THE IMPACT OF NATIONAL CERTIFICATE VOCATIONAL ON THE CONTINUED LEARNING: *PATTERNS AND DESTINATION OF THE FET COLLEGES ENGINEERING GRADUATES IN THE NORTH WEST PROVINCE*

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Background of the study

- The study was triggered by a quest to respond to the skills shortage and the inadequacy of the outdated National Education Programmes for Technical Colleges to provide the needed human resources
- "The NC (V) programmes are intended to respond directly to the priority skills demands of the modern South African economy by exposing students to high skills and knowledge" (DHET 2009:5).
- The Government Notice number 28677 (DoE, 2005: 82) on the policy for the National Certificate (Vocational) states that "the NC (V) at L4 on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) enables students to acquire the necessary knowledge, practical skills, applied competence and understanding required for employment in a particular occupation or trade, or class of occupations or trades, or entrance into Higher Education."
- The research by Cosser et al. (2011:118) noted that all colleges and college campuses in the North West Province are situated in municipalities in which 20% - 60% of the unemployed are of employable age. Eight of the college campuses are situated in the areas where the rate of unemployment is between 20% - 40%. Six campuses of Taletso, Orbit and Vuselela are situated in municipalities where the rate of unemployment is higher than 40%. This factor is a serious impediment to students who are looking for employment within the municipalities they are studying in. In the North West Province, 9 of the 11 FET college campuses are within the middle poverty rate category, while the other two are in the lower poverty category (Cosser, 2011:129).

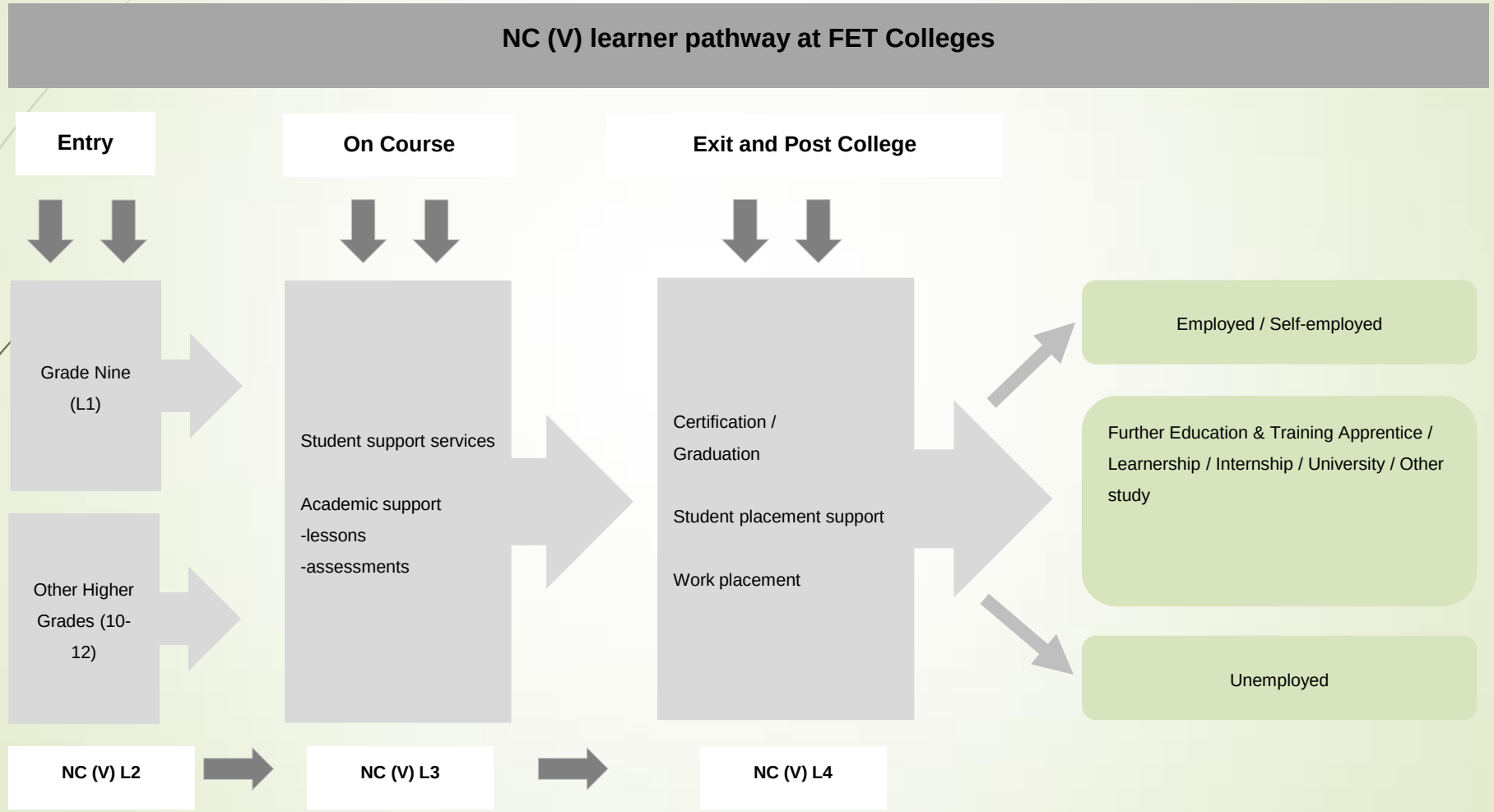
Research problem

- What impact does the NC (V) qualification has on the destination of the graduates?

Delimitation

- Confined to the three North West Province Colleges. Cohorts of graduates from the year 2009 to 2012, in the three engineering programmes, namely, Civil Engineering and Building Construction, Engineering and Related Design and Electrical Infrastructure Construction, were surveyed. The research did not evaluate the NC (V) as a programme.

NC (V) learner pathway at FET Colleges



Literature review and Theoretical framework

- The learning concept of Community of Practice was not optimised by the FET College Sector to enhance other curriculum review processes. These learning principles can benefit the colleges with the promotion of student experiential learning, the relevance and responsiveness of the NC (V) programmes.
- The FET Colleges made use of the Academic Boards to monitor and to review the success of their academic programmes and curriculum, including the NC (V) programmes. The boards were made-up of mostly internal representatives of each college ranging from the lecturers, student support officials, campus heads, and academic programme managers led by the principal or the deputy principal.
- At national level the DHET coordinates the FET College programme review process by, among others; inviting participants from industry and the colleges
- This study argued that the use of theory of Connectivism combined with the establishment of the FET College Community of Practice learning theory could reduce the misalignment between the NC (V) programme theory and practice. Wenger (1998: 72–73) described the structure of a CoP as consisting of three interrelated terms: 'mutual engagement', 'joint enterprise' and 'shared repertoire'.
- Introduction of College CoP would allow members to establish norms and build collaborative relationships that lead to a social entity. College CoP would through their interactions, create a shared understanding of the key drivers for the curriculum or programme review. Lesser and Storck (2001: 836) indicated that an important aspect and function of communities of practice was increasing organisation performance of which, in the case of the FET Colleges, the connection to the world of work would improve the NC (V) programme responsiveness to the skills needs.
- Lesser and Storck (2001:836) identified four areas of organizational performance that can be affected by communities of practice; decreasing the learning curve of new employees; responding more rapidly to customer needs and inquiries; reducing rework and preventing "reinvention of the wheel" and spawning new ideas for products and services.

Interviews of the Employers

- Theme – duration the graduates spend in the workplace;
- Theme – exposure to the workplace for experience;
- Theme – partnership or relationship with industry or business;
- Theme – advocacy and communication by the colleges;
- Theme – support by the college to the graduates; and
- Theme – other skills

Interviews responses of the Employers on the NC (V) graduates

- 60% of the respondents indicated that they knew and understood the NC (V) qualification particularly in the engineering field, 30% indicated that they did not know, and some of them confirmed their knowledge of the NATED programme while 10% of the respondents were not sure.

- 100% of the respondents said their companies employed the NC (V) graduates and that the graduates' performance was satisfactory.

- 30% of the employers would employ or accommodate the NC (V) graduates in their businesses while 70% indicated that they could employ or provide workplace experience to the graduates provided that there was appropriate college support to the graduates, funding for work placement purpose, improved college relationship and communication with the employers and if their businesses expands.

- 22% of the responses indicated the importance of graduates' exposure to the workplace for experience; while 10% of the respondents indicated the importance of acquiring other additional skills such as communication and administration.

Findings

- There were different areas of emphasis on the way the three colleges were rolling out the NC (V) programme. The difference was evident in their student support priorities such as the importance of exit support from one college resulting in high student placement rate.
- Interview data from the universities showed that there was a lack of interest in the NC (V) qualification. The same could have been said about SETAs had it not been the DHET directives that SETA offices be opened in the colleges.
- Although Higher Education South Africa (HESA) which is an association for principals of the universities was consulted regarding the acknowledgement of the NC (V) qualification as one of the entrance requirements to universities, different universities continue to use different criteria. As a result there is silent university apathy towards the qualification culminating into less than five percent of NC (V) students progressing to university education.
- The SETAs had recently started a drive to facilitate the placement of FET College students into industry through experiential training, internships and learnerships. There was little concerted effort in targeting the NC (V) graduates as a fairly new qualification with the aim of monitoring its impact.
- Most employers were satisfied with the performance of the NC (V) graduates placed within their companies or businesses. They were willing to increase the numbers of the graduates for work-placement purposes provided colleges were prepared to support graduates with funding during experiential training period.
- Other important areas that colleges should improve on were the establishment of college-industry partnerships and effective communication. Employers recommended that to improve areas such job readiness, administration skills and self-mastery skills of the graduates, the review of the curriculum had to be considered urgently.

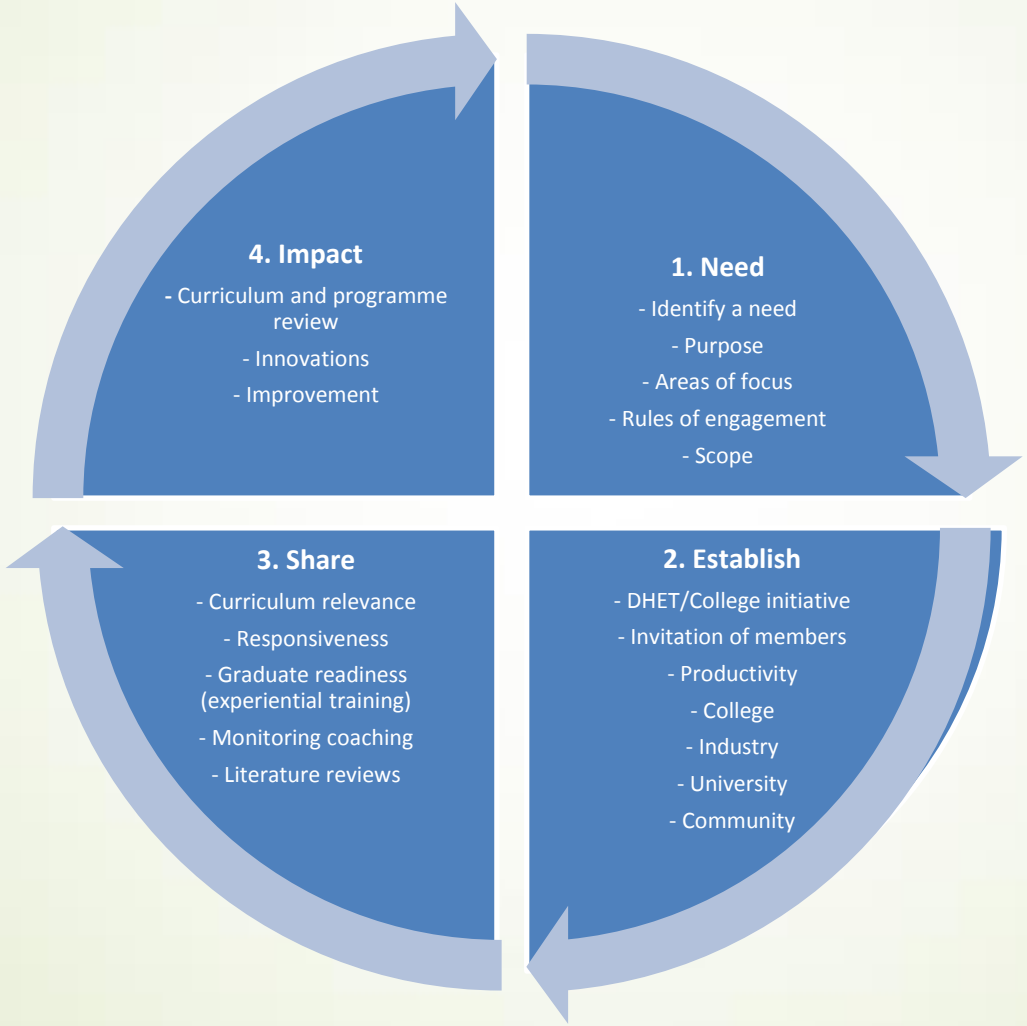
Conclusion

- The impact of the NC (V) qualification in this study centred on the extent to which the theory and practical components learnt at the college were connected to the real life situation that was the destination of the graduates. The theoretical knowledge of the graduates had to be tested when applied in the world of work situations, where they were required to demonstrate the skills they had acquired.

Recommendations

- The quality of the experiential training can be improved by developing a workplace learner guide in order to improve tripartite relationship involved in training. The graduate responses highlighted that the NC (V) graduates were not well prepared for the workplace environment and found it difficult to cope. Although there were still workplace readiness challenges regarding the graduates, some employers were happy about the performance of the graduates.
- The FET College Community of Practice Forums should be established to facilitate, to enhance and to enrich curriculum development; programme reviews; industry-college partnerships; college-university partnerships; and college-community partnerships. A learning theory model that promotes theory and practice connectedness through the strengthening of the College Community of Practice Forums should be developed.

Elements of an Integrated Community of Practice Model



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