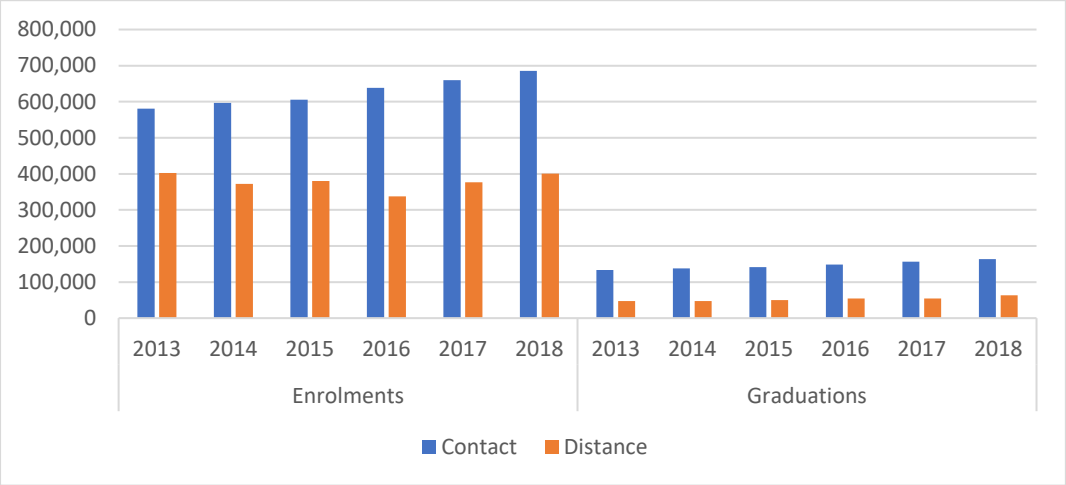


Source: CHE (2020b). See Annexure A for detailed figures.

Modalities of educational delivery in South African HEIs can be divided broadly along the lines of contact and distance offerings. Historically, the University of South Africa (UNISA) was the only distance learning institution, but over time other HEIs started offering 'blended

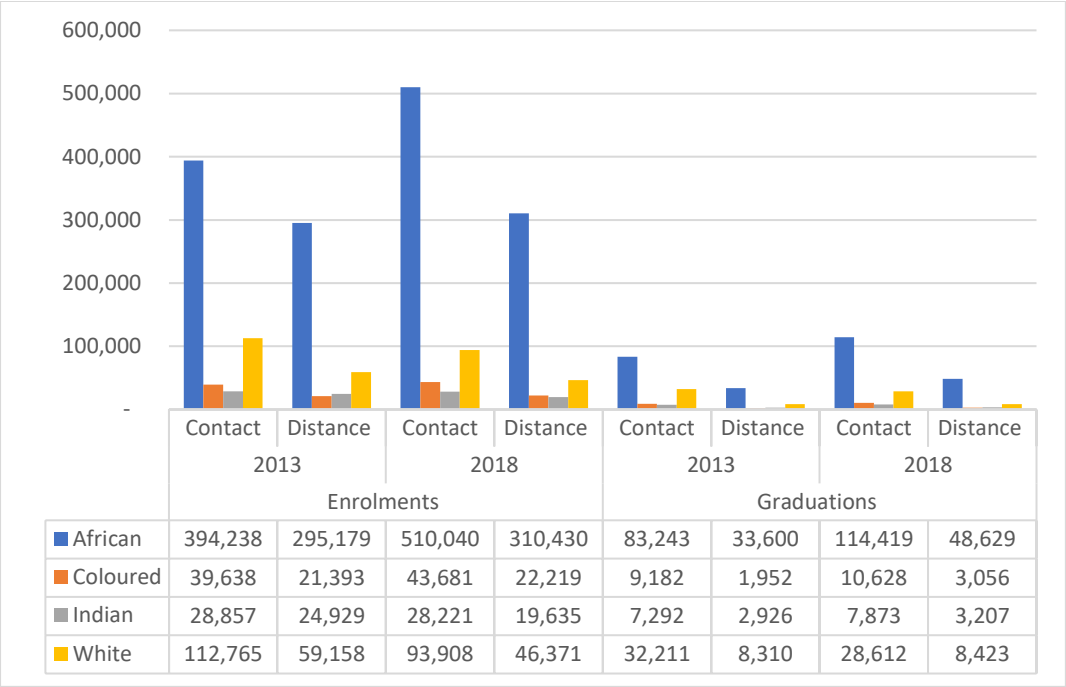
learning'. While the proportions of these modalities differ across institutions, the following paragraph is useful: "Between 2017 and 2018, public HEIs' student enrolment increased by 4.7% (48 584). In this period, students enrolled through the distance mode increased by 6.2% or 23 485, while those enrolled through the contact mode increased by 3.8% or 25 099" (DHET, 2018:9). No register of blended learning offerings was found at the time of the research. Figures 16, 17 and 18 show enrolments, graduations and headcounts in public HEIs by mode of delivery between 2013 and 2018, as well as the related demographic information.

Figure 15. Overall enrolments and graduations in public HEIs by mode of delivery, 2013 – 2018



Source: CHE (2020b). See Annexure A for detailed figures.

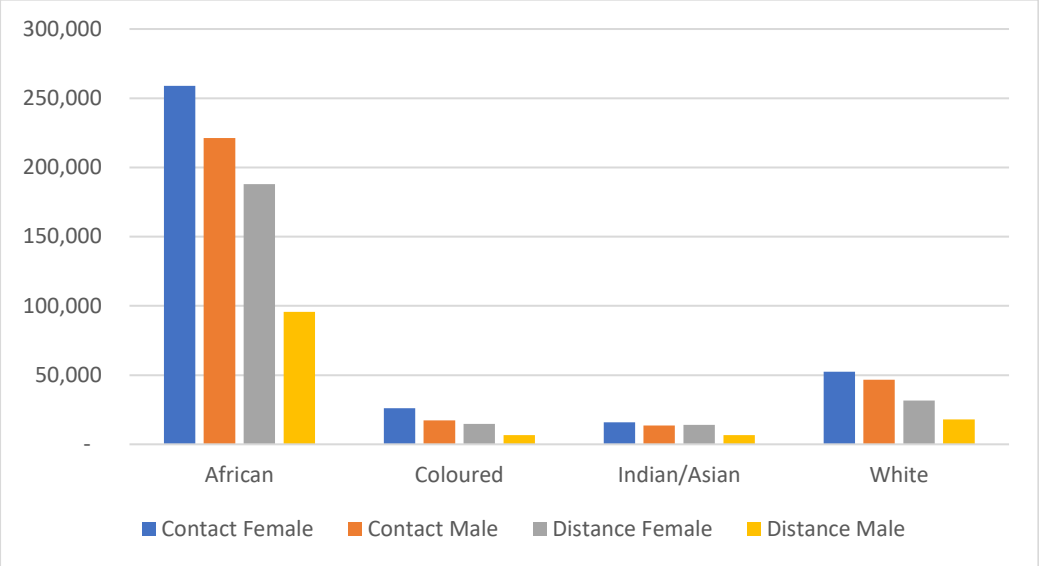
Figure 16. Enrolments and graduations in public HEIs by mode of delivery and population group, 2013 and 2018



	Enrolments 2013 Contact	Enrolments 2013 Distance	Enrolments 2018 Contact	Enrolments 2018 Distance	Graduations 2013 Contact	Graduations 2013 Distance	Graduations 2018 Contact	Graduations 2018 Distance
African	394,238	295,179	510,040	310,430	83,243	33,600	114,419	48,629
Coloured	39,638	21,393	43,681	22,219	9,182	1,952	10,628	3,056
Indian	28,857	24,929	28,221	19,635	7,292	2,926	7,873	3,207
White	112,765	59,158	93,908	46,371	32,211	8,310	28,612	8,423

Source: CHE (2020b). See Annexure A for detailed figures.

Figure 17. Numbers of students in public HEIs by gender, population group and mode of delivery, 2018

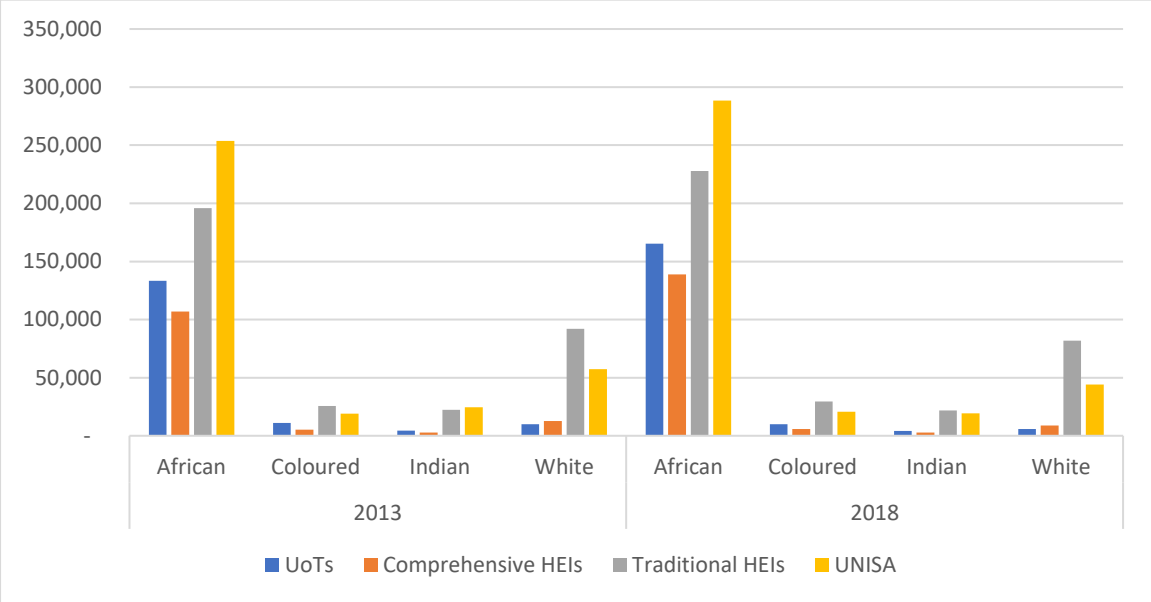


Source: DHET (2019). See Annexure A for detailed figures.

Figure 18 disaggregates modes of delivery by gender and population group. There are several notable observations. Firstly, female students outnumber male students across all racial groups. This pattern mirrors global trends but what is interesting, however, is that the numbers of female students studying via the distance mode are twice those of their male counterparts. This gender disparity is consistent across all population groups. The reasons for these trends are not readily apparent but several speculative comments can be offered, including gender inequality in domestic responsibilities or gender inequality in the workplace. This may be an area for further research.

Figure 19 shows equity trends in enrolmets per institutional type for 2013 and 2018. Across this period, there were increases in the numbers of African students in all institutional types and decreases for their White counterparts across the board. The numbers of Coloured and Indian students were roughly similar across the years shown, with an increase in Coloured learners in traditioinal HEIs , and decreased numbers of their Indian counterparts at UNISA.

Figure 18. Overall enrolments by institutional type and population group in public HEIs, 2013 and 2018



Source: CHE (2020b). See Annexure A for detailed figures.

2.4.4. Disability trends in higher education

Students with disabilities are part of the equity groups and make up a small percentage of the total numbers of students enrolled. In 2018 a new Strategic Framework on Disability for the Post School Education and Training System was approved. It is the first formal policy addressing the inclusion of people with disabilities in the PSET system and is aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals. The document cites some of the following institutional challenges:

i. poor implementation of disability policies in institutions, including the failure of many institutions to develop programmes of action, budgeting for programmes and coordinating mechanisms;

ii. social exclusion – there is minimal access, particularly for people with disabilities, from previously disadvantaged groups, to a variety of cultural, social and sporting activities which cater for their needs;

iii. lack of access to buildings for people with disabilities – while progress has been made to ensure accessibility to physical buildings, other facilities such as cultural, social and sports facilities are often not accessible for people with disabilities; neither are residential areas designed in suitable ways to enable access;

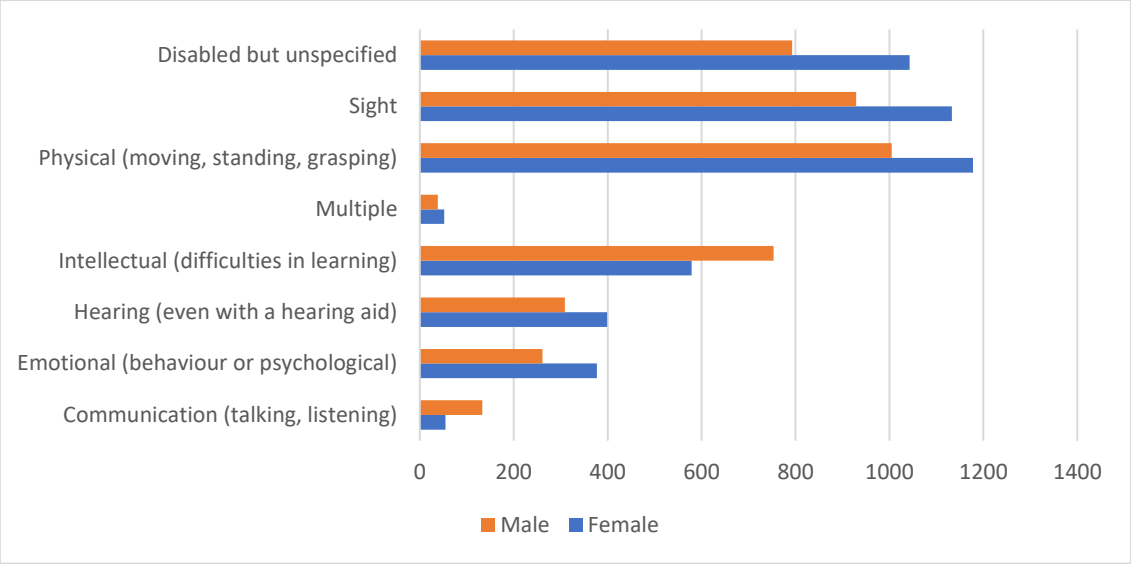
iv. persons with disabilities are marginalised by not being involved in decision-making;

v. an inflexible curriculum and teaching and learning environment;

vi. inappropriate languages of teaching and learning, and communication, and

vii. inappropriate and inadequate support services.

Figure 19. Numbers of students in public HEIs by primary disability and gender, 2018



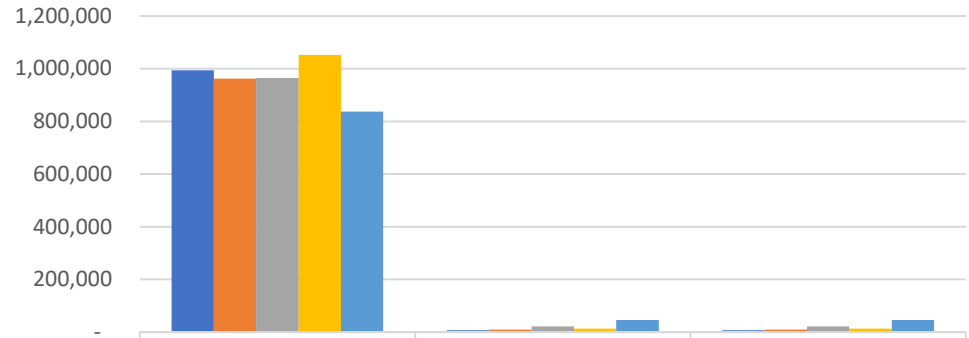
Source: DHET (2019). See Annexure A for detailed figures.

Figure 20 shows that in 2018, around 0.8% of the total enrolment numbers in public HEIs, had disabilities (DHET, 2019:18). Almost a quarter of students with disabilities (24.1% or 2 183) reported having physical disabilities, while roughly a further quarter (22.8% or 2 062) reported sight disabilities (Ibid.). One in five students did not specify their disabilities.

2.4.5. Socio-economic status trends in higher education

Perhaps the least visible equity group in HEIs in South Africa is that of students from poor and working-class households and communities. While there are overlaps between population groups and social class in the country due to its particular history, there is not an exact overlap. However, fewer statistics are collected on social class than on population groups based on 'race'. Figure 21 shows educational attainment among youth aged 20-24 years, by household income expressed in terms of quintiles, with Quintile 1 representing the group with the lowest incomes.

Figure 20. Educational attainment among youth aged 20-24 years by household income quintiles



	Holds qualification(s) at NQF Levels 1-6/ below NQF Level 1	Holds qualification(s) at NQF Level 7	Holds postgraduate qualification(s) at NQF Levels 8-10
Quintile 1	994,158	7,260	7,260
Quintile 2	961,941	10,112	10,112
Quintile 3	965,119	22,099	22,099
Quintile 4	1,051,731	13,024	13,024
Quintile 5	837,462	46,307	46,307

Source: STATSSA (2019). See Annexure A for detailed figures.

Figure 21 shows how income and educational attainment are correlated. Although the institutions in the case study did not take socio-economic status into account in their admissions processes, some HEIs in the country do. The University of Cape Town, the country's most highly-ranked HEI, for example does so through a 'Disadvantage Factor', which applies only to South African undergraduate applicants. This is a transparent and deliberate attempt to transform the university in terms of population group and gender (UCT, 2020).

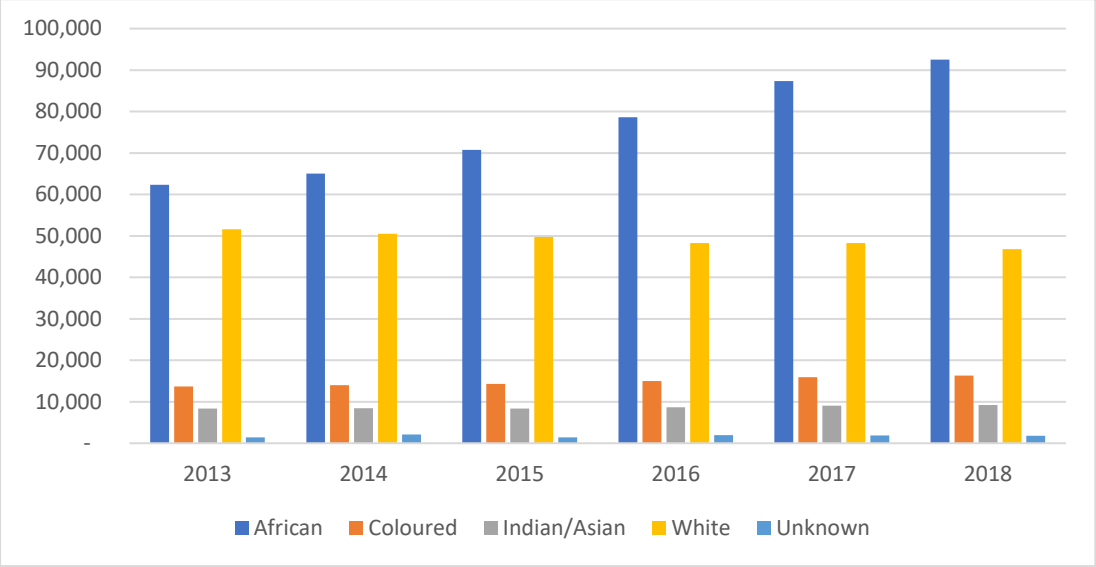
The Disadvantage Factor is calculated as a percentage of the Faculty Points Score (FPS) required for admission to study at the university – it is added to the FPS in the calculation of the 'Weighted Points Score' (WPS). When seeking admission, applicants provide information relating to family and school such as 'mother's first language', 'highest education level of mother and father/main guardian', 'highest education level of grandparent', whether the family had received a 'child support grant' on behalf of the applicant, whether the family relied on 'a social pension from the state', and others. The percentage of the Disadvantage Factor counts for between 0% and 10% of the WPS for all programmes except for the Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MBChB) Degree, where the percentage is between 0% and 20%. The more privileged an applicant, the closer the WPS to zero.

In South Africa, employment equity is tracked in public and private workplaces. The higher education QA body, in its annual statistical publications, includes analyses of equity patterns amongst the staff in public HEIs.

2.4.6. Equity trends for staff in public HEIs

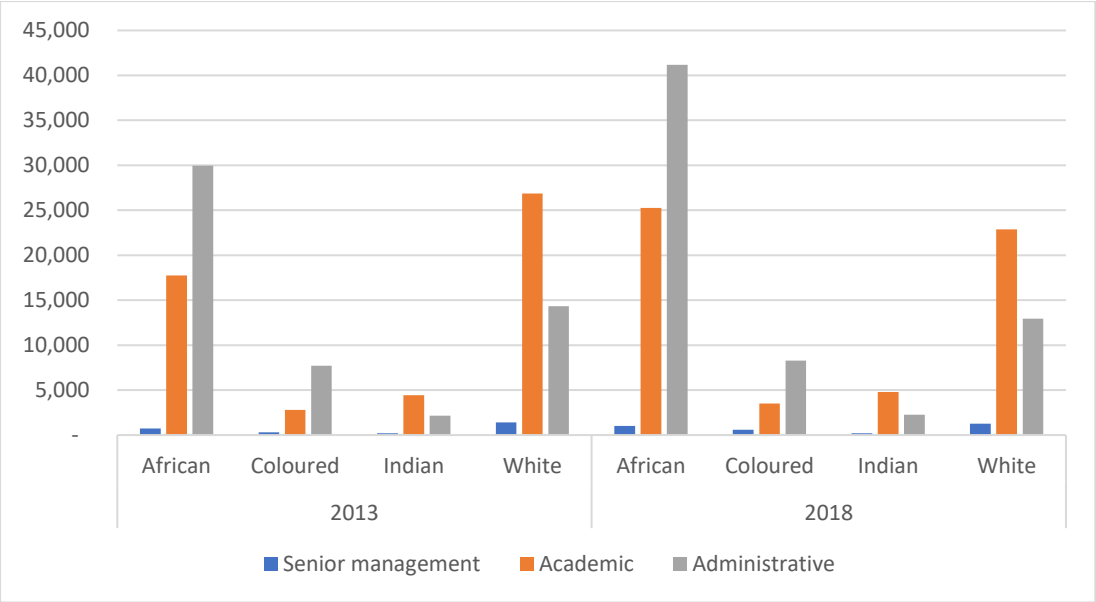
Figures 22 and 23 show equity trends in the staff of public HEIs over a recent five-year period, in terms of population group overall, and by staff category and qualifications held.

Figure 21. Numbers of staff in public HEIs by population group, 2013 – 2018



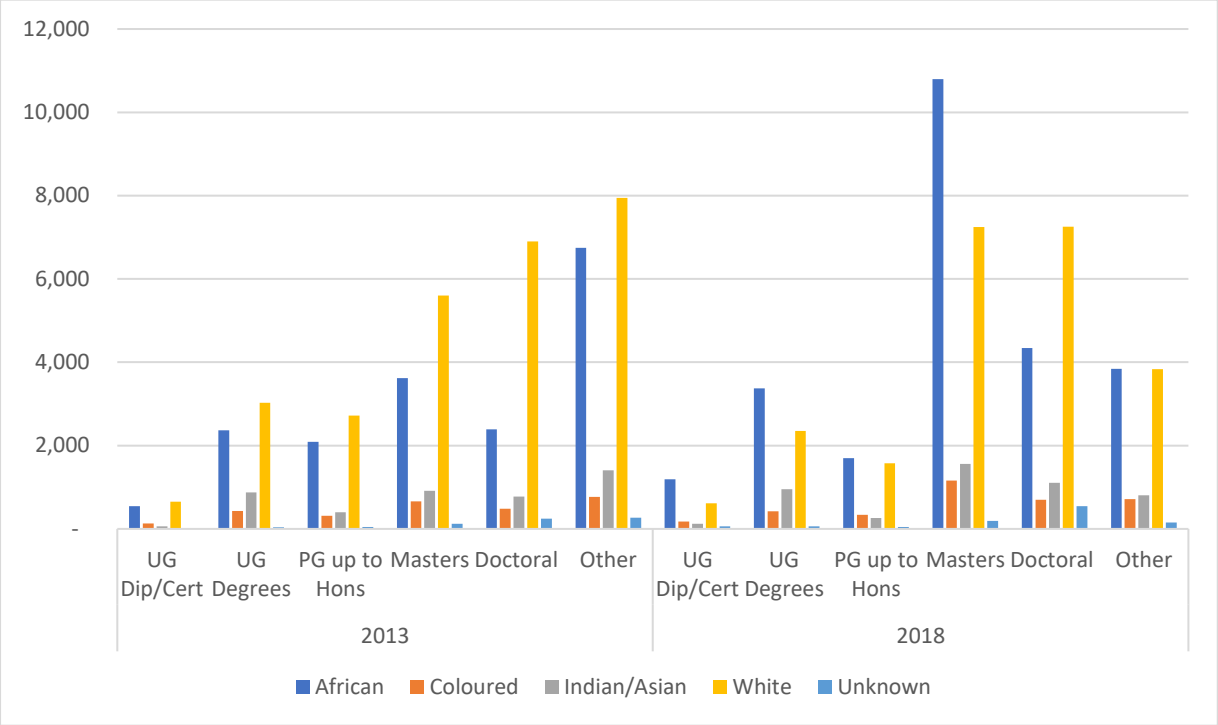
Source: CHE (2020b). See Annexure A for detailed figures.

Figure 22. Numbers of staff in selected personnel categories in public HEIs by population group, 2013 and 2018



Source: CHE (2020b). See Annexure A for detailed figures.

Figure 23. Academic staff in public HEIs by population group and qualification level, 2013 and 2018



Source: CHE (2020b). See Annexure A for detailed figures.

Figures 22, 23 and 24 show that over the recent five-year period tracked, on the whole, the numbers of African staff members in public HEIs have increased steadily, with a corresponding decrease in the numbers of White staff members. This trend has continued for well over a decade (CHE, 2011b, 2020b). It was visible initially in the administrative staff category but spread to the academic staff category and later to the management level. For the period shown, it is clear that the staff generally have higher qualification levels in 2018 than five years previously. The numbers and proportions of African staff with qualifications in all categories increased. While what lies in the category of 'other' qualifications is not spelled out, part of this category comprises foreign qualifications, in line with moves to include staff from outside the country, and particularly from elsewhere in Africa.

2.5. Governance and funding of higher education

The governance of HEIs in South Africa is through registration, accreditation, funding and reporting – the funding being tied, amongst others, to enrolments and graduations[11]. Private HEIs must register with the national department to be 'registered providers of higher education' and must also register every higher education QA body-accredited (learning) programme they

[11] The information in this section was drawn from the NQF Act No. 67 of 2008; the Higher Education Act of 1997, as amended; the accreditation policies of the higher education QA body, and is supplemented by information gained in the interviews with national officials for the current study.

intend to offer (DHET, 2016b). All HEI learning programmes that lead to full qualifications – to be offered by public and private HEIs – must be accredited by the higher education QA body, and the qualifications must be registered on the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) part of the NQF. While full qualifications must be registered on the NQF, HEIs also offer short courses that are not on the NQF and that are often a source of 'third stream' income. Programme accreditation for public HEIs does not lapse but undergoes periodic review. However, should 50% or more of a programme change, then re-accreditation is required. In addition, programmes can be de-accredited when national reviews or audits deem that that should be the case. Private HEI's are required to undergo a re-accreditation process every three to five years, as per arrangement with the national department.

The Programme Qualification Mix (PQM), is an "innovative framework for determining the viability of academic programmes using multiple criteria" (Visser and Van Aardt, 2015:1). The PQM contains the full complement of programmes and qualifications offered by any given institution. It serves as a management tool for the national department. For each year, public HEIs submit a PQM to the national department, and after negotiation, the PQM is agreed, enrolment planning is done, and funding is awarded accordingly. Public HEIs may only offer programmes in their PQMs and are penalised for under- and over-enrolling. Students are funded 'as Full Time Equivalents' (FTEs), with a portion of the funding for each student awarded upon admission to study and the reminder upon graduation, per student.

Reporting by public HEIs is regulated through the Higher Education Act (RSA, 1997, as amended). Each public HEI must produce a Strategic Plan and update it at least every five years and must submit an Annual Performance Plan (APP) to the national department, which is consistent with the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) period. The APP must contain performance targets and identify core sets of indicators that the HEI will use to monitor institutional performance. In addition, a Mid-Year Performance Report must be submitted as part of a mid-term review. The Strategic Plan, Annual Performance Plan, Annual Report, budget documents, Mid-Year Performance Report, targets and indicators must align. HEIs do not receive clean audits if these aspects do not align, and are further penalised financially when students do not graduate as planned. However, there may be points at which re-alignment is possible.

Private HEIs report annually to the Registrar located in the national department[12]. When registering, a private HEI submits a signed declaration that the institution, when registered, will not discriminate based on race, gender and disability, and that it will comply with the South African Constitution (RSA, 1996). It must also submit evidence of its financial sustainability, including recent audited financial statements and a certified copy of a three-year financial forecast. The audit comprises verification of the information provided. Private HEIs do not receive state funds. The Registrar determines that its programmes are of the same standards as those in public HEIs. Private HEIs undergo evaluations by the Registrar at intervals determined by the Registrar. They may not exceed 'reasonable' enrolment for the facilities provided.

It is known that the governance processes for public and private HEIs have the potential to enable or block FLPs. Registration and accreditation determine whether or not qualifications can be offered by HEIs (or other entities), and the extent to which these qualifications are linked to diverse learning pathways. For public HEIs, funding supports FLPs, and its absence hampers such pathways. In some cases, the funding of FTEs hampers CAT because both the 'sending' and 'receiving' HEIs lose part of the FTE funds linked to the transferring students.

While the over-arching national policy for CAT (SAQA, 2014b and forthcoming [c]) does not limit the amount of learning that can be recognised for CAT, there is a widely-known issue in the country, linked to what is referred to as the '50% clause', whereby "a maximum of 50% of the credits of a completed qualification may be transferred to another qualification …" (CHE, 2016b: Clause 5.2.6). Further, the HEQSF (CHE, 2013b: Clause 64) states that the general principle for admissions involving CAT "must be that the admitting institution is satisfied that the applicant has the necessary competence, and that the 50/50 rule applies". On the one hand, the Higher Education Amendment Act (RSA, 2016a, Clause 74:6) says: "The joint statutes and joint regulations and rules made in terms of the University's Act (Act No. 61 of 1955), and the Technikon's Act (Act No. 125 of 1993), continue to exist until the date or dates contemplated" and this clause has in fact not officially been repealed in legislation. On the other hand however, the higher education QA body's recent publication on *Norms and Standards for Certification* (CHE, 2020a: Clause 6.2.3) notes that the 'the 50% clause' is, in reality, "going to be implemented in a more nuanced manner by individual institutions taking into consideration any other pertinent rules within an institution". In addition, the HEQSF policy is in the process of being revised. In a recent survey conducted as part of its 2021 NQF Impact Study (SAQA,

[12]Private HEIs are governed by the regulations for the registration of private HEIs (RSA, 2016b).

forthcoming [a]), a preliminary analysis of the responses relating to CAT showed that while two thirds of public HEI responses and a similar proportion of professional body responses indicated support for the idea of the '50% clause', just over half of those for private HEIs did so: there was also clear support for doing away with the clause in many instances.

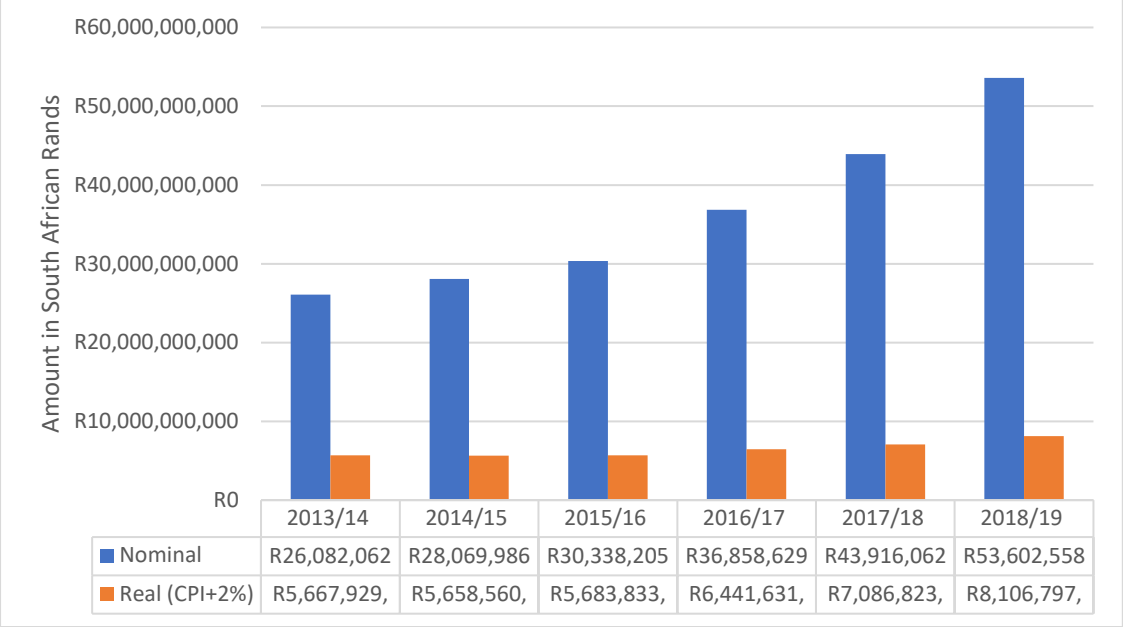
Public HEIs are funded from the National Treasury via the national department, according to the FTE principle, and by student fees, and 'third stream income'[13]. Between 2000 and 2015, the percentage of state funding awarded to public HEIs decreased steadily, annually, from being 49% of their total income to 39% of the total (DHET, 2018). At the same time, student fees rose from being 24% of their total income to being 35%, while third-stream income remained between 26% and 28% annually (Ibid.). This is an interesting pattern, given the 'Fees Must Fall' student movement which gained strength from 2015. The student lead movement initially organised around an increase in fees which disproportionally affected underprivileged students, grew to galvanise the wider student body around decolonising the curriculum (a push for epistemic diversity) and gender-based violence. 'Fees Must Fall' culminated in a 2017 statement by the then-President guaranteeing 'free higher education' for all poor and working-class students. Student funding by the government has clearly filled the gap.

Public HEIs receive block grants to fund the operational costs of teaching and learning that are under the control of university councils, while earmarked grants are geared towards ensuring that universities address national priorities. Funding for TVET and CET colleges is also administered directly from the national department. The central funding and regulation by one department is widely viewed in the country as an indication of the increasing integration of the system. The total funding for the PSET system increased from comprising 4.7% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) 'non-interest expenditure' of the country in 2006/07 to 5.9% of the GDP in the 2018/19 year[14] (DHET, 2018). Of the total of R40.5 billion (approximately USD 2.5 billion) allocated in the 2017/18 financial year, the largest proportion was allocated to public HEIs (78.0% or R31.6 billion or approximately USD 1.9 billion), while the TVET and CET sectors were allocated 16.7% (R6.7 billion or USD 406 million) and 5.3% (R2.1 billion or USD 127 million) respectively (DHET, 2017b). Figure 25 shows the funding allocated to

[13] Universities also offer short courses and adult learning not registered on the NQF.
[14] Non-interest expenditure refers to expenditure after government has paid the interests on its debt.

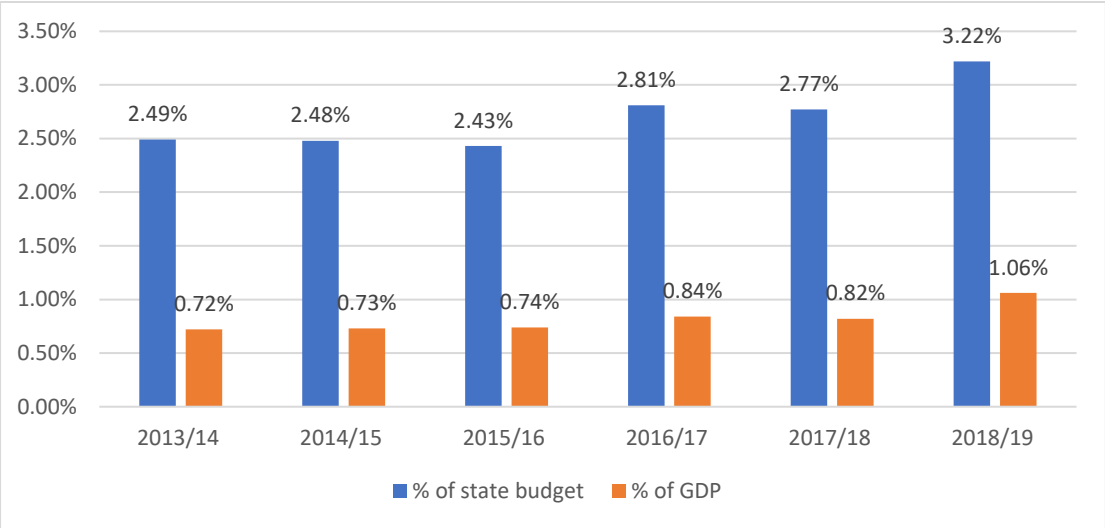
public HEIs over the last five years, in real and nominal terms[15]. Figure 26 shows this funding as a percentage of State Budget and GDP respectively.

Figure 24. Funding allocated to public HEIs in real and nominal terms, 2013/14 - 2018/19



Source: CHE (2020b). See Annexure A for detailed figures.

Figure 25. Funding allocated to public HEIs as a percentage of GDP and of state budget, 2013/14 to 2018/19

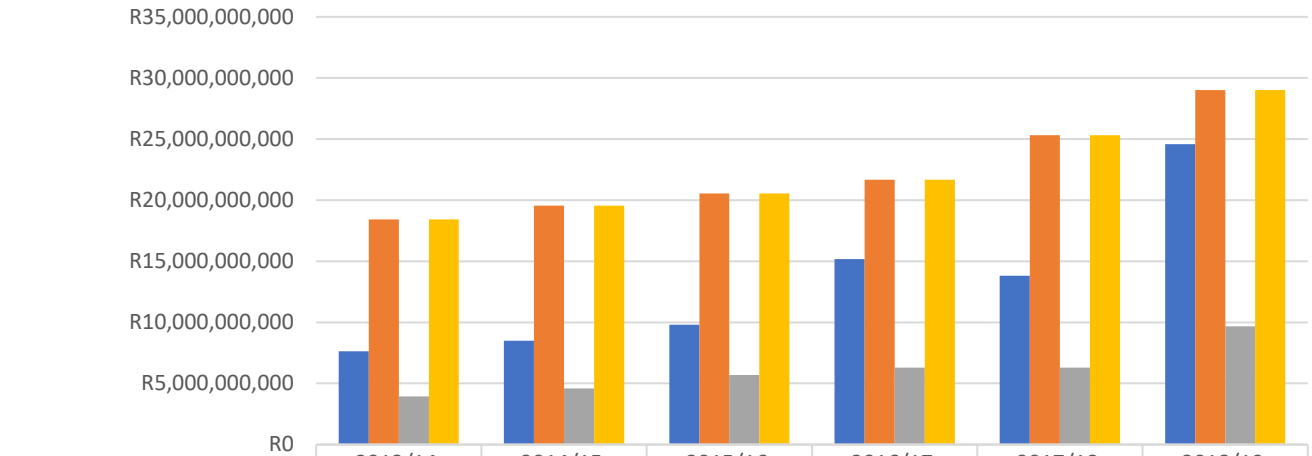


Source: CHE (2020b). See Annexure A for detailed figures.

[15] Nominal funding refers to the actual amount of money given in Rand value. Real funding is relative to a base year – it takes inflation into account and allows the comparison of purchasing power over time, as increases/decreases are compared to the base year (CHE, 2018).

Figure 27 shows the proportions of block to earmarked funds, respectively including and excluding National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) funds[16]. It is clear that the proportions of the funding allocations have shifted over the years shown, towards increased student aid. These shifts can be linked to the Fees Must Fall movement already described.

Figure 26. Proportion of block to earmarked funds including and excluding NSFAS allocation, 2013/14 - 2018/29



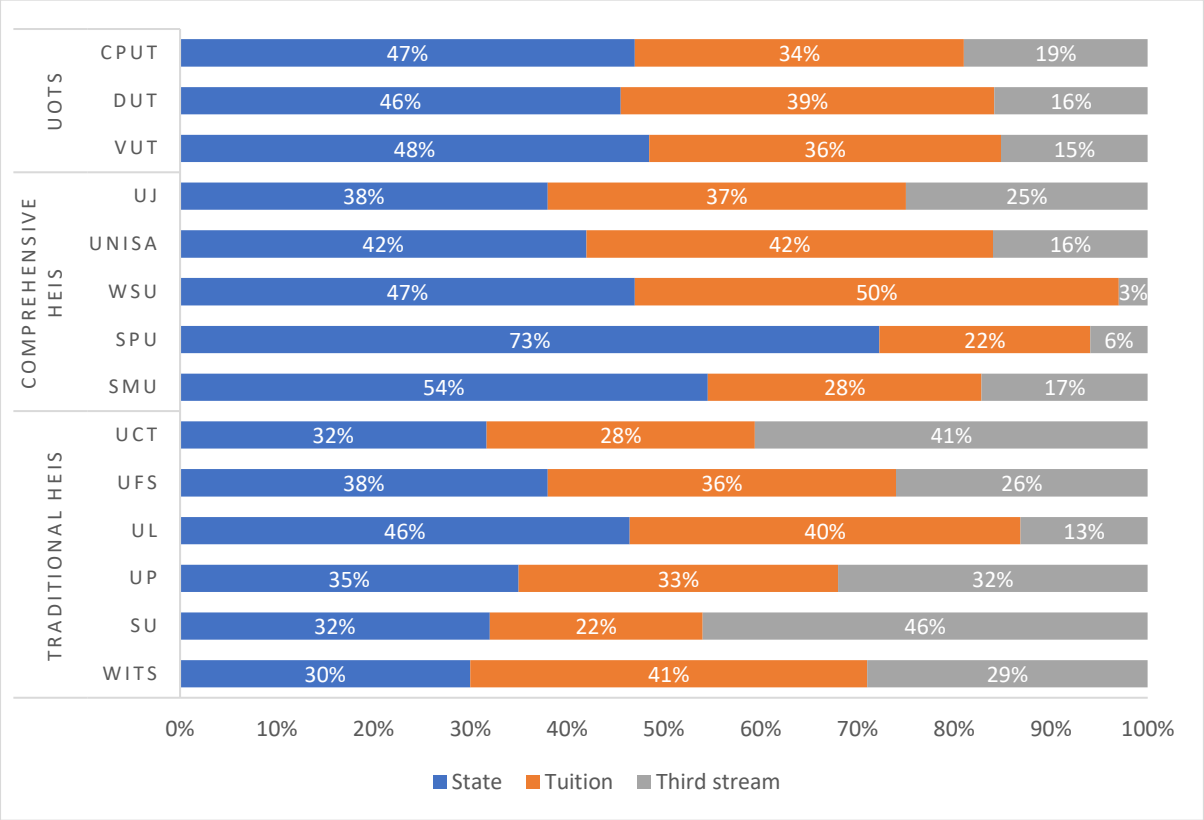
	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Including NSFAS Earmarked	R7,643,478,000	R8,508,752,000	R9,799,844,000	R15,180,531,000	R13,803,252,000	R24,579,366,000
Including NSFAS Block	R18,438,584,000	R19,561,234,000	R20,538,361,000	R21,678,098,000	R25,322,874,000	R29,023,192,000
Excluding NSFAS Earmarked	R3,950,183,000	R4,593,859,000	R5,704,866,000	R6,286,720,000	R6,283,967,000	R9,678,097,000
Excluding NSFAS Block	R18,438,584,000	R19,561,234,000	R20,538,361,000	R21,678,098,000	R25,322,874,000	R29,023,192,000

Source: CHE (2020b). See Annexure A for detailed figures.

Figure 28 shows the proportions of institutional funding per institutional type and source of funds, for 2017.

[16]State subsidies to HEIs are divided into block and earmarked grants (CHE, 2018). Block grants can be used for any legitimate university purposes linked to (1) teaching inputs (based on enrolments) and (2) outputs (based on graduations), (3) research outputs (based on approved publications and research masters/ doctoral graduations) and (4) institutional factors (size/ proportion of historically disadvantaged students). Earmarked funds must be spent on the purposes for which they are designated, for example, infrastructure, teaching development, foundation courses, and others.

Figure 27. Proportion of institutional funding per institutional type and source, for 2017



Source: CHE (2020b).

HEIs in South Africa have the autonomy to design their own curricula in line with the HEQSF (CHE, 2013b) requirements and SAQA's (2013b; 2020c) policy and criteria for developing qualifications, registering qualifications on the NQF and publishing these qualifications. The criteria are broad, for example (SAQA, 2020c: Clause 14), "In developing a qualification, Quality Councils must ensure that developers:

(a) identify the relevant Sub-Framework on which it is recommended for registration on the NQF;

(b) include clear specifications of learning outcomes, using the appropriate NQF Level Descriptors;

(c) specify the minimum requirements to achieve the qualification;

(d) provide articulated learning pathways;

(e) in the case of qualifications, ensure a minimum of 120 credits;

(f) in the case of part-qualifications, and in ensuring that it forms part of a registered national whole (parent) qualification, the following must be taken into account …

[parent qualification name; ensuring that the maximum credits of the part-qualification amount to less than 120 credits; ensuring distinctions between the names of full- and part- qualifications, and others];

(g) includes [documented] consultation with stakeholders; and

(h) includes a public comment period …"

The HEQSF (CHE, 2013b) provides further details and guidance regarding the roles and responsibilities for developing qualifications and work-integrated learning in higher education; higher education qualification types and descriptors; the naming of higher education qualifications and their respective characteristics and admission requirements; and progression, RPL and CAT in the higher education context, as well as the rules for academic transcripts.

2.6. Student funding elaborated

The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) – overseen by the National Skills Authority (NSA), a statutory body reporting to the national department – subsidises fully, the PSET studies of poor and working-class students, in the form of bursaries that must be repaid on the completion of studies. Students qualify for NSFAS bursaries if they are South African citizens studying at public HEIs and TVET and CET Colleges, and their families rely on South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) grants and have combined monthly incomes of not more than R350,000 (USD 21.212) per year[17], and if they meet the specified levels of academic achievement (NSA, 2019).

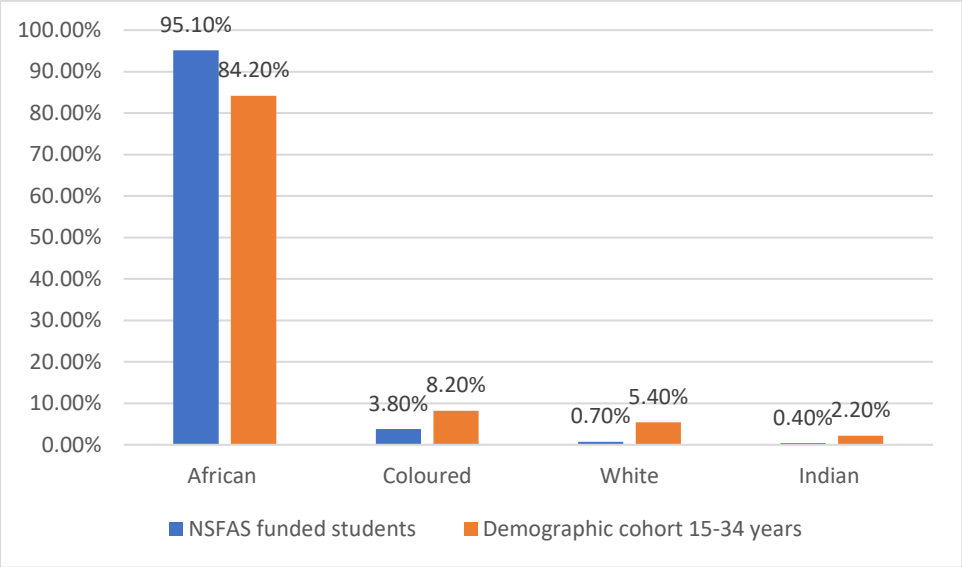
NSFAS funding makes up 1% of the GDP of the country. In 2018, a total of 604 114 students – roughly half of the PSET student body – met both the academic and financial eligibility criteria to benefit from NSFAS funding. Some 372 617 (61.4%) were female, and 234 512 (38.6%) were male (NSA, 2019).

Figure 29 shows the proportions of students receiving NSFAS funding by population group in the 2018/19 year. The proportion of African students receiving funding was 14% higher than the proportion of African people in the South African population, while the proportions of Coloured, White and Indian students receiving assistance were under-represented relative to the proportions of these groups in the national population. This over-representation of African students may be due to the racialised nature of poverty and income inequality in the country.

[17] This figure rises to R600,000 (USD 36,363) for students with disabilities.

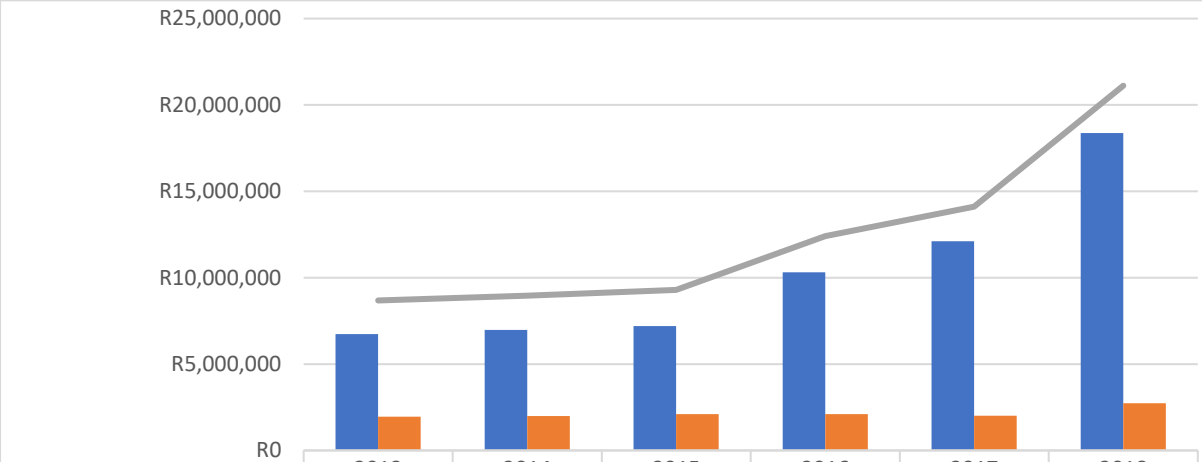
Around 0,5% of the total NSFAS disbursements were awarded to students with disabilities. Figure 30 shows overall NSFAS funding in the most recent five-year period.

Figure 28. NSFAS funding by student population group, for 2018



Source: NSA (2019).

Figure 29. NSFAS Student awards (in thousands), 2013-2018



	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
University allocation	R6,729,070	R6,969,941	R7,194,619	R10,304,757	R12,106,307	R18,373,239
TVET allocation	R1,953,253	R1,991,488	R2,095,130	R2,106,267	R2,012,108	R2,742,607
Total	R8,682,323	R8,961,429	R9,289,749	R12,411,024	R14,118,415	R21,115,846

Source: CHE (2020b). See Annexure A for detailed figures.

It is important to note that although NSFAS funds studies in HEIs and TVET and CET Colleges, the funds are skewed towards studies in HEIs both in terms of the proportions of expenditure and the numbers of students funded. This is in part due to the higher costs and longer duration of university qualifications.

2.7. Closing comments for the section

South Africa faces many challenges in its higher education sector, some of which are due to the legacy of *apartheid*. In the post-*apartheid* context, higher education has been a key site of transformation. In the early 2000s, the interventions towards structural integration as well as further large-scale systemic changes under the SAQA and NQF Acts, established the foundation of equity, redress, access, progression, quality and transparency in the sector. The NQF is a key instrument for addressing the issue of dead-end qualifications and promoting articulation, amongst others. It is the instrument through which the education and training system in the country is aligned with its Constitution, and socio-economic and legal development. The development of comprehensive legislative, regulatory, planning and funding frameworks has meant that HEI's, despite their relative autonomy, are bound to the transformative agenda of the State. The following sections of this report point to some of the successes in achieving this agenda, as well as some areas that need further fine-tuning.

Chapter 3. System-level support for FLPs in South Africa

This chapter comprises ten sub-sections. The first three cover the legislation and policies, instruments and actors that support FLPs in South Africa. These are followed by a sketch of the interviews conducted at national level and further sub-sections that present the interview responses. The responses touch on FLP practices, monitoring, evaluation, enablers and priorities for the future.

3.1 Legislation and policies that support FLPs

This sub-section covers the legislation and policies that frame FLPs in South Africa. It touches on the NQF Act and NQF policy suite, the Acts of the three Quality Councils and their policies, the articulation and RPL coordination policies of the national department, the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (PSET) and policy for an integrated career development system. The purpose of the sub-section is to show how the goal of FLPs is framed at national level.

3.1.1. NQF Act and structures

The NQF in South Africa was established under the SAQA Act No. 58 of 1995 (RSA, 1995), to integrate and transform the system divided under *apartheid*. The early NQF system, while achieving a measure of transparency, joint work, and dialogue, was contested for its one-size-fits-all model of quality assurance. A national review led to the Joint Policy Statement (DoE-DoL, 2007), followed by the development and promulgation of the NQF Act No. 67 of 2008 (RSA, 2008) – and the later NQF Amendment Act No. 12 of 2019 (RSA, 2019), which enabled SAQA to implement the NQF Act more effectively.

Under the NQF Act and the NQF Amendment Act, there are three differentiated and coordinated NQF Sub-Frameworks described in Chapter 1 of this report. The objectives of the NQF remain to facilitate learners' access to, and progression within the system, and enhance quality, transparency, and redress. The structure of the NQF under the NQF Act is designed to enable learning pathways within and across the NQF Sub-Frameworks.

The key NQF partners are SAQA, the three Quality Councils, the Departments of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and Basic Education (DBE). Key NQF stakeholders include public and private providers of education and training, professional bodies, organised business, and organised labour. Table 4 summarises the roles and responsibilities of each of the stakeholders in PSET.

Table 4. NQF partners and their roles and responsibilities

Body	Responsibility
Ministry of Basic Education (MBE)	Oversees: • Department of Basic Education (DBE) • Schooling: Foundation Phase (School Grades R-3); Intermediate Phase (School Grades 4-6); Senior Phase (School Grades 7-9); Further Education and Training (School Grades 10-12) Report to it: • Umalusi (Council for Quality Assurance in GENFET) • Nine Provincial Departments of Education
Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology (MHEST)	Oversees: • Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) • HEIs and TVET Colleges • Community Education and Training Colleges (CETCs) • Adult Education and Training (AET) • National Career Development Services (CDS) • Central Application Clearing House (CACH) for higher education and TVET • National Student Funding Aid Scheme (NSFAS) • Others Report to it: • National Skills Authority (NSA) • South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) • Quality Councils (CHE, QCTO, Umalusi[18]) • Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) • Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) • Others
South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA)	• Oversees the implementation and further development of the NQF, and advises the MHEST in this regard • Coordinates the three NQF Sub-Frameworks • Develops a 'System of Collaboration' to guide the mutual relations of SAQA and the Quality Councils, and resolves disputes involving the Quality Councils • Develops the NQF Level Descriptors • Develops and implements policy and criteria for registering qualifications and part-qualifications on the NQF (registers qualifications and part-qualifications on the NQF) • Develops and implements policy and criteria for recognizing a professional body in the context of the NQF and registering its professional designations on the NQF (recognises professional bodies and registers their professional designations) • Develops policy and criteria for RPL, CAT and assessment • Collaborates with its international counterparts and informs the NQF partners about international good practice regarding NQFs • Conducts/ commissions research of relevance for the implementation and further development of the NQF, including periodic NQF impact studies – and publishes the findings • Maintains the National Learners' Records Database (NLRD) • Provides a foreign qualification evaluation and advisory service

[18] Umalusi reports to the MBE regarding GENFET and the MHEST regarding TVET.

	• Informs the public about the NQF
Quality Councils (Umalusi, CHE, QCTO)	• Develop and manage their NQF Sub-Frameworks • Develop and implement policy and criteria for quality assurance in their NQF Sub-Framework contexts • Align their NQF Sub-Framework policies for quality assurance, RPL, CAT and assessment, to the counterpart policies of SAQA and the DHET • Oversee the development of qualifications in their NQF Sub-Framework contexts, and submit and recommend these qualifications to SAQA for registration on the NQF – publishing the qualifications once registered on the NQF • Oversee the implementation of RPL, CAT and assessment in their NQF Sub-Framework contexts

SAQA is mandated to oversee the implementation and further development of the NQF, and coordinate the three NQF Sub-Frameworks (RSA, 2008). Almost all of SAQA's responsibilities support FLPs, for example SAQA develops the NQF policy suite, and provides system leadership for its implementation. SAQA also provides public services which support FLPs, such as:

- the registration of qualifications and part-qualifications with articulation and RPL options;
- the recognition of professional bodies which meet the criteria required;
- the evaluation of foreign qualifications for national and international mobility;
- the Verification and Record of Learning Services;
- the National Learners' Records Database;
- NQF research;
- International liaison; and
- NQF advice.

The roles of the three Quality Councils– for General and Further Education and Training (Umalusi), Higher Education (CHE), and Trades and Occupations (QCTO) respectively are also key in developing and strengthening FLPs. The Quality Councils (RSA, 1995) must:

- collaborate with SAQA and the other Quality Councils;
- develop and manage their NQF Sub-Frameworks, the qualifications in which need to articulate within and between the NQF Sub-Frameworks;

- develop and implement policy and criteria for developing qualifications, RPL, CAT, and assessment, so that these are aligned with SAQA policies – and submit the qualifications and part-qualifications to SAQA for registration on the NQF; and
- conduct quality assurance in their NQF Sub-Framework contexts, amongst others.

The Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) delegates some of its functions to Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs)[19], Development Quality Partners (DQPs), Assessment Quality Partners (AQPs), Quality Development Facilitators (QDFs), and Community Expert Practitioners (CEPs) – there are policies for each category of stakeholder. Each of the types of stakeholders listed here plays a role in enabling or limiting FLPs.

Umalusi reports to both the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) – for TVET – and the Department of Basic Education (DBE) for schooling. The other NQF partners – SAQA and the other two Quality Councils– report to the DHET only. The DHET and the DBE develop and implement over-arching policies to support the NQF policy suite – such as the RPL coordination policy (DHET, 2016a) and Articulation Policy (DHET, 2017a), and the DBE's 'Three-Stream Model', the intention of which is to provide for subjects in Basic Education and FET, that lead to academic, vocational, and occupational learning pathways respectively.

HEIs and TVET Colleges report to the DHET, which requires learner enrolment and achievement data from these entities. As already noted, based on HEI motivations, the DHET approves the Programme Qualification Mix (PQM) for each public entity, and funds 'Full-Time equivalents'. Public HEIs are penalised financially if they under- or over-enrol. Private HEIs and their students do not receive funding from government.

All public and private providers of education and training are obliged to align their practices to the NQF Act and NQF policies of the DHET or DBE; SAQA; and one of the Quality Councils. All HEIs must seek and achieve accreditation from CHE for particular programmes in order to offer these. In addition, private HEIs need to register with the DHET. For qualification programmes to be accredited, they need to be registered on the NQF, part of articulated learning pathways, and provide for RPL, amongst other criteria.

Professional bodies are key role-players in the NQF because they support HEIs in the quality assurance of qualifications and oversee the continuing professional development (learning-at-

[19] There are currently 21 SETAs, one for each economic sector.

work), which is central in lifelong learning. There are currently 108 SAQA-recognised professional bodies – some statutory; some non-statutory. To be recognised (SAQA, 2012b, 2020b), professional bodies must amongst others:

- protect the public interest (which includes lifelong learning);
- develop, monitor, award and revoke their professional designations;
- set criteria for, and promote and monitor, Continuing Professional Development (CPD);
- not apply unfair exclusionary practices;
- develop and submit their professional designations for registration on the NQF – where each professional designation must be part of a progression pathway, and provide for an RPL access route.

Organised business and organised labour are invited to participate in NQF initiatives. SAQA ensures that these sectors are represented in its initiatives. When they offer training, the training must be aligned with NQF policies. Organised labour strongly supports RPL. SAQA encourages workplaces to support learning-at-work – formally, non-formally, and informally, and has held several seminars and workshops to this end. The programmes of NQF events show that many entities are doing so.

Umalusi, CHE and QCTO oversee GFETQSF, HEQSF and OQSF respectively, and SAQA coordinates the three NQF Sub-Frameworks. Having three differentiated NQF Sub-Frameworks and the mandatory articulation of qualifications enables the specialised development and quality assurance of different types of qualifications together with learning pathways. The NQF policy suite provides for this articulation at policy level.

3.1.2. NQF policy suite

NQF Level Descriptors

The ten levels in the South African NQF each have a level descriptor which focuses on the same ten areas of competence (SAQA, 2012a). The purposes of the NQF Level Descriptors are to ensure coherence and progression in learning, and to enable the allocation of qualifications to particular levels in the South African NQF. While the NQF Level Descriptors are expressed in general terms so that qualification designers can develop specific content appropriate for their NQF Sub-Framework contexts, it is intended that the NQF Level Descriptors be cumulative: there is progression from one level to another. Research by SAQA (2019b) on stakeholder-reported implementation and impact of the NQF Level Descriptors, showed that

most NQF stakeholders are using these; about half of the respondents reported experiencing no difficulties in this regard. Some stakeholders reported difficulties in distinguishing the mid- and lower levels of the NQF. Regarding benefits, most stakeholders reported that the descriptors assisted them in developing qualifications that articulate with other qualifications in learning pathways.

Policy and criteria for registering qualifications and part-qualifications on the NQF

SAQA's (2013b; 2020c) *Policy and Criteria for Registering Qualifications and Part-Qualifications* on the NQF comprises a second key policy for articulation. To be registered on the NQF, a qualification or part-qualification must, amongst others, show use of the NQF Level Descriptors, and indicate the horizontal, vertical, and diagonal articulation possibilities in the learning pathways where the qualifications (or part-qualifications) are located. There must be coherence between the constituent parts of the qualification, and between the qualification and others from which, and to which, it leads. A recent national articulation initiative (SAQA, 2020d) has showed that in order further to strengthen learning pathways, qualification designers in the different NQF Sub-Framework contexts, need to collaborate with each other in this work.

Policy and criteria for recognising a professional body and registering a professional designation

The role of professional bodies, as described, is to support articulation between learning and work. SAQA's (2012b, 2020b) *Policy and Criteria for Recognising a Professional Body and Registering a Professional Designation* support learning-and-work pathways by requiring transparency, fairness and continuing professional development. The professional designations (professional titles) awarded by professional bodies must be part of progression pathways and must include experiential learning, practical experience, and RPL.

Policy and criteria for implementing the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

SAQA is also mandated to develop, after consultation with the Quality Councils, policy and criteria[20] for RPL, CAT, and assessment (RSA, 2008, Clause 13:1, h(iii)). Two types of RPL are recognised in SAQA's (2013a, 2016a, 2019e)[21] RPL policy: RPL can be for access to learning, advanced standing (joining studies mid-way), and credit. The policy makes clear that RPL in South Africa is multi-dimensional – non-formal, informal, and formal learning can be measured and mediated against learning outcomes, regardless of how the learning was

[20] The status of these policies is that of legal documents; their implementation is mandatory.
[21] SAQA's (2019e) RPL policy is aligned to the DHET's policy for coordinating RPL, and replaces SAQA's 2016 RPL policy – which replaced SAQA's 2013a RPL policy.

obtained. Qualifications, part-qualifications, and professional designations can be awarded in whole or in part, through RPL. RPL can differ across contexts – it does not need to have the same form across contexts. RPL can facilitate access, redress, and progression in learning-and-work pathways. The drive to develop RPL policy in South Africa originally came from organised labour. RPL assumed central importance in democratic South Africa and the NQF.

The National Learners' Records Database (NLRD) shows that to date, 30 868 *learners* have achieved qualifications through RPL and 82 242 have achieved part-qualifications via this route. The total number of *qualification*s in these learner achievement records is 34 367 and of *part-qualifications* – 1 545 305, because some learners have achieved more than one qualification/part-qualification via RPL. These numbers exclude RPL achievements in public HEIs because the data are submitted to the NLRD via the national department which currently only stores 'Senate Discretion' data. Senate Discretion achievements refer to learner achievements via RPL, CAT, age-exemption and other means – the data are not segregated; attempts by the researchers to obtain these data were not successful. These challenges are in the process of being addressed.

It has only been mandatory to supply RPL data to the NLRD since 2014 and not all organisations do so yet; there are not yet penalties for failing to supply data. There is, however, another challenge: while there is political will at national level to implement RPL, it is an unfunded mandate. Since some HEIs implement extensive RPL, the extent to which the absence of dedicated funding hampers the implementation of RPL is not clear.

Policy for implementing Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT)

The national *Policy for Credit Accumulation and Transfer* (SAQA, 2014b) provides for credible, efficient, and transparent CAT, to enable optimal learner movement within and across learning entities. Education and training providers and professional bodies need to implement CAT in line with the NQF Sub-Framework CAT policies developed by the three Quality Councils, which should be aligned to SAQA's CAT policy. In practice these policies were broadly aligned; work is currently underway towards closer alignment. Providers need to demonstrate CAT practices in their quality reviews, and to provide career advice services that make CAT opportunities known to learners. The three Quality Councils must develop linkages so that learners can progress within and between the NQFs Sub-Frameworks. This work includes promoting the collaborative development of curriculum and qualifications pathways. SAQA plays a mediating role, supportively alerting institutions to unfair or exclusionary CAT practices, which it can publish (*Op.Cit*.: Clause 23f).

Policy and criteria for designing and implementing assessment in the context of the NQF

The purpose of SAQA's (2014a) *Policy and Criteria for Designing and Implementing Assessment*, is to set minimum standards for effective, valid, reliable, fair, transparent and appropriate assessment in accordance with the NQF Act (RSA, 2008). The policy and criteria are written broadly and apply to all NQF Sub-Framework and sectoral assessment policies. They seek to provide broad guidelines for assessment and to be instructive and enabling, to provide holistic and progressive assessment principles and criteria that serve RPL and CAT assessments as well as traditional assessments for qualifications, part-qualifications and professional designations across NQF contexts.

3.1.3. Acts and policies of the three Quality Councils

The General and Further Education and Training Quality Assurance Amendment Act, Higher Education Amendment Act, and Skills Development Amendment Act – all of 2008 – are aligned to the NQF Act (RSA, 2008). This legislation provides for the Quality Councils' quality assurance work in the context of the NQF Act.

The three Quality Councils must develop policies for registering qualifications in their NQF Sub-Framework contexts, that are in line with SAQA policies (RSA, 1995: Clause 27[h](i)), and submit the qualifications developed, to SAQA for evaluation towards registration on the NQF. They must also, amongst others, maintain databases of learner achievements in line with the National Learners' Records Database (NLRD), and submit these data for uploading – and develop policy for RPL, CAT and assessment after taking SAQA's counterpart policies into account (Ibid.: Clauses 27[h](ii) and [j](i-ii)).

National policy for articulation and the coordination and funding of RPL

These umbrella policies (DHET, 2016a; 2017a) provide high-level requirements for the related SAQA and Quality Council policies. Both make clear, the specific roles and responsibilities of SAQA and the Quality Councils in this regard. The RPL and CAT policies of SAQA and the Quality Councils must align with these umbrella policies.

White Paper for Post-School Education and Training

Post-School Education and Training (PSET) is understood as comprising all education and training for those who have completed school, as well as those who did not complete school, and those who never attended school (DHET, 2013). The White Paper for PSET sets out a vision for an integrated education and training system outside of school – although schooling

qualifications are also on the NQF and are expected to articulate into PSET. This vision must be realised by 2030. There is a National Plan for PSET (NPPSET) (DHET, 2019d) – that lays out the targets and steps to be achieved, to achieve the goals described in the White Paper.

The White paper has stipulations for the NQF partners, and public and private HEIs, TVET Colleges, and Community Education and Training Colleges (CETCs). It emphasises that SAQA must continue to play a leadership role in guiding the further development of systemic articulation and RPL, and that NQF entities must implement these aspects.

The White Paper sets targets for student enrolment and completion rates by 2030. It emphasises the importance of higher education qualifications articulating with other PSET qualifications – and that the existing goals of equity, redress, access, and student success and progression need to remain and improve. Addressing disability and blended learning are key aspects. Amongst the important things in this White Paper, from the point of view of the FLP research, are the foci on equity and enhanced redress, access, and progression, and the view of higher education as being an integral part of PSET.

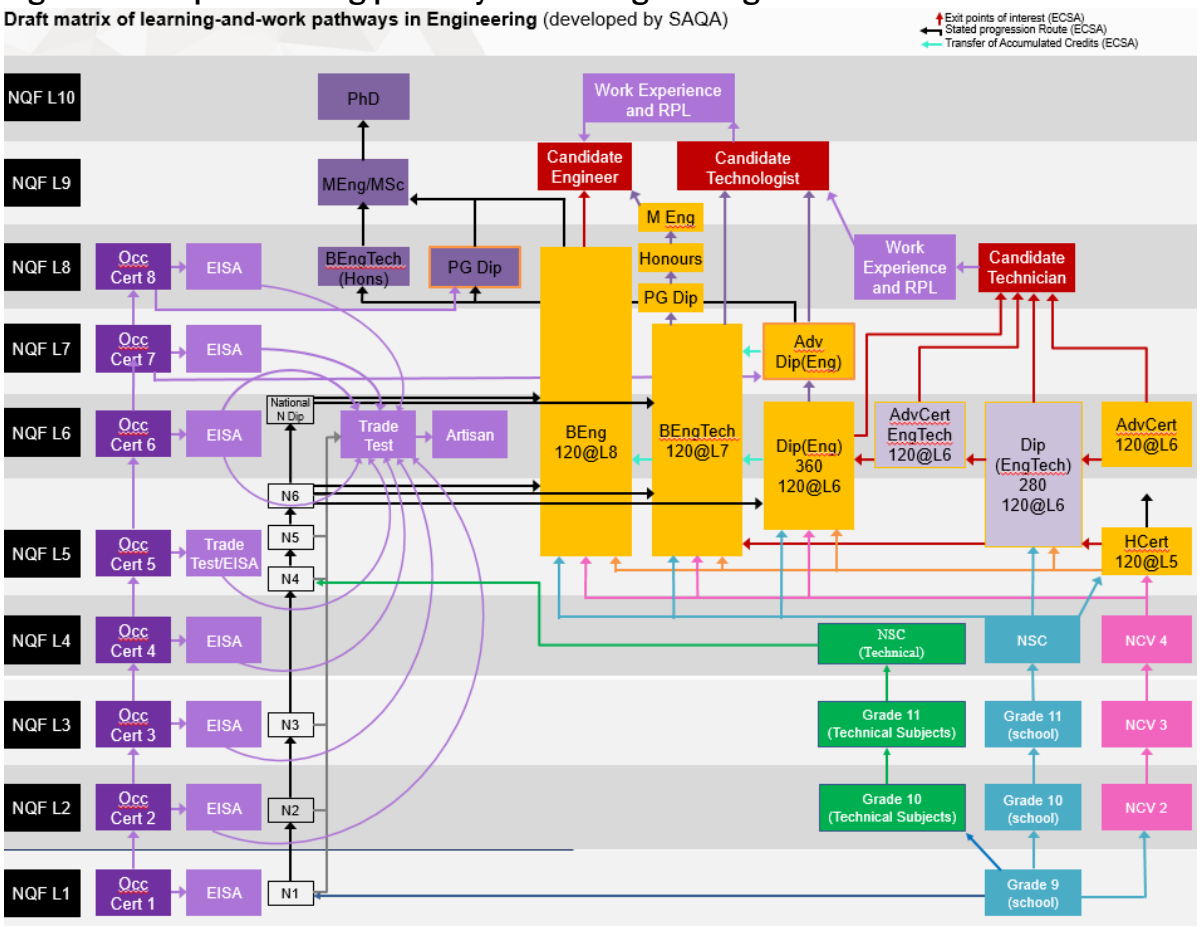
The NPPSET addresses RPL, the protection of credit through certification and regulation so that students can transfer credits and not repeat learning unnecessarily, articulation and progression pathways – per PSET sector, namely, for Community Education and Training (CET), TVET and higher education. It notes (DHET, 2019:74) that the DHET will work with the other relevant government departments to exend the South African National Research and Education Network (SANREN) into all public TVET and CET colleges and higher education institutions to provide broadband access to all campuses.

In 2016-2017, a National Articulation Baseline Study (SAQA, 2018; SAQA-DUT, 2020) was conducted with all 26 public HEIs and all 50 public TVET Colleges in the country; a 98% response rate was achieved. The study sought to identify existing TVET-HEI articulation (learning pathways), with a view to taking good practices to scale. Some 75 articulation agreements and 12 types of learning pathways were identified.

Following this study, SAQA initiated a national learning pathways initiative to address articulation blockages that exist and build on the initiatives desired, starting with three sectors: Community Development, Early Childhood Development (ECD) and Engineering. These sectors were chosen because they had already achieved considerable work on learning pathways. Learning pathway maps were developed, and stakeholder roles identified to address any further blockages. Figure 31 shows the Engineering pathways map, as an example.

Although RPL and CAT can occur anywhere in this map, the dotted lines indicate that RPL and/or CAT are necessary for articulation and progression in the learning pathways.

Figure 30. Map of learning pathways in the Engineering sector



Source: SAQA (2020d).

Policy for an integrated career development system in South Africa

As noted, learning pathways comprise systemic articulation (joined-up qualifications), specific articulation (inter-institutional agreements and arrangements) and supporting individuals as they transition along their learning pathways. Career advice at key points is essential for effective and efficient learning pathways.

The National Policy for an Integrated Career Development System for South Africa (DHET, 2017c) locates career advice in the national and international contexts, noting the country's 'rampant poverty, inequality, and unemployment'[22]. It has a national footprint that spans government departments; all levels of government, SAQA, the Quality Councils and providers of education and training.

[22]Equity is not mentioned but equity is integral in all legislation in South Africa.

In keeping with the principle of lifelong learning – which is linked to equity and equality – it caters for young people, adults, the ageing population, caregivers, and vulnerable groups. It also provides for a comprehensive set of 'multi-channel' strategies to enhance access – including services via walk-in offices, telephone, email, Short Messaging Service, and social media; career days and fairs; and broadcasts via radio and television. It sets out systemic and individual policy goals, creating an enabling environment for Career Development Services (CDS) through legislation, policy and policy frameworks, CDS leadership, and monitoring and evaluation. One of its tools is the National Career Advice Portal (NCAP), in which one can key in individual jobs to see the qualifications needed, or qualifications, to see possible occupations.

If people contacting the CDS require RPL information and/or support regarding offering or undergoing an RPL process, they are referred to the NQF Directorate in the national department. The NQF Directorate works with SAQA to provide RPL assistance.

For further information about qualifications, part-qualifications and the providers accredited to offer these, anybody can access the National Learners' Records Database (NLRD). The NLRD provides the broad content of qualifications/part-qualifications as well as information on the accredited providers linked to each offering. The following section briefly describes other instruments that support FLPs in South Africa.

3.2. Key instruments that support flexible learning pathway practices in South Africa

There are a number of key instruments that support FLPs in South Africa. This section presents the main instruments namely the evaluation and verification of qualifications, more detail on the CDS and the NLRD, the System of Collaboration, reporting, and the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) with its tools.

Evaluation and verification services

The South African NQF supports learning pathways within the country – for holders of South African and foreign qualifications. SAQA (RSA, 2008) is mandated to provide Foreign Qualification Evaluation and Advisory Services, which enable articulation into and within the South African system, and across countries. SAQA (RSA, 2019) is also mandated to provide a Verification Service – to assess the authenticity of qualifications and part-qualifications. Both of these services enable learners to move to subsequent parts of their learning pathways.

NQF advocacy and communication, and career development services

The tool linked to the national career development policy described, is the national department's Career Development Service (CDS). Learners access this service via walk-in, telephone, SMS, What's App, various media and field days, and social media. There is an online CDS platform which people can access, and either type in qualifications to see what types of jobs are linked to the qualifications – or type in particular jobs, and see the qualifications and learning pathways needed to be eligible for these jobs/trajectories. SAQA offers the NQF Advice Service which can be accessed similarly; people can receive responses to/ advice on, any questions and matters linked to the NQF system. Over 3.5 million people access CDS platforms weekly; the NQF Help Desk received over 92 million queries in the 2019/20 financial year.

National Learners' Records Database (NLRD)

The National Learners' Records Database (NLRD) is the Management Information System (MIS) of the NQF hosted by SAQA; it contains data on:

- all qualifications and part-qualifications registered on the NQF;
- all recognised professional bodies;
- the registered professional designations of recognised professional bodies, and holders of these designations;
- information on the quality assurance bodies accredited to quality assure particular qualifications, and on qualifications registered but still needing quality assurers;
- education and training providers accredited to offer registered qualifications and part-qualifications; and
- data on learner achievements for qualifications, part-qualifications, and learnerships, in South Africa (only the qualification achieved is stated; there are no further details regarding the achievements).

Different groups of stakeholders are able to access this information, in line with the Protection of Personal Information (POPI) Act (RSA, 2013). The NLRD is used by decision makers and policy developers, education and training providers, learners, employers, a variety of other NQF stakeholders and the public in general. The information on qualifications, professional bodies, quality assurance, and registered and accredited providers, is available to the public.

Personal learner achievement-related information is carefully managed, through controlled access and fair and transparent processes. The NLRD provides system transparency; its data can be used to understand and strengthen articulation. For example, SAQA uses the information in the NLRD to identify learning pathway and other trends in the education and training system.

System of Collaboration

In addition to the NQF policy suite, the NQF Act (RSA, 2008) mandates SAQA and the Quality Councils to develop and implement a *System of Collaboration* (SAQA, 2011b). The development of this document was led by SAQA and developed collaboratively by the NQF partners, to guide the mutual relations and constructive cooperation between SAQA and the Quality Councils. The Quality Councils need to encourage similar cooperation within and between their NQF Sub-Framework contexts.

Reporting

SAQA must report annually on the implementation of articulation, to the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET, 2017a)[23], and conducts RPL Update analyses twice a year.

Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework

The Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) sets out (CHE, 2013b) 'a single higher education qualifications framework for a diverse system', the structure and characteristics of this framework, and roles and responsibilities for implementing it. By making the qualification types, NQF levels, descriptors, naming, entry criteria, and progression rules clear, this framework supports articulation (see Section 3.5).

The higher education QA body published the Framework for Qualification Standards in 2013. This document provides for the QA body responsibilities to ensure that its "standards-development mandate takes into account the imperatives of access, articulation, progression, portability, and public accountability" (CHE, 2013a: Clause 8.3). The document makes clear that it is not the role of qualification standards to determine progression and CAT. Rather, qualification standards guide articulation, establishing benchmarks for progression between higher education qualifications – while articulation is forged through collaborative curriculum development. When HEIs develop qualifications, they must ensure that these are aligned with the NQF Level Descriptors and the CHE's qualification standards. The National Articulation

[23] The three Quality Councils need to report to SAQA, on the implementation of articulation and RPL in their NQF Sub-Framework contexts; this reporting has commenced very recently and was not analysed.

Baseline Study (SAQA, 2018; SAQA-DUT, 2020) showed that the qualifications registered on the NQF under the NQF Act support learning pathways to a greater extent than those registered prior to the NQF Act. There are initiatives underway to address the historically-registered qualifications that are not aligned to the NQF Act.

In addition to the CHE's qualification standards, its quality assurance processes include HEI self-evaluations and national programme reviews. The purpose of national reviews is to assess the quality of learning programmes. Accreditation is the third 'leg' of quality assurance in higher education in South Africa: HEIs are accredited to offer particular qualifications. These quality assurance processes create transparency in the system: all HEIs are bound by the same criteria; the criteria are publicly available; anyone can access the NLRD to see if HEIs are accredited to offer particular qualifications. SAQA's (2019b) research showed that the NQF stakeholders surveyed are aware of the NLRD, and that there is increased student movement between public and private higher education – an indication of the increased integration of the public and private systems in the desired direction although still with some way to go.

The CHE's (2012a) criteria for programme accreditation include the requirement for "partnerships in higher education provision, which include collaboration between and among institutions between the public and private sector, universities and Universities of Technology (UoTs), between higher education and the business sector, and across national borders (Ibid.: Clause 1); articulation with TVET Colleges is not noted, which is a weakness in the policy. Qualifications and their learning programmes must amongst others, be part of the institutions' Programme Qualification Mix (PQM), and institutions must be accredited to offer them. The criteria for programme accreditation include widened access, equity, and articulation (Ibid.: Clause 2). The learning outcomes, degree of curriculum choice, teaching and learning methods, modes of delivery, learning materials, and expected completion times must cater for the learning needs of targeted students (Ibid.: Clause 3.1.1[iii]). In addition, "qualification programmes must offer learning and career pathways to students, with opportunities to articulate to other programmes and across institutions where possible" (Ibid.: Clause 3.1.1[v]). Further, "recruitment documents inform potential students of the programme accurately and sufficiently …. [the] admission and selection of students are commensurate with the programme's academic requirements within a framework of widened access and equity" (Ibid.: Clause 3.1.2, Criterion 2).

There are also requirements for RPL, "[institutions must have] appropriate policies and procedures for RPL, including the identification, documentation, assessment, evaluation, and

transcription of prior learning against specified learning outcomes, so that it can be articulated with current programmes and qualifications" (*Op.Cit.*: Clause 3.1.5, ii). Assessment must include an RPL option in line with the institutional RPL policies, and fair and transparent assessment.

Demographic diversity and equity feature in the requirement for flexible administration criteria, "[To be accredited to offer qualification programmes, HEIs must have] effective administration systems [in] place for … dealing with the needs of a diverse student population" (*Op.Cit.*: Clause 3.1.7, ii). If HEIs want to offer qualification programmes, they need to meet these and other criteria.

The CHE has distributed to HEIs over the years, a number of guidelines and documents that support articulation. These include:

- Educational Pathways (CHE, 2017);
- Good Practice Guide and Self-Evaluation Instruments for Managing the Quality of Service-Learning (CHE, 2006a);
- Good Practice Guide for the Quality management of Short Courses (CHE, 2016a);
- Good Practice Guide for Work-Integrated Learning (CHE, 2011a);
- Service-Learning in the Curriculum: A resource for Higher Education Institutions (CHE, 2006b);
- Service Learning in the Disciplines: Lessons from the Field (CHE, 2008);
- Student Quality Literacy and Empowerment (CHE, c.2002); and
- Teaching and Learning beyond Formal Access (CHE, 2010a).

The DHET has developed draft policy for Open Education Resources (OER) and has been working with the South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE) for several years, on such resources. The DHET has also commenced discussions around micro-credentials.

3.3. Interviews on FLPs conducted at the national level

Fourteen interviews were conducted at national level, as shown in Table 5. Specific questionnaires were developed for the specific categories of interviewees, based on the UNESCO templates provided. Formal letters were sent to each of the interviewees outlining the main objectives of the research and requesting their participation in the study. Before the interviews began, participants were asked to sign letters of informed consent. The interviews

were conducted by two SAQA researchers. The duration of each of the national interviews was around two hours. Each was recorded using an audio recorder and transcribed. Conditions of strict anonymity were observed. As soon as the interviews were transcribed, data analysis was initiated manually using an Excel spreadsheet. First, data categories were established per the stakeholder group, based on the sets of questions asked during interviews. The categories comprised the following.

- Key practices supporting FLPs.
- Role of national policies and instruments in supporting FLPs.
- Monitoring the implementation of FLPs.
- Monitoring equity groups.
- Evaluating the effectiveness of FLPs.
- Enablers of FLPs.
- Barriers for FLPs.
- Future priorities for FLPs.

Secondly, searches for words, phrases and synonyms of the categories were systematically undertaken, each of which was captured under the main category and identified by its unique code (e.g. pHEI-001; UoT 012e; SAUniversity014). Under 'Institutional policies and practices', for example, words and phrases such as 'flexible admissions'; 'age exemptions'; 'transfer'; 'RPL'; 'CAT', and others, were grouped. Thirdly, when these words and phrases were captured, a theme was identified, examples of which are, 'definitions for FLPs'; 'types of practice'; 'aim and objectives of FLPs'; 'procedures for FLPs', and so on. In some cases, the further refinement of themes was undertaken.

Each interview was subjected to the same treatment, extracting the most relevant data per category, grouping the data, and establishing an emergent theme. Importantly, no numerical values were given, for two reasons. Firstly, the small size of the sample, relative to the size of the populations (particularly in terms of the institutions), meant that generalisations could not be made. Individuals from the three HEIs and the national officials in the sample, were purposefully chosen as rich and meaningful sources of information. Secondly, there was remarkable agreement across institutions and the national respondents regarding the country's FLPs, and despite the number of transcripts, data saturation was reached early in the analysis.

The detailed data capturing approach assisted in identifying the many verbatim quotes from respondents that were used to support the findings in this report.

Analyses were undertaken per stakeholder group – namely the national and institutional stakeholder groups – and in addition, per category and sub-category, where relevant. The final discussion followed the same pattern. However, under the section dealing with the comparative analysis of policies and practices, respondents' inputs and comments from both stakeholder groups were combined under the same headings, for example under the heading 'National and institutional policies, instruments and practices for FLPs in South Africa'.

Table 5. National officials and key role-players interviewed

National interviewees				
Body/ organisation	**Date**	**No.**	**Role of interviewee**	**Type of interview**
National Department	September 2019	1	High level official for equity, social inclusion and access Senior national official (inclusivity)	Face-to-face interview
	September 2019	1	High level official for TVET Senior national official (TVET 1/2)	Face-to-face interview
	September 2019	1	High level official for Higher Education planning Senior national official (Planning 1/2)	Face-to-face interview
	September 2019	1	High level official for PSET planning Senior national official (Planning 2/2)	Face-to-face interview
	September 2019	1	High level official for curriculum innovation in TVET Senior national official (TVET 2/2)	Face-to-face interview
	September 2019	1	High level official for data Senior national official (Statistics 1/2)	Face-to-face interview
NQF authority				
NQF authority	September 2019	1	Senior NQF authority figure Senior national official (NQF)	Face-to-face interview
	September 2019	1	High level official for data Senior national official (Statistics 2/2)	Face-to-face interview
Higher education QA body/ Higher education coordinating body (two entities)				
Higher education QA body and higher education coordinating body (two entities)	September 2019	1	Senior higher education QA body official Senior national official (HE 1/2)	Face-to-face interview
	September 2019	1	Senior higher education coordinating body Senior national official (HE 2/2)	Face-to-face interview
Professional body representatives				
Professional body representatives	October 2019	1	Senior official in a non-statutory professional body 1/2	Face-to-face interview
	October 2019	1	Senior official in a non-statutory professional body 2/2	Face-to-face interview

Key non-governmental organisation (NGO) regarding online learning platforms and Open Education Resources (OER)				
NGO representative	October 2019	1	CEO of NGO (Online platforms and OER)	Telephone interview

3.4. Practices that support FLPs

Most of the national respondents interviewed generally agreed that South Africa does not have a single set of policies that provide for FLPs. Each respondent referred to the particular sets of policies with which s/he worked. For example, a respondent from the national department said, "There's nothing like that. Flexible learning is an approach to learning" (Senior national official [Planning 2/2], interview). The White Paper for PSET (DHET, 2013) is seen to cover a wide breadth of policies including those that enable and promote FLPs: "…we have a policy for education and training – [which directs the system in] how we transform education and training to be responsive [to the needs of the country, and the needs of individual learners]" (Senior national official [Planning 2/2], interview). Consequently, "we don't have specific policies for FLPs because flexible learning is a principle of learning [in the country] and we have several [policies], aims and objectives to increase access, to ensure success and transformation. It's all those principles of the [NQF]" (Senior national official [Inclusivity], interview).

Furthermore, respondents observed that the South African system has matured to such a point that it no longer talks about 'alternative' pathways. A respondent from the NQF Authority commented that "[I don't like using the words] 'alternative pathway'… because for the last 22 years, we have worked very hard to make sure that Recognition of Prior Learning is part and parcel [of qualifications], that Credit Accumulation and Transfer, [are central] to qualifications" (Senior national official [NQF], interview).

Respondents felt strongly that,

> CAT is not an alternative pathway, and RPL is not an alternative pathway. Your pathways are – you can either go through the [qualifications in the] Higher Education [Qualifications Sub-Framework] or through the Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework. RPL is a way to get your qualification. Your pathways are flexible within the [National] Qualifications Framework [NQF] (Senior national official [Inclusivity], interview).

Moreover, it is clear that these policies permeate the system: "they are in the NQF Act, the NQF Amendment Act, and policies for articulation, Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT),

RPL, assessment, registering qualifications, recognising professional bodies, [and] evaluating foreign qualifications" (Senior national official [Inclusivity], interview). An Open and Distance Learning (ODL) expert supported this view by saying, "[RPL and CAT are] principles which underpin our work. And so in any project that we undertake, we attempt to influence the direction and methods of RPL dramatically within the organisation" (CEO of NGO, interview)[24].

3.4.1. National stakeholder responsibilities

Indeed, national stakeholders are responsible for the development of a suite of policies that seek to enable FLPs in the country. An NQF authority respondent, for example, indicated that the authority plays a central role in policy development – it is the body,

> … that is responsible, and that is overseeing the NQF – [and it] plays a major role in policy development. Through doing research, we were able to influence the policy that was made by the Minister on the one hand, but we've also influenced [the NQF authority's] own policy, [and] its own policy understandings (Senior national official [NQF], interview).

Further, these actions have resulted in the inclusion of criteria that deal with RPL and articulation, for the registration of qualifications on the NQF (Senior national official [NQF], interview).

The national department respondents supported this view; one said, "it's our responsibility [to] provide the directives. Then the implementation policies – CAT and RPL [are] the over-arching policies which provide the policy directives, the mandate" (Senior national official [Inclusivity], interview).

While the NQF authority develops the NQF policy suite after consultation with the three Quality Councils and other entities, the Quality Councils must develop the associated aligned policies with more implementation guidance for organisations within their NQF Sub-Framework contexts (RSA, 2008). Representatives of the public and private higher education sectors participate along with the representatives of the other NQF stakeholder groups, in these policy development processes.

While currently there are non-aligned areas between the policies of the department and NQF authority on one hand, and on the other hand, those of the Quality Councils, these discrepancies

[24] This expert is located in an NGO and the interview was recommended for the study by a national department respondent.

are in the process of being addressed (SAQA, 2019b, 2019c). Thus, for example in the department and NQF authority policies, RPL and CAT can lead to the awarding of credit, but in the higher education QA body's RPL policy there is only RPL for access. This is one of the aspects being addressed. A national department respondent commented that while CAT allows for credit transfer, "RPL is not for transfer. Okay, so in theory [transfer] is also through RPL, but not in practice" (Senior official [Planning 2/2], interview). The respondent rightly ascribed this state of things to the higher education QA body's rules and regulations, and the differences between these rules and those espoused by the national department and the NQF authority (National senior official [HE 2/2], interview). In fact, the higher education QA body needs to align its policy.

A higher education QA body respondent confirmed the national department's stance on policy as directives, saying that "the starting point is that there is the policy at the national level, and here [located with the QA body] is the regulatory regime" (Senior national official [HE 2/2], interview). The regulatory regime [the requirements of the QA body] appears to have encouraged the system-wide inclusion of FLP policies and practices in HEIs (Ibid.).

On the other hand, the existence of system-wide legislation, policies and practices do not necessarily translate into full implementation, or consistent implementation, across all of the entities involved. A national department respondent admitted that:

> the stronger the university is in terms of its own autonomy, the stronger it is also, in applying these [practices]. So if you're a struggling institution, those that are wobbly, that don't have a vision of themselves – they also struggle to implement these [policies]. It's almost like they're more easily intimidated by RPL, they worry too much." [They ask] "What is RPL going to do to our reputation? Whereas in an institution that has a strong identity, they are not flustered by [the challenges of] CAT and RPL. It's almost like a university requires a certain level of academic maturity before it can successfully implement CAT, RPL, and alternative learning pathways (Senior national official [Planning 1/2], interview).

Further, despite the presence of national policies, "looking at the context of FLPs, the three [QA bodies] and [the NQF authority] … [make up] the core by which FLPs happen. The university branch of the [national department] [for example] does not engage on matters regarding qualification design and pathways issues, because they rely on the [QA body and NQF authority] to do that" (Senior national official [Planning 2/2], interview). This situation is true for the other two [QA bodies] as well, and it poses problems for FLPs across the NQF

Sub-Frameworks in the country (Senior national officials [NQF] and [Planning 2/2], interviews)[25]. These officials were clearly pointing to the need for enhanced collaboration between the Quality Councils – work which is already underway.

The national stakeholders interviewed were in agreement that the national policies and practices described in the White Paper for PSET (DHET, 2013), and the NQF Act, and elsewhere, create an enabling environment for the establishment of specific practices, such as RPL, CAT, articulation, and other elements of system flexibility. In addition, the enabling environment is backed up by the roles and responsibilities assigned to the various regulatory bodies in the system, as described in the NQF Act (RSA, 2008) and its policies, regulations and amendments (RSA, 2019) (Senior national official [Planning 2/2], interview). As one respondent put it: "the end gain is to achieve the goals of the PSET system – and the goals of the PSET system are to improve access, quality, efficiency, success, responsiveness, and equity" (Ibid.). These goals are encapsulated in the NQF objectives – namely to create a single integrated national framework for learning achievements; facilitate access to, and mobility and progression within, education, training and career paths; enhance the quality of education and training; and accelerate the redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment opportunities.

> All of these aims have been taken up in the policy and legislation, and the NQF Act (RSA, 2008). If you look at the discussion document that is the precursor to the NQF Act – it is there. If you look at our RPL policies and all of the policies related to the implementation of the NQF, it is all set down there very clearly. It is also in the National Plan for PSET (Ibid.).

3.5. Views on major FLP practices in South Africa

3.5.1. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

RPL was one of the first alternative pathways introduced after the establishment of democracy in South Africa in 1994. Indeed, it was seen to be a central tenet of the new education and training system, and was explicitly taken up in one of the objectives of the NQF, namely to "accelerate the redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment

[25]One of the known challenges is that the funding, which is controlled by the national department, sometimes works against RPL and CAT. For example, funding is awarded to HEIs for students only if they complete 50% or more of a programme at the institution. In addition, no additional funding is provided for RPL – institutions are expected to resource RPL from the funds that they already have.

opportunities" (RSA, 2008: Clause 5(1)[d]). Consequently, much work has been undertaken to advance the implementation of RPL.

Now, "RPL is mainstream and not an alternative" (Senior national official [NQF], interview) – meaning that all education and training providers must implement RPL. The practice of RPL has become deeply entrenched in higher education. It is a key feature of the accreditation required by HEIs to offer learning programmes; the higher education QA body ensures "that institutions adhere to the [national] policy – it is done through their accreditation, because when they are submitting programmes for accreditation, one of the requirements is that they should submit their [institutional] policies on RPL" (Senior national official [HE 1/2], interview). Institutions must show "[the] avenues and pathways [that] you [as an institution] create for your students to come in. One of them will be through RPL. Another will be through students trying to accumulate credits" (Ibid.).

However, while there are guidelines in policy documents that describe the rationale for RPL, and its value, principles and criteria, the 'how' of RPL is developed at implementation level: "RPL is very much institutional … it's left at the institutional level. So each university has got its own kind of approach to RPL. And, some universities have got a whole office associated with it. Others really leave it to faculties to do" (Senior national official [HE 2/2], interview). RPL practices are common in the higher education system in South Africa, and even more so in the occupational qualifications arena – for example, for artisan and other Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) programmes (Senior national official [TVET 2/2], interview)[26]. It is widely known that RPL is implemented unevenly across HEIs in the country: in many HEIs, there are good practices that are widely recognised nationally and internationally, while in a small number of HEIs, RPL practices are not established.

Nevertheless, even as the higher education QA body claims to ensure that institutions "give expression to national policies at the institutional level and at the programme level" (Senior national official [HE 1/2], interview), RPL may only be implemented in accordance with the QA body rules if the institutions are accredited. A national department respondent drew attention to the fact that HEIs only implement RPL for access, "In fact, there is a law that you

[26] Occupational qualifications on the OQSF in South Africa must have theoretical, practical and workplace experience components – the latter lending itself to RPL. The SETAs have implemented RPL extensively – they were established in 1999, and were tasked with coordinating and promoting workplace skills-based training and development. There are currently 21 SETAs, each focused on a particular section of the economy.

are legally bound to, which indicates a different interpretation of RPL" (Senior national official [Planning 2/2], interview)[27].

Thus, despite the fact that RPL has been implemented in the country for over two decades, there are still contestations surrounding the practice in higher education because of the way it is interpreted in the higher education QA body policy. As a respondent from the NQF authority put it: "... progress has been that universities have accepted the idea of RPL, but to use it as a tool for access. They don't even think about the person getting [credit or] the full qualification" [in accordance with the DHET, 2016a and SAQA 2013a, 2016a, 2019e policies], because "universities are hellishly conservative" (Senior national official [NQF], interview). However, it is also known – and is clear from the interviews in this study – that some HEIs are implementing RPL in deep, extensive, and highly integrated and innovative ways.

A noteworthy feature of RPL practices in the country has been the 'champions' for the practice. A national department respondent, for example, noted that:

> ... at the institutional level, admission via alternate pathways depends on champions at institutions. So some institutions have really strong RPL champions; other institutions have very strong collaborative working relationships with TVET Colleges. It all depends on the interests of the institution, and whether they have the people who are focusing in these areas (Senior national official [Planning 2/2], interview).

This situation may suggest that even as institutions have developed policies and procedures for RPL, it may still be a practice on the margins for some – possibly due to the fact that the numbers are quite small. A respondent from the NQF authority commented "… it's too hard to say when it's going to be implemented universally. And will it ever, ever be completely implemented? Because it's up to the institutions themselves to implement their own RPL policies" (Senior national official [Statistics 2/2], interview). These officials were not fully aware of the extent and nature of the RPL activities underway in HEIs, a situation not aided by the fact that the RPL data of public HEIs is embedded in 'Senate Discretion' data and is not visible in its own right.

The picture regarding the percentages of learners entering/ progressing through HEIs via RPL is not as clear as it could be, due to the data category-related challenges in the national databases. While the National Learners' Records Database (NLRD) provides for the loading

[27] This comment is a reference to the higher education QA body's RPL policy which places restrictions on RPL that are not in line with the national department and NQF authority RPL policies.

of RPL data, the data submission categories are not mutually exclusive for HEIs: institutions may need to enter learner achievements via RPL, in addition to submitting the achievements elsewhere, as 'full-time' or 'part-time', 'distance' or 'residential', and so on. While all learner achievement data should be recorded in the NLRD, for historical reasons, some of the data are submitted via other databases. Currently, private HEIs submit data directly to the NLRD; public HEIs submit data to the national department, which submits the data to the NLRD. The department has a submission category 'Senate Discretion', in which all the RPL, CAT, and other alternative pathways are recorded: these data do not distinguish between the various alternative pathways. There are thus no RPL data for the public HEIs, while it is clear that considerable RPL is taking place in these institutions.

3.5.2. Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT)

It is very likely that CAT practices existed in informal terms in the past; these practices were not couched in the terms currently used. While respondents generally acknowledged that the South African system now has a CAT system, most felt that this system needed more work. The respondent from the higher education QA body, for example said: "the fact is that our policy has made it known that there is a system of Credit Accumulation and Transfer. And there are students who are actually using this system of transfer from one institution to another" (Senior national official [HE 1/2], interview). He added: "compared to a decade ago, we would not be [discussing] CAT ... it might not be happening at the scale at which it is desired, but it is happening" (Ibid.).

An NQF authority respondent agreed that the practice has "not yet gained much traction" in the South African system:

> Although we have developed a policy, we haven't done half of the work that we have done on RPL, and articulation. Broadly speaking. [Despite the fact that] the national system policies have been developed in an integrated manner to draw on a common conceptual basis and strengthen the interrelationships between RPL and CAT (Senior national official [NQF], interview).

A respondent from the national department confirmed that "a lot still needs to be done" regarding the implementation of CAT in South Africa (Senior national official [Planning 1/2], interview). There is still mistrust between institutions although students are increasingly moving between public and private HEIs (SAQA, 2019b). This respondent came up with possibilities such as: "allow for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) offered by

registered providers to count towards the credits for CAT, and [for] RPL into higher level qualifications" (Senior national official [Planning 1/2], interview).

Furthermore, it was suggested that:

> short learning programmes need to get some form of recognition towards formal qualifications. [Universities should] start organising themselves into mutual recognition clusters – for mutual learning agreements, [including] each other's short learning programmes [as they have done in the United States of America] (Senior national official [Planning 1/2], interview).

The recognition of short courses is a much-debated issue. Some years ago, the NQF authority oversaw the development of draft policy for such courses but abandoned the initiative in light of the risks linked to short courses that are not part of articulated learning pathways and may lead to dead ends. It was found in research by the NQF authority (SAQA, 2018; SAQA-DUT, 2020), that 'articulated short courses' required collaborative relationships and formal agreements, to ensure that the courses were recognised as components of larger learning and-work trajectories. Short courses that do not lead to qualifications are desirable to learners, employees and employers alike as they offer upskilling for the labour market and the often flexible course delivery format that means there is little disruption to learners who are in full-time employment. The NQF authority does acknowledge that not all learning needs to be on the NQF, however, it does not encourage short courses as these are too open to variable quality and students do not necessarily understand that they may not be able to use such courses for credit. The higher education QA body's (2020a) norms and standards for certification echo this principle, allowing credit for modules that are parts of full qualifications, and disallowing credit for stand-alone short courses.

It is evident that CAT is more common amongst public HEIs, and between public and private HEIs, than between HEIs and TVET Colleges; there are even fewer CAT transfers involving the occupational (SETA) sectors and HEIs. A national department respondent for example, mentioned that the college sector "doesn't really use CAT … we struggle with that – to equate the modules they have completed in the Higher Education Institution, to give them credit in the TVET [College], is so difficult" (Senior national official [TVET 1/2], interview).

It appears that the main credit transfer used in the TVET sector is where a student has completed the school-leaving certificate [the National Senior Certificate (NSC)] and s/he wants

to carry some credits from the NSC to the National Certificate Vocational, where credits can be granted for Mathematics and languages (Senior national official [TVET 2/2], interview)[28].

Some of the other TVET College programmes such as the National Accredited Technical Education Diploma (NATED) programmes are often not recognised by universities as they do not have the prerequisite curriculum coverage. As noted by a national respondent, "they [the HEIs] don't enrol the NATED students into university programmes. So that doesn't work" (Senior national official [TVET 1/2], interview). The QA body respondent acknowledged this problem, saying: "[it is a] priority to ensure that credit is accepted across the board, because at the moment, you still find that there are some restrictions. There are still some institutions that do not accept the credits of other institutions" (Senior national official [HE 1/2], interview). A university coordinating body respondent agreed, saying: "if the credit is from a university in South Africa to another university in South Africa then there should be no kind of impediment" (Senior national official [HE 2/2], interview). Research is currently being conducted by the NQF authority to assess the extent to which CAT is being implemented.

Thus, CAT practices are still relatively constrained in the South African system. There is clearly some inter-institutional mutual acceptance of credit, especially between public institutions, and within the HEQSF context, but there is very little recognition in this regard, between the NQF Sub-Frameworks.

3.5.3. Articulation and articulated learning-and-work pathways

A national department respondent noted that, "inter-institutional collaboration is very important" for FLPs, saying that:

> … guidelines to build FLPs into the design of the qualifications [must be published], because people don't necessarily know how to write learning outcomes in a way that they articulate. The fundamentals must be there – and how the fundamentals in one [qualification] are core in the other [qualification] – [so that it is possible to] link up with the core modules in another pathway, another programme (Senior national official [Planning 1/2], interview).

The NQF authority is aware of the need for this guidance; it is clear that articulation, and CAT practices in particular, are in need of further work. There is a common perception that articulation practices face major constraints. For this reason, the NQF authority established the long-term research-and development partnership with the UoT noted, to research articulation

[28] Both of these qualifications are at NQF Level 4.

between TVET, higher education, and work. Some sixteen strong articulation initiatives were found as were several emerging and latent initiatives (SAQA, 2018)[29]. The work of this partnership included sharing widely, the findings of the study. It was important to grow awareness of the articulation achievements and possibilities, in order to 'absent the absences' (Baskhar, 2003).

Knowledge of these initiatives is slowly gaining traction. There was awareness of the inroads made regarding articulation between TVET Colleges and public UoTs. For example, a national department respondent indicated that "[the Dean of a UoT] they just wait for TVET students and they feel that not enough TVET students come to them and they wanted to engage with us on how to promote that" (Senior national official [TVET 1/2], interview).

Various role-players are working actively towards achieving articulation, including at national department level:

> We have this working group. We call it the [working group]. It meets every two months at least. The working group involves the senior administrators and senior managers on the operational side [of the organisations] – we literally hammer out individual [articulation] issues that come to mind, and we come to agreement so that we cut out the red tape, bureaucracy and formal emails and letters, and solve the problems. That works very well (Senior national official [Planning 1/2], interview).

There is shared responsibility for articulation. The NQF authority will only register a qualification on the NQF when it includes clear articulation pathways, RPL routes, and is internationally comparable (for national and international articulation), amongst others (SAQA, 2013b, 2020c). The HEIs need to ensure articulation into, and from, the programmes for the qualifications that they are accredited to offer (CHE, 2013a): the QA body assesses these aspects in order to accredit them. The responsibility of the national department is to ensure that higher education qualifications are 'linked':

> … in terms of the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF), and how [qualifications] link up with each other. Also, to what extent is there articulation from one institution to another utilising the HEQSF. Because we apply the principle in our assessments [of learning programmes], of 'articulation by design' – it [articulation] is

[29] Articulation initiatives were categorised as 'developed' when they included formal articulation agreements, had been operating for some time, and had transitioning students; 'emerging' when these elements were in the process of being set up, or were newly set up; and 'latent' when they had been operating, and had since ceased due to challenges (SAQA, 2018).

> by choice, and it has to be enforced. It has to be practically applied, because policy can be quite sterile in making it happen (Senior national official, [Planning 1/2], interview).

The discourse of 'articulation' permeated the national responses, an NQF authority respondent suggested that the questions to be asked, to ensure 'articulation by design' should be, "What does the *generic* Bachelor's Degree look like? And, what are the differences across the institutions that we've got in South Africa? If we can do that kind of analysis, we will be able to make proposals around articulation" (Senior national official [NQF], interview). In the words of a national department respondent, "the bottom line is: articulation – the flexibility of the pathway and how one qualification links into and articulates into the next, is something we specifically look at [as a department]" (Senior national official [Planning 1/2], interview).

To date, 'articulation by design' between the NQF Sub-Frameworks, has been a focus for the developers of school and higher education qualifications, more than it has been for developpers working between the OQSF and HEQSF contexts – probably as a result of the traditional articulation between school and higher education. As one national respondent noted:

> You could have an occupational programme at [NQF] Level 6, but then to try and get into university, you are really going to struggle. And it is all about learning outcomes – the occupational programmes are often criticised by universities, saying they lack foundational knowledge and skills. I don't know that that's entirely correct (Senior national official [TVET 2/2], interview).

Another respondent said: "I think articulation really should be easier. I really think it shouldn't be so difficult to get some of these things done. But at least it's getting done in some cases, so that's good. So it is doable" (Senior national official [TVET 2/2], interview).

The responses made clear that there is a growing awareness around articulation in the country, and that articulation is being implemented, if unevenly. While very strong FLP practices were observed in the current study, and reported in the National Articulation Baseline Study (SAQA, 2018), a national department respondent commented that:

> We need all the institutional types to be in synergy. For example, [what about the] Community Education and Training Colleges? We are not very clear. It makes it difficult. How would students from there articulate into TVET Colleges? And then from TVET Colleges into universities and Universities of Technology? It's not very clear [how this should work] (Senior national official [TVET 1/2], interview).

Respondents recognised that structural articulation, understood as being the regulated relationships between sub-systems, institutions and qualifications (Lotz-Sisitka, 2015; DHET,

2017a; SAQA, 2018; SAQA-DUT, 2020), is enabling. The NQF "creates an environment for articulated pathways. Articulation deals with the questions about systemic issues, [and it is also] about having specific articulation pathways, agreements and so on, between different institutions and then of course, [it is about supporting] the individual" (Senior national official [NQF], interview)[30]. Likewise, the QA body said that it requires institutions to "show their pathways in terms of articulation ... in an integrated manner. It [articulation] permeates throughout" (Senior national official [HE 1/2], interview). It was noted that "at the structural level we have the NQF family. There is the [NQF authority] and the [QA bodies] and the national department" (Senior national official [NQF], interview), which support the development of articulated pathways across the system.

The public university coordinating body also pays attention to the issues of articulation: "universities are trying to understand just how they fit into the Post-School Education and Training system, the kinds of articulation we need, and what depth. It [a Working Group] focuses on curriculum issues" (Senior national official [HE 2/2], interview). This respondent added, "we need a much more serious conversation about articulation, [which] is not just about having the NQF. Having the NQF is important but, we have to start looking at qualification structures – there is no discussion at institutional level about articulation" (Ibid.). While articulation appears to be top of mind in many high level initiatives, the comments also show varying awareness levels of articulation initiatives already underway; this official was clearly not aware of the articulation initiatives already underway, and documented (SAQA, 2018, 2019a).

3.5.4. Extended Curriculum Programmes (ECPs) and bridging programmes

The stark realities of the state of the education system in South Africa – including Basic Education, TVET, and higher education – with its high attrition, and relatively low throughput rates in many instances, have led to the emergence of bridging programmes. Based on a study undertaken on behalf of the Minister of Higher Education and Training in 2013, it was found that:

[30] The national department (DHET, 2017a) and the NQF authority (SAQA, 2018) recognise and promote three aspects of articulation. Firstly, systemic articulation, or connected qualifications, part-qualifications, professional designations, and other elements of learning pathways. Secondly, specific articulation – or institutional arrangements such as Memoranda of Understanding, CAT, place reservation, and so on. Thirdly, support for individual learners as they transition along their learning-and-work pathways. The three aspects support each other.

> Young people accessing TVET Colleges are inadequately prepared with the learning foundations to be successful in the TVET Colleges. So those entering [appeared to need the foundations] …. Consequently, all kinds of bridging and foundational programmes offered locally and internationally, their structures and designs, were investigated …. These initiatives led to the development of a 'Pre-Vocational Learning Programme (PLP)' – it's based on the fact that the throughput rates are so poor in the Colleges. So it's very clear – our aim in the Pre-Vocational Learning Programme is to prepare students for the College programmes (Senior national official [TVET 1/2], interview).

Further, "this is where the flexible learning comes in, [flexible] pathways. [It is a case of] we can help you, but you can't go straight into the programme. You have to spend a year in this programme, and if you achieve the entry requirements for this programme after this year, you go straight into that programme" (Senior national official [TVET 1/2], interview). The respondent was convinced that this form of 'extended curriculum' was very successful, as increasingly more students from the TVET College sector gain entrance, through this route, to higher education: "So the National Certificate Vocational [qualification], we believe, is gaining traction in terms of [graduates] accessing higher education opportunities" (Ibid.).

Secondly, the Higher Certificate, an NQF Level 5 qualification, and the first of its type on the HEQSF, also seems to be playing a bridging role. Large numbers of potential higher education students are unable to access higher education due to their poor achievement results in the school-leaving certificate or College qualifications. While HEIs have always offered bridging programmes, the Higher Certificate is used nation-wide as a bridging and access programme as well as a qualification in its own right. The Higher Certificate is an NQF Level 5 120-credit qualification accessed via the National Senior Certificate (NSC) or National Certificate: Vocational (NCV) – both of which are school-leaving qualifications[31] – or RPL. It is an entry-level higher education qualification that typically includes simulated work experience or work-integrated learning (WIL). It articulates into cognate Diplomas and Degrees and is itself easier to access than Diploma and Degree studies. A national department respondent noted:

> So, maybe what we are going to do in the future is give students the opportunity to do Higher Certificates in partnership with the Higher Education Institutions - and the delivery will be in the Colleges, which will enable a learning pathway into the partnering Higher Education Institution …. As it happens, there are [already] quite a

[31] The NCV can also be completed at TVET Colleges.

> few formal partnerships between universities and Colleges for the offering of the Higher Certificates (Senior national official [TVET 1/2], interview).

This comment is in line with the National Articulation Baseline Study findings (SAQA, 2018), which revealed some developed articulation initiatives between HEIs and TVET Colleges jointly offering Higher Certificates.

Thirdly, several respondents mentioned Extended Curriculum Programmes (ECPs) in HEIs: these are available in all public HEIs. The ECPs were instituted by the national department in 2012. ECPs are designed to equip students who do not meet the minimum requirements/ competences for admission to succeed in their studies: the academic support and skills development are integrated with regular academic work, so that additional study time is not needed. Students complete the additional work needed, at the same time as the rest of their studies. If needed, however, the additional time is available.

3.5.5. Tools to enhance FLPs in South Africa

Nationally, a great deal of thought and resources have been dedicated to 'blended learning' as a means to enhance access, and the flexibility of learning pathways. Blended (mixed-mode) learning is facilitated by and through technology; at present the prevalence of mixed-mode learning is not known and the national department is considering researching this. A national department respondent for example, said, "we're developing the National Open Learning System. Infrastructure development [is taking place]; we put a lot of digital technologies in and they're training the lecturers in the new ways of doing blended learning" (Senior national official [Inclusivity], interview).

In addition to the national open learning system initiatives, Career Development Services (CDS) have been rolled out on a large scale. A respondent reiterated that the CDS services provide advice via walk-in, telephone, email, social media, radio and television broadcasts, and fair days, amongst others (Senior national official [Inclusivity], interview). The respondent noted that the National Career Advice Portal (NCAP) is an important tool in this initiative, and for the flexibility of learning pathways – and that over two million people use the services annually.

However, whereas the national department can direct these initiatives to the TVET College sector[32], this is not the case for universities:

[32] The national department has direct responsibility for the TVET sector.

> We must remember that universities are autonomous. So flexible learning is being directed through policies and it's being monitored through policy implementation and reporting – but there's no 'authority' to impose [blended learning] in universities (Senior national official [Inclusivity]. interview).

On the other hand, another national department official noted that: "there is a strong move towards blended learning, which allows both a mixture of contact and distance learning from a policy point of view" (Senior national official [Planning 2/2], interview). In addition, "there is a strong move to promote the flexible scheduling of programmes so that people who are working can attend evening classes; that is what is being pushed" (Senior national official [Inclusivity], interview). There are other initiatives regarding open learning:

> … which are well articulated in policy in South Africa, including in [a government department]. And that does include issues of flexibility and access and success – by making use of strategies used in Distance Education, as well as technology …. [organisation] also substantially contributed to White Paper 3 [on] Open Learning through Diverse Modes of Provision, and is actively encouraging institutions to make greater use of Distance Education modalities …. our work is trying to give practical expression to those principles (CEO of NGO, interview).

Moves are currently underway to develop online material for a second-chance opportunity to write the school-leaving certificate – the National Senior Certificate for Adults (NASCA), which could have a significant system-wide impact on access and learning pathways, in "a wider network of Adult Learning Centres, [where] all sorts of possibilities emerge" (CEO of NGO, interview).

In all, the South African education and training system reflects a range of policies, plans, and tools to enhance FLPs – and most are expressed in legislation, policy and regulations. Although implementation is uneven, there are many pockets of success and excellence.

3.6 Monitoring the implementation of FLPs, including for equity groups

As expected, the national department monitors many aspects of the education and training system – a respondent noted "we produced the PSET Monitor which provides macro indicators for trends. We also produce statistics on PSET. We are responsible for policy and legislation, and monitoring and evaluation, with regard to the NQF" (Senior national official [Planning 2/2], interview). This monitoring includes learner enrolments and achievements by race, gender and disability – key equity groups.

Other national department respondents confirmed the role of the department as a monitoring agent in the system. One respondent added, “we set policies. So we do monitoring, reporting, everything – the requirements are driven from here” and, based on the monitoring, adjustments are made to annual performance plans (Senior national official [TVET 1/2], interview). In addition, projects and initiatives are set up “to include a kind of learning cycle - there's lots of reflection built into what it is that we do, and therefore whether or not we have achieved what we wanted to do”, which is often followed by formal evaluation (CEO of NGO, interview).

Furthermore, a national department respondent emphasised “we do annual reports on Student Support Services in Colleges. Even on teaching and learning – the status of teaching and learning. It is an annual [requirement]” (Senior national official [TVET 1/2], interview).

This monitoring and evaluation also includes research, which “has not been in the form of formal evaluations. However, the research that has been undertaken illuminates many dimensions of what is happening in the implementation of FLPs” (Senior national official [Planning 2/2], interview) – including the issues of admission via alternate pathways, and RPL.

While data are collected for RPL and CAT in HEIs, they are not collected by the national department for monitoring purposes. An NQF authority respondent indicated that:

> The data were not collected for this purpose. I think it is more about ‘while we have the data, let us start looking at RPL’. RPL categories [such as race and gender]) have been built into data collection requests, but CAT, progression, not really (Senior national official [Statistics 2/2], interview).

The higher education QA body is expected to monitor the implementation of FLPs in institutions; reporting in this regard was not mandatory until 2019 and the first report was descriptive, suggesting that HEIs were implementing RPL. The QA body currently does not specifically monitor or evaluate the role of flexible pathways – the focus remains on the way in which institutions introduce, implement and maintain their own policies. As the QA body respondent explained:

> The kinds of questions we ask [of HEIs include]: ‘Do you have FLP policies? Or related policies?’ ‘How effectively are they being implemented and applied?’ Is it just there on paper or…?’ So we look in terms of the evidence and what the processes are, for credibly shifting students through those avenues, those pathways, to success (Senior national official [HE 1/2], interview).

An evaluation conducted by the national monitoring department in 2017-2018 reported that RPL and CAT were being implemented, but unevenly across HEIs. The NQF authority is currently conducting a survey to assess the implementation of RPL and CAT and to obtain actual RPL and CAT data.

In general, respondents to this survey question indicated that they monitor for equity objectives, because: "equity is always part of the aims in this country. It goes without saying actually. I think we've achieved a lot but still that doesn't mean it now becomes redundant or we don't do it anymore' (Senior national official [TVET 2/2], interview). "Equity is one of the [national] aims. I believe some of the main drivers [of the education and training system] are socio-economic growth, access [and] redress" (Senior national official [Planning 1/2], interview).

All of the respondents agreed with these sentiments, highlighting the categories of information of particular interest, for example "we [look at] females and disability" (Senior national official [Planning 2/2], interview). Another said: "[We focus on] race, gender, disability, as well as socio-economic status" (Senior national official [Inclusivity], interview). A third said: "Language [as a barrier to learning]" (CEO of NGO, interview). A national department respondent proudly indicated that the department is making progress with its gender objectives:

> In terms of gender equity, we have a big plus. The enrolments in TVET Colleges nationally, [show that the numbers of] female [enrolments] are higher than [those for] males. And the numbers of females are rapidly increasing in traditionally male-dominated programmes … (Senior national official [TVET 1/2], interview).

Another respondent raised concerns about the same trend: "we have some worries about the boys. At the moment [the ratio] it's 58 [girls]:42 [boys]. What is happening to the boys here?" (Senior national official [HE 2/2], interview).

The 'race demographics' in institutions have changed dramatically over the past 20 years, and now reflect the demographics of each province, for example:

> The students in the [province] will be predominantly Coloured, with a small number of Whites, and others …. Then if you come to [the Colleges in three provinces], the learners are all Black [African]. The most notable number of Indian students is obviously in [province]. The [composition of the student bodies is] reflective of the demographics of the country …. (Senior national official [TVET 1/2], interview).

In the current study, the researchers did not name the specific equity categories to the respondents interviewed, rather allowing these categories to emerge in the responses. From

these responses, it was clear – as the researchers thought – that equity in South Africa relates mainly to 'race' (population group), gender, disability – and to a lesser extent to social class and age. Race and gender trends are tracked regularly across all sectors. As one respondent noted, "equity objectives are being achieved at the moment, and we are working towards [this goal] all the time – we'll never stop" (Senior national official [Inclusivity], interview).

3.7. Evaluating the effectiveness of FLPs

National respondent comments were in agreement that there had not been a formal evaluation in South Africa that focused specifically on the effectiveness of FLPs as such, although some studies had included foci on the implementation of RPL, CAT and articulation (different terminology is used). The Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) for example, conducted an NQF Act Implementation Evaluation in 2017-2018, which focused on the implementation of the NQF policy suite. The study considered the implementation of the national RPL and CAT policies, amongst others (DPME, 2018). An NQF authority respondent pointed to this evaluation, "there hasn't been a specific evaluation that [focused] on FLPs, but [learning] pathways were part of the broader theme the last time there was an evaluation of the NQF" (Senior national official [NQF], interview). This study led to an 'NQF Improvement Plan', and:

> … the general outcome of the evaluation is that 76% of people interviewed [in the NQF Act Implementation Evaluation] saw the NQF as being embedded in the education and training landscape within South Africa. They did find that there were a number of inefficiencies [in the NQF system], which has led to the [NQF] Improvement Plan (Senior national official [NQF], interview).

The NQF authority is mandated (RSA, 2008) to conduct periodic studies of the impact of the NQF, and has done so since 2010. The first NQF Impact Study focused on the emerging impact of the then newly promulgated NQF Act, on the work of the NQF authority and QA bodies. The second investigated the impact of the NQF objectives of access and redress, mobility and progression, quality and transparency, on the education and training system (SAQA, 2017a). It was found that movements were generally in the directions desired. The third NQF Impact Study (SAQA, 2019b) studied the reported impact of the following, supported by the analysis of quantitative data:

(1) NQF authority and Quality Council implementation of RPL, CAT and assessment policies;

(2) the NQF Level Descriptors;

(3) the National Learners' Records Database (NLRD) transparency tools;

(4) higher education QA body efforts to integrate public and private higher education; and

(5) the occupational qualifications QA body model for qualifications.

The 2021 NQF Impact Study looks in more detail, at the extent to which, and how, RPL, CAT, student support, and other elements of system flexibility are implemented in public and private entities across the range of NQF stakeholders. This study commenced in 2019; preliminary analyses were conducted in 2020 and the draft and final reports will be disseminated in 2021 and 2022 respectively. All three of the NQF Impact Studies (SAQA, 2017a; 2019b and forthcoming [a]) focus on aspects of FLPs although the terminology used is different.

The national articulation initiatives – the learning pathways research (Lotz-Sisitka, 2015), Flexible Learning and Teaching Provision research and development (Walters, 2015a; 2015b); National Articulation Baseline Study (SAQA, 2018), and national initiative to strengthen learning pathways (SAQA, 2020d), which includes analyses of the actual pathways followed by learners, based on NLRD data – all touch on FLPs in different ways. All of these projects used developmental research methods, seeking to strengthen the aspects being researched. The related papers and reports are available on SAQA's website.

The higher education QA body, as part of its accreditation processes, undertakes institutional audits, which look at the extent to which institutions implement their policies and procedures in respect of FLPs.

> The institutional audits, as well as the application of the accreditation criteria serve as a form of evaluation …. Furthermore, the review of the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework [HEQSF], and the current review of the NQF are secondary investigations [into learning pathways], but there has not been a specific evaluation [that is] particularly focused on looking at learning pathways and the flexibility thereof (Senior national official [Planning 1/2], interview).

On the other hand, although the higher education QA body may not have led an FLP-focused evaluation, it participated in the 2014 and 2017 NQF Impact Studies (SAQA, 2017a; 2019b). While two national officials emphasised that FLP are now mainstream in South Africa (Senior national official [Inclusivity]; Senior national official [NQF], interviews), a third noted that some PSET entities see FLPs as being 'alternative', and that "anything, no matter what it is, if it is not mainstream, then it will never be mass-orientated. It will always have limitations because it will always be driven by individuals or champions" (Senior national official

[Planning 2/2], interview). These different views reflect the different positions of these officials in the system and that there is work to be done, to achieve universal understanding and implementation of FLPs in South Africa.

A notable success story however, is the reach of the national Career Development Service (CDS)[33], where a respondent from the national department indicated that:

> We've got 3,500,000 learners listening weekly to our radio programmes, so, that's the kind of scope that we are looking at. That is a weekly statistic from the SABC [South African Broadcasting Corporation] (Senior national official [Inclusivity], interview).

The medium of radio is the most accessible for poor and rural youth. Another official pointed to the importance of career guidance in the College sector:

> The good thing is that Colleges see [career guidance] as an important area. So they offer it in some form or the other, even if it's just through linking them to the Help Desk here [at the department] because the Help Desk is quite active. You know, it has programmes weekly on all the national stations, even in the vernacular (Senior national official [TVET 1/2], interview).

3.8. Key enablers and barriers for FLPs

Interview respondents were presented with a list of potential FLP enablers and barriers – the list was provided by UNESCO for use by the eight countries in the study – and were asked to talk about the main enablers of, and barriers to, FLP. The list was such that when the items were present, they were enablers, and when absent, they were barriers. The listed items were as follows.

- Political will and determination.
- Leadership in HEIs.
- Appropriate management structures and distribution of authority.
- Targets.
- Resources: time, finances, equipment.
- Staff development and training.
- Institutional autonomy.
- Enabling culture (e.g. organisational values, attitudes, professional norms).
- Involvement of student unions or associations.

[33] See the full description of the CDS in the section 'Tools to enhance FLPs' above.

- Practical support from national agencies (e.g. QA, NQF, department).
- Professional bodies of practitioners (e.g. management associations and networks, teaching unions, academic networks, etcetera).
- International support from experts (e.g. international associations).
- Other items.

The responses to each item are discussed in this section.

Political will and leadership

When respondents from the national stakeholder group were asked about the key enablers for FLPs in South Africa, political will and leadership were immediately identified as being critical for the advancement of such pathways (CEO of NGO; Senior national official [Planning 2/2]; Senior national official [TVET 2/2], interviews). Respondents felt that political will had also been backed up by solid national policies: "we have a very clear NQF and we have RPL policies and we have CAT, articulation – and all those policies [are fully developed]" (Senior national official [Inclusivity], interview). The QA body noted that: "[the main enabler] is political will and leadership, even at the institution … leadership at the institution, because what is happening in the institutions also depends on the leaders of the institutions" (Senior national official [HE 1/2], interview).

An NQF authority respondent indicated, however, that political will is not enough:

> I don't think the problem in South Africa is political leadership, political will ... the problem is the technical and the administrative and the budgetary will, because RPL is an unfunded mandate. So the problem is, on the one hand, you have political will, [but] on the other hand, if you don't make money available for RPL, it is not going to happen (Senior national official [NQF], interview).

Inter-institutional cooperation and institutional autonomy

Another key enabler identified by most of the national respondents, was "inter-institutional cooperation" (Senior national official [Inclusivity]; Senior national official [TVET 1/2]; Senior national official [Planning 1/2]; Senior national official [Planning 2/2]; Senior national official [TVET 2/2], interviews). One said, for example: "Definitely inter-institutional cooperation. There are a lot of agreements between [TVET] Colleges and universities. And that makes [for] flexibility" (Senior national official [Inclusivity], interview). Further, linked to inter-institutional cooperation, is "intra-institutional cooperation, cooperation across faculties, across schools, across departments" (Senior national official [Planning 1/2], interview), and

“the organisational values” of actively seeking to advance access and articulation (Senior national official [TVET 2/2], interview). Two respondents noted that these aspects are “enabled by institutional autonomy” in some instances (Senior national official [Planning 2/2] and Senior national official [TVET 2/2], interviews). “Where [universities] see one institution gaining an edge by having a more open approach to learning pathways, they'll implement it themselves very quickly if they are allowed … that's why inter-institutional cooperation is [also] so very important” (Senior national official [Planning 1/2], interview).

At the same time, institutional cooperation could be experienced as a barrier, because “universities are elitist” and would like to have control over who they provide access to (Senior national official [TVET 2/2], interview). A respondent from the national department said: “for us [in the TVET College sector], institutional autonomy is a big problem. [College] principals complain about the lack of institutional autonomy and [the Minister] says we treat them like high schools” (Senior national official [Planning 1/2], interview). More than one respondent raised concerns about institutional autonomy, for example:

> There’s a misnomer about institutional autonomy. No university has the right to say ‘we won’t apply the NQF’. Institutional autonomy needs to be framed in the context of accountability. There really is no possibility of a university saying, ‘I’m not going to take this student because the student has not done a, b, c and d’… institutional autonomy does not give the institution the right to subvert the national policy, because they are fully accountable as public institutions (Senior national official [HE 2/2], interview).

Another respondent’s view supports this idea:

> Clear [government-set] targets clash with institutional autonomy, [because the targets suggest government steering] …. Furthermore, the system is highly over-burdened by policies which enforce rules, increase accountability and reduce institutional autonomy …. we don't need more legislation, we don't need more policy; we actually need less. Government [is] over-regulating training institutions … it is infringing on institutional autonomy and academic freedom. More policy is not the answer to poor [learner] performance ... more stringent policies are not going to be the answer as to why [some of] our institutions are in such trouble (Senior national official [Planning 1/2], interview).

Common qualifications

One respondent felt that common qualifications and curricula facilitate learning pathways:

> There is less of a problem [with articulation] at the national level because the TVET College and Community Education and Training College (CETC) qualifications are centrally [developed]. There are fewer qualifications [in these sub-sectors], and it is easier to make sure that they articulate …. I support the idea that the country should have 'fewer qualifications' because [in higher education] in South Africa each institution develops its own qualifications, [resulting in] a higher risk of [poor] articulation and [weak] FLPs (Senior national official [Planning 2/2], interview).

This respondent added that while the QA body and the NQF authority are responsible for ensuring FLPs in the design of qualifications, "the capacity is low, [and] coordination across the QA bodies is difficult. [At present] we do not have the capacity to make sure that the designs of these qualifications and programmes allow for flexible pathways" (Senior national official [Planning 2/2], interview). Another said similarly:

"[We cannot ensure articulation] that is, other than a statement that claims the qualification allows for RPL, and makes provision for articulation" (Senior national official [NQF], interview). However some of the evidence available, such as the strong articulation initiatives reported in the National Articulation Baseline Study (SAQA, 2018), suggests that articulation initiatives are taking place: 75 articulation initiatives were found, of which 16 were flourishing, others were emerging and a small number had stalled.

Policy coherence

Despite the existence of well-articulated policies at the national level, some respondents saw the policies as barriers to FLPs, "the critical thing for me is the issue around policy coherence. You see [even if you have] political will and leadership and there is no policy coherence then you [have a problem]" (Senior national official [HE 2/2], interview). The differences in the NQF authority and QA body RPL policies is an example of this lack of coherence (Senior national official [Planning 1/2], interview). These differences are in fact being addressed in both the NQF Improvement Plan (DPME, 2018), and through the 2017 NQF Impact Study Recommendations Implementation Plan (SAQA, 2019c).

While there are known articulation successes, other respondents elaborated on particular barriers: "For example, qualifications that people get in the [school-leaving certificate] from the Technical Schools. The policy says that the universities need to recognise these qualifications, but none of the universities do that" (Senior national official [Planning 2/2], interview). A second system blockage is the pathway from the National Certificate: Vocational (NCV) into universities:

> The poor articulation between this school-leaving-equivalent qualification and higher education does not appear to be from a design point of view, so theoretically, there is no problem … However, it appears it has more to do with the universities not being willing to accept the qualifications, which points to the gap between theory and practice (Senior national official [Planning 2/2], interview).

Funding

Another major barrier is funding. Most respondents noted that funding is a problem, both in terms of the development of capacity, and of government subsidies:

> … the finance issue is twofold – one has to come in and establish [RPL] offices [at universities], but it's also about addressing the enrolment plan [which] should make space for RPL students, with the requisite [government] subsidy levels (Senior national official [HE 2/2], interview).

An NQF authority respondent commented along similar lines that:

> The weakest part of the [articulation policy], is how this will be funded. What we have in the articulation policy, is a wish list. It said we will do this, we will do that ... [but] where is the money? And we hear three things: number one, there's no money; number two, there's no money; number three, there is no money … (Senior national official [NQF], interview).

It appears that many decisions about FLPs are based on the funding regime. A national department respondent commented that:

> I sometimes believe that universities make rules based on the funding they're going to get, instead of the actual academic progression. I question whether those learning pathways – articulation and RPL decisions – are based on academic content rather than on funding. If you were to ask me whether the way we fund universities influences the flexibility of learning pathways – absolutely. Universities will chase the funding, instead of the flexible learning pathway and the articulation. If something is not financially viable, they cannot afford to go the route that is less financially viable (Senior national official [Planning 1/2], interview).

Other respondents shared these frustrations. A national department respondent indicated that, "like many things, we are not able to sustain [initiatives] because everything is related to funding. The funding ends, the initiatives disappear. Finances are a problem – because flexible pathways cost" (Senior national official [TVET 1/2], interview). The issue of funding needs serious consideration.

Capacity

Another issue, particularly for public education providers, is the availability of 'places'. Students who seek to access further and higher education through alternative pathways are often the last to be considered. A national department respondent said for example:

> Moving into higher education is such a tricky thing because of the number of places – … [places are] so limited that really, universities are just taking the cream of the crop from the schooling system. You know, even good students in the schooling system are not getting in (Senior national official [TVET 1/2], interview).

Resistance to change

Another notable barrier to FLPs is 'resistance to change', for example: "I think the main barriers are really just how difficult it is to change an education system. Their [institutional ways of doing things] are deeply entrenched in all our societies" (CEO of NGO, interview).

Over-arching summary of national views regarding enablers and barriers to FLP

Overall, the strongest enablers of FLPs identified by the national respondents, were political will and leadership, as well as institutional autonomy and institutional leadership. Although institutional autonomy seemed both to enable institutions to implement FLPs, and to result sometimes in the failure to implement FLPs – this failure was not due to lack of the desire to implement FLPs, but lack of the capacity to do so. The biggest blockage to the implementation of FLPs noted by the national respondents, was the lack of dedicated funding to do so, and the implications of the current funding model – that mitigated against FLPs. Other barriers emerging clearly were the need for common qualifications – and by implication, the diversity of qualifications that exist, and the lack of parity of esteem between them – and the lack of policy alignment regarding FLPs, in which the particular issues of whether or not to allow credit for RPL, and the proportions of learning to be recognised, were clear.

There was however, recognition of the importance of FLPs – an awareness that the system cannot afford *not* to be ready for FLPs, because:

> The demographics show that we have a large youth population and as they grow, they need flexible [pathways]. They have many years ahead of them, and the economy and the world are going to change. So they need FLPs that will allow them to change their jobs and skills, and to make horizontal and vertical shifts in their skills (Senior national official [Planning 2/2], interview).

3.9. Priorities for the future

National interviewees suggested seven priorities for FLPs: (1) incorporating technology and blended learning, (2) opening up the NQF Level 5 space – expanding the qualification offerings in this space; (3) introducing shorter learning programmes; (4) ensuring that funding is effective and efficient; (5) enhancing communication and embedding national policy; (6) expanding CAT practices; and (7) strengthening regional integration and mobility. The seven priorities are elaborated in this section.

Incorporating technology and blended learning

A national department respondent describes as a priority for FLP, "removing the barriers to learning", which could be achieved by providing different modes of learning, and open learning approaches, "we are developing blended learning approaches" (Senior national official [Inclusivity], interview). This respondent rightly emphasised the need for a National Open Learning System.

> If we are not going to change the approaches to learning [and move] to flexible learning, to blended learning, to resource-based learning, to making use of technologies, we are going to stay behind…These methodologies are important to stay abreast of developments in contemporary learning spaces, but are also important to prepare students for future workplaces (Ibid.).

Other respondents similarly said that the short term goals included the establishment of the National Open Learning System, and the development of online materials for the National Senior Certificate for Adults (NASCA), TVET colleges and Community colleges, which will enable students to access learning flexibly (Senior national official [Planning 2/2], interview). The NQF authority respondent said: "We actually need to use technology … to drive us forward and in actual fact, it can be a mechanism for overcoming some of the barriers, and challenge the real gatekeepers" (Senior national official [NQF], interview).

Opening the NQF Level 5 space

The importance of the Higher Certificate as a 'bridging qualification' at NQF Level 5 was noted. It was acknowledged that together with a need for high skills levels, growing numbers of learners were failing to achieve school-leaving qualifications with sufficiently high achievement levels to access Bachelor's Degree studies at HEIs. While the NQF Level 5 bridging qualifications exist, there is a need for more, and more diverse NQF Level 5 qualifications, to enable learners to transfer into different types of HEIs. A national department

respondent made the point that, "the main priority is to open up the NQF Level 5 space …. in which qualifications are increasingly seen as 'access' and 'bridging' mechanisms. So, it is about expanding the NCV [National Certificate Vocational] pathway to [NQF] Level 5" (Senior national official [TVET 2/2], interview).

Shorter programmes

The contentious issue of short courses arose. While the official positions of the NQF authority and the higher education QA body are that they do not support the idea of stand-alone short courses for credit – because of the associated risks of dead-ends in learning-and-work pathways, and quality issues – some national officials raised this issue. One said, for example:

> Instead of offering only full qualifications, one of the biggest priorities is that we have shorter programmes. Shorter offerings would be accessible to people who cannot afford to spend a year or more at an institution. We've become quite fixed on these long qualifications, whereas in a dynamic labour market with high unemployment rates, we should be thinking of shorter programmes that can lead people to employability (Senior national official [TVET 2/2], interview).

Another national department official pointed to the necessary relationship between short learning programmes and whole qualifications:

> Short learning programmes should count towards credits for a qualification. In addition, the regulatory bodies, for example [the NQF authority], the [higher education QA body], and the [national government department] should facilitate mutual recognition clusters, mutual learning agreements amongst institutions, which [could] lead to eventually quality assuring and recognising each other's short learning programmes, which would relieve the authorities from an excessive quality assurance burden (Senior national official [Planning 1/2], interview).

That short programmes should be parts of whole qualifications is of critical importance. Research (SAQA, 2018; SAQA-DUT, 2020) shows that it is only 'articulated short courses', that are parts of full qualifications, support learning-and-work pathways – and that stand-alone short courses usually lead to dead ends.

Funding, effectiveness and efficiency

Most respondents agreed that funding, resources and capacity were on the agenda for any future FLP priorities: "funding is very important because the more you implement, the more you imbed the regulatory policy and regime, the more costly it becomes, the more personnel, the

more resources, the more capacity is required" (Senior national official [HE 1/2], interview). So, "if you take RPL for example, there is [currently] no mechanism in the funding system for universities for RPL, to set up RPL offices. So what universities have to do is, they have to find the money somewhere else" (Senior national official [HE 2/2], interview). The higher education QA body respondent further indicated that: "Finance, human capacity, political will … all of those things are associated. Because if you want to put in a regimen of oversight control and regulation [in respect of FLPs], then you must have the political will to [provide] the resources and capacities in support of that …. " (Senior national official [HE 1/2], interview).

Other respondents noted the importance of strengthening the role of the higher education QA body:

> We need to bring back the institutional audits done by the [QA body] – and focus on undergraduate teaching and learning, and on FLPs. Make RPL and articulation more than just [the NQF authority's] qualification registration criteria. Make it the [QA body's] accreditation criteria, because FLPs are the one way in which we can counter academic programme proliferation and early specialisation. [The proliferation of learning programmes is] a barrier to FLPs – with early specialisation, you paint a student into a corner (Senior national official [Planning 1/2], interview).

Another respondent echoed this thinking:

> By inserting these [FLP] criteria into accreditation requirements, it is more [enforced] at an institutional level … where all institutions need to start especially looking at learning pathways and access to qualifications … and then of course, the end result is reporting RPL achievements to the NLRD (Senior national official [Statistics 2/2], interview).

Enhanced communication towards embedding NQF policy and learner success

Most of the national respondents acknowledged the need for enhanced communication between the NQF partners – the national departments, the NQF authority and the Quality Councils – and between the NQF partners on one hand, and on the other hand, the broader range of NQF stakeholders, to enhance NQF policy alignment and deepen its implementation. For example, a university coordinating body respondent suggested:

> A national conversation about the qualifications structure [is needed] ... we should get to a point where we say, if a young person who completes the [College school-leaving equivalent] qualification, there is a direct articulation into, [for example] Engineering,

> or such like … it needs to be worked out [between institutions] … Furthermore, the long term view is really that we should be seeking to develop [an integrated] higher education system rather than a private one and a public one (Senior national official [HE 2/2], interview).

The need for enhanced communication within and between the NQF partners was particularly clear in that national officials were not necessarily all aware of important initiatives underway regarding FLP. For example, the 2017 NQF Impact Study (SAQA, 2019b) showed – by tracking actual learner transitioning – that the higher education QA body efforts to integrate public and private higher education, had led to shifts in the desired directions. These trends, although needing further strengthening, had clearly shifted in response to focused efforts in this regard. Other officials were not aware of a large initiative to strengthen learning pathways sector by sector (SAQA, 2020d).

The expressed need to deepen understandings of RPL also pointed to the need for enhanced communication: "We need to try and understand how to unlock the potential of the NQF and the other kinds of facilitative structures, for example, around RPL. So in other words, [determine] what it is that's impeding the flourishing [of FLPs]" (Senior national official [HE 2/2], interview). One of the few peer-reviewed books on RPL (Cooper and Ralphs, 2016) in the world was developed based on a [NQF authority] research partnership, and strong RPL practices have been documented (SAQA, 2020a). On the other hand, the fact that the RPL and CAT data of public HEIs are not visible – they are hidden amongst the 'Senate Discretion' data of the national department – render access and redress in this sector partly invisible.

A main priority remains: "increased access, and success. And success is not necessarily throughput. Success is also being economically and socially active …. giving everybody a chance to succeed. And I hope that by, [and through], flexibility, we will be able to give everybody a chance to be successful" (Senior national official [Inclusivity], interview).

Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT)

CAT was seen as not yet facilitating progression in systematic ways and as being less prevalent than RPL; CAT emerged as a priority in the medium term. A national department respondent suggested for example, that:

> We need to look at coherence across the institutions for the movement of students. And we need to look at institutional arrangements across the board, across all our

> institutional types. At the moment, [articulation] is through individual negotiation (Senior national official [TVET 1/2], interview).

An NQF authority respondent made a similar point: "we are trying to develop this culture of articulation. While we've been focusing on RPL, we have only been focusing on articulation broadly. The two areas that we will focus on in the short to medium term are CAT and assessment" (Senior national official [NQF], interview). A QA body respondent also noted:

> The transfer of credit is very important for parity of esteem ... [It is a] priority to ensure that CAT is accepted across the board because, at the moment, you still find that there are some restrictions. There are still some institutions, which do not accept the credits of other institutions (Senior national official [HE 1/2], interview).

Strengthening regional initiatives

There is a Southern African Development Community Regional Qualifications Framework (SADC RQF), against which SADC countries are in the process of aligning their NQFs. There is also a continent-wide African Qualifications Verification Network (AQVN) to support the evaluation and verification of foreign qualifications across the continent, and there are moves towards an African Credit and Qualifications Framework (ACQF). One respondent expressed the view that South Africa should continue to strengthen existing regional initiatives regarding mobility within and across the continent:

> The fact that South Africa is aligned to the SADC Regional Qualifications Framework (SADC RQF), the fact that there's now an ACQF on the horizon, is going to assist in terms of [national and international] mobility. And the fact that we are setting up these mutual agreements, and that we have comparability tables ... all of that is about facilitation, with [mutual] recognition and mobility (Senior national official [NQF], interview).

Chapter 4. FLPs in practice: In-depth study of three HEIs

This section is divided into two parts. Part 1 provides a brief overview of the methodology for the institutional part of the case study, followed by short background sketch for each of the HEIs in the sample. Part 2 presents an analysis of the flexible learning pathway policies and practices across the three institutions selected.

4.1. Interviews and focus group discussions conducted at institutional level

As for the national officials, considerable effort was made to interview the categories of people identified by UNESCO, for the three HEIs in the case study. Where staff categories in the

sample differed from the UNESCO-specified categories, the researchers selected respondent positions that matched most closely.

Sample

Eighteen interviews were conducted at a public university; twelve interviews at a public University of Technology (UoT); eight interviews at a private Higher Education Institution (pHEI). The study included 51 interviews in all; 38 of these were in HEIs.

Method

Specific questionnaires were developed for the specific categories of interviewees, based on the UNESCO templates provided. The same two researchers who interviewed the national officials, conducted the 38 interviews in the HEIs. Formal letters were sent to each of the interviewees outlining the main objectives of the research and requesting their participation in the study. The six student and alumni focus group interviews required – two in each of the selected HEIs – were coordinated by contact people at each of the HEIs. As for the national officials, before the interviews began, participants were asked to sign letters of informed consent. Each interview took one to two hours, and was recorded using an audio recorder and transcribed. As for the national interviews, conditions of strict anonymity were observed. Thematic analyses of the transcripts were done.

Data analysis

Once the institutional interviews were transcribed, data analysis was initiated. The process for this analysis and the analytical categories used, were the same as those used for the interviews with national officials. The analytical categories again comprised the following.

- Key practices supporting FLPs.
- Role of national policies and instruments in supporting FLPs.
- Monitoring the implementation of FLPs.
- Monitoring equity groups.
- Evaluating the effectiveness of FLPs.
- Enablers of FLPs.
- Barriers for FLPs.
- Future priorities for FLPs.

The ‘institutional’ responses also included an additional category, namely ‘Institutional policies and practices for FLPs’.

The section that follows presents key data from the three HEIs in the sample. The discussion opens with a general description of each of the HEIs and the qualifications they offer. For each institution, the sample of people interviewed is provided. A discussion of the FLPs in the HEIs follows these sections.

4.2. General description of the selected HEIs and their qualifications

A public university, a University of Technology (UoT), and a private HEI were selected for inclusion in the South African case study. The institutional profiles provided are based on 2019 data; they outline briefly, the size and composition of each HEI, the types of qualifications conferred and the respective student profiles. The demographic information provided is typically tracked in terms of ‘equity areas’ or ‘equity targets’. HEIs do not routinely collect information on the socio-economic status of their students.

4.2.1. General description of the public university

The traditional public university (SA-HEI) selected is one of the 26 public HEIs in South Africa. It was included in the study because of its long history of, and commitment to, FLPs in the form of offering a variety of modes of provision, and its thriving and widely recognised RPL practices (Table 6). It combines face-to-face with blended learning, block-release learning arrangements, extended opening hours, and other aspects that provide student support. It offers a range of qualifications between NQF Levels 5 and 10 including Certificates, Diplomas; Advanced Diplomas; Degrees; Honours Degrees; Masters and Professional Masters Degrees, and doctoral and professional doctoral studies – across seven faculties: Community and Health Sciences; Dentistry; Economic and Management Sciences; Education, Law and Natural Sciences. Some of the qualifications are more theoretically oriented; others relate more closely to the workplace.

In 2019, the student headcount stood at over 23 000; 79% of the student body was enrolled in undergraduate programmes and 21% in postgraduate. At the undergraduate level, 62.2% of the student body was female and 37.8% male. At postgraduate level, the gender gap closed slightly with 56.8% being female and 43.2% male.

In terms of racial composition, the student breakdown in 2019 was as follows: 46% African, 45% Coloured, 4% Indian, 4% White and 1% unknown. Under half (43.7%) of the student body was under the age of 21, followed by those in the 21-23 age group (26%). The remainder

of the student body was over 24 years old; the university is known for accommodating adult and working learners.

With regard to home language, in 2019 46% of the students had an African language as their home language, 27% had English, 12% Afrikaans, and 5% 'other'[34]. While no information was immediately available on the socio-economic status of the student body, based on the university fees and profiles of the students and alumni interviewed, it appeared that students were predominantly from the lower middle class and working class backgrounds.

Table 6. RPL statistics of the public university in the study, 2019

2019 RPL statistics at the public university selected		
Faculty/ Department	**RPL for access (undergraduate)**	**RPL for access and advanced standing: postgraduate**
Law	7	10
Social Work	5	-
Humanities	12	-
Education	21	-
Management	29	21
Public Administration	4	-
Sport & Recreation	1	5
Land & Agrarian Studies	-	3
Computer Science	-	6
Religion & Theology	-	2
Science	-	9
Total	**79**	**56**

Sample at the public university

In all, 18 interviews were conducted at the public university, as shown in Table 7 below.

Table 7. Interview sample at the public university

Public university interviews				
SA-HEI	**Date**	**No.**	**Role of interviewee**	**Type of interview**
Public university Management	October 2019	2	SA-HEI, Senior official [academic] and advisor	Face-to-face interview
	October 2019	2	SA-HEI, Senior official [quality] (and predecessor/ mentor)	Face-to-face interview
	October 2019	1	SA-HEI, Official [advice]	Face-to-face interview
	October 2019	1	SA-HEI, Official [statistics]	Face-to-face interview
Public university Faculty of Education	October 2019	1	SA-HEI, Dean Education	Face-to-face interview

[34] South Africa has 11 official languages, namely, Afrikaans, English, Afrikaans, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu; Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda and Xitonga.

	October 2019	1	SA-HEI Recommended respondent in institute linked to RPL/ system flexibility 1/3 (Recommended by Dean Education)	Face-to-face interview
	October 2019	1	SA-HEI Recommended respondent in institute linked to RPL/ system flexibility 2/3 (Recommended by Dean Education)	Face-to-face interview
	October 2019	1	SA-HEI Recommended respondent in institute linked to RPL/ system flexibility 3/3 (Recommended by Dean Education)	Face-to-face interview
Public university Faculty of Science	October 2019	3	SA-HEI, Dean Science (and senior staff members in the Faculty of Science)	Face-to-face interview
Public university Faculty of Health Sciences	October 2019	1	SA-HEI, Dean Health Sciences,	Face-to-face interview
Public university Faculty of Management Sciences	October 2019	3	SA-HEI, Dean Management Sciences (and senior staff members in the Faculty of Management Sciences)	Face-to-face interview
Public university RPL centre	September 2019	1	SA-HEI, Head of RPL Unit (SA HEI, LLL specialist HEI)	Face-to-face interview
	October 2019	1	SA-HEI, Immediate previous LLL specialist 1/2	Face-to-face interview
	October 2019	1	SA-HEI, Immediate previous LLL specialist 2/2	Face-to-face interview
	October 2019	1	SA-HEI, RPL official	Face-to-face interview
Public university Innovative teaching/learning centre	October 2019	1	SA-HEI, Head of innovative teaching and learning	Face-to-face interview
Public university student and alumni focus group interviews	October 2019	4	SA-HEI-Students 1/4, 2/4, 3/4, 4/4	Focus group interview
	October 2019	5	SA-HEI-Alumni 1/5, 2/5, 3/5, 4/5, 5/5	Focus group interview

Focus groups at the public university

The student focus group comprised four people, all of whom had entered the public university through its RPL processes. The group consisted of male and female students currently enrolled in either undergraduate or postgraduate degree programmes. All of the students in the group could be classified as mature students (over 21 years).

The alumni focus group included five people, all of whom were employed at the time of the research. Two of the participants were formally employed at the university upon graduation

and worked closely with the RPL unit. The group had a mix of male and female interviewees, all above the age of 30.

Most of the interviewees in both focus groups could be classified as Black or Coloured in the South African context; there was one alumnus who may have been categorised as Indian, and one as White. It is also important to note that most of the participants identified as coming from backgrounds in which they experienced social and economic hardship. Each of the respondents reported that RPL had offered them a way out of a difficult life and that it had improved their life chances. Their testimonies were striking in this regard; this discussion is elaborated in the sections that follow.

4.2.2. General description of the University of Technology (UoT)

The public University of Technology (UoT) (SA-UoT) is one of six UoTs in the country. In the National Articulation Baseline Study (SAQA, 2018), it was found to have 'developed' (well-established) articulation practices; it tracked articulating students and was part of a provincial articulation initiative. The UoT offers career-specific qualifications at NQF Levels 5-10, including Certificates, Diplomas; Advanced Diplomas; Degrees; Honours Degrees; Masters and Professional Masters Degrees, and doctoral and professional doctoral studies – across its four faculties: (1) Engineering, Built Environment and Information Technology; (2) Health and Environmental Sciences; (3) Management Sciences and (4) Humanities. The programmes for these qualifications combine academic and practical industry-specific content. Over the past decade, the offerings have shifted from being primarily National Diplomas (NDs) to an increasing number of student enrolments in, and awards for, Bachelors' Degrees.

The current dominant attendance mode is contact-classes, as opposed to distance learning. While the institution does have a history of distance offerings, these were reported to have declined steadily over time – mainly due to the growth of other attendance modes such as block-teaching, in which contact teaching occurs in intensive short periods. This mode of attendance was noted to be popular amongst students who are employed on a full-time basis and who would like the benefit of contact teaching.

In 2019, the UoT had a headcount of just over 21,000 students, spread across three campuses. The headcount has been gradually increasing, growing from 12,000 to over 21,000 in the past seven years. Some 53% of the student body was female. In 2019, the vast majority of the student body was Black African (95%); Coloured students accounted for 2%, Indian students for 0.2%, and White students for just under 3%, having declined steadily from 10% in 2012.

Most of the student body would be considered mature students with 42.5% of the students being between 21-24 years, and 39% over 24 years, with 18.5% in the under-21 age cohort.

In 2019, some 68.7% of the student body had an indigenous African language as their home language, 5.9% had English, and 25.4% 'another' language. The language of instruction at the UoT, is English. As for the public university, based on the university fees and profiles of the students and alumni interviewed, it appeared that the students were predominantly from lower middle class and working class backgrounds.

Sample at the UoT

Table 8 details the 12 interviews conducted at the University of Technology (UoT).

Table 8. Interview sample at the public University of Technology

Public UoT interviews				
SA-UoT	**Date**	**No.**	**Role of interviewee**	**Type of interview**
Public UoT Management	September 2019	1	SA-UoT, Senior official [academic]	Face-to-face interview
	September 2019	1	SA-UoT, Senior official [leadership]	Face-to-face interview
	September 2019	2	SA-UoT, Two officials [quality] delegated by the senior quality official	Face-to-face interview
	September 2019	1	SA-UoT, Senior official [statistics]	Face-to-face interview
	September 2019	3	SA-UoT, Head [advice] and two key senior advice-function colleagues	Face-to-face interview
	September 2019	2	SA-UoT, Head of innovative teaching and learning and a key colleague in the unit	Face-to-face interview
Public UoT Faculty of Education	September 2019	1	SA-UoT, Dean of Education	Face-to-face interview
Public UoT Faculty of Health/ Environment Sciences	September 2019	1	SA-UoT, Dean of Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences	Face-to-face interview
Public UoT Faculty of Management Sciences	September 2019	1	SA-UoT, Dean of Management Sciences	Face-to-face interview
Public UoT Faculty of Engineering, Built Environment, IT	September 2019	1	SA-UoT, Dean of Engineering, Built Environment and Information Technology (IT)	Face-to-face interview

Public UoT Student and alumni focus group interviews	September 2019	6	SA-UoT-Students 1/6, 2/6, 3/6, 4/6, 5/6, 6/6	Focus group interview
	September 2019	6	SA-UoT-Alumni 1/6, 2/6, 3/6, 4/6, 5/6, 6/6	Focus group interview

Focus groups at the UoT

Two focus group interviews were conducted at the UoT, one with six students; the other with six alumni – all of whom had experienced RPL and/or other elements of system flexibility. The students and alumni groups were a mix of males and females from across the four faculties. Most of the students were enrolled in part-time studies, with contact classes largely being offered in the early evenings (17h00-20h00) and on Saturday mornings. The students could be categorised as mature students; one self-identified as being physically disabled. Several of the alumni were enrolled for postgraduate studies at the time of the interview. The students and alumni could be classified as Black or Coloured South Africans. Several self-identified as being part of the 'working classes'.

4.2.3 General description of the private Higher Education Institution (pHEI)

The private HEI (pHEI) was selected because it submitted to the National Learners' Records Database (NLRD), the highest numbers of RPL records that included RPL for Bachelors' Degrees[35]. The institution is a private HEI with a specialised area of focus. Its main offerings are Higher Certificates at NQF Level 5; Bachelors' Degrees at NQF Level 7 and Honours Bachelor Degrees at NQF Level 8. The Level 5 qualification is designed to serve as a bridging year for students who do not yet exhibit the competences needed to access the first year of the undergraduate programmes.

The private HEI is a relatively small institution with a headcount of around 300 students. In 2019, some 66% of the student body was female and 34% male. Some 47.5% of the students were classified as White, 26% African, 13% Indian, 7.5% Coloured and 6% as 'foreign nationals'. No age profile was available for the institution. It is important to note that as a private institution, the tuition fees were far higher than those of the public HEI and UoT in the sample; the student body could thus be categorised as 'middle class' or 'upper-middle-class'.

Table 9 shows the numbers of students admitted to the private HEI via RPL and CAT processes, and the numbers admitted via the NQF Level 5 qualification, for the 2015-2020 period.

[35] One other private HEI submitted higher numbers of RPL records, but these were for qualifications below NQF Level 7.

Table 9. Statistics for RPL, CAT and bridging course admission to the private HEI

RPL, CAT and alternative admissions statistics at the private HEI selected			
Year	**No. of students via NQF Level 5 programme**	**No. of students via RPL**	**No. of students via CAT**
2015	23	4	6
2016	24	3	4
2017	22	3	2
2018	13	3	2
2019	22	1	2
2020	20	0	11

Sample at the pHEI

Eight interviews were conducted at the pHEI – these are listed in Table 10. Since it was a relatively small institution, some senior staff members held more than one position in terms of the UNESCO categories provided. The six staff interviews conducted were with four individuals: one held three of the UNESCO-category positions.

Table 10. Interview sample at the private HEI

Public UoT interviews				
pHEI	**Date**	**No.**	**Role of interviewee**	**Type of interview**
Private HEI Management	October 2019	1	SA-pHEI, Senior employee [Academic]	Face-to-face interview
	September 2019	1	SA-pHEI, Senior employee [Quality]	Face-to-face interview
	September 2019	1	SA-pHEI, Senior employee [Statistics]	Face-to-face interview
	September 2019	1	SA-pHEI, Head of RPL	Face-to-face interview
Private HEI Heads of departments	September 2019	1	SA-pHEI-Head of Department [Discipline 1/2]	Face-to-face interview
	September 2019	1	SA-pHEI-Head of Department [Discipline 2/2]	Face-to-face interview
Private HEI Student and alumni focus group interviews	September 2019	5	SA-pHEI-Students 1/5, 2/5, 3/5, 4/5, 5/5	Focus group interview
	October 2019	1	SA-pHEI-Alumni 1/1	Online submission

Focus group in the private HEI

The private HEI student focus group comprised five participants, three male and two female. Two could be categorised as White, one Indian, one Coloured, and one Black. All were enrolled in undergraduate programmes at various levels. An alumni focus group was arranged – 20 alumni were contacted; at the appointed time, none arrived. One alumna phoned to apologise, and she later emailed her responses to the questions.

4.3. Flexible learning pathway policies and practices in the three HEIs

4.3.1. Definitional issues regarding FLPs

In almost all of the institutional interviews at the three HEIs, the respondents asked what the researchers meant by 'FLPs'. The researchers pointed out that flexible pathways comprised aspects which supported learners, such as using RPL and CAT processes for access or advanced standing[36], flexible hours, part-time studies, the opportunity to 'stop in and stop out' of studies[37], repeat lessons, blended learning[38], extended programmes, flexible teaching and learning methods, using technology in teaching and learning, flexible administration systems, flexible modes of assessment, flexible mind-sets in organisational leadership, and others. The researchers made clear that there were a variety of aspects which made learning pathways flexible, and that they were open to hearing about the institutions' forms of flexibility. It was clear that there were no commonly understood definitions for FLPs. Interviewees were generally more familiar with the terms 'articulation' and 'articulated learning-and-work pathway'.

One respondent described FLPs thus: "flexible learning is, as I understand it … where a student can start at any time, and he can continue at his own pace…" (SA-UoT, Head of innovative teaching and learning, interview). Another respondent explained, "[what you are describing], that's the access part. But [FLPs] also involves the curriculum, yes, [it] is the pedagogy ... it also entails delivery, [which] could be blended, self-paced, or online … so, it means that it's much broader, much wider, not just access" (SA-HEI, Senior official, academic, interview). It was evident that in South Africa, alternative admission and entry routes were seen as part of a whole suite of practices that could be described as FLPs.

New modes of delivery are also seen to enhance flexibility, for example, through:

> … the multiple innovative ways in which one could have some flexibility in terms of your [delivery] options … this is definitely why I'm saying that the online [learning] will become quite important. I don't want the online to be separate in terms of our [the national department] strategy, some online falls under flexible learning provisioning. So the flexible learning and provisioning strategy, you know, should speak to the online as well, and not the other way around (SA-HEI, Senior official, academic, interview).

[36] Advanced standing refers to the recognition that a student has sufficient knowledge and skills to enter studies at advanced points rather than starting at the beginning of a learning programme.
[37] 'Stopping in and stopping out' refers to students taking breaks from their studies, and resuming these studies at later stages.
[38] Blended learning refers to a mix of face-to-face and online teaching and learning.

Lifelong learning is central to the NQF in South Africa and to the discourse around FLPs, "because [FLPs] cannot solely [be] from the perspective of access for undergraduate students … it might be mature students wanting to access the system … it has to be right across [the system] (SA-HEI, Senior official, academic, interview).

FLPs have been present since the establishment of the NQF in South Africa in 1995. As one respondent put it:

> [The purpose of such pathways was] "to support the admission and development of an alternative access route into university. Essentially, for those who had been denied educational opportunity of one kind or another …. [These aims were linked to] the after-hours and part-time provision; [the] RPL work that was going on nationally, [and] opening up alternative pathways for access (SA-HEI, Immediate previous lifelong learning specialist 2/2, interview).

From the start, in democratic South Africa FLPs challenged the conventional means of entry into higher education. Over time, increasing types of FLPs emerged. As a UoT respondent framed it: "[the introduction of the] Higher Certificates and the ECPs [Extended Curriculum Programmes] – I foresee them as the future of South African higher education. Given the [state of] of the Basic Education in our country – our students are not prepared [for higher education]" (SA-UoT, Senior official, quality, interview).

The need to undertake higher education studies at slower rates and the need for flexible delivery are widely acknowledged. These pathways need to be understood in terms of the aims and objectives of introducing the practices in the first place.

4.3.2. Aims and objectives of FLPs

Three aims and objectives for FLPs emerged across the three participating HEIs. There were overlaps and differences in the ways in which these aims were expressed, but they could be summarised as (1) supporting student access to higher education, (2) successful student progression through higher education to further studies and work, and (3) embracing the needs of diverse students in order to enable this access and progression. Access refers not only to physically accessing studies, but also to epistemological access when at the HEI. Each of these aims is illustrated with quotations in the following sections.

Enabling access and progression for diverse students

The private HEI in the study was pragmatic about its practices and the purposes of its FLPs, which were, "to get students and retain them" (SA-pHEI, Senior employee [RPL], interview).

This respondent elaborated by saying that the aim of RPL at the institution, "is (i) to keep the students as long as possible, and (ii) to let students finish their first qualifications and come for further qualification(s) at a later stage". A colleague of the respondent agreed, indicating that the aim was "to register students" (SA-pHEI, Senior employee [Academic], interview).

While private HEIs in South Africa are often seen as being expensive and financially out of reach for working-class students, the participating private HEI indicated that it seeks to:

> … use RPL to accommodate more a disadvantaged class or community … [because] for us, I think it's important for there to be equality in our sector. We would try and encourage racial diversity and cultural diversity in our programmes, and that is obviously also important for the industry. So, for us, it is one of the aims of our flexible learning (SA-pHEI [Departmental Head 1/2], interview).

A public UoT respondent specifically mentioned, "[seeing] access as the aim of [our] FLPs – in short, it is just to widen access, more especially for students who do not meet our admission requirements, so we provide them with FLPs (SA-UoT, Senior official [Academic], interview). This respondent felt strongly that FLPs should support students, "so that the student will be guided through his learning experience from a first-year student to a graduating student". Another added similarly, "one of our big aims is to actually support our students in the most possible ways that we can" (SA-UoT, Head of innovative teaching and learning, interview).

At the UoT, there are further reasons fopr FLPs, namely, "to help students to succeed", and "to cater for working learners" (SA-UoT, Dean of Health Sciences, interview), which suggests growing awareness that delivery should be flexible to accommodate the changing demographics of the student population. This respondent also passionately expressed the intention, "not to condemn students because they do not have the minimum requirements to get into institutions of higher learning" (SA-UoT, Dean of Health Sciences, interview).

The aim of FLPs extends to articulation between institutions, particularly between the TVET Colleges and UoTs. For instance, a UoT respondent indicated that the university "wants to give more and different kinds of students opportunities. In other words, we want to give opportunities for those students that are more technically oriented, [who] went to TVET Colleges" (SA-UoT, Dean of Engineering, interview). The aim is to increase the intake in Engineering studies through opening up access to non-traditional learners because, "every year ... the biggest problem for Engineering in South Africa, [is that] the learners taking Maths and Science [subjects at school] are coming down" (SA-UoT, Dean of Engineering, interview), so

the pool from which Engineering faculties can draw is decreasing. Further, this strategy seemed to be successful:

> One thing I can tell [you] about these students is that they have talent and brains, it is just that they come from an environment that was not able to stimulate all those talents …. So when they come here, we make sure that we do not lose them and provide all the necessary support and the extra academic support that they need – so that is the other aim (SA-UoT, Dean of Engineering, interview).

For the public university respondents, the purposes of FLPs were clearly also student access and progression, for example:

> … to widen access for people, [particularly] access for success ... access through the various routes, of which are RPL is one. It's also to validate people's competencies and to allow them experience in a university environment, if they [have the] potential to be in a university environment (SA-HEI, Senior official [Academic], interview).

The views of the respondents suggest that FLPs in South Africa evolved from primarily opening up access to higher education, to including a focus on deepening epistemological access, "if you don't offer epistemological access, you are in fact offering [students] a revolving door" (SA-HEI, Immediate previous lifelong learning specialist 2/2, interview). Epistemological access is described by Morrow (in Garraway, 2017:110) as, "access to the ways of doing and thinking at the university in particular fields, as opposed to simply physical access", so that students are able to operate more confidently and independently. One of the ways in which epistemological access was addressed in the public university was through well-thought-out RPL process design. The HEI took a 'pastoral' (deep caring) approach, working closely with potential RPL candidates all the way through the RPL process, and afterwards as they made their way through their university studies. Initially, the RPL office welcomed and helped candidates through a series of engagements, to see if higher education was indeed the place for them. The engagements ranged from information sessions, to tests, to the development of the Portfolio of Evidence.

One of the alumni in the focus group at this HEI explained:

> I applied – [in the RPL process] I did literacy and numeracy tests. Then I went to a workshop – they gave us a newspaper article, and we had to write about it. Then [after this was assessed] I got a call – I was invited to the next session [next step of the RPL process]: the Portfolio of Evidence [sessions] … They said 'come to Portfolio of Evidence classes' – on Saturday afternoons. You build up a file that goes to the Dean

> [of the faculty concerned, for assessment]. They decide if you are university-friendly, and then there are exams …. I had to write a four-hour exam. Now I got a note 'you are accepted into the university' (SA-HEI, Alumna, interview).

One of the respondents in the student focus group at the HEI similarly said the following.

> We had info sessions, where they taught us what was essential, like literature reviews. They also showed us how to quantify things – for example, your household – they tied it into your learning. It was brilliant! The info sessions – it improved my skills at work as well. The biggest message they give you subliminally is, 'Why do you think you deserve a spot at this university?' It's one of the things they created. By the flick of a switch. It makes you feel like – you'd feel that you'd belong (SA-HEI, Student [2/4], interview).

Another student in the same focus group added:

> … the RPL process gave a very good preparation for university. Because university is very different to everything else around me. I knew what I was getting into. I got an 'H' [achievement symbol] for Maths in 1999 [at school] – there wouldn't have been another way for me to get into university [other than RPL]. I had a wonderful mentor – [name anonymised] – and also [name anonymised]. I had a very, very good experience with the entire programme. There are other students at this university who were with me in the same class [RPL programme] – they're [now] doing Honours; some are doing a Masters' [Degree]. A lot of people had to leave school because of crime [in the area], and this [RPL] programme was an opportunity to get a professional qualification (SA-HEI, Student [3/4], interview).

The idea of epistemological access was echoed by a respondent from the UoT: "access does not equate to success. Students [who] were just placed there, and no support was provided for them ... you are guaranteed that half of them would drop out before graduation ... hence we have these support measures in place" (SA-UoT, Senior official [Quality], interview).

Mid-set of accommodating the needs of diverse students

The aims of FLPs in South Africa go beyond access and progression in their own right; FLPs are about system flexibility for accommodating the diverse needs of learners, and cultivating the mind-set to support this approach. Further, 'access' is not only from the point of view of historical disadvantage, but it is also about enabling people who are struggling currently, for example: "to make access possible for people who live distances away from the campus, [or] who live in other countries, who might want to study. So it really is about access" (SA-HEI,

Dean-recommended respondent [2/3], interview). Access to the HEI itself was enhanced through e-learning, online and blended learning, as alternative modes of delivery and pedagogy, "access is not only access in terms of the institution, but also in terms of a variety of learning styles and modes" (SA-HEI, Dean of Education, interview).

FLPs were linked to the idea of 'learner-centeredness', where the needs of learners were used to shape the HEI system rather having a rigid one-size-fits-all approach, for example:

> … the main aim [of FLPs] is really to ensure that you have learner-centred approaches which are appropriate for people who have all kinds of different backgrounds …. [There was awareness that FLPs must accommodate] citizens, workers, mothers, fathers …. [And that] we must not be tied to a sort of a static understanding of teaching and learning. So you need to take your students seriously and understand the world [from] which they came, and then adjust your methodology, your curricula and all that, to match it so that they can be successful, [because] most students at this university [have] had complex lives. They [are] struggling economically; they [are] taking care of elderly parents or their own children, or whatever. So you need to actually take that into account (SA-HEI, Immediate previous lifelong learning specialist [1/2], interview).

4.3.3. Institutional FLP practices

Articulation can be understood in at least three ways, as being 'systemic', 'specific' and 'individual' (Lotz-Sisitka, 2015; DHET, 2017a; SAQA, 2018; SAQA-DUT, 2020). 'Systemic articulation' refers to articulated qualifications, professional designations, and other elements of official qualifications and developmental pathways. 'Specific articulation' is the type of articulation afforded by inter- and intra-institutional agreements, RPL, CAT, and other flexibility elements that enable learner transitioning by arrangement. Individual learner support – through career advice and student counselling, Flexible Learning and Teaching Provision (FLTP) and other forms of learner support – comprises a third way in which articulation can occur. All three types or levels of articulation are needed together, for successful learner transitioning in learning-and-work pathways.

Six different FLP 'tools' emerged in the HEI responses, namely, career advice; RPL; CAT; bridging courses such as a national Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) initiative, and others; flexible modes of curriculum delivery, and inter-institutional agreements. Each of these aspects is elaborated in the sections that follow.

FLPs supported by career advice

It emerged that career advice was integrated into the work of different staff members at the three HEIs in the study. In addition, advice was made available in 'registration week' at the institutions. Positions dedicated solely to the provision of career advice were not easy to identify.

At the UoT for example, a student in the focus group said:

> I had SI [Supplemental Instruction] – there was SI in first year for Mathematics; this [second] year, not so much …. As you are applying, [the UoT] checks your AP [Admission Point] score and subjects. If you have STEM subjects [Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics] – you get SI. As you apply – you walk in – and someone looked – they were handling the applications. They [the applications official] told me about the SI opportunities (SA-UoT, Student [4/6], interview).

Another said:

> SI was voluntary. You would go to a lecture [one of the compulsory lectures], and the lecturer would announce the SI class. The SI instructor would then make the time and venue available and communicate with the students. You would go to the SI Centre – the Student Support Centre …. It's about the SI instructor, and the student – the lecturer was not involved (SA-UoT, Alumna [5/6], interview).

Other UoT students and alumni in the focus groups mentioned simply arriving at the UoT, and obtaining advice from the admissions office, or approaching a Dean for advice – and receiving good advice and support. Further students and alumni noted that on both the UoT website and walk-in registration, there were options for 'application' and 'application through RPL'. Several also noted the 'Student Support Centre', and the 'Mentor System', where one could access support easily. It was clear that there was a 'culture of student support and advice' at the UoT in the study.

At the private HEI, advice and career guidance were provided on an individual basis, on-demand, as well as in publicised information sessions. There were "open days are kind of typically though for prospective students" (SA-pHEI, Senior official [Academic], interview). In addition, there were, "Date night[s], is what it is called. It is where third-year students, twice a year now, showcase their portfolios to people working in industry. It is modelled on a speed date session, so they have got five minutes to showcase their portfolios to someone in order to get some kind of feedback, and then move on to the next date" (SA-pHEI, Senior official

[Academic], interview). There was a general culture of student support at the private HEI, "Because we are a relatively small institution", it could offer its students extensive individual guidance (Ibid.). This was in the interests of the students, as well as the organisation: if the students progressed well in workplaces, more students were likely to seek to study there.

At the public university, across staff, student, and alumni responses, it was clear that the RPL office offered extensive advice and support – to individuals, and to groups; the office clearly had an open door policy. This advice and support were provided on meeting interested individuals; before, throughout and after RPL processes; and at any time during the learners' stay at the university, and afterwards. In addition, while there were formal advice sessions around registration, and faculty staff were available to give career advice – dedicated advice may have existed, but was not found. As for the UoT and private HEI in the study, it was clear that there was a culture of learner support at the public university.

FLPs through the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

In the interviews, the most frequently mentioned FLP practice was Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). Interestingly, while there have been national policy and criteria for RPL since 2002, it was clear the RPL practices in the three HEIs in the study differed and all were highly effective. These differences are in fact deliberately enabled by the national RPL policy and criteria, which are designed to be non-prescriptive and to present high-level principles and guidance in line with which organisations are encouraged to be flexible. It was gratifying to the researchers, to be able to observe how the policy and criteria had been implemented by the three HEIs in the study. Each had developed strong and unique RPL traditions.

The researchers describe the RPL approach in the public HEI as '**pastoral**' because of the intense care and support provided to RPL candidates before, during and after the RPL processes – in most cases for years after the RPL processes. The RPL approach in the public UoT is described as '**integrated**' because candidates can apply to the UoT online or on a walk-in basis: online, there are items to click for conventional versus RPL/CAT/flexible access; face-to-face, there are different queues for the same options. In the private HEI in the study, the RPL process is described as '**individual**': the organisation is sufficiently small for candidates to approach leaders in the organisation for individualised RPL processes. Each of these different approaches are elaborated through quotations from the interviews.

The public university has long been at the forefront of developments around alternative routes into higher education in South Africa, to the extent that these routes are no longer seen as

‘alternative’ – rather, there are a variety of mainstream access and progression routes. A respondent linked to this HEI noted the following.

> In the early days [of democracy] … the Continuing Education policy, the Recognition of Prior Learning [policy] – [these were] the first kind of catalytic projects [which involved] an active organisational intervention, to try and shift the discourse around teaching and learning. [Where we] used notions of Recognition of Prior Learning, for instance, to unsettle, the sort of understandings of knowledge and whose knowledge counts (SA-HEI, Immediate previous lifelong learning specialist [1/2], interview).

These efforts now bear fruit in terms of the universal use of RPL throughout the South African higher education system. While the proponents of the practice bemoan the fact that RPL is limited to access to and/or advanced standing in university programmes, and is not generally used to grant credit towards a qualification (SA-HEI, Immediate previous lifelong learning specialist [2/2], interview)[39], it is clear that RPL practices are entrenched in the HEIs in the sample as well as in other HEIs across the country. Another respondent linked to the public HEI noted the following.

> [What is] seen as ‘alternative’ today is not necessarily what … we considered ‘alternative’ then [in the 1990s]. It’s not what one considers alternative now – because what was considered alternative then, some of the admission pathways, have become mainstream, so they are hardly alternative (SA-HEI, Dean-recommended respondent [2/3], interview).

A private HEI respondent said similarly, “I can't tell you specifically how long we have been doing RPL, but we have always been dealing with students transferring from other institutions. So it is a combination of students from all other private and public [institutions]” (SA-pHEI, Senior official [Academic], interview).

However, while the RPL office at the public HEI followed a pastoral and inclusive approach, it appeared that not all of its faculties embraced RPL equally. The differences observed along disciplinary lines seemed largely due the legacies within faculties. For example, while its Faculties of Management Sciences and Education respectively had long histories of FLPs including night classes and flexible curriculum delivery, the stringent Mathematics requirements in the Sciences, meant that the Faculty of Science struggled to admit students through RPL processes. In the Faculty of Science, the students admitted at the lower threshold

[39] This reference is to the QA body policy, which provides for ‘RPL for access’ but not ‘RPL for credit’ – unlike the national department and NQF authority RPL policies, which do. The QA body policy needs be aligned.

of the Mathematics requirements were placed into Extended Curriculum Programmes (ECPs) – another form of FLP. Further, the RPL candidates often stand "at the end of the line" in the selection process in this Faculty because, "where aspirant traditional students meet the selection criteria, [it] means we've taken the top students" (SA-HEI, Dean of Science, interview).

Respondents from the public UoT in the study often spoke about RPL and CAT together: RPL is applicable in instances where students have gained knowledge and skills in workplaces and life outside the university (SA-UoT, Dean of Health Sciences, interview), while CAT involves "subject recognition where you did this module … at another institution" (SA-UoT, Dean of Management Sciences, interview). The UoT recognises RPL "for admission" and "RPL for credit" (SA-UoT, Dean of Engineering, interview). In designing the curriculum for any programme, "we have to have an RPL [statement] ... it is a university requirement [that] when you develop a curriculum, to be explicit and clear about your RPL" (SA-UoT, Dean of Education, interview).

The pastoral and multi-stage approach of the RPL process at the public HEI, which includes exercises to bridge the knowledge and skills gained outside the university, to the writing, Mathematical and logical reasoning skills required inside it, was described at the end of the previous section. This process involves 'mediating' the learning gained outside the university, and translating this, and progressively leading candidates towards increased awareness of its relevance and usefulness for, academic work.

At the UoT, RPL applicants submit 'Portfolios of Evidence' (PoE) that comprise documentary evidence of the knowledge and skills gained through education and work experience. Applications are sent by the applicants to a central assessment unit at the institution; this unit is the key contact between the applicants and the institution. Following the submission of the PoE to this unit, an RPL committee is established at faculty level for each application or groups of applications. The faculty RPL committees examine the portfolios – a time-consuming process – and recommendations are made as to whether or not to admit each applicant to study within the faculty concerned. The RPL committees are convened and chaired by the Dean of the faculty involved, who allows Heads of Departments and senior lecturing staff of the programme for which the candidate is seeking access, to make the final decisions. The outcome of an RPL application is communicated to the applicant in writing by the central assessment unit. The UoT also has an online platform that allows enrolled students to build portfolios of evidence as they go through their studies in order to prepare them for life after university.

The private HEI conducts RPL for access to, and advanced standing in, undergraduate programmes – and for admission into its Honours Degrees if students are accessing this level of study from other institutions (SA-pHEI, Senior official [Academic], interview). There are no restrictions regarding the levels at which students may enter programmes.

While RPL processes are centralised at the public HEI and UoT, they are individualised in the private HEI. As one respondent noted, "predominantly we are dealing with people who have been through one or other institution. So typically, we are looking at some kind of formal learning, often in combination with a portfolio of work" (SA-pHEI, Senior official [Academic], interview). This HEI's experience has been that, "people usually come in with high technical and presentation abilities because they have been practising [in the field, in the industry]" (SA-pHEI, Departmental Head [1/2], interview). Some people have:

> … worked in industry for many years [who] may have a two-year Diploma or qualification and then maybe want to either get a formal Degree or an Honours [Degree] …. [Sometimes] "someone is capable in the practical components or the practical subjects but not competent on the academic side. [Then we will accept them, but] we might ask them to enrol for the programme for the year that they need to catch up in … just that subject (SA-pHEI, Senior official [Academic], interview).

RPL "acts as almost a gateway into the Degree [at] different levels in the Degree" (SA-pHEI, Departmental Head [1/2], interview). The RPL process at the private HEI is led by one senior manager with the support of the heads of the programmes involved. Candidates are briefed and guided in the compilation of portfolios of evidence, which are judged by the panel set up for that purpose.

FLPs through Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT)

A second common practice, albeit a less well-established one, with reportedly lower numbers of candidates, is that of CAT. While RPL processes are used towards the recognition of learning gained non-formally and informally, CAT is used to grant credit for formal learning already achieved – across institutions or across programmes within HEIs. All institutions of learning in South Africa must comply with the DHET's (2017a) articulation policy and SAQA's (2014b and forthcoming [c]) CAT policy.

Unlike its long RPL tradition – a public HEI respondent noted that there were only attempts to establish CAT processes at the institution when the university decided to offer [a Bachelor Honours Degree] and it sought to recognise [practitioners] seeking access to this Degree (SA-

HEI, Immediate previous lifelong learning specialist [2/2], interview). A UoT respondent similarly noted that the numbers of students applying for CAT processes were far lower than those applying for RPL (SA-UoT, Dean of Engineering, interview). This respondent noted that CAT had been common in the [pre-1994] past, as the former Technikon curricula strongly overlapped[40]: "What was done before …was subject recognition. So ... our previous Engineering, the old Diplomas, and old Degree [made CAT possible], so everybody [at the different Technikons] was within 80-90% of the same subject [content]" (SA-UoT, Dean of Engineering, interview). Currently however, there were 'only a handful' of CAT candidates at the UoT.

Nevertheless, CAT was accepted and practiced across the HEIs in the study. In the private HEI for example, "for people who want to apply for [credit] transfer, we ensure they come with the evidence of an academic transcript, and portfolio of work they have done – and some academic writing …. [what is important is] the ability to communicate in English" (SA-pHEI, Senior official [Quality], interview). Another private HEI respondent noted:

> We recognise credits from other institutions .... [The students] bring transcripts of previous studies, and we … look at the credits [for] the various levels of studies, and then use those towards their admission criteria, as long as applicants have previously completed at least one full year or level of study. Previous study must have been in a programme that is comparable to the programme at [private HEI] (SA-pHEI, Departmental Head [1/2], interview).

More than one UoT respondent noted that the onus was on the transferring students to provide the academic transcripts showing learning already achieved, as well as evidence of the curriculum covered. A UoT respondent noted that the power to make CAT decisions was devolved to the faculties, "the people who actually make those decisions are the faculties ... because they need to satisfy themselves about … whether the modules that [students] are transferring are actually equivalent in some way to ours" (SA-UoT, Senior official [Leadership], interview). The CAT process requires:

> … an interrogation of the syllabus and the curriculum from the other institution [and] then we compare and see to what extent ... it correspond[s] with our syllabus for that specific subject. And if [the overlap is] 80% or more, then we would normally give the

[40] Technikons in the *apartheid* era, were merged in democratic South Africa the new entities became UoTs. The old Technikons offered standardised qualifications within a 'Convener System' where a single Technikon carried the responsibility to coordinate a particular qualification, making CAT easier than it is in the current system.

> subject recognition ... the credits must have been obtained [at] the same NQF level (SA-UoT, Dean of Management Sciences, interview).

While the national CAT policy (SAQA, 2014b:3) provides for the "vertical, horizontal or diagonal relocation of credits towards a qualification or part-qualification on the same or different level, usually between different programmes, departments or institutions", the three HEIs in the study were found to have granted mostly 'horizontal relocation' – the transfer of credits across programmes at the same NQF levels.

It also appeared that CAT processes were similar across the HEIs in the study, involving "detailed formal curriculum mapping" (SA-UoT, Dean of Engineering, interview), especially when qualifications used different nomenclature and/or were quality assured by different QA bodies[41]. While several respondents referred to this process as being difficult and onerous, respondents at all three HEIs in the sample confirmed that it was taking place. Some of the reasons given for students' seeking transfers include, "A switch between institutions. For example, students who come here, it is either because they do not like the other institution, or they want to switch from one programme to another" (SA-pHEI, Senior official [RPL], interview). A UoT respondent said similarly, "[CAT] supports transfers from other institutions, from programme to programme. Also, internal programmes, from programme to programme internally" (SA-UoT, Senior official [Leadership], interview). Likewise, a public university respondent noted, "students that have registered at another institution, but for some other reason might've failed or they might have decided to change pathways or programmes or course [can be granted credits]" (SA-HEI, Dean of Science, interview).

Under certain conditions credit transfers were said to be easier, such as those taking place within an HEI for example: "inside the university, that is where for us it is more like a credit transfer because it is not somebody coming from outside .... [If] a student wants to move from [the] Engineering [Faculty] to [the] Health Sciences [Faculty], then you will look at the subjects that you can transfer, and then it will be a pure credit transfer because it is in the same university, it is the same subject, and you are transferring the credits from this programme over to that programme (SA-UoT, Dean of Engineering, interview). The Dean of Management Sciences and a Senior official [Leadership] at the UoT made identical comments.

[41] There are currently three Quality Councils in South Africa (see Chapter 1 above).

While these practices can appear unproblematic, respondents across all three HEIs in the sample mentioned 'the 50% rule', as prescribed the higher education QA body[42]. In practice, this rule means that regardless of how many credits achieved elsewhere, the receiving institution will only recognise and grant up to 50% of the qualification. While the QA body expects all HEIs to comply with this rule, it appeared that respondents at the public HEI and UoT were more accepting of it, while the private HEI found it to be a barrier. Further research conducted by SAQA (Forthcoming [a]) showed that while two thirds of public HEIs expressed support for the '50% rule', the remaining third did not; for private HEIs two fifths expressed support for this rule, while three fifths did not. There are clearly quality arguments for the rule, and flexibility-related arguments against it.

A respondent from the public HEI noted that it was not always easy to convince the institution's authorities to accept credits from elsewhere. The issue of the lack of parity of esteem between institutions is largely responsible for this reticence. The known and established hierarchy in the South African higher education landscape means that the status of institutions and the quality of their offerings differ, which has implications for the transfer of credit.

Nevertheless, as in the case of other FLPs, CAT responds to contemporary problems. A UoT respondent, for example, explained how the institution uses CAT to help students to graduate.

> Some of our students, before they finish the programme …get a job. And because we are not a distance [education] institution, they cannot enrol with us [to complete their programmes]. Then our administration department looks [for] the programmes of other universities and … we allow our students to go and do the modules that are outstanding and come back and graduate with us when they pass (SA-UoT, Dean of Education, interview).

Sometimes CAT was applied in international partnership arrangements where students were granted credit for, "any projects they do at the international institutions, [which] are assessed there, and we only look at the portfolio they bring back and then allocate marks equivalent to our subjects" (SA-pHEI, Senior official [Quality], interview)[43].

[42] This rule does not appear in national department and NQF authority policies for articulation and CAT, to which the QA body policy must be aligned.

[43] In these international partnership arrangements, the participating institutions were selected carefully up-front, and Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) were signed. The student exchanges were framed by these MoUs.

FLPs through Extended Curriculum Programmes (ECPs) and other bridging programmes

More than one respondent noted that learners transitioning from the Basic Education system in South Africa are poorly prepared for the demands of higher education. Several respondents indicated that some form of support was needed to enhance student success. The most common approach is to offer some kind of 'bridging' to enable student transitioning between school and higher education. As one respondent said, "[the objective is] to support the students, so that they can be successful [and can] adapt into university life and academically" (SA-UoT, Senior official [Advice], interview). Bridging studies are often needed in Engineering.

> Something that is definitely working with this flexible learning pathway [is that] we help those students to come in at a different level, and then we help them to get to a higher level that is needed for the subject, for instance, for Engineering, they need certain knowledge about Mathematics, about Physics (SA-UoT, Head of innovative teaching and learning, interview).

In some cases, the bridging – generally – is for the whole first year of higher education.

> [We have] a first [year] experience programme. And every faculty has now a person appointed as a first-year transition officer. And that first-year transition officer in a sense [is] the peer mentor for those students … [because] … there is a significant gap between the schools and the universities, and that gap is not narrowing – it's getting wider (SA-HEI, Dean of Science, interview).

Success in the first year can be linked to successful further study. A respondent from the UoT noted for example:

> I found ... that if the students pass the first year and are acclimatised, they stay. While some take a little bit longer, they do not disappear. The biggest problem is going through the first year. So if they manage to survive the first year, generally they progress (SA-UoT, Senior official [Statistics], interview).

One type of bridging programme found was the 'Extended Curriculum Programme' (ECP) – a national department initiative implemented from 2012 (DHET, 2012). It was formalised in terms of earmarked funding and support from the national department in accordance with the national policy for Foundation Provision on Ministerially Approved Programmes (Ibid.). The national department recognised that large numbers of students entering higher education take longer than the minimum number of years to conclude their studies and as a result, "three years [are] spread out over four or five years" (SA-UoT, Senior official [Advice], interview). This

situation necessitated the extension of curricula for academically able but scholastically underprepared students entering the higher education system.

This initiative, “isn’t a different admission route ... it is a different pacing” (SA-HEI, Dean of Science, interview). The ECP “is a normal formal course; [students] register and [they] have to pass it and so on. So you see, you have, for example, an additional Maths course, Chemistry or Physics course” (SA-UoT, Senior official [Statistics], interview). The ECPs are often offered in specific fields of learning, such as Mathematics and Science. A respondent from the UoT for example noted that, “the extended [curriculum] programme gives you just one semester [of] Maths and Science, [called] “Maths Zero” and “Science Zero” (SA-UoT, Dean of Engineering, interview). In some cases, it appeared that these programmes could be completed at the same time as the conventional programmes.

In most cases, students are selected for ECPs at the point of application/ access (SA-HEI, Dean of Science, interview), but could also be moved to an ECP during the academic year when it becomes evident that they seem to struggle (SA-UoT, Senior official [Academic], interview). A UoT respondent noted that “instead of chasing them away, they will be transferred to an ECP programme” (SA-UoT, Senior official [Statistics], interview). While ECPs are offered to students who appear to be at risk (SA-UoT, Senior official [Academic], interview), sometimes they are framed as enrichment, “[ECPs are offered] not only as formal access to programmes, but also as a way of academic development, because you are increasing students’ chances of [being successful]” (SA-UoT, Head of innovative teaching and learning, interview).

ECPs are designed differently within and across HEIs. The following response conveys this flexibility.

> [ECPs are designed] in the form of tutorials …. And secondly, [the students] get extra modules that are specifically designed for them …. [Other modules are designed for all students] whether you're specialising in Maths, in Social Sciences, in languages, because we believe that language is a barrier (SA-HEI, Dean of Education, interview).

The responses showed mixed views around the status of ECPs. While one UoT official said that students who are enrolled for the ECPs, “feel they are less capable than those who go directly into the mainstream” (SA-UoT, Senior official [Academic], interview), an alumna had only appreciation for this form of support, “I went straight to the [Design and Studio Art] Department. I was interviewed. Then I had to do a test. They said I could go to ECP in first year. I passed that year. The experience was very nice” (SA-UoT, Alumni [1/6], interview).

A second type of bridging course offered for students who do not qualify for access to a particular programme of study, or who have not shown the necessary prerequisite knowledge and skills to do so, is the NQF Level 5 Higher Certificate. This qualification, mentioned by respondents across the three HEIs in the study, can provide access to studies at NQF Levels 6 and 7. As noted by a respondent from the private HEI, "we have a Higher Certificate programme, which is now recognised as a stand-alone qualification, but it was originally conceived as a bridging programme for learners to gain entry into undergraduate programmes" (SA-pHEI, Senior official [Academic], interview). At the private HEI, students desiring to do so were automatically enrolled in the Bachelors' Degree programme upon their completion of the Higher Certificate.

A student respondent at the private HEI said:

> I didn't pass [the school-leaving qualification] with a Bachelor's Pass [type of pass needed to access Bachelors' Degree studies] – I passed with a Diploma Pass [lower level pass]. I heard about [the Higher Certificate] after applying here and going through the process – I did the one-year course and then went into the Degree (SA-pHEI, Student [1/5], interview).

The Higher Certificate does not lead to credits in Bachelor's Degrees.

A third type of 'bridging course' identified in the study was the 'Critical Studies' programme that focused on language and academic writing, offered by the private HEI in the study (SA-pHEI, Departmental Head [1/2], interview). An extra year was added to studies in some instances – which students could do while in the workplace – in order to complete this programme before commencing further study. The institution also allowed its postgraduate Degree to be stretched over two years (rather than only one year), in order to provide greater flexibility (SA-pHEI, Senior official [RPL], interview).

FLPs through mode of delivery

Several respondents in the public HEI and UoT mentioned using different modes of delivery as key strategies for FLPs. A respondent from the public university for example, noted that flexible modes of delivery could include flexibility in time-tabling; support through tutorials and working through notes from previous exams; fully remote learning supported by online platforms, and hybrid modes of delivery. One of the frequently reported strategies for flexibility was that of 'blended learning', which includes e-learning and online learning elements in

addition to face-to-face delivery and other elements. A respondent indicated that blended learning could entail:

> A block and a blended approach, so we can have some kind of a block session ... [where students] probably come [to attend classes for] a week or three days [as well as undertake] blended learning. That is how we want to design that programme from the beginning (SA-HEI, Dean of Education, interview).

A UoT respondent noted that a blended learning approach had been adopted in the overall teaching and learning strategy of the institution, "the Teaching and Learning Plan is based on a blended learning approach at the university. So all our learning, all our teaching is guided by a blended learning approach" (SA-UoT, Head of innovative teaching and learning, interview). A public HEI noted similarly that:

> Blended learning [is] our default – but [the extent to which technology is used] depends on the kind of programme. [The teaching] is not always just a 50-50 [face-to-face/technology], and so on ... in certain instances, you might have a 75-25; in others, you would have 100% [online learning] (SA-HEI, Senior official [Academic], interview).

Other public university respondents echoed the idea that blended learning is an institution-wide initiative, for example: "even [for] our extended programmes …. part of the flexibility is also about the mode of presentation, [which] is the blended learning approach" (SA-HEI, Dean of Science, interview).

The reasons for making use of blended learning include the needs of working students undertaking postgraduate studies (SA-UoT, Senior official [Academic], interview); the ability to deliver programmes off-campus, especially for mature learners in industry (SA-UoT, Dean of Management Sciences, interview); and the use of technology for learning, because it is seen to be, "enabling student success" (SA-HEI, Senior official [Academic], interview).

However, due to the nature of the student population and the costs associated with purchasing data in South Africa, some students may struggle to access the electronic learning platforms. Institutions, therefore, need to take care to "enable students to work in blended learning environments" (SA-HEI, Head of innovative teaching and learning, interview). In rural South Africa, access to the internet is difficult; an alumnus respondent commented that "[the online learning platform] requires Wi-Fi to work – but Wi-Fi is not available in rural areas" (Sa-UoT, Alumni [4/6], interview).

Another danger in addition to the "epistemological divide" linked to socio-economic divisions, was that of disciplinary fragmentation: "Because the danger is that in what appears to be more digitally blended learning-friendly in practice, is seriously fragmenting the knowledge base of these disciplines" (SA-HEI, Immediate previous lifelong learning specialist [2/2], interview). This comment refers to the potential gaps that could be created by the delivery system, in the knowledge base of the discipline being taught and learned.

Online teaching and learning are also very demanding for lecturing staff.

> For me, one of the concerns related to [online learning], is that for those who are not involved in teaching online, they do not know how much time it takes ... and they do not take that into account when calculating workload. You almost need a different workload norm for flexible practices …. while e-learning provides alternative admission pathways, I think that sometimes the learner support that is required for that could be underestimated (SA-HEI, Dean-recommended respondent [2/3], interview).

However, despite these constraints, blended learning allows thousands of students to continue to access their learning materials in times of interruption, such as the 2015-16 'Fees must Fall' student protest movement in South African public higher education. An academic said the following, for example.

> Our students couldn't reach the campus, and we had to fall back more on the e-learning [so that] they could still gain good access, where they could still even do some online assessments so that they could still get admission to the examinations (SA-UoT, Head of innovative teaching and learning, interview).

There are other forms of flexible delivery. Some traditionally contact HEIs are now offering programmes that are entirely online, for students who do not have contact hours. A public HEI respondent gave the example of its Management Development Programme, which also has several starting dates per year. A UoT respondent noted that the UoT was in the process of investigating a similar arrangement.

A further strategy towards flexibility is 'extended timetabling': "So you might have classes in the evening, or repeat classes, or you might have blended learning ... anything that accommodates learners to be able to follow flexible pathways" (SA-UoT, Head of innovative teaching and learning, interview). Extended timetabling was common at all three HEIs in the study. Several students and alumni from the UoT acknowledged that they were only able to study because part-time after-hours classes were offered, for example:

> I'm doing the BTech Project Management [Degree] part-time. It's not the entire [UoT] that gives part-time [studies] – only Project Management, Business and Management studies. There's full-time and part-time [for these programmes]. Part-time is good, because I'm a full-time employee … The [face-to-face] classes are on a Saturday from 8h00-12h00" (SA-UoT, Student [1/6], interview).

In the past, the public university also offered well-subscribed part-time after-hours classes across several faculties (SA-HEI, Immediate previous lifelong learning specialist [2/2], interview). While such classes enabled students to study while meeting their family nd economic responsibilities, they had ceased after a number of decades due to the pressures on staff who had to teach in the daytime, and again in the evenings.

Flexible timetabling at the private HEI took a different form in that while class times were set, the facilities were made available to students at all hours of the day and night. The UoT students and alumni also noted that their computer laboratories and work spaces were open around the clock. A public HEI respondent noted extended library hours of up to midnight daily, including on weekends, in term times.

While the private HEI did not offer part-time studies as such, allowances were made regarding attendance, for students who were working and studying; the HEI did not publicise this flexibility but rather negotiated it on an individual basis (SA-pHEI, Senior official [Academic], interview).

Overall, blended learning is widely seen as an important solution to reach students who, under different circumstances, would not have been able to access higher education at all. Respondents appear largely to have "adopted blended learning approaches, and see the practice as [being] enabling in terms of flexible learning" (SA-HEI, Dean of Science, interview).

FLPs through articulation agreements

Noting that articulation can be understood in at least three ways, as being 'systemic', 'specific' and 'individual' (Lotz-Sisitka, 2015; DHET, 2017a; SAQA, 2018), the preceding sections on career advice, RPL, CAT, bridging courses and flexible delivery comprise some of the elements that support the articulation of individual students. Some of the challenges linked to 'systemic' articulation – the issues around qualifications that are designed to articulate yet do not always do so in practice – also emerged in the responses already referred to. In addition, respondents across the three HEIs in the study made many references to 'specific' or inter-institutional agreements.

Respondents in all three HEIs mentioned 'internal articulation' where students could transfer across programmes *within* the institutions. This practice, for example, "relates to internal arrangements between qualifications where it is meaningful to move from one programme to another" (SA-pHEI, Departmental Head [2/2], interview). Students who want to switch across programmes are told about and supported in the processes they need to follow (SA-pHEI, Senior official [Quality], interview).

The UoT respondents referred to several types of inter-institutional agreements. On one hand, UoTs in South Africa are members of a network – the South African Technology Network (SATN), where "inter-institutional communication and mutual recognition are encouraged – we do continue to try and keep things … well, to communicate at least between UOTs" (SA-UoT, Head of innovative teaching and learning, interview).

Several UoT respondents also referred to inter-institutional agreements with TVET Colleges. For example, "learning pathways that are arranged ... between the university and the [TVET] College … to enable access" (SA-UoT, Head of innovative teaching and learning, interview). For the Management Sciences and Engineering, there were MoUs between the UoT and all the TVET Colleges in the province, so that the College graduates with NQF Level 6 Diplomas achieved through the National Accredited Technical Education Diploma (NATED [N]) programme could articulate into the NQF Level 7 programmes at the UoT. The Dean of Management Sciences at the UoT confirmed these arrangements, noting that traditionally, a school-leaving certificate (at NQF Level 4) was required for admission. However, for the Management Sciences, learners with school Grade 9 (NQF Level 1) certificates as well as "NATED N3 or N4 from a TVET College … may qualify for admission to our first-year programme" (SA-UoT, Dean of Management Sciences, interview). The arrangement includes subject recognition (CAT) between the UoT and the College. In addition, "if you have an N5 or N6 from a TVET College ... where you also completed the Work-Integrated Learning component, then you can apply for subject recognition to ... get admission into a higher qualification. It works quite well" (SA-UoT, Dean of Management Sciences, interview). Further, some of the UoT's partnership agreements extend to the lecturing staff of the College: "It also assists the College lecturers in terms of development because faculties feel that the TVET lecturers are sometimes not adequately prepared, so ... there's this professional development that takes place" (SA-UoT, Senior official [Leadership], interview). For TVET graduates, such articulation routes significantly enhance access to higher education opportunities – however, the successes are not necessarily documented and publicised.

Further types of inter-institutional arrangements referred to by the UoT respondents included agreements with private colleges and HEIs, and with international institutions for student exchange (SA-UoT, Dean of Management Sciences, interview). These agreements were based on deep understanding of the content and substance of the articulating programmes: "beforehand, we would sit and look at both our subjects and theirs, and then have a partnership agreement that ... we will give [the student] credit … so that [s/he] knows that he is not coming back after six months [to] redo [the subjects]" (SA-UoT, Dean of Engineering, interview). Another respondent noted that, "my faculty has MoUs with two universities in the United States, one institute in India, two universities in Thailand, and we also have local MoUs with TVET Colleges (SA-UoT, Dean of Education, interview). In this case, the partnership facilitates the recognition and transfer of credits, but the degrees obtained by the South African students are granted by the UoT. This kind of arrangement is possible in South Africa because in the context of the NQF in the country, the integration of public and private higher education is encouraged; the higher education QA body has initiatives to support it and there has been increased student movement over the last 20 years, between public and private HEIs for subsequent qualifications (SAQA, 2019b).

Similar arrangements were reported to exist between the public university and Colleges in the province in which it is situated. For example, "when our university decided to open up the [Bachelor Degree], we then suggested that an approach be made to the neighbouring TVET Colleges that were offering the [cognate] N6 Diploma because there would appear to be a level of articulation options possible" (SA-HEI, Immediate previous lifelong learning spcialist [2/2], interview). These initiatives appear to have had a wider impact than originally envisaged. One respondent added that the university and the College will be collaborating in a partnership to offer the programme, "So, I've had some conversations with them because the Colleges already have these [qualification] certificates. But now it is a great opportunity for us to bring [their lecturing staff] on board to learn from them because they have the practical skills, and then [we] learn from each other in terms of research" (SA-HEI, Dean of Education, interview). The TVET College lecturers were able to take up Masters and PhD studies at the university.

Another type of inter-institutional articulation agreement was reported by the private HEI because its offerings currently extend to NQF Level 8 only. It has agreements with several public HEIs in the country, "for students who want to further their postgraduate studies because [it does not] "offer Masters and Doctoral Degrees" (SA-pHEI, Departmental Head [1/2], interview). These agreements are based on good relationships with the public institutions –

which it was possible to form because “we are all involved in each other's examination processes [and] we have a good relationship with [them] because they know the level of quality of our studies ... they moderate for us, and we moderate for them” (SA-pHEI, Departmental Head [1/2], interview).

The private HEI also has MoUs, “with institutions from other parts of the world, and that [adds to] mobility in our programmes” (SA-pHEI, Departmental Head [1/2], interview). In these partnerships, the institutions partner for the delivery of the programmes and at the end of the day, the students are certified by one of the partnering institutions.

Students in private HEIs in South Africa are not eligible for state funding but several private HEI respondents noted partnerships with industry and others, for student funding. For example:

> We do have access for partnerships with funding organisations that can help students apply for bursaries and student loans to get into our programmes. We’ve had a number of situations where we have seen how a student might be able to benefit from our programmes, and they might come from disadvantaged circumstances and may not be able to afford the fees (SA-pHEI, Departmental Head [1/2], interview).

Another respondent from the private HEI said, “the main partners, especially with the RPL students, are often financial for bursary application or internships” (SA-pHEI, Senior official [RPL], interview). A UoT respondent similarly indicated that:

> Obviously we work with employers ... we've got, I think, just in excess of 2000 employers on our database that we work with. [And] then [we have partnerships] with the Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs): this year we worked with 10 SETAs for funding (SA-UoT, Senior official [Advice], interview).

The ‘date nights’ of the private HEI with industry have already been noted, as have the industry partnerships for funding. The HEIs in the sample also have partnerships with professional bodies where members of these bodies serve on Advisory Boards to ensure that industry standards are upheld. The Advisory Boards seem to play an important role in decisions relating to RPL (SA-UoT, Dean of Health Sciences, interview).

Resilience of the students using the FLPs

It is worth noting an additional theme that emerged from the analysis of the interview comments, namely, that of the resilience of the students who have used the FLPs available to them. One alumnus in the public HEI for example, noted how an RPL process had given him an opportunity to continue his education: “In 1985 we had, ‘you have 45 minutes to disperse,

or we'll make front-page statistics of you'" (SA-HEI-Alumnus [5/5], interview) [referring to political protests in the *apartheid* years and the police handling of the protesters]. This respondent related how the political protests and turmoil during *apartheid* prevented him from completing his schooling. He gained access to the public HEI through RPL and is now doing doctoral studies at the university.

Another alumnus from the UoT focus group said, "I heard about it [the RPL process] and decided to try. I've got my N6 [qualification], I did my Diploma[44]. I tried to apply at [the UoT], but I couldn't get directly into the BTech [Degree]. Then I heard about the RPL" (SA-UoT, Student [5/6], interview). There were similar comments referring to how Supplemental Instruction, ECPs, CAT and flexible provision had enabled studies at the UoT. An alumnus of the private HEI also captured the value of her RPL process and being allowed additional completion time: "the experience was an incredibly good one for me, as I was not expecting to be able to finish my Degree in two years. At this stage of my life, trying to work and look after my family and study, that one year made an enormous difference to me" (SA-pHEI, Alumnus [1/1], online interview). Similar sentiments were shared by one of the mature students at the public university:

> I'm an only child: I lost my father tragically – he was murdered when I was 12 [years old]. So at the age of 12, I left home – we were a religious family – I went to do Islamic Studies. After 12 years, I came back. I spent two years with my mother and [step] father, then my [step-] father died. RPL changed me. By the grace of God – I have two jobs; one does not pay enough. I have a wife. I want to be in the High Court – I want to be the next Gerrie Nel [one of the best lawyers in South Africa, and well known for winning tough cases and enabling justice]. This would not have been my aspiration if it weren't for RPL (SA-HEI, Student [2/4], interview).

Most of the student and alumni respondents noted that you had to be committed to the RPL process, to succeed. For example, "the time to meet was Friday morning, but I came any time [to speak to my mentors]. I didn't have a computer – I stay in [named the area]; I had to sleep in [another area] to get access to a computer cafe. I had to be committed; I could not use my circumstances as an excuse to fail" (SA-HEI, Alumna [2/5], interview).

[44] After the theoretical component of the National Accredited Technical Education (NATED or N6) qualification, and the successful completion of 18 months of structured work experience, learners are awarded what was the 'N Diploma'. This qualification is in the process of being phased out, as qualifications are being restructured to align to the post-2010 revised NQF Sub-Frameworks.

Many of the HEI staff respondents in the sample noted that RPL candidates turned out to be 'good students'. One public HEI respondent indicated, "in most cases, you find that it's mature people [who come for RPL] who know what they want. And in some cases, they do very well. In *most* cases, they excel …. So that is my experience with it' (SA-HEI, Immediate previous lifelong learning specialist [1/2], interview). Another respondent commented similarly, "RPL students [might or] might not be the most brilliant, but they are dedicated, hard workers and that often is the most important thing" (SA-pHEI, Senior official [RPL], interview).

4.3.4. National policies that support FLPs

The NQF policy suite and national 'policy basket' were discussed in Chapter 3 of this report. It was clear from the interviews that the three participating institutions are keenly aware of the policies and their impact on the HEIs. A respondent from the UoT, for example, said:

> the Higher Education Act … we cannot operate outside of that, the transformation paper – the 1997 one [RSA, 1997], the NQF Act of 2008 [RSA, 2008], the articulation policy itself [DHET, 2017a], the policy on the differentiation [DHET, 2014], we [take direction from these] …. [Other key policies include the] HEQSF [Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework], the post-school policy [White Paper for PSET, DHET, 2013] ... but also the NSDS-3 [National Skills Development Strategy 3), are important, and the National Development Plan [NDP], are vitally important (SA-UoT, Head of innovative teaching and learning, interview).

It is evident that national policies have had a profound impact on the introduction, implementation and continued development of FLPs in the South African higher education system – public and private. All of the respondents were not only aware of the national policies; they were aligning institutional policies to these, in an active way, "the national policies guide in terms of how to develop institutional RPL policies ... we stick to them" (SA-pHEI, Senior official [RPL], interview). For the private HEI, compliance with national policies is linked to its right to practice. Another private HEI respondent commented that, "especially if you are a private [institution]. No, we have to be [compliant]; otherwise, we cannot practice as an education institution (SA-pHEI, Senior official [Academic], interview).

While the national department policies for RPL and articulation (DHET, 2016a, 2017a) and NQF authority policies for RPL and CAT (SAQA, 2013a, 2014b, 2016a, 2019e) are used within the HEIs, and shape the implementation of RPL, CAT and articulation in these entities, the HEIs are compelled to align their practices with the policies of the higher education QA

body policy for accreditation purposes, despite key differences between this policy and those of the national department and NQF authority. Thus, while RPL, CAT and articulation are mandatory – in line with the QA body policy, a maximum of 10% of a student cohort may enter via RPL, and after an RPL and/or CAT process, 50% of programmes must be completed at the awarding HEIs[45]. Several respondents across the three HEIs in the sample referred to these rules, and challenges linked to the rules. As already noted, while some HEIs support these rules, many do not.

4.3.5. Institutional policies that support FLPs

The three HEIs in the study all have institutional policies and procedures that provide for FLPs, although the policies are not necessarily named as such. All HEIs in South Africa must have institutional policies for RPL and CAT and in most cases, institutions thought that these practices were "pretty standard" (SA-HEI, Senior official [Academic], interview). The institutional policies cover a range of aspects such as RPL, CAT, articulation, alternative admission arrangements, recognition of work experience, age exemptions, advanced standing, and credit transfer. For example, one of the private HEI respondents said, "[we have an] Admissions Policy – it includes RPL and CAT – a Special Admissions Guide; Assessment Policy, [which] includes resubmission ... and [the] Teaching and Learning Policy" (SA-pHEI, Senior official [RPL], interview).

A UoT respondent indicated that the UoT has institutional policies covering flexible practices, "[For] the RPL, we have a policy for the institution [but] the RPL is done at the faculty level because faculties know what they require" (SA-UoT, Senior official [Academic], interview). The CAT policy, "supports transfers from other institutions, from programme to programme. Also, internal programmes – from programme to programme internally" (SA-UoT, Senior official [Leadership], interview). All faculties in the UoT are obliged to comply with the institutional RPL and CAT policies.

Other policies considered to be part of the suite of policies that address FLPs include, "the e-learning policies of the university …. I think the fact that e-learning is considered to be an academically acceptable platform for learning [is positive for FLPs]. I think if anything – that's been mainstreamed" (SA-HEI, Dean-recommended respondent [2/3], interview). Institutional policies, particularly in the two public HEIs, provide for Extended Curriculum Programmes

[45] These rules are from the QA body policy, and do not feature in those of the NQF authority or national department.

(ECPs) at faculty level; ECPs are considered to be FLPs (SA-HEI, Dean of Education, interview).

From the repetition of information across the interviews in all three HEIs in the sample, but to the greatest extent in the UoT, it was clear that the policies and practices were implemented institution-wide, "it's all part of the institutional policies. We really do not have faculty-specific regulations. We are very, all faculties, in fact, we are very cautious not to develop our own sets of rules which differ from each other ... so no, it's institutional" (SA-UoT, Dean of Management Sciences, interview).

In addition, it was clear that the institutions in the sample were at relatively mature stages of policy enhancement and implementation. This view is supported by some of the reflective comments made, for example:

> We have ... refined our policies and I think that they are quite useful ... the RPL Policy is part of the Admissions Policy. But then, we have a Special Admissions Guide which is really useful. It is quite easy to go through the process, but there is also a degree of flexibility within that process. So the decisions, or the conversations that we have around entry for special admissions, are fairly flexible, which is a good thing. The policies are concrete enough to know what we are trying to achieve but flexible enough for us to be able to address the needs of individuals (SA-pHEI, Departmental Head [1/2], interview).

A UoT respondent said similarly: "I think that a lot has been done, and it's not just on paper. It's happening ... the pathways to admission [are] available. So it's not just in writing – things happen. Actions speak louder than words" (SA-UoT, Senior official [Advice], interview). There was evidence of refinements done, for example: "We had an RPL policy only, then Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) [policy], and then the policy on Articulation. At our last Senate meeting, we merged the two policies together so that we [now] have one policy called 'Articulation Policy' (SA-UoT, Senior official [Academic], interview).

Institutional policies tried to encompass every aspect of the 'student walk' or "learning journey" (SA-HEI, Senior official [Academic], interview). The journey was understood to start with admission and continue through to graduation, and included continued support throughout. A UoT respondent pointed out, for example, that: "the admissions policy, of [the UoT], [which] makes provision for [everything] that we've spoken about: 'How are students admitted?' It is [also] contained in that policy that if a student is not making progress, [s/he] has to go to for support and all those things" (SA-UoT, Senior official [Advice], interview).

Similarly, in the public HEI, the institutional policies deal with criteria for the different flexible routes that are available for example, "in our official document, which is the Calendar [this is usually referred to as a university handbook/ course-guides in other parts of the world], you would see [the criteria for] qualifying for RPL and … ECP" (SA-HEI, Dean of Education, interview).

There was clearly institutional policy for FLPs across the three HEIs and an awareness of the importance of system flexibility. While FLPs are typically driven by senior management in all three HEIs, teaching staff are drawn into the processes through their participation in the committees that oversee the FLPs. A public university respondent indicated for example, "[we have] a policy clearing the ground towards understanding and implementing 'Flexible Learning and Teaching' [practices] (FLTP)" (SA-HEI, Dean of Science, interview). The university had already piloted FLTP over a five-year period between 2011 and 2015 (Walters, 2015a; 2015b). All three HEIs had developed and implemented suites of policies and procedures that made their systems more flexible than was previously the case.

Importantly, the HEIs have aligned their institutional policies to the national counterpart policies. A UoT respondent claimed for example that, "I do know that from that … national policy, there has been [a set] of rules … that we have to follow, and those rules have been adopted" (SA-UoT, Senior official [Leadership], interview).

4.3.6. Other aspects that support FLPs

Other practices reported by the respondents under the umbrella of FLPs include the extensive support provided to students, in various ways. One, already mentioned, was 'Supplemental Instruction (SI)', in which "specialised [additional] guidance and assistance [are given] to make sure that [the students] really succeed" (SA-UoT, Dean of Health Sciences, interview). The other two HEIs in the study describe similar practices as 'Student Support' in various forms. An example of student support is when the Engineering and ICT faculties take charge of additional 'numeracy' initiatives across the university, so that students, "have the opportunity to attend those" (SA-UoT, Dean of Education, interview). These practices were introduced because:

> [We do] not [want] to lose the students again because they are coming with a deficit, or because of the type of schooling they get due to low socio-economic backgrounds. We know, internationally, that socio-economic backgrounds always … impact on the type of education you receive … [We] work hard with it to make sure the [student's abilities are] refined (SA-UoT, Dean of Education, interview).

It must be noted that while there is a particular focus on FLPs, all three of the participating HEIs made clear that their support systems are available for all of their students, regardless of how they gained access to the system. Respondents in all three institutions also made clear that students who gained access or progression via FLPs would never be disadvantaged because they had followed these routes. In most cases, the lecturers were not even aware of the FLPs that students had followed. A UoT respondent further expressed the feeling that institutions are obliged to assist students because "[when] we accept these students, we have [to have] a support system to make [sure that] these students succeed" (SA-UoT, Dean of Education, interview).

In the student and alumni focus group discussions, all of the respondents elaborated on the types of support they had received. For example, "[the applications' official] told me about the Supplemental Instruction opportunities. [The UoT] pays – and you don't have to pay anything back … and if you didn't do [certain subjects] in high school, they offer extras. For example, English literature" (SA-UoT, Student [4/6], interview). An alumnus agreed that the additional support was helpful, and said "I had to do different subjects – like Physics and Chemistry – which I never did before. What really helped, was the [Supplemental Instruction]" (SA-UoT, Alumnus [5/6], interview).

Many of the public university respondents were unequivocal about the need for FLPs, especially given the under-preparedness of students for higher education, the hardship in their lives, and the need for non-traditional pacing. For example:

> [So] there's a mixed bag [of factors], but the overwhelming majority of the applicants are students that have some sort of financial, social reason, economic reason, for failing …. And therefore are in need of additional support. [The support could involve] counselling, access to food parcels, access [to] professionals that can help [students] with literacy, numeracy, and all of those additional things. That's for everybody (SA-HEI, Dean of Science, interview).

A private HEI respondent also noted that the institution provided second chance opportunities where, "if the student did not qualify for this course and we have given him six months in the Degree, and then if s/he cannot cope, we automatically [offer the] Higher Certificate" (SA-HEI, Dean of Science, interview) – as a stand-alone or stepping-stone offering.

Learning outcomes

It was clear from the responses that the NQF plays a central role in guiding RPL, CAT and articulation processes. The NQF Level Descriptors are designed to act as a guide and a starting

point for, *inter alia*, writing learning outcomes and associated assessment criteria for qualifications and part qualifications, pegging qualifications at appropriate levels, and, used together with purpose statements, outcomes and assessment criteria – assisting learners to gain admission through RPL (SAQA, 2014c:4). All three HEIs in the sample mentioned that learning outcomes are important benchmarks for RPL, CAT and articulation, for example: "learning outcomes are the outcomes of the programme. And [students] are judged against that as well. You cannot take the RPL students without considering the outcomes" (SA-HEI, Senior official [Quality], interview). A respondent at the private HEI said similarly, "we need to be able to see what level students would be able to fit into … [And] whether or not their portfolios ... meet those learning outcomes at the various levels" (SA-pHEI, Departmental Head [1/2], interview). A respondent at the UoT indicated that for credit transfer:

> The faculty requests [that] the students [get] the syllabus of the institution. The faculty then compares that syllabus with ours to make sure that the syllabuses of both institutions are aligned so that students can be able to be credited and graduate with us ... [and] learning outcomes are part of the syllabus (SA-UoT, Senior official [Academic], interview).

Articulation

'Articulation' is a key principle of the NQF in South Africa; it is provided for in the NQF Act itself (RSA, 2009), in a dedicated policy (DHET, 2017a), and in the NQF policy suite (SAQA, 2012a, 2012b, 2013b, 2014b, 2016a, 2020b and 2020c). While articulation featured in the NQF policy basket from the inception of the NQF, organisations implemented it together with the other aspects of the NQF, over time, and to differing extents; it is embedded in differing degrees (DPME, 2018). Although a National Articulation Baseline Study (SAQA, 2018) was conducted and revealed the existence of extensive articulation initiatives, some national role-players interviewed for the current study were not aware of the extent to which articulation is being implemented. Institutional respondents, however, made several references to 'articulation'. A public university respondent noted, for example, its response to a request from the national department:

> This is their [national department's] request. [We] responded to a document from the [national department] where they requested [the HEI] to give access, to widen access by agreements with TVET Colleges, you understand. This is what we've done … That is how we articulate (SA-HEI, Senior official [Quality], interview).

Quality assurance requirements

The stringent quality assurance requirements of the higher education QA body were also noted frequently. Public and private HEIs are subject to its rules and regulations, in addition to those of the national department and the NQF authority. A private HEI respondent, for example, said: "We are recognised by [the higher education QA body]. Therefore, as part of [this body], you have to have an RPL policy [amongst other prescripts]" (SA-pHEI, Departmental Head [2/2], interview). A public university respondent said similarly: "Besides the RPL policies, and the CAT ... of course, we need to conform to the policies around [the QA body accreditation system] and [NQF authority's] own policies, when it comes to both academic planning and the quality management (SA-HEI, Senior official [Academic], interview). The UoT officials are highly "cognizant of the national policies" (SA-UoT, Senior official [Leadership], interview); all responded with comments along the lines of, "we cannot divorce our institutional frameworks from the national policies – we always try to be in line with the national policies and to adapt ours accordingly" (SA-UoT, Head of innovative teaching and learning, interview).

Monitoring the implementation of FLPs: institutional voices

The three HEIs participating in the study all have internal monitoring processes for monitoring their FLPs.

The private HEI, for example, indicated that it uses internal and external moderators to ensure that its RPL practices have high standards:

> [We undertake] internal moderation with different lecturers looking at the work of others, [and] external moderators who then check if that is [the marks] they would [award] – according to our policies and institutional culture – and then the verifiers will verify the process. That process is very reliable, and it is unlikely that students will appeal the mark because of all of these checks at different layers (SA-pHEI, Senior official [Statistics], interview).

In addition, the private HEI uses student monitoring to review its systems and to determine which students are struggling. The head of quality assurance provides feedback after major assessments, and compiles statistics, at which point, "we would be able to see how our programme is addressing or accommodating the needs of students who might struggle" (SA-pHEI, Departmental Head [1/2], interview). As the institution is small in size, the quality assurance manager tracks the academic performance of each the students, using Excel, to monitor their performance across assessments such as tests and exams. Should there be any indication of declining performance, interventions are put in place quickly. These include a

one-on-one meeting with the students and in some cases, a student's sponsor, parent or funder is brought in for a discussion.

A UoT respondent noted similarly that the UoT applied strict rules for FLPs; it tried to:

> … close all loopholes, especially with RPL … [and] with subject recognition running a close second". [The UoT] puts experienced academics on the RPL panels, they sit for hours working through those files. Because with each RPL application, the applicant must submit a comprehensive portfolio of evidence …. [If the institution does not monitor the progress of the successful candidates] you open yourself up for damaging the academic integrity [of the process], you must be very responsible (SA-UoT, Dean of Management Sciences, interview).

The quality assurance managers in the HEIs in the sample appear to play key roles in the monitoring of FLPs. The monitoring of ECP implementation is strictly controlled through the national department's earmarked or ring-fenced funding requirements. The staff responsible must produce records that account for all academic, curricular, pedagogic, assessment and administrative functions and activities associated with the ECP programmes (CPUT, 2018). Consequently, the ECPs are monitored, "through the formal report to [the national department], including the number of students we had; how many have passed and failed, and how many have dropped out" (SA-UoT, Senior official [Academic], interview).

However, other related initiatives are not necessarily routinely monitored and/or evaluated – a UoT respondent, for example, indicated that the UoT has recently appointed an institutional researcher, "so that we can evaluate the implementation of these interventions, so that it's evidence-based" (SA-UoT, Senior official [Leadership], interview).

External factors

In addition to internal monitoring arrangements, institutions were clearly influenced by external factors, resulting in changes to institutional approaches. A UoT respondent mentioned how the institution tried to keep abreast of developments, especially those in the TVET sector, so that it could respond appropriately:

> I think the sort of practice that is most important is that we keep being informed about the quality of the different pathways that we do allow. So if there are changes in TVET and in the different international standards or the exams that come to us, we are informed, and so that we know what is happening there (SA-UoT, Dean of Engineering, interview).

Professional bodies in South Africa also play a role in ensuring that flexible pathways meet the requirements for professionalization; recognised professional bodies are governed by NQF policy (SAQA, 2012b; 2020b). Several HEI respondents, especially in the UoT, mentioned the importance of working closely with professional bodies. The professional bodies undertake accreditation or inspection visits where they expect to see the results of, amongst others, the flexible learning pathway initiatives. As one respondent put it:

> As far as I know, there are no issues [with our] flexible pathways, as long as we can, with confidence, state that it is meeting the [professional body] criteria. The Engineering Council [ECSA] is regulating the profession, and … is also involved in universities, Universities of Technology, TVET Colleges as well. So they are aware of our initiatives, and they actually also want this [the flexible pathways] (SA-UoT, Dean of Engineering, interview).

Tracking equity

Equity trends are tracked in higher education (see Section 2 of this report). As one respondent said, "equity is always part of the aims in this country. It goes without saying actually" (SA-National department official [inclusivity], interview). As explained in Chapter 2 above, public HEIs must report to the national department on their figures regarding students in different population and gender groups, poor students and students with disabilities. There are additional aspects to include, as noted by a UoT respondent, "I am thinking in terms of race, gender, as well as [the] equity of access and success" (SA-UoT, Senior official [Quality], interview).

Private HEIs do not necessarily track equity but must supply their data to the national department and the NQF authority, for the purposes of reporting and analysis. Private HEI data include learning achievements against the qualifications and part-qualifications they offer, together with the related information on their students' population groups, gender, disability and achievements via RPL, amongst others. One respondent from the private HEI in the study noted that it is exclusive without seeking to be so: "the reality is that we are private, our fees are high. We probably do not get as many applications as the public [HEIs] would" (SA-pHEI, Senior official [Academic], interview). Nevertheless, this HEI actively seeks to open access to disadvantaged students:

> We drop the fees to be able to accommodate them. In other instances, we have been able to partner or broker with industry to be able to sponsor [students]. So in the past, for example, we have had a situation where a company would agree to pay half of the

> fees, and we would make up the rest, because that student has a lot of potential (SA-pHEI, Departmental Head [1/2], interview).

Another respondent from the private HEI explained that in other instances, the private HEI has not turned anyone away who sought access through flexible pathways:

> We have always made a plan to either put them in the first year or second year. We do not have a big number of applicants, but if it gets to that point, we would prefer equity candidates (SA-pHEI, Departmental Head [2/2], interview).

The data in the Higher Education Quality Committee Information System (HEQCIS) – the data system for private HEIs in South Africa – show that the student body in private higher education has indeed shifted. According to the database of the NQF authority, the percentage of African students in private HEIs grew from just over a quarter in 1999, to around half in 2019, while the percentages of Indian and Coloured learners declined slightly, and the percentages of White learners remained around half.

The public university and the UoT in the study are proud of the fact that their student bodies are predominantly made up of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The extensive RPL and blended learning initiatives, and the 'fairy-godmother' initiative[46] amongst others in the public HEI attest to its attempts to meet the needs of its students. The UoT respondents made many comments relating to equity. One UoT respondent said for example, "if we did not have the MoUs with these TVET Colleges, we would not be recognising those students for access, we would only be looking at the students who [come through traditional routes] (SA-UoT, Senior official [Quality], interview). Another respondent said similarly of the MoUs, that: "it is allowing us to get students [other than] from normal academic schools, from technically-oriented TVET [Colleges], and even international students. So it is a positive experience" (SA-UoT, Dean of Engineering, interview). A third said: "We have progressed so far in terms of transformation [towards greater equity] – I'm not saying we are the finished product – but there is continuous improvement of things that you can see and appreciate" (SA-UoT, Senior official [Advice], interview).

To ensure that its equity objectives remained front-of-mind, the UoT had established a transformation office: "We need to adhere to the national imperatives. I mean there is evidence that we've done so, and we'll continue to do so" (SA-UoT, Senior official [Advice], interview).

[46] In this initiative, students can contact anonymous donors through a dedicated number, and receive financial and other assistance.

Another UoT respondent noted how far it came come in this regard: "I mean, if you look at the composition of our student population, I don't think equity is a challenge any more regarding that. You know, the access has been widened" (SA-UoT, Dean of Management Sciences, interview).

The UoT had also instituted gender equity imperatives. A respondent spoke about a programme focussing on preparing women for leadership. "It's like succession planning – it is managed through the talent office. So they take women, and then they develop them for future leadership positions" (SA-UoT, Senior official [Advice], interview). There was a similar initiative in the Faculty of Engineering.

> We have started 'Women in Engineering', a sort of forum where the women are going to schools and [telling] the girls that 'we are in the Engineering field, we can do this, you can do it as well'. So once they [the women students] are here, they are fine. I think we are sitting at, depending on which field, between 29% and 34% [women], but it was much worse when I started here. I think we were about 14% [then]" (SA-UoT, Dean of Engineering, interview).

Equity of access emerged as a key issue as the higher education system is increasingly confronted with the changing demographic of its student population. With the successful campaign by students in South Africa, for 'Free Higher Education'[47] – increasing numbers of poor but academically deserving students have entered public higher education. Despite the increased access, however, many students may be unable to take full advantage of being at the HEIs, mainly due to their lack of financial resources. Public HEIs try to enable access to learning once students have 'physical' access; this was the case in the public university as well as in the UoT in the sample:

> We try to achieve equity through ... for instance, on the e-learning site. We do make the WiFi available to students on campus ... We do have our open labs on the campus where they can come in and use a computer, get access to the Internet, get access to the learning material, get access to the online learning, and all that stuff. So in that sense we do … It is always in the back of our minds, we try to make equity the objective of that (SA-UoT, Head of innovative teaching and learning, interview).

[47] Over previous decades, but most intensely since 2015, the 'Fees-Must-Fall' movement, with its various student protests, has gained ground in South Africa.

The issue of equity for differently-abled people was raised by only one respondent, suggesting that institutions still need to consider the access needs of these students.

> I can say that flexible learning [potentially] is [relevant here] because the student doesn't have sight or doesn't have good hearing and so on. They provide technologies, as well as ways to support those students and to make it possible for them to follow a pathway throughout their whole academic [journey] here at the university (SA-UoT, Head of innovative teaching and learning, interview).

Another respondent raised an issue which is a challenge for many students seeking to succeed in higher education in the country – that of language. There are 11 official languages in the country, and English is the main language of instruction in South African HEIs and TVET Colleges.

> The one [aspect], which is difficult is the language issue. You must remember there is no textbook in Engineering in Zulu, Sotho, or other languages. This is not only a South African [problem] but [in] many African countries too. In the University of Swaziland, everything is done in English, not in Swazi, despite that the one dominant language [in the country] is Swazi (SA-UoT, Senior official [Statistics], interview).

4.4. Evaluation of effectiveness, enablers and barriers

4.4.1. Effectiveness of FLPs

The staff currently working in all three participating HEIs said that they did not routinely undertake formal evaluations of their FLPs. In most cases, it appeared that the institutions inferred effectiveness from the immediate results of implementing these practices. For example, the private HEI indicated that its use of the Higher Certificate as a bridging and access qualification, is reasonably successful, "the effectiveness of the Higher Certificate, at the moment, is that half [of the students] will enter into the Degree. The students who came in through our Higher Certificate first and then [have] done the three [year] Degree, do exceptionally well in the industry" (SA-pHEI, Senior official [Quality], interview).

More than one respondent mentioned the success rates of RPL candidates. A private HEI respondent said, "[Even] if they [the students] … do not qualify [initially], they usually do well [after entering via RPL]" (SA-pHEI, Senior official [Statistics], interview). Another respondent said:

> I actually prefer the RPL students because they come in a lot more mature, they are ready to work, and they have done something before, so by the time they come to us

> and want RPL, they are hundred per cent sure that they want to do [the course]. They are much more focused and easier to work with ... [they] usually end up graduating top of the class (SA-pHEI, Departmental Head [2/2], interview).

Similarly, a public university respondent estimated that "about 80% to 90% of the students [who were] admitted into RPL, [were] successful" (SA-HEI, Senior official [Quality], interview). Another public university respondent said:

> They [the RPL candidates] were so very successful [in their] studies …. As we had successful admissions, and those students who were successfully admitted started to … get through the first, second, third year, then graduate, the stories would go into the broader community. And so on average, for every person that we admitted into the university [via RPL] in the last five years … you would see a minimum of 10 others who would seek applications (SA-HEI, Immediate previous lifelong learning specialist [2/2], interview).

Since employability is such a key consideration in South Africa, gaining employment could be seen as another measure of effectiveness. The private HEI indicated that:

> 80% plus of our students would find employment in a cognate area ... one of the mechanisms that we try, (but again it is informal), [is that] upon graduation, we would speak to the students … to find out what they are doing. And on the basis of that, it is 80% plus [employed] (SA-pHEI, Senior official [Academic], interview).

One respondent who had played a key role in setting up the RPL office in the public university mentioned that:

> After the first year, [there] was a formal internal evaluation. After the second year, there was an external evaluation … [a professor with a PhD in RPL] did the second evaluation … And then about three or four years later, we had our external evaluation. We began to do our own internal tracking studies with the [registrar's office]. We were constantly exposed [to good RPL practices] through international conferences and correspondence with international [experts] (SA-HEI, Immediate previous lifelong learning specialist [2/2], interview).

The tracking studies referred to involved keeping track of how the students entering through RPL performed, and where they ended up in the institution. This process was largely driven by the former head of the unit and was an institutionalised practice.

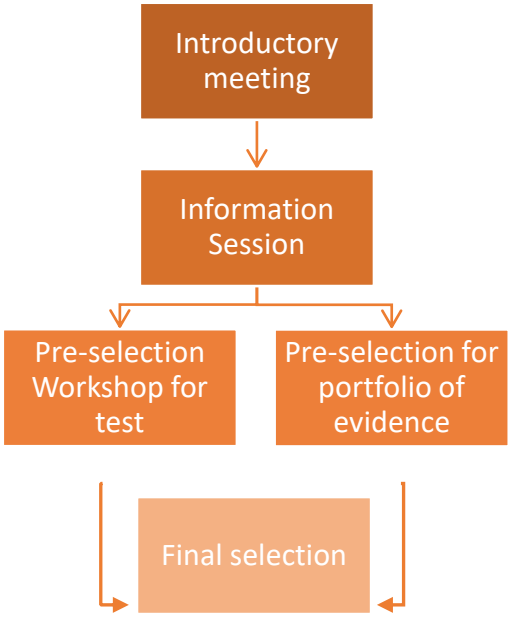
The experiences of CAT were more mixed. One respondent indicated that he had found that CAT candidates often struggle (SA-UoT, Dean of Management Sciences, interview). Others

commented on the opportunities provided by CAT, "[the CAT system is effective] because it gives a student a chance to study … without having to repeat certain subjects that he or she has done before" (SA-UoT, Dean of Health Sciences, interview). Another said:

> The requirements are well documented, so the students know exactly what to do, [what] to get from their original university, so, I think it's working well for those students who are applying and are admitted. And the other thing, that helps, is the open communications between the institutions because institutions are collaborating very well on matters of that nature (SA-UoT, Senior official [Leadership], interview).

Some felt that the national quality assurance processes safeguarded FLP practices, "the quality system has ensured that the students who are coming in are still meeting the minimum criteria and that we do not have to lower our standards within the programme to accommodate the students from different pathways" (SA-UoT, Dean of Engineering, interview). Another said similarly, "I think we are really trying our best to diversify entrance into the university and we quality assure that. Because of the quality element, we are not as flexible as [it would seem], despite [what] the political agenda is" (SA-UoT, Dean of Education, interview). A further UoT response in this regard was, "We are able to give examples of good practices. We are able to show our support; we are able to give evidence" (SA-HEI, Head of innovative teaching and learning, interview). One public university respondent explained how quality assurance was built into the RPL process at the HEI. Figure 32 illustrates the process.

Figure 31. Quality assurance through the RPL process using a 'pastoral' approach



Source: SA-HEI-Immediate previous lifelong learning specialist [2/2], interview.

Figure 32 illustrates the RPL process in the public university, which starts with an 'enquiry', either by appointment or 'walk-in'. Front-line RPL Advisors respond to each individual enquiry in the home-language of the applicant. In this introductory meeting, an initial application is made, which includes the applicant's highest school qualification and work experience. Applicants are given the institution's RPL policy and criteria.

Information sessions are then held, in workshop format, in which a two way exchange occurs between the applicants and the RPL Coordinators. At the end of this process some applicants are invited to the next step, the pre-selection phase. Through telling the story of their lives, the applicants:

> …begin to see quite quickly, those whose … experience – formal, informal, non-formal learning – has led them almost more predictably to university-level study … The sessions are absolutely crucial for giving people some of the clues or the codes, to university-level learning (SA-HEI, Immediate previous lifelong learning specialist [2/2], interview).

There are two routes for admission through RPL at the public university, namely, Tests for Access and Placement (TAP) and the Portfolio Development Course (PDC). Each admissions route has its own pre-selection workshop.

> 150 or so would [be selected] … about 100 on the portfolio course, and about 50 writing the tests. The key distinction being that for the test candidates, the workshop took a much more formal code …. The TAP route includes language and numeracy tests while in the PDC workshops analytic skills are assessed and honed through debate and textual analysis. Following the pre-selection sessions, the final criteria are the grading of the tests and scripts. By [that] time … the total number is down to 10% [of the original annual 1500-1700 candidates]. Finally, less than 5% of those who apply, are getting in through this window [the actual intake into Degree studies via RPL in a single year, was around 75 students] …. Applicants who were not successful at the end of this lengthy process were given information on the nearest TVET College and encouraged to improve their literacies (SA-HEI, Immediate previous lifelong learning specialist [2/2], interview).

In further discussion about this 'pastoral' method, the challenges of the 'digital divide' were noted.

> [With online RPL application and portfolio development] we see the danger of the digitization … unless it's rooted in a pedagogy that understands Social Science, or the

> narratives of Adult Learning, you're going to get a fragmentation and all you're going to get is a privileging of the academic literacies. So those who may have … a familiarity with digital and with academic literacies may well get through the new format, but the danger [of the digital] throughout the university – not just for RPL … is that it supports the fragmentation of knowledge, the fragmentation of learning. And … the digital divide, those who've got serious access to digital learning capabilities and facilities are going to succeed in these places. Those who do not have data, do not have the equipment and the machinery, I'm afraid are not going to be able to cope with a solidly online, or even a blended learning version of these programs, [whatever the discipline] (SA-HEI, Immediate previous lifelong learning specialist [2/2], interview).

Student assessment of the quality and benefits of FLPs

Participants in the student and alumni focus groups of the public university praised their RPL experiences highly, "I've come back to do my Masters and PhD [degrees]. The RPL programme facilitated all this. It's important to study; I wanted to study. RPL facilitated it. If not for that, I could not have done what I did" (SA-HEI, Alumnus [1/5], interview). Another alumna explained how her career trajectory completely changed as a result of her gaining access through RPL.

> I've finished three degrees. I've been offered a scholarship with [prestigious foreign university] to study water and soil contamination. In Honours, for the Honours Degree, I registered with the Department of Geography – I did the full-time course, and then I added myself as a student in the Water Sciences Department. I passed four plus eight modules, and I contributed to a peer-reviewed book. My Honours work is Chapter 5 of the book (SA-HEI, Alumnus [4/5], interview).

These experiences are mirrored in the focus group interviews with the other institutions in the study.

> I changed my career path completely, from sitting in a drawing office, I began to lecture, and I have a side business doing contracting work and content development, which is something I never imagined doing before my studies at [the private HEI]. What I am doing now, is very fulfilling to me (SA-pHEI, Alumna [1/1], online response).

It is unsurprising that these experiences are overwhelmingly positive. The very framing of RPL as an inclusive pathway results in many of those who have experienced it thinking of it as a second chance, an opportunity to steer their lives in a different direction.

Views of the success or otherwise of FLPs

Thus, it appears that, anecdotally at least, institutions and students find FLPs effective.

> If you look at the statistics, to see the growing numbers of TVET learners that get access into our learning programmes, then at least that is, to me, an indication that it's working … this pathway is working, because it's really growing from year to year. [In terms of] subject recognition [CAT], it's difficult to measure the effectiveness, but, let's say there's no evidence that it's not effective (SA-UoT, Dean of Management Sciences, interview).

A respondent at the public university made a similar comment.

> I think we have become effective in the last couple of years ... when it comes to the regulatory system, our system is very effective. I'm very happy about the system that we put in place [for FLPs], because [FLPs] are the way to go. It's the future (SA-HEI, Senior official [Academic], interview).

Reported enablers of FLPs

Respondents were asked to talk about the enablers and barriers to FLPs. Like the national interviewees, they were also asked to choose from a list of possible enablers such as political will, institutional leadership and management structures, distribution of authority, an enabling institutional culture, institutional autonomy, targets, the involvement of student unions, support from experts and resources (human, budget, time and equipment), and inter-institutional cooperation agreements, amongst others.

Organisational culture and leadership as enablers

The institutional responses showed organisational culture and leadership to be strong enablers of FLPs. Many institutional respondents in the sample said that their institutions had internal cultures that were enabling for the FLPs, for example, "[enabling] organisational values, attitudes, professional norms" (SA-pHEI, Departmental Head [2/2], interview), and "I think [the organisation has] political will and determination" (SA-UoT, Senior official [Academic], interview; SA-HEI, Immediate previous lifelong learning specialist [1/2], interview).

Moreover, there was leadership and management support.

> The fact that there are MoUs between the [UoT] and the various TVET Colleges show that there is willingness on the part of management to support these [pathways]. The fact that we have our academic staff who are involved, together with assessments and

> graduation, in the implementation of the RPL, shows that there is willingness on the part of the institution (SA-UoT, Senior official [Quality], interview).

As another respondent put it: “you're asking if institutions hold the key to an alternative way. If you don't have FLPs built into the culture and history of your institution, I think you're going to go in circles” (SA-HEI, Immediate previous lifelong learning specialist [2/2], interview).

Other respondents further pointed to the importance of leadership and strategic support, “the VC [Vice-Chancellor] is very much in favour of articulation from TVET [Colleges], and he has established very good links” (SA-UoT, Dean of Management Sciences, interview), and “the leadership would make sure that everybody is on board and lead the way so that people can follow that vision that [he has]” (SA-UoT, Dean of Health Sciences, interview). In this regard, a respondent from the public university pointed out that:

> You can't do flexible learning provisioning, if you don't have buy-in, I mean, strategic support and the buy-in [for flexible learning]; the vision is much broader than just RPL, [because] student success is everybody's business ... that is quite a powerful part of our retention and success framework (SA-HEI, Senior official [Academic], interview).

Targets as enablers

Targets were said to encourage FLPs and transforming the demographics of HEIs.

> Looking at the future, what kind of professional do we want to have? And how do we support health in the country? What is it that we want to actually change? So [as Deans], you will come up with those targets to make sure that you transform because transformation is one of the things that we need to actually do. We also have to make sure that we demographically diversify and look at the fact that students would also want to have role models. This also makes one think differently about how you do things, not because you just want to meet the targets, but because you want to change the landscape (SA-UoT, Dean of Health Sciences, interview).

Respondents also noted the pressure of targets, on time and resources: “I suppose everybody has to align themselves to certain targets from the [national department], so that's a pressure. You do feel constantly pressured” (SA-UoT, Senior official [Advice], interview). Targets are often seen as being too high or too low, “we’re not allowed to under-register and we’re also not allowed to over-register [because there are funding penalties]. So it may be that there are still TVET students who wanted to study, but we’ve reached our quota” (SA-UoT, Dean of Management Sciences, interview).

International expertise as an enabler

In addition, it appears that international expertise was very important in the early years of implementing FLPs: "international support from experts was a key enabler. Now it's less so because now we actually have expertise. In fact, now what you have is support from local, national and international networks" (SA-HEI, Dean-recommended respondent [2/3], interview)[48].

Management structures as enablers

Many respondents commented on the importance of management structures for FLPs, for example: "I would say that appropriate top management structures and then, of course, the distribution of authority to the structures lower down, follows …. There are a lot of checks and balances in this process: (SA-HEI, Senior official [Quality], interview). In other words, the implementers of FLPs should have, "executive-level authority within the university – both in the academic systems as well as in the administrative systems of the university, [who] will fight for the FLPs and campaign to keep these [doors] open" (SA-HEI, Immediate previous lifelong learning specialist [2/2], interview).

National policies and agencies as enablers

One of the respondents said that the higher education QA body policy prescripts were enablers because:

> When you talk to academics [you point out that] 'you cannot come up with a programme that does not lead [to a learning-and-work pathway]' …. [You cannot come up with a programme] that leads to a cul-de-sac. You need to think about promoting lifelong learning for the student. [You need to think about] What is the next step of this qualification? (SA-UoT, Head of innovative teaching and learning, interview).

Another respondent said similarly, "Practical support from national agencies [is important] – the [professional body and national departments] – and remember the [national department] supports [universities] financially, so we always have to have their policies and align ourselves. We also work with the higher education QA body" (SA-UoT, Dean of Education, interview). Interviewee responses showed that there are many enablers for FLPs in the South African education and training system in the NQF context.

[48] South Africa is generally seen as being a leader in terms of RPL.

4.4.2. Reported barriers to FLPs

Respondents were asked to discuss barriers that they had experienced and were referred to the same list of items that denoted enablers. Many said that the enablers they had mentioned, when absent, became barriers.

Unintended consequences of national quality assurance

Several respondents pointed out that the higher education QA body accreditation processes, while enabling FLPs, also presented barriers due to the related bureaucratic challenges.

> The organisational system relating to [the] accreditation of [university] programmes [is a] challenge that the system is experiencing … [the time] it takes to accredit [a programme] means that one can't be so flexible and agile in terms of new curricula, because it takes up to two years, sometimes even three years, to have a programme accredited. But that is a national, it's a systemic issue (SA-HEI, Senior official [Academic], interview).

A UoT respondent expressed the same concern, "we have made some submissions to [the QA body] to assist us in accelerating some of the processes that take them three years to respond to, that are affecting our mission" (SA-UoT, Dean of Education, interview).

While the HEIs in the sample reported some thriving international partnerships, the private HEI noted that the fact that in South Africa, accreditation was granted only to offer qualifications registered on the South African NQF, hindered it's relationships with HEIs internationally.

> The regulation changes in South Africa, [resulted in the fact that we are] not allowed to offer qualifications endorsed by international institutions ... so, these relationships have become untenable from the [point of view of the] legislative framework (SA-pHEI, Senior official [Academic], interview).

Conflicting aspects of national policy

A private HEI respondent also referred to the lack of clarity regarding 'the 50% rule' – where the national department and the NQF authority did not prohibit the awarding of qualifications when students had completed less than 50% of the programme at their HEIs – the QA body did (SA-pHEI, Senior official [Academic], interview). A UoT respondent said similarly:

> the contradictions in some of the policies, [for example] the move from the HEQF [Higher Education Qualifications Framework] to the HEQSF [Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework] led to an articulation gap … you need to have a picture of how articulation is going to be considered [by the QA body]. There are conflicts and

> contradictions in some of the policies (SA-UoT, Head of innovative teaching and learning, interview)[49].

Lack of parity of esteem

The perceived lack of parity of esteem between HEIs was noted as hindering CAT and articulation.

> Different institutions' ideas of standards, because ... the whole idea of the NQF is supposed to be [common] standards, like a levelling field for students who want to be mobile between different programmes. But we still have institutions that think that the quality of their programme is different or better [thereby disadvantaging student mobility]. The double standards in higher education [between] the public and the private sector, are not fair (SA-pHEI, Departmental Head [1/2], interview).

Powers of professional bodies

Other barriers related to professional bodies, which in South Africa are part of the NQF system. In some cases, "the professional boards, with their external quality reviews, have an impact on how flexible you can be in terms of your curriculum, or your delivery, or your access routes" (SA-HEI, Senior official [Academic], interview). A private HEI respondent commented similarly.

> There are always issues between [the Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA)] and [the professional body]. For example, [the professional body] does not recognise the [SETA][50]. In essence, you graduate as [a specialist] who cannot register with the professional body. As a consequence, it gives the graduates no access to the industry and hampers their mobility (SA-pHEI, Departmental Head [2/2], interview).

A UoT respondent, on the other hand, said that "[the] ministerial requirements are not always talking to the professional bodies' requirements, so the programme is caught in the middle. Professional bodies are very strict; they will not grant you accreditation [when your programme does not meet its requirements]" (SA-UoT, Senior official [Quality], interview).

Resistance to change

Initial staff attitudes to change were also noted as being problematic.

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[49] The HEQSF was published in 2013 under the NQF Act (RSA, 2009); the HEQF was its earlier counterpart under the SAQA Act (RSA, 1995).

[50] The Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) delegates some of its roles to SETAs and others; there are 21 SETAs in South Africa, for the different economic sectors.

> At first there was resistance, you know, from academics [to implementing FLPs]. You know, [it was a question of] 'we are lowering standards', so there was that reaction at first. But as we adopted our transformation policy and procedures, and faculties were required to report annually on transformative actions, the attitudes started changing. Now there is a change in attitude (SA-UoT, Senior official [Leadership], interview).

Continuing staff development was also noted as being imperative to ensure continuity when existing experienced staff retired or left the institution, and new staff arrived who did not necessarily have an "FLP perspective" (SA-UoT, Senior official [Leadership], interview).

Surprisingly, institutional autonomy was said to be a barrier in some instances, "our 'institutional autonomy' doesn't allow for lower-level learners to come here [to the university]" (SA-UoT, Dean of Management Sciences, interview). In another instance, the reason given for denying a student entry was, "because [the] qualification … falls under [another QA body]" and was not recognised by the university (SA-HEI, Senior official [Quality], interview). An alumnus at the university said similarly, "it should be [a matter of] if you want to study, everybody should be allowed" (SA-HEI, Alumnus [1/5], interview). In other words, institutional autonomy could end up enabling, or blocking, FLPs.

Resources

All of the institutional respondents emphasised that resources were a serious concern, "[resources] can be a blockage if the funds are not available. Or where you are not getting extra lecturers. So there will be a blockage" (SA-UoT, Senior official [Leadership], interview). One respondent put it as follows.

> Resources: time, finances, and equipment [are barriers]. Resources are a very thorny issue for all Higher Education Institutions. Worldwide, budgets are being cut for universities. We get more funding but time and again there is a reduction in the funding …. If it [FLPs are] important enough to the university ... [if] we value it, it means that we are arguing for the funding to be available in order to enable [more FLPs] (SA-HEI, Senior official [Academic], interview).

Another respondent noted that, "[if] institutions are going to be able to match, deliver and build flexible learning pathway practices, they would need to be supported by substantial research, finance and funding" (SA-HEI, Immediate previous lifelong learning specialist [2/2], interview). Sometimes the institutional champions of FLPs feel let down by the lack of funding, as in the following example.

> Unfortunately, the state has not come to the party yet – I've not seen any funding for RPL coming to the public universities and Colleges. I've seen it all going through the Skills Development Levy …. Can [the state] commit to epistemological access? So the state says yes, in principle, but the state doesn't back it up with finance. So that's where we sit today – we can't implement [fully] (SA-HEI, Immediate previous lifelong learning specialist [2/2], interview).

The issue of national department funding being for 'Full Time Equivalents' (FTEs) was also raised. This practice disadvantaged institutions carrying out CAT processes, in that the originating institutions would lose funding when a student left the entity and the certifying institution would lose out on the initial funding tranche for the CAT students.

Noting blended learning as a means to achieve FLPs, another respondent said, "I'm concerned about the actual implementation and sustainability [of blended learning] within our different contexts. Funding? From the national department, it would have to be huge" (SA-HEI, Head of innovative teaching and learning, interview). In addition, HEIs sometimes received "'ministerial statements' such as, 'you shall admit 150 students' – but your facilities and resources can only accommodate 50 students" (SA-UoT, Senior official [Quality], interview).

Another challenge noted was human resources, "it is important that before you implement your policies and put procedures into place, there are human beings involved" (SA-UoT, Senior official [Quality], interview). It was evident that while the three participating HEIs supported, embraced, and implemented FLPs, this work was not without its challenges.

4.5. Institutional priorities for the future of FLPs

The researchers asked the institutional interviewee respondents to talk about priorities for the future regarding FLPs – in the short, medium and longer-term.

4.5.1. Enhanced student support in FLPs

All three participating HEIs noted that students who accessed higher education through any of the FLPs needed some form of support. A private HEI respondent was excited about these students and had committed "to look at the challenges to retain students and to support RPL and CAT students until their graduation" (SA-pHEI, Senior official [RPL], interview). Likewise, UoT respondents expressed optimism about their RPL processes and the successes of the RPL students, for example, "as long as we are having these RPL processes and articulation processes in place and then support the students once they are admitted, then we will [be successful] at the end of the day" (SA-UoT, Senior official [Quality], interview). The

public university respondents were similarly upbeat; for example, “the priority is to continue our support structures, definitely to continue and sustain [them]” (SA-HEI, Head of innovative teaching and learning, interview).

A private HEI respondent, in keeping with the desire of the institution to contribute to diversification in the industry of which it was part, wanted to see:

> … more diversity in [terms of students’] economic backgrounds. I think we are doing a lot of work in terms of making people from underprivileged communities aware of [the field and its specialisations] as potential occupations. But I'm not sure how much we’re doing to support [these students when they] enrol here …. I think those are conversations we are going to have in the future in my department (SA-pHEI, Departmental Head [1/2], interview).

4.5.2. Enhancing the flexibility of curricula

Several respondents noted the need for increased curriculum flexibility, for example, “we want to transform the curriculum to allow for a variety of different avenues. For example, once you qualify as [a specialist], you could go into different avenues, so that you can almost branch out within the field” (SA-pHEI, Departmental Head [2/2], interview). A public university respondent said, “we tried to bring the flexibility, the formative degree flexibility into the Physical and Mathematical Sciences” (SA-HEI, Dean of Science, interview).

Linked to curriculum flexibility is the strong emergence of Extended Curriculum Programmes (ECPs). In all three HEIs, this approach was seen to support increased access to wider ranges of students. As one respondent said, “the Higher Certificates and the ECPs, from my own personal opinion, I foresee them as the future of South African higher education. Given the precarious nature of Basic Education in our country, [and the fact that] our students are not prepared” (SA-UoT, Senior official [Quality], interview). Another UoT respondent said, “all the faculties, all of them, should have extended curricula. So we are saying to all faculties [that] you need to have extended curricula. *All* the faculties. To accommodate students that need it” (SA-UoT, Senior official [Leadership], interview). A public university respondent similarly said for example that, “internally our FLPs are the Extended Curriculum Programme. And that is a priority at this stage in the Science faculty [for example]” (SA-HEI-Dean of Science, interview).

4.5.3. Enhancing flexible modes of delivery

Enhancing flexible modes of delivery comprised another priority, as illustrated by the following interview extract.

> Flexible learning and provisioning [are part] of our strategic priorities. It flows from this institutional operating plan …. These plans were made in the context where it is increasingly difficult to separate full- and part-time delivery …. You cannot distinguish between full-time and part-time students, because many of those students who are [full-time] are living at the residences and have to work during the day [to survive] and come to after-hours processes. So we were forced to look at a different model for offering learning and teaching (SA-HEI, Senior official [Academic], interview).

In addition, public HEIs in the country need to consider that a large number of their students are from poor households and that it may not be safe to travel at all times.

> You know, our students are living in crime-ridden areas; [they] are living far away from campus; they're affected by taxi wars and all those kind of things. So you have to make learning opportunities more accessible to them …. [the HEI] tries to bring the different parts relating to flexible learning and provision together under one comprehensive strategy, [which will also involve] the curriculum and the assessment, and the teaching methodologies, as [these] influence flexible learning. So all of those will be brought together in a single framework (SA-HEI, Senior official [Academic], interview).

Several UoT respondents were quite explicit regarding the UoT's plans to offer fully online programmes as a means to reach working people.

> We identified eight programmes, Advanced Diplomas and Postgraduate Diplomas – that target people who are already working. I had a meeting with our Information and Communication Technology Director to plan for the 2021 implementation to make sure that our systems accommodate the online programmes so that anyone can access our Blackboard from different parts of the world (SA-UoT, Senior official [Academic], interview).

Moreover, as the available spaces in public higher education become more limited due to the increasing demand, online learning is seen as a way to accommodate additional students, "the other challenge – why we are going online – is because of enrolment, and our infrastructure cannot take more students" (SA-UoT, Senior official [Academic], interview). Thus, a priority is "to increase online delivery, so that students do not really necessarily have to come [to the campus], and that would also give us the scope to increase our student numbers because we

[cannot] increase our student numbers if they have to be in class" (SA-UoT, Dean of Health Sciences, interview). A public university respondent argued along the same lines, especially in terms of enhancing access, "we want to give access to teachers anywhere in the world, we want to attract people from anywhere in the country" (SA-HEI, Dean of Education, interview).

4.5.4. Expanding articulation initiatives

The expansion of 'articulation routes' (learning pathways) also emerged as a clear priority. All three HEIs reported the successes of their expanded access and bridging programmes – and particularly the Higher Certificate and ECP programmes, and the inter-institutional agreements to enable learner transitioning from TVET Colleges to HEIs.

The Higher Certificate was widely recognised as an access qualification for students who did not meet the entry requirements for a Bachelor's Degree, especially in the Science and Mathematics fields, "recently, the Department of Mathematics from [the] Engineering [faculty] has developed the Higher Certificate in Mathematics for Engineering Technology. It is part of improving articulation and access to Engineering programmes" (SA-UoT, Senior official [Quality], interview).

Several UoT respondents emphasised the importance of the emerging articulation routes between TVET Colleges and the UoT, for example, "it is definitely one of our priorities, [namely] to work [more closely] with the TVET Colleges. We must make sure that we ease the barriers that there may be in terms of articulation" (SA-UoT, Dean of Management Sciences, interview). Another pointed to the importance of supporting the upskilling of the TVET College lecturers, "[the UoT needed to] make sure that even their lecturers are fully trained, because some of them are artisans, or they are coming from the industry, but they have no official qualification, even if it is Engineering or Teaching" (SA-UoT, Dean of Engineering, interview). The eventual plan was to offer the Higher Certificates in the Colleges, where the UoT would assist with curriculum development so that "students can articulate directly into universities" (SA-UoT, Dean of Engineering, interview). Respondents in all three participating HEIs emphasised that 'articulation initiatives' need to be 'taken to scale' for example.

Chapter 5. Comparative analysis of policies and practices for FLPs

Chapter five, with four sections, closes the report. Section 5.1 summarises the information on the national structures, policies and instruments regarding FLPs. Section 5.2 presents in summary form, the FLP practices in the three HEIs in the sample. Section 5.3 sketches the findings regarding the monitoring and evaluation of FLPs, and Section 5.4, the enablers of, and barriers to, FLPs. Section 5.4 includes the closing comments and recommendations.

5.1. National structures, policies and instruments for FLPs in South Africa

This section has two parts – the first summarises the findings on national structures and policies; the second, the national instruments for FLPs.

5.1.1. Structures and policies for FLPs

Although the phrase 'FLPs' is not widely used in South Africa, there is in fact an extensive policy regime for FLPs in the country. The system for education, training, development and work is framed by the NQF, which comprises three articulated NQF Sub-Frameworks – the General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework (GFETQSF), Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) and the Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF) – coordinated by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). The NQF includes all the education, training and development sub-sectors – Basic Education, TVET, higher education, adult education and professional development – and all the public and private organisations through which these are delivered, including recognised professional bodies. The main NQF partners – the Departments of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and Basic Education (DBE); SAQA and the three Quality Councils – one of which delegates some of its roles to Development Quality Partners (DQPs), Assessment Quality Partners (AQPs), Quality Development Facilitators (QDFs) and Community Expert Practitioners (CEPs) – have oversight responsibilities. There are further structures for coordination at the national level namely, the NQF Forum, the CEO Committee with its NQF Operations Committee, and the System of Collaboration policy.

The NQF policy suite developed by SAQA after consultation with the Quality Councils, provides for:

- NQF Level Descriptors (SAQA, 2012a);

- Policy and Criteria for Registering Qualifications and Part-Qualifications on the NQF (SAQA, 2013b, 2020c);
- Policy and Criteria for Recognising a Professional Body and Registering a Professional Designation (SAQA, 2012b, 2020b);
- Policy and Criteria for the Implementation of the Recognition of Prior Learning (SAQA, 2013a, 2016a, 2019e);
- Policy for Credit Accumulation and Transfer (SAQA, 2014b and forthcoming [c]);
- National Policy and Criteria for Designing and Implementing Assessment (SAQA, 2014a);
- Draft National Policy on the Misrepresentation of Qualifications (SAQA, 2017c); and
- Policy and Criteria for Evaluating Foreign Qualifications (SAQA, 2017e).

These policies are framed by the over-arching DHET policies for the coordination and funding of RPL (DHET, 2016a) and articulation in Post-School Education and Training (PSET) (DHET, 2017a), and the White Paper for PSET (DHET, 2013). The policies are augmented by their Quality Council counterparts that must elaborate specific details in an aligned way, for use in each of the three NQF Sub-Framework contexts respectively.

This policy basket provides specifically for access and progression – in other words, for FLPs. In South Africa, FLPs are mainstream and not 'alternative'. In this legislation, 'articulated learning pathways' must exist at systemic level and at the 'specific' level of institutional arrangements', as well as at the level of 'learner support'. There is an emphasis on learner access and transitioning in flexible ways; years of long-term NQF Research Partnerships have studied the implementation and impact of these policies, and how the related challenges have been addressed (see, for example, Cooper et al., 2016; Lotz-Sisitka, 2013, 2015; SAQA, 2016b, 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2020a, 2020d; Walters, 2015a, 2015b, and others).

Whilst the three Quality Councils are mandated, amongst others, to develop policies for RPL, CAT, and assessment, and must align these to the respective national policies – the Quality Council policies were found to be *generally* aligned to their national counterparts, but with some non-aligned aspects that hamper the flexibility of some pathways (SAQA, 2019b). These areas are in the process of being addressed through policy revision. Other inherited (legacy) overlaps in the legislation framing the work of SAQA, the Quality Councils, and recognised professional bodies, are also in the process of being addressed.

In the interests of being accredited to offer learning programmes, public and private HEIs in South Africa must align their institutional policies and practices with those of the higher education QA body. There are some challenges in this regard, including but not limited to the QA body's (1) limitation of RPL to 10% of any given learner cohort, (2) allowing RPL for 'access and advanced standing' but not for 'credit', and (3) permitting a maximum of 50% of credit to be transferred to awarding HEIs, in RPL and CAT processes. These restrictions do not feature in the national policies of the department and the NQF authority.

5.1.2. National instruments for FLPs

In addition to the NQF policy regime, there are at least twenty sets of tools that support the provision and use of FLPs in higher education – and the same or similar tools also exist for the other sectors making up the NQF. Three key instruments for the purposes of the current study, are the registration of qualifications and part-qualifications on the NQF (SAQA, 2013b; 2020c), the accreditation of specific learning programmes to be offered by particular HEIs (CHE, 2012a), and the recognition of professional bodies (SAQA, 2012b; 2020b).

To be registered on the NQF, qualifications and part-qualifications must, amongst other criteria, show articulation pathways and provide for RPL options. A challenge is that while these aspects are always present in the registered qualifications and part-qualifications, in practice they are sometimes, but not always, robust.

The higher education QA body uses the HEQSF (CHE, 2013b), the Framework for Qualification Standards in Higher Education (CHE, 2013a), and the Criteria for Programme Accreditation (CHE, 2012a), as well as guidelines for HEI self-evaluations, and overarching programme reviews[51], and a number of other aspects relating to good practice[52]. Articulation features in all of these key documents but could be elaborated further. The HEQSF policy (CHE, 2013b: Clauses 63-66) for example, details 'progression within the framework' and 'RPL for access and advanced standing' – it could also deal with 'progression between the NQF Sub-Frameworks' and 'RPL for credit'. Further, the HEIs in the sample reported some bureaucratic challenges – especially delays – in the accreditation processes. The Framework for Qualification Standards in Higher Education (CHE, 2013a:15-18) refers to different types

[51] The QA body conducts its quality assurance through standard-setting, accreditation, HEI self-evaluations, and from time to time, particular programme reviews – for example, it might focus on 'doctoral programmes', or 'Master of Business Administration (MBAs)', and so on.
[52] The guidelines for good practice relate to capacity development in the HEIs.

of pathways: ‘academic (or general)’, ‘vocational’ and ‘professional’; these could also be elaborated.

To be recognised in the context of the NQF in South Africa, professional bodies must have RPL routes to their professional designations. To date, some professional bodies have achieved these routes in practice; the NQF authority holds regular professional body workshops to showcase good practices for this and other aspects.

The NQF authority provides a Verification Service, the use of which is compulsory in South Africa when taking up a position of employment; it can also be used when taking up further studies on the basis of foreign qualifications. The Service comprises verification of the authenticity of the qualifications held. It draws on data in the National Learners’ Records Database (NLRD), and if there is a gap in the NLRD data, on research.

A further instrument comprises the national Career Development Services (CDS) – which can be accessed via walk-in services, mobile phone, internet, email, social media, career days, radio and television. Over three million people use these services annually. There is an online tool – the National Career Advice Portal (NCAP) – via which anyone can key in qualifications to see what kinds of jobs they would be able to do, and key in jobs to see the qualifications needed. Different jobs come with demonstration videos. National priorities include further expanding NCAP content and targeted outreach to schools and colleges, to expand awareness of it.

FLP data and tracking also support system flexibility. Higher education data are collected through the Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS) for public HEIs and the Higher Education Quality Committee Information System (HEQCIS) for their private counterparts. Learner achievement and qualification-related data are stored in the National Learners’ Records Database (NLRD). The higher education QA body releases its ‘*VitalStats*’ publications annually; these publications feature trends in higher education – organised around equity and demographic transformation. Each *VitalStats* publication focuses on the latest five years of data; the actual transformations that have taken place – in higher education student enrolment and achievement data, and the demographic composition and qualifications of different categories of staff in HEIs, are clear. The NQF authority publishes NLRD Trends Reports from time to time; NLRD Trends Reports 1 and 2 (SAQA, 2004; 2006) focused on general trends in Higher Education. While NLRD Trends Report 3 focused on occupational qualifications, NLRD Trends Report 4 (SAQA, 2017d) focused specifically on learning pathways, including learner movements within and across the NQF Sub-Frameworks, and NQF

levels. NLRD Trends Reports 5 and 6 (SAQA, forthcoming [b]) deepen these learning pathway analyses. The NQF authority also publishes *RPL Updates* once or twice a year, in which achievements via RPL are shown in relation to qualification types and levels, gender, population group, and others. Recent developments include planning to report systematically on the same categories over time, in order to make the advancement of specific trends over time, more visible.

Providers of learning must submit RPL data for uploading into the NLRD (SAQA, 2019e, 2016a, 2013a). On the one hand, the NQF authority has struggled to enforce these RPL data submissions and, to date, only about 20% of private HEIs do so. On the other hand, while it is common knowledge that considerable RPL is taking place in public HEIs, there are currently no RPL data from these entities in the NLRD. For funding reasons, the public HEI data are submitted via the national department-overseen HEMIS, to the NLRD which is overseen by the NQF authority. Public HEIs currently submit their specific data on RPL, CAT, ECPs, and other flexible practices – in a category called 'HEI Senate Discretion'; these data are not disaggregated by the national department, creating a data gap which needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

The NQF partnership research and NQF impact studies overseen by the NQF authority focus on areas needed for the further development of the NQF, and the impact of particular NQF initiatives, respectively. Both types of studies are developmental, seeking to build the understanding of, and develop, key NQF theory, knowledge, and practices. The last six long-term partnerships have focused on learning pathways for sustainable development, and the nature of learning pathways (Lotz-Sisitka, 2015; SAQA, 2017b); Flexible Learning and Teaching Provision (FLTP) (Walters, 2015a, 2015b); TVET College lecturers (SAQA, 2015); developing a maximally inclusive RPL model (Cooper et al., 2016); and articulation between TVET, higher education, and work (SAQA, 2018; SAQA-DUT, 2020). All of this research is conducted collaboratively, and the findings and recommendations are workshopped extensively with NQF stakeholders – towards capacity building to enhance the implementation of NQF policy and the further development of the NQF.

The 2017 NQF Impact Study (SAQA, 2019b) – conducted by a team of researchers from the NQF authority and the three Quality Councils, focused on, amongst others, the reported impact of implementing the NQF Level Descriptors, and the NQF authority's policies for RPL, CAT, and assessment; the NLRD Trends Reports; and the QA body's efforts to integrate public and private higher education. This study exposed the areas of misalignment between the various

national policies. The learner achievement data showed increasing learner movements between public and private higher education – as a proxy for integration – the increases being small but in the desired directions.

The principles of lifelong learning, redress, access, mobility and progression, quality and transparency clearly inform national policies and structures for education, training, development and work in South Africa. Further, the interview respondents showed fairly high levels of awareness of these policies and tools.

5.2. Summary of flexible learning pathway practices in South Africa

This sub-section of the report summarises the findings of the current study regarding the FLP practices found across the three HEIs in the sample generally, and then goes on to summarise details around the RPL, CAT, articulation, student support, bridging qualifications, and flexible learning and teaching practices, found in particular.

5.2.1. General findings regarding the implementation of FLPs

FLPs, which in the past were viewed by many in the country as being 'alternative', are now generally seen as being 'mainstream', as was the case in the three HEIs in the study. This finding mirrors that of the National Articulation Baseline Study (SAQA, 2018), and the NQF Act Implementation Evaluation (DPME, 2018) – both of which found that the implementation of NQF policy 'is embedded' in the system albeit to differing degrees. Key foci for the NQF authority include continuing to document and share, known successful articulation and RPL practices, and taking these to scale; supporting emerging initiatives and unblocking those that have stalled.

From the establishment of the NQF in democratic South Africa – from 1995 – there have been strong foci on the implementation of RPL, enhancing access and redress, quality and transparency (SAQA, 2011a; 2014c; 2017a, 2017b, 2017d, 2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2020a, 2020d and others). There was a shift after the promulgation of the NQF Act (RSA, 2008), to deepening epistemological access once learners are inside institutions, and to learning pathways and learner transitioning. Respondents in the study commented on the importance of focusing on diversity and equality; student access and support; student success; accommodating changing student demographics and working students; providing second and further chances; articulation between institutions; and addressing the geographic, linguistic, and fundamental knowledge barriers to access and progression. These concerns have grown

from a collective desire to redress the discriminatory practices of the past as well as eradicating the disadvantages that exist in the present.

All of the participants in the study strongly espoused the principles underpinning FLPs and the national policies that seek to enable such practices. While there was a shared understanding that RPL, CAT, and articulation policies are key for FLPs, the instruments for, and applications of, these policies differed in practice – in line with the policy intentions to provide enabling frameworks while encouraging diverse approaches. Further, almost all of the respondents in the study pointed to the contradictions between the national department and NQF authority policies for RPL and articulation on the one hand, and the QA body requirements on the other. The conflicts between professional bodies' policies and those of the NQF authority were also noted. The HEIs in the sample dealt with these challenges in different ways, but respondents expressed frustration regarding the lack of coherence between some aspects of the policies.

Nevertheless, all HEIs – public and private – are obliged to develop and implement the policies and procedures for FLPs (access and articulation), as these are part of the minimum requirements for the registration of qualifications on the NQF by the NQF authority, and for the accreditation of learning programmes to be offered by particular HEIs, by the higher education QA body. As seen in the three HEIs in the study, the institutional access and articulation policies align with the QA body requirements of necessity, which in some ways negates the policies of the NQF authority and the national department. These issues are a matter of ongoing debate and contestation in the system.

5.2.2. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and other FLPs

Both public and private HEIs must comply with the NQF authority's qualification registration requirements and the QA body's accreditation rules. The NQF authority has been successful in including clear criteria for RPL and articulation in the qualification registration requirements – these are more stringent in the recently revised version of the policy (SAQA, 2020c). In the registration process, qualifications and part-qualifications submitted are rejected where these aspects are excluded or insufficient. For accreditation, there are also requirements for RPL and articulation; HEIs meet these criteria in differing ways, and the QA body system allows institutional autonomy and these differences.

In the study, it was clear that FLP practices in general, and RPL practices in particular, took different forms and were managed differently across the HEIs studied. The researchers categorised the RPL approach and processes in the public HEI, as 'pastoral'. Care and support

were shown to applicants before, during and after the RPL process. If the candidates opted out of the RPL process or were not invited to participate in it, they were still advised and given options. Successful candidates who went on to study at the university kept contact with the RPL office and consulted it in difficult times. Many of the RPL candidates went on to study postgraduate qualifications, and all spoke highly of the process. In the student and alumni focus group interviews, there was a great deal of consistency across the 'stories' of the candidates – across about ten years, and across academic disciplines. There was also consistency across staff respondents.

The researchers categorised the RPL approach at the UoT as 'integrated' – RPL was integrated into the online and walk-in application processes. The UoT staff, students and alumni interviewed noted similar facts about the processes. The students and alumni confirmed that the online process was easy if one followed the prompts typical of any online process. For walk-in applications, students and alumni reported 'just walking in' – there were two queues in the applications office, one for traditional applicants (school-leavers), and a separate queue for RPL and FLP applications. The UoT also had an 'open-door' policy – some students and alumni entering via non-traditional routes had simply approached Heads of departments or Deans – or been referred to these staff members. The extent to which RPL candidates – and students – are supported at the UoT, were striking. Firstly, there are the study options and the Extended Curriculum Programmes (ECPs) – which can be followed at different paces. Once studying, there are 24-hour support systems, and a number of mentor programmes, and 'Supplemental Instruction' – all of which are voluntary. The students and alumni recounted various experiences – the administration of some RPL processes had run smoothly; for others, there had been bureaucratic hurdles – but overall, all appreciated the opportunities they had been given. Many also went on to study postgraduate qualifications. The student and alumni complaints about the shortages of library materials and computer spaces were echoed by several staff respondents, who noted that the UoT was running at full capacity. There was again consistency across the 'stories' of these candidates across academic disciplines.

The researchers categorised the RPL approach at the private HEI, as 'individual' – those seeking admission were advised and supported on a one-on-one basis. While this HEI had guidelines for alternative access and advanced standing – it was clear that the student experiences differed according to the knowledge and skills that they already had, and the gaps they needed to address. This flexibility was also visible in the working arrangements agreed between the students and the HEI: some were working to earn, and were not required to report

for classes every day. There was clearly genuine recognition of the prior knowledge and skills of the learners; people were not made to repeat content they had studied elsewhere or learned in workplaces. There was also a strictness around the learning outcome requirements: those who did not have particular academic literacies were required to study these, even at the expense of immediate progression. Even although the fees at the private HEI were relatively high, it was clear that student backgrounds spanned a range in terms of social class. This HEI, ike the public university and UoT, had an 'open-door' policy – the students noted seeking help from each other, and the staff. The different admission processes had gone well according to the student and alumni respondents. In this case, too, there was consistency across the 'stories' of the RPL candidates across disciplines, and between the responses of staff and students.

Looking at the institutional interview responses on the whole, it was clear that there were different institutional cultures across the HEIs in the sample, but that all had cultures of widening access and student support in different ways. The researchers had the sense that in each case, there were institutional 'champions' driving the RPL and other elements of flexibility. In the case of the UoT, there was clearly strong leadership in this regard: the top management and Deans spoke with very similar voicing. Responses at the public university were more differentiated, and it was clear that while the HEI strongly supported RPL, FLPs, and Flexible Learning and Teaching Provision (FLTP), there were differing approaches as to *how* these aspects were delivered. In the private HEI, the voices were also fairly similar.

While all three HEIs were clearly complying with legislative requirements and wanted to contribute to social justice, the public HEI respondents also appeared to be motivated by throughput, and the private HEI by attracting and retaining students. All three sought to support learners as they followed their learning-and-work pathways. Staff respondents in all three HEIs commented on the fact that students who had entered via FLPs, while initially needing additional support, turned out to be amongst the strongest students.

5.2.3. Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT)

Another common FLP practice in South Africa is Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT). All of the respondents in the sample noted that CAT is not as widespread as may be desired and that there were usually fewer CAT than RPL candidates. All of the HEIs in the sample had clear and straightforward CAT policies. The lack of alignment between the policies of the national department and NQF authority on one hand, and those of the QA body on the other – especially regarding the 50% clause – were noted. This was especially the case for the private

HEI respondents, who detailed their quality assurance processes – that included professional judgment and peer review within and across HEIs – and the fact that they would be prepared to grant greater percentages of credit where applicable, in the interests of efficiency. Some respondents in the two public HEIs mentioned the issue of differences between the curricula across HEIs. These types of issues were found to be shared by respondents in another study (SAQA, forthcoming [a]).

One national respondent noted that the reason she thought CAT was not as widespread as it could be, was that the funding formula for public HEIs is calculated on the basis of 'full-time equivalents'. In CAT processes, both of the institutions involved lose out on portions of funding – the 'original' HEI loses the percentage of funds paid by the national department upon graduation, while the 'certifying' HEI loses the initial enrolment portion of the funds.

A further potential issue is the historical lack of public trust in private higher education and between public and private HEIs. While the QA body has sought over the last two decades to integrate public and private higher education, and research shows increased movement of individuals across public and private HEIs (SAQA, 2019b) – this issue remains to an extent. However, in the three HEIs in the study, while respondents said that not enough work had been done in terms of CAT – all reported CAT processes sufficiently robust to deal with the formal learning presented by the students seeking access in this way.

5.2.4. Articulation arrangements

A third flexible practice that has become common in the country, is articulation. Articulation is understood in at least three ways (SAQA, 2018; SAQA-DUT, 2020). Systemic articulation comprises joined-up qualifications, professional designations, or other elements of learning-and-work pathways. Specific articulation is achieved through RPL, CAT, MoU, MoA, and other intra- and inter-institutional arrangements. The third aspect of articulation is learner support, and Flexible Learning and Teaching Provision (FLTP). All three aspects are needed for successful articulation initiatives. A National Articulation Baseline Study (SAQA, 2018) showed 16 'developed articulation initiatives' across the country, and around 60 emerging. Some of the emerging initiatives had commenced and for different reasons, stalled. The three HEIs in the sample provided three different models for implementing the three aspects of articulation within the same legislative framework.

5.2.5. Student support practices

In South Africa, other FLP practices have evolved – and continue to evolve – in relation to the 'success' part of 'access'. Even when students gain access to HEIs, their levels of success are not guaranteed for a variety of reasons. Thus 'access' is seen to be the first step before a range of other practices take effect. In South Africa, FLPs include flexible curriculum delivery. Once students have accessed higher education, epistemological access and progression are the focus. These foci are addressed through programmes like Extended Curriculum Programmes (ECP), Supplemental Instruction (SI), peer mentoring, and other programmes that provide academic support. These programmes can involve additional time, tutoring and assistance, although many students go through such programmes as they complete their main programmes – without using additional time.

5.2.6. Qualifications as bridges

Furthermore, the Higher Certificate has strongly emerged as an access and bridging qualification, particularly where students did not meet the requirements to access Bachelor Degree studies. On the successful completion of a Higher Certificate, a student may gain access to further qualifications, including degree studies. In some cases, Higher Certificates are already offered within TVET College-HEI partnerships – where the curriculum content is developed collaboratively; teaching is done by College staff, and assessment by HEI staff, in the context of an MoA. Increasing numbers of such partnerships are expected.

5.2.7. Flexible Learning and Teaching Practices (FLTPs)

Flexible Learning and Teaching Practices (FLTPs) include but are not limited to, blended, distance and online learning. Long-term NQF authority partnership research (Walters, 2015a; 2015b) showed that FLTPs require flexibility in four sub-systems. Flexibility in the *student* sub-system involves knowing who the students are, and their needs regarding residential and transport facilities, and the academic, emotional, and other kinds of support needed. Flexibility in the *academic staff* sub-system refers to the conditions of service and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) of staff. Flexibility in the *teaching-and-learning sub-system* means providing for the infrastructure; programme regulations; ICT, timetabling, admission and progression policies; curriculum and assessment. Flexibility in the *administrative* sub-system requires adapting the use of finances, student registration, student and staff administration policies, and systems. The research and development (Ibid.) investigated, developed and implemented the detailed organisational change strategies needed to effect flexibility,

including the supporting champions, working towards common understandings, incentivising and rewarding innovations of the types needed, and encouraging collaborative relationships. The findings of the research included that employers needed to have study leave policies, and to support and encourage working students (Ibid.). Adopting an FLTP framework and aligning this to the Institutional Operations Plan was recommended (Ibid.).

Respondents saw aspects such as the flexible scheduling of programmes, part-time attendance, block-attendance, repeat lectures, the option of a mix of face-to-face and online learning, and other such innovations, as FLPs.

5.3. Monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of FLPs

In South Africa, the implementation of RPL and articulation are monitored by the NQF authority. The three Quality Councils submit annual reports to the authority, on the implementation of articulation in their NQF Sub-Framework contexts – this is a relatively recent practice. The NQF authority analyses RPL data in the National Learners' Records Database, providing *RPL Update* reports twice a year. Between 1996 and July 2020, a total of 31 143 people on the NLRD had achieved 34 695 full qualifications through RPL, while 87 915 people had achieved 1 610 956 part-qualifications via RPL[53]. The number of full qualifications involved was 229; the number of part-qualifications, 3535. The submission of RPL data has been mandatory since 2014 but there are still issues around non-submission; in addition, public HEIs submit 'Senate Discretion' data that include RPL but in a non-segregated way. The NQF authority also publishes NLRD Trends Reports (SAQA, 2004, 2006, 2017d, forthcoming [b]), and conducts and oversees NQF Impact Studies (SAQA, 2017a, 2019b and forthcoming [a]).

The Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) in the Presidency conducts evaluations from time to time, of the implementation of the country's legislation. It conducted an NQF Act Implementation Evaluation that found the NQF to be embedded in the system (DPME, 2018).

The higher education QA body produces annual *VitalStats* publications that present, for public HEIs, learner enrolments, achievements and throughput data per qualification type and level, institutional type, funding, and staff categories and qualifications, amongst others, organised around overall as well as gender and population group (equity) trends. The national department

[53] Some people achieved more than one qualification or part-qualification via RPL.

monitors the implementation of NQF policy and Annual Performance Plans of the NQF authority, the Quality Councils and its other entities, on a quarterly basis.

Monitoring is also undertaken in the form of research at the national level, which illuminates key dimensions in the implementation of aspects of FLPs. The NQF authority has between one and five long-term research partnerships at any given time. Recent studies include for example, the National Articulation Baseline Study (SAQA, 2018) and the NQF Impact Studies (SAQA, 2017a, 2019b and forthcoming [a]) – that focused on the implementation and impact of RPL and CAT, amongst others. The national department keeps a register of research conducted by the entities that report to it.

Institutional monitoring is in keeping with the higher education QA body's quality assurance procedures; it includes internal *Self Evaluations* and peer monitoring for HEIs. The QA body is responsible for monitoring the implementation of its accreditation criteria, including those that relate to FLPs.

One objective which is almost universally monitored, is 'equity' because equity is always part of the aims in democratic South Africa. Some of the categories that respondents raised in respect of equity include gender, disability, race, socio-economic status, and language. There are historical race-based patterns in individual HEIs. Overall however, the demographics of students and staff in public HEIs are moving steadily to match national demographics (CHE, 2020b). The focus has shifted and deepened over time, to include the demographics of student throughput rates as well as access and achievements. In terms of socio-economic status, access to all education and training has increased over time; the bursary scheme for PSET reaches 90% of households in the country. All of the respondents in the research noted that progress had been made regarding equity and that FLPs had contributed to these patterns.

None of the evaluations focused on 'FLPs' using that phrasing, but did focus however on the elements that in fact contribute to the flexibility of learning-and-work pathways in South Africa, as these are embedded in the system. The recommendations from the studies are taken seriously and are addressed through the NQF partner structures. The recent DPME (2018) Implementation Evaluation of the NQF Act found that the NQF was embedded in the education and training system, albeit unevenly, and identified some weaknesses and blockages in the system. These areas are in the process of being addressed through the NQF Improvement Plan.

5.4. Summary of enablers and barriers to FLPs

Key enablers for the development and implementation of FLPs in the country include political will and leadership at the national and institutional levels. This political drive is accompanied by solid national policies for RPL, CAT and articulation, Extended Curriculum Programmes, Career Development Services, and other forms of student support in the context of the NQF. Several respondents commented that systems need technical, administrative and budgetary will, in addition to political will.

Institutional respondents identified organisational culture as being the most enabling factor at the institutional level, and examples of FLP-supporting cultures and practices were revealed and referred to in the study. Other enablers identified by these respondents included *inter*-institutional collaboration, and *intra*-institutional cooperation across faculties and departments, which reflected the organisational desires to advance access and articulation.

While institutional autonomy enabled some entities to implement FLPs in innovative ways, autonomy was seen to be a barrier in some instances, in that it enabled some HEIs to implement FLPs in minimal ways. Aspects of policy misalignment were also barriers – such as when funding did not support the implementation of FLPs, or when national policies required different things, and when there were conflicting responsibilities between the NQF bodies and statutory professional bodies, based on old professional body legislation.

In some instances such as CAT, implementation was slow because of the hidden financial implications, and the perceived lack of parity of esteem between HEIs and qualifications. Examples were also given, of collaborative relationships which were able to overcome such challenges.

In addition, the lack of available places in public HEIs relative to the demand, which was often over ten times higher – led to HEIs prioritising top school achievers. When there were insufficient places for strong applicants following traditional routes, HEIs were not motivated to accept students who did not necessarily meet the entrance criteria. Enrolment planning may also have mitigated against widening access, as public HEIs are penalised when they over- or under-enrol. Despite these barriers, there was a strong awareness that the system could not afford to be ill-prepared for FLPs, give the demand and need for higher education.

5.4.1. Closing comments

FLPs and flexible learning and teaching provision are integral to the NQF policy basket for education, training, development and work in South Africa, given that holistic lifelong learning

is a key NQF organising principle. The NQF aligns the system to the values of the Constitution in the country and there is deep political will to implement it. This commitment is also visible in the practices of NQF stakeholders. While some aspects of some of the policies are not fully aligned, the related policy refinement work is currently underway. Providers of education and training are implementing the policies to differing extents; where entities lack the confidence to innovate or where they seek to preserve practices that led to excellence in the past, FLPs are still present, if to smaller extents. In many other HEIs, there are remarkable and inspiring examples of the kinds of FLPs desired. There are existing resources; entities are required to 'do differently', in line with the NQF. A monitoring system has been emerging for some time and has recently been enhanced. The National Learners Records' Database is a powerful tool for tracking progress in terms of RPL, learning pathways, and learner transitioning within and between the NQF Sub-Frameworks. UNESCO's FLPs research has helped the NQF authority to locate the source of the challenges regarding RPL data in public higher education, and steps are underway to address it.

The recent NQF Act Implementation Evaluation (DPME, 2018) found that NQF policies were embedded in the system to differing extents. The National Articulation Baseline Study (SAQA, 2018) revealed an array of developed, emerging, and latent articulation initiatives between HEIs, TVET Colleges, and workplaces; there are clearly growing pockets of success and excellence. The UNESCO research has served to highlight three strong models for institutional policy and practices for FLPs, in three different types of HEIs. These models need to be shared widely.

5.4.2. Recommendations

There are seven recommendations from the South African case study.

Recommendation 1: Policy alignment

That the NQF partners **engage around the misaligned aspects** of national policies for RPL, CAT and articulation, towards full alignment. The apparent juxtaposition between national policies and institutional autonomy must be interrogated with the aim of moving towards greater alignment.

Recommendation 2: Enhancing system-wide regulated articulation

That the NQF authority initiates and leads a national initiative to **enhance system wide regulated articulation** between TVET Colleges and UoTs, and within sectors. The articulation

between occupational and higher education qualifications needs to be strengthened. This work could be part of the national initiative to strengthen learning pathways or a separate initiative. The work should also prioritise building **parity of esteem** between different qualifications at the same NQF levels. There is a need to **expand the Extended Curriculum Programmes (ECPs)** offered in public HEIs, to other types of institutions. All qualification mapping needs to include consultation with the range of **stakeholders** involved. **Guidelines** are needed for designing qualifications, to ensure the design of learning outcomes that articulate.

Recommendation 3: Strengthening learning pathways between public and private HEIs

The QA body must **continue and increase efforts to integrate public and private higher education**. The success of this work needs to be monitored amongst others, by tracking learner transitioning using NLRD data. Again, all qualification mapping needs to include consultation with the range of **stakeholders** involved, and **guidelines** are needed for designing learning outcomes that articulate. More detailed articulation criteria are needed in the **programme accreditation criteria**.

Recommendation 4: Further documenting and sharing good articulation practices

That successful FLP initiatives such as the Higher Certificates; Extended Curriculum Programmes (ECPs); Supplemental Instruction (SI); mentoring programmes; institutional RPL models, policies and processes; articulation partnerships (MoU; MoA) and others – continue to be **documented and shared widely**, towards the universal implementation of good practices. A holistic approach is needed in this documentation so that the whole 'ecology' of the initiatives is captured, to deepen understandings.

Recommendation 5: National campaign

That the existing national **campaign** to strengthen learning pathways and articulation, also emphasises FLP and flexible learning and teaching provision. The NQF authority is well placed to continue to lead and oversee this work. The national department and QA body could enforce entity participation through their processes. The campaign needs to continue to enhance:

- understandings of learning pathways across the NQF Sub-Frameworks;
- *collaborative* qualification, programme, and curriculum development for 'articulation by design';
- the advocacy of learning pathways and advice for learners early, and at key transition points;

- incentivising, establishing, and implementing Memoranda of Agreement to enable RPL, CAT, articulation, and flexibility;
- establishing a national FLP advisory unit; and
- taking developed articulation initiatives to scale, supporting emerging articulation initiatives, and unblocking latent articulation initiatives.

Recommendation 6: Revisiting Funding Formulas

That national **funding formulas need to be revisited** to avoid the situation where HEIs lose funding when implementing CAT and RPL: in the current system, such HEIs receive the initial enrolment or graduation funding tranches only, rather than both tranches. Further, HEIs need **articulation offices and/or officers**, so that when 'champions' leave, systems are not lost. If special funding is allocated to the implementation of CAT and RPL, institutions are more likely to support and institutionalise these practices, as has been the case with ECPs.

Recommendation 7: Reporting requirements

That **reporting and data requirements and guidelines be developed at national level** that include clearer specifications for articulation, RPL, CAT, and other forms of FLP, flexible learning and teaching provision, and learner support. This reporting needs to disaggregate data currently captured under 'senate discretion'. These requirements and guidelines need to be consistent across the NQF partner organisations, to enable the tracking and monitoring of trends.

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Annexure A

(For) Figure 1. Unemployment rates by levels of education, 2020 (STATSSA, 2020)

Education level	15-24 years (%)	25-34 years (%)	35-64 years (%)
'Under matric'	58,40	41,00	23,30
'Matric'	55,00	32,40	17,00
'Graduates'	31,00	12,90	4,30
'Other tertiary'	47,50	25,20	9,40
Total	**55,20**	**34,20**	**18,00**

(For) Figure 4. Numbers of students enrolled in public HEIs, 2009 - 2018 (DHET, 2018)

HEI Type	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Contact	521,427	545,759	556,695	566,239	581,048	596,824	605,480	638,001	659,970	685,069
Distance	316,349	347,177	381,506	387,134	402,650	372,331	379,732	337,836	377,014	400,499
Total	**837,776**	**892,936**	**938,201**	**953,373**	**983,698**	**969,155**	**985,212**	**975,837**	**1036,984**	**1085,568**

(For) Figure 5. Enrolment in private HEIs by population group, 2011 - 2017 (DHET, 2018)

Year	African	Coloured	Indian/ Asian	White	Non-SA students	Un= specified	Total
2011	56,988	7,526	5,913	23,311	9,298	n/a	103,036
2012	56,813	6,876	5,222	18,500	10,067	n/a	97,478
2013	64,933	8,183	6,649	26,664	13,512	n/a	119,941
2014	80,983	12,716	10,396	22,191	12,921	3,350	142,557
2015	83,997	11,127	9,456	25,740	15,670	1,220	147,210
2016	99.972	11,223	10,494	27,212	16,393	2,114	167,408
2017	112,124	13,491	11,955	29,780	16,387	1,309	185,046

(For) Figure 6. Mid-year population estimates for South Africa by population group and gender, 2019 (STATSSA, 2019)

Population group	Male		Female		Total	
	Number	% of Total population	Number	% of Total population	Number	% of Total population
Black African	23,124,782	80,70	24,318,477	80,80	47,443,259	80,70
Coloured	2,513,221	8,00	2,663,530	8,80	5,176,750	8,80
Indian/Asian	768,594	2,70	734,413	2,40	1,503,007	2,60
White	2,266,151	7,90	2,385,855	7,90	4,652,006	7,90
Total	**28,672,748**	**100,00**	**30,102,275**	**100,00**	**58,775,022**	**100,00**

(For) Figure 7. Student enrolments in public HEIs by population group, 2013 - 2018 (CHE, 2020b)

Population group/ Year	African	Coloured	Indian	White	Total
2013	689,503	61,034	53,787	171,927	976,251
2014	679,800	60,716	53,611	166,172	960,299
2015	696,320	62,186	53,378	161,739	973,623
2016	701,482	61,963	50,450	152,489	966,384
2017	763,767	64,772	5,0131	148,802	1027,472
2018	820,619	65,911	47,865	140,304	1074,699

(For) Figure 8. Student enrolments in public HEIs by gender, 2013 - 2018 (CHE, 2020b)

Gender	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Male	409,988	404,365	410,523	408,697	430,065	444,040
Female	573,698	564,784	574,677	567,119	606,898	641,491
Total	**983,686**	**969,149**	**985,200**	**975,816**	**1036,963**	**1085,531**

(For) Figure 9. Graduations in public HEIs by gender, 2013 - 2018 (CHE, 2020b)

Gender	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Male	70,844	72,746	75,117	78,764	81,241	85,296
Female	109,979	112,627	116,405	124,302	129,681	141,876
Total	**180,823**	**185,373**	**191,522**	**203,066**	**210,922**	**227,172**

(For) Figure 10. Graduations in public HEIs by population group, 2013 - 2018 (CHE, 2020b)

Population group	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
African	116,867	122,145	127,237	138,630	147,322	163,087
Coloured	11,135	11,628	11,883	12,723	12,744	13,690
Indian	10,218	10,255	10,405	10,710	11,030	11,084
White	40,524	39,543	39,344	38,739	37,844	37,049
Unknown	2,079	1,802	2,655	2,274	1,991	2,278
Total	**180,823**	**185,373**	**191,524**	**203,076**	**210,931**	**227,188**

(For) Figure 12. Postgraduate enrolments in public HEIs by population group, 2013 and 2018 (CHE, 2020b)

Qualifications	2013				2018			
	African	Coloured	Indian	White	African	Coloured	Indian	White
PG up to Honours	61,789	5,363	5,293	17,854	68,744	5,319	4,686	14,128
Masters	27,493	3,285	4,196	16,011	37,717	3,839	3,997	13,226
Doctoral	8,012	869	1,221	5,500	14,632	1,118	1,513	5,387
Total	**97,294**	**9,517**	**10,710**	**39,365**	**121,093**	**10,276**	**10,196**	**32,741**

(For) Figure 13. Postgraduate qualifications awarded in public HEIs by population group, 2013 and 2018 (CHE, 2020b)

Qualifications	2013				2018			
	African	Coloured	Indian	White	African	Coloured	Indian	White
PG up to Honours	21,817	2,482	2,371	10,597	29,617	2,745	2,440	9,216
Masters	4,677	566	827	4,383	7,489	781	953	4,100
Doctoral	896	111	140	869	1,962	135	216	954
Total	**27,390**	**3,159**	**3,338**	**15,849**	**39,068**	**3,661**	**3,609**	**14,270**

(For) Figure 14. Throughput rates by population group for 360-credit diplomas with first year of enrolment in 2013 (public HEIs excluding UNISA) - non-accumulative (CHE, 2020b)

Year	African		Coloured		Indian		White	
	Graduated %	Dropped out %	Graduated %	Dropped out %	Graduated %	Dropped out %	Graduated %	Dropped out %
2015	22	6	26	5	35	4	37	5
2016	18	3	16	3	18	1	14	3
2017	10	1	8	1	7	1	5	0
2018	5	6	3	3	3	2	2	2

(For) Figure 15. Throughput rates by population group for three-year degrees with first year of enrolment in 2013 (public HEIs excluding UNISA) - non-accumulative (CHE, 2020b)

Year	African		Coloured		Indian		White	
	Graduated %	Dropped out %	Graduated %	Dropped out %	Graduated %	Dropped out %	Graduated %	Dropped out %
2015	24	3	27	5	33	3	46	2
2016	20	3	20	3	20	2	15	1
2017	8	2	8	2	9	1	5	0
2018	4	4	2	3	3	2	2	1

(For) Figure 16. Overall enrolments and graduations in public HEIs by mode of delivery, 2013 - 2018 (CHE, 2020b)

HEI Type	Enrolments						Graduations					
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Contact	581,048	596,824	605,480	638,001	659,970	685,068	133,375	137,637	141,244	148,696	156,214	163,571
Distance	402,556	372,142	379,716	337,719	376,925	400,295	47,420	47,691	50,273	54,321	54,682	63,552
Total	**983,604**	**968,966**	**985,196**	**975,720**	**1036,895**	**1085,363**	**180,795**	**185,328**	**191,517**	**203,017**	**210,896**	**227,123**

(For) Figure 17.Enrolments and graduations in public HEIs by mode of delivery and population group, 2013 and 2018 (CHE, 2020b)

Population group	Enrolments				Graduations			
	2013		2018		2013		2018	
	Contact	Distance	Contact	Distance	Contact	Distance	Contact	Distance
African	394,238	295,179	510,040	310,430	83,243	33,600	114,419	48,629
Coloured	39,638	21,393	43,681	22,219	9,182	1,952	10,628	3,056
Indian	28,857	24,929	28,221	19,635	7,292	2,926	7,873	3,207
White	112,765	59,158	93,908	46,371	32,211	8,310	28,612	8,423
Total	**575,498**	**400,659**	**675,850**	**398,655**	**131,928**	**46,788**	**161,532**	**63,315**

(For) Figure 18. Numbers of students in public HEIs by gender, population group and mode of delivery, 2018 (DHET, 2019)

Population group	Contact			Distance			Total
	Female	Male	(NI)	Female	Male	(NI)	
African	258,989	221,179	12	187,957	95,629	1	**763,767**
Coloured	26,085	17,297	2	14,654	6,734	0	**64,772**
Indian/Asian	16,006	13,503	0	14,012	6,610	0	**50,131**
White	52,509	46,607	2	31,665	18,019	0	**148,802**
No information (NI)	4,036	3,739	4	985	748	0	**9,512**
Total	**357,625**	**302,325**	**20**	**249,273**	**127,740**	**1**	**1 036,984**

(For) Figure 19. Overall enrolments in public HEIs by institutional type and population group, 2013 and 2018 (DHET, 2019)

HEI type (Public)	2013				2018			
	African	Coloured	Indian	White	African	Coloured	Indian	White
UoTs	133,344	11,100	4,510	10,020	165,415	9,837	4,226	5,699
Comprehensive	106,814	5,256	2,652	12,556	138,799	5,907	2,729	8,783
Traditional	195,732	25,573	22,224	92,083	227,866	29,585	21,717	81,723
UNISA	253,613	19,105	24,401	57,268	288,539	20,582	19,193	44,099
Total	**689,503**	**61,034**	**53,787**	**171,927**	**820,619**	**65,911**	**47,865**	**140,304**

(For) Figure 20. Numbers of students in public HEIs by primary disability and gender, 2018 (DHET, 2019)

Disability	Female	Male	Total
Disabled but unspecified	1,043	793	1,836
Sight	1,133	929	2,062
Physical (moving, standing, grasping)	1,178	1,005	2,183
Multiple	52	38	90
Intellectual (difficulties in learning)	579	753	1,332
Hearing (even with a hearing aid)	399	309	708
Emotional (behaviour/ psychological)	377	261	638
Communication (talking, listening)	55	133	188

(For) Figure 21. Educational attainment among youth aged 20-24 years by household income quintiles, 2018 (STATSSA, 2019)

Income quintile	NQF Levels 1-6/ below NQF Level 1	%	NQF Level 7	%	NQF Levels 8-10	%
Quintile 1	994 158	20,70	7 260	7,40	4 978	10,10
Quintile 2	961 941	20,00	10 112	10,20	1 325	2,70
Quintile 3	965 119	20,10	22 099	22,40	14 529	29,50
Quintile 4	1 051 731	21,90	13 024	13,20	10 726	21,80
Quintile 5	837 462	17,40	46 307	46,90	17 679	35,90
Total	**4 810 411 (97%)**	**100**	**98 802 (2%)**	**100**	**49 237 (1%)**	**100**

(For) Figure 22. Numbers of staff in public HEIs by population group, 2013 - 2018 (CHE, 2020b)

Population group	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
African	62,335	64,996	70,716	78,587	87,359	92,513
Coloured	13,702	13,998	14,283	15,038	15,956	16,288
Indian/Asian	8,325	8,464	8,394	8,693	9,040	9,201
White	51,579	50,513	49,720	48,267	48,246	46,827
Unknown	1,420	2,141	1,447	1,992	1,868	1,790
Total	**137,361**	**140,112**	**144,560**	**152,577**	**162,469**	**166,619**

(For) Figure 23. Numbers of staff in selected personnel categories in public HEIs by population group, 2013 and 2018 (CHE, 2020b)

Personnel categories	2013				2018			
	African	Coloured	Indian	White	African	Coloured	Indian	White
Senior management	731	320	182	1,425	1,004	606	212	1,270
Academic	17,753	2,791	4,440	26,847	25,252	3,510	4,808	22,877
Administrative	29,961	7,725	2,149	14,335	41,173	8,289	2,274	12,939
Total	**48,445**	**10,836**	**6,771**	**42,607**	**67,429**	**12,405**	**7,294**	**37,086**

(For) Figure 24. Academic staff in public HEIs by population group and qualification level, 2013 and 2018 (CHE, 2020b)

Population group	2013						2018					
	UG Dip/ Certificate	UG Degrees	PG up to Honours	Masters	Doctoral	Other	UG Dip/ Certificate	UG Degrees	PG up to Honours	Masters	Doctoral	Other
African	544	2,366	2,090	3,616	2,390	6,747	1,190	3,377	1,702	10,800	4,341	3,842
Coloured	131	433	312	663	484	768	174	425	340	1,158	696	717
Indian/Asian	61	874	400	916	779	1,410	123	955	259	1,558	1,107	806
White	651	3,029	2,718	5,604	6,898	7,947	613	2,351	1,576	7,245	7,258	3,834
Unknown	8	40	44	126	249	273	63	64	44	191	545	153
Total	**1,395**	**6,742**	**5,564**	**10,925**	**10,800**	**17,145**	**2,163**	**7,172**	**3,921**	**20,952**	**13,947**	**9,352**

(For) Figure 25. Funding allocated to public HEIs in real and nominal terms, 2013/14 - 2018/19 (CHE, 2020b)

Year	Funding (Nominal)	Funding (Real CPI + 2%)
2013/14	R26 082 062 000,00	R5 667 929 601,00
2014/15	R28 069 986 000,00	R5 658 560 449,00
2015/16	R30 338 205 000,00	R5 683 833 847,00
2016/17	R36 858 629 000,00	R6 441 631 605,00
2017/18	R43 916 062 000,00	R7 086 823 879,00
2018/19	R53 602 558 000,00	R8 106 797 900,00

(For) Figure 26. Funding allocated to public HEIs as a percentage of GDP and of state budget, 2013/14 - 2018/19 (CHE, 2020b)

Proportions	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
% of state budget	2,49	2,48	2,43	2,81	2,77	3,22
% of GDP	0,72	0,73	0,74	0,84	0,82	1,06

(For) Figure 27. Proportion of block to earmarked funds including and excluding NSFAS allocation, 2013/14 - 2018/19 (CHE, 2020b)

Year	Funding category (including and excluding NSFAS)							
	Including NSFAS				Excluding NSFAS			
	Block (R)	%	Earmarked (R)	%	Block (R)	%	Earmarked (R)	%
2013/14	18 438 584 000	70,7	7 643 478 000	29,3	18 438 584 000	82,4	3 950 183 000	17,6
2014/15	19 561 234 000	69,7	8 508 752 000	30,3	19 561 234 000	81,0	4 593 859 000	19,0
2015/16	20 538 361 000	67,7	9 799 844 000	32,3	20 538 361 000	78,3	5 704 866 000	21,7
2016/17	21 678 098 000	58,8	15 180 531 000	41,2	21 678 098 000	77,5	6 286 720 000	22,5
2017/18	25 322 874 000	64,7	13 803 252 000	35,3	25 322 874 000	80,1	6 283 967 000	19,9
2018/19	29 023 192 000	54,1	24 579 366 000	45,9	29 023 192 000	75,0	9 678 097 000	25,0

(For) Figure 30. NSFAS student awards (in thousands), 2013 - 2018 (CHE, 2020b)

Funding allocations	2013 (R)	2014 (R)	2015 (R)	2016 (R)	2017 (R)	2018 (R)
University	6 729 070	6 969 941	7 194 619	10 304 757	12 106 307	18 373 239
TVET	1 953 253	1 991 488	2 095 130	2 106 267	2 012 108	2 742 607
Total	**8 682 323**	**8 961 429**	**9 289 749**	**12 411 024**	**14 118 415**	**21 115 846**