

# Nursing education in 2020

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Prof Nurs Today 2020;24(2):26-28

A year ago, we were planning a special year with great anticipation as we would celebrate the year 2020 as the *International Year of the Nurse and Midwife* as declared by the World Health Organization (WHO). To complement this exciting event in South Africa, we had finally reached the stage where nursing education would transition to higher education in its entirety. In 2020, all nursing education institutions can only offer the new nursing programmes promulgated in 2013, provided that they are either registered (private sector) or declared (public sector) as higher education institutions by the Department of Higher Education and Training. While the progress in nursing readiness was slow and arduous in getting here, the plans and roadmaps were in place and we knew what we were moving towards.

However, come 2020, we found a spectacular year arising in front of us. Not for all the reasons we were expecting, but for a very different reason. A global lockdown due to COVID-19 with its ostracisation from what we saw as civilisation, no social contact other than within our own four walls at home, no cigarettes for those who desperately need them, and many others. Despite all our exciting plans on how we would tackle this important year as nurses and midwives, we suddenly found ourselves in uncharted waters with all our plans and roadmaps becoming very fluid.

## Nothing the same?

All our well-planned activities were abruptly terminated as we went into hard lockdown and students were sent home. Nothing will ever be the same, everyone said – but no-one knows exactly what or how things will be different. What we do know, is that nursing and the shortage of nurses has become very visible and high on the agenda. So, we do hope that the Minister of Finance takes note of this so that we do not see the health budget shrinking from year to year, as this usually has a direct impact on funds available to employ health practitioners, particularly nurses, as well as on the education and production of nurses.

This situation emphasises the important role of nurse educators in the bigger picture of health care. As educators we are used to working in a very structured way with curricula, rosters, lesson plans, assessments and the like. The lockdown reflection time has forced us out of this structured environment into one where we have had to become more flexible and digitally adept to ensure that we move forward and not allow students, especially final year students, to lose an academic year. We cannot escape the future, and the decisions and actions we undertake during this year will certainly influence the profession in the coming decade.

What we do know, is that we have found ourselves in challenging times; as we mastered all the new technologies and new ways of teaching and hosting meetings, many of us also had to home school our children.

## So where are we in nursing education?

Taking a step back from 2020, the transition of nursing education started more than a decade ago with the regulations for the new programmes promulgated in 2013. These regulations determine that nursing programmes must now be accredited by both the Council for Higher Education (CHE) as well as the SA Nursing Council (SANC). The regulations followed on the changes in education legislation prior to 2010 and the need for the SANC to review the nursing qualifications framework (see Table I).

Until the Minister of Higher Education and Training published a government notice containing an ultimatum, there was limited progress in terms of clear expectations to get new nursing programmes accredited. The ultimatum was set for 31 December 2019 following which no institution could take in students on the legacy (or old) programmes. A teach-out period of five years and three years for the four-year programme and the bridging programme respectively, has been approved by the SANC to allow the students currently in the system to complete their studies. Intakes for the enrolled nursing programmes were already terminated in 2015.

**Table 1:** Nursing qualifications framework as it reflects on the NQF

NQF	Qualifications	Nursing qualification	Credits	Admission requirements
10	Doctoral degree	No category	360 Min 360 credits at level 10	Master's degree
9	Master's degree	Advanced specialist (2 years)	180 Min 120 credits at level 9	Honours or professional degree Postgraduate diploma
8	Postgraduate diploma	Specialist nurse/midwife (1 year)	120 Min 120 credits at level 8	Bachelor's degree or Level 7 qualification
8	Bachelor's honours degree (Professional degree)	General nursing and midwifery (4 years) R173	480 Min 120 credits at level 8 and 96 at level 6	National Senior Certificate
7	Bachelor's degree Advanced diploma	Not used in nursing/midwifery (1 year)	360 Min 120 credits at level 7 and 96 at level 5 120 credits	National Senior Certificate
6	Diploma	General (Staff) Nurse (3 years) R171	360 Min 60 credits at level 7 and max 120 @ level 5	National Senior Certificate
5	Higher certificate	Auxiliary Nurse (1 year) R169	120 credits	National Senior Certificate

Just an additional note on the dual accreditation requirement with CHE and SANC – The NQF Act, 2008 specified that there will only be three education and training quality assurance (ETQA) bodies, namely CHE for higher education programmes; Umalusi for basic schooling; and Quality Council for Trade and Occupation (QCTO) for skills programmes. The professional councils will therefore no longer be ETQA bodies for the programmes offered in their fields and can apply with SAQA to be registered as professional bodies. SANC remains co-responsible for the quality of nursing programmes in view of the determinants in the Nursing Act, 2005. The Nursing Act, 2005 is due for review and amendment – one of the changes that will be provided for is that the SANC will in future institute a Council examination for all new entrants onto the registers after completion of their programmes.

### Accredited institutions

Currently there are five private nursing education institutions (NEIs) accredited to offer the General Nurse (R171) and Auxiliary Nurse (R169) programmes with one private institution offering only R169. Twelve of the universities' new programmes (R174) have been accredited and seven still await their final approval from SANC. The programmes (R171) of the public colleges had all been accredited by CHE and SANC by November 2019 but the institutions have not yet been declared as higher education institutions (HEIs). The numbers approved by the SANC for the new programmes at all the accredited institutions have been decreased, so the number of qualified practitioners that will be produced is going to drop. One of the challenges during the transition to get to a place where we only offer the new programmes, is that there will be a dual educational system in place for the next four to five years.

### Transitional arrangement

The declaration of the public colleges has been one of the big headaches in the process of transitioning nursing programmes to higher education. While the Higher Education

and Training Amendment Act, 2016 makes provision for the inclusion of public colleges in the higher education band, no regulations were made available to guide the process of getting these colleges declared as HEIs. It is a well-known fact that the public colleges have been producing 73–80% of the professional nurse graduates every year, and if they were not in a position to train any nurses this year, the shortage would have worsened severely.

This challenge is created by current and amended legislation. All nursing education programmes are located in the higher education band of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). According to the Constitution of the RSA, higher education is a national competence which falls under the jurisdiction of the Minister of Higher Education and Training. Public nursing colleges have traditionally been managed by Departments of Health at provincial level, with very different management approaches. Colleges mostly did not have an independent budget but were incorporated in the budget of a provincial institution and were based in facilities that belong to public works. Technical staff such as this and being declared a *juristic person* has been dealt with the Higher Education Amendment Act, but the management of nursing colleges as a national entity under the jurisdiction of the Minister of Higher Education has presented a major challenge.

Section 238 of the Constitution makes provision for one organ of state to delegate a task to another organ of state – so the Minister of Higher Education can delegate the management of nursing education and the colleges to the Minister of Health. However, the challenge remains that the colleges must become a national entity. Irrespective, public colleges must comply with the minimum criteria to be declared as HEIs – none of them meets the prescribed minimum criteria, particularly with regard to facilities, IT, skills labs and libraries. To cover this gap, the Minister of Higher Education and Training issued a notice with transitional arrangements in October 2019. This notice states that the Department of Higher Education and Training and the Department of

Health have entered into an agreement in terms of the Intergovernmental Relations Act, 2005 to address the shared education responsibilities and to work towards declaring public nursing colleges as HEIs. It further designates the public colleges to offer higher education programmes provided that these programmes are accredited by CHE and SANC, and registered on the HEQSF. No end date is provided for this transitional arrangement and all colleges can offer the three-year Diploma Programme (R171) for General Nurses (referred to as staff nurses in Act, 2005). A team is working in the background to facilitate the move towards getting public colleges recognised as HEIs.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we are moving forward on the implementation of the new programmes developed to ensure that we produce critical thinking, generalist practitioners that are competent to work in all types of environments to provide quality and safe care for their communities. Educators have a big responsibility to ensure that their students are taught to critically think on their feet and are equipped with the skills

to do so. This is the opportunity to make 2020 an exceptional year for the profession in South Africa for very different reasons. It is with great relief that it can be reported that R635 for the PGDip has finally been published which will allow the submission and accreditation of specialist programmes.

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